

WARHAMMER

40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

# BLADES OF DAMOCLES

PHIL KELLY





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# BLADES OF DAMOCLES



PHIL KELLY



BLACK LIBRARY

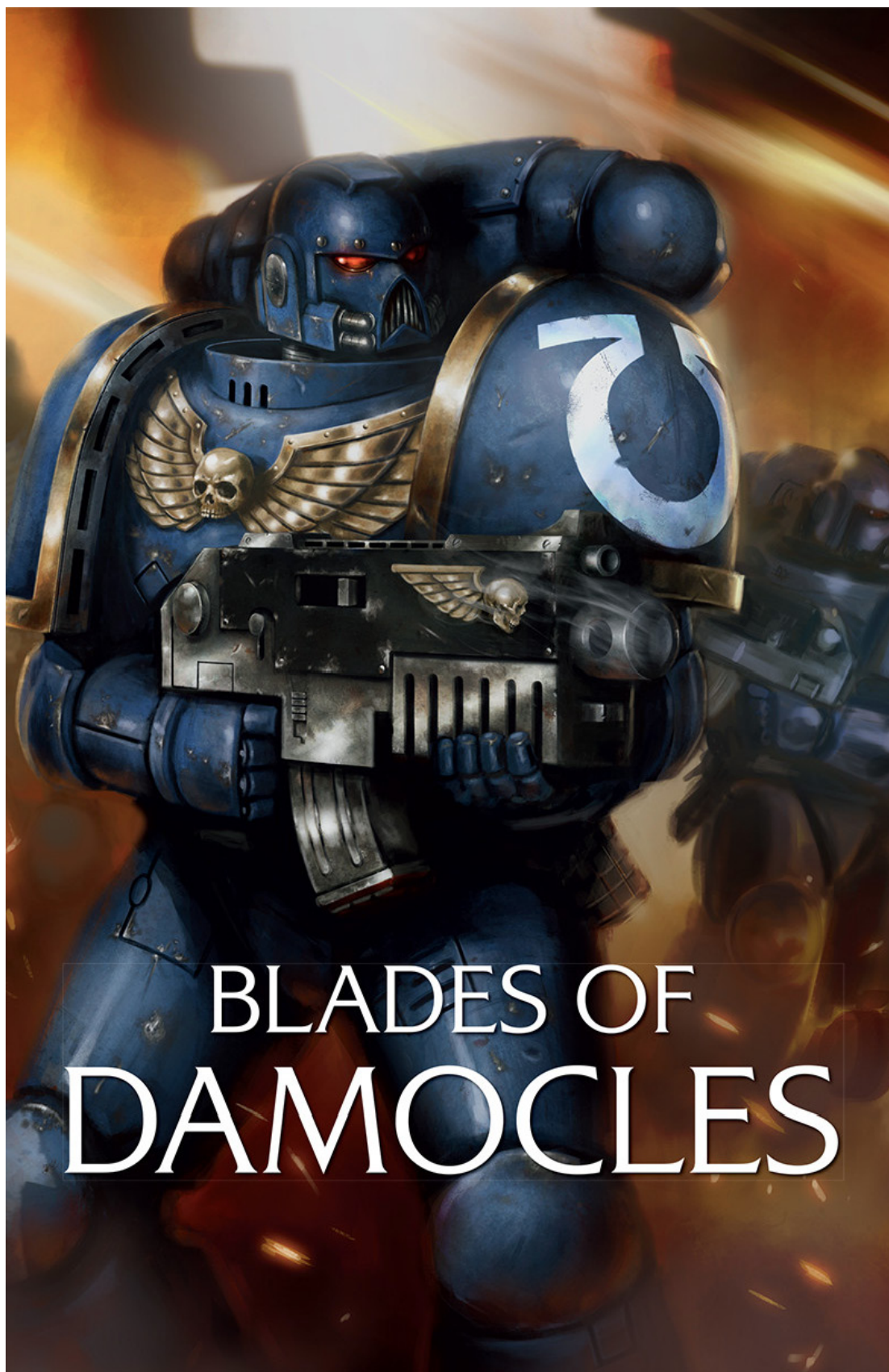


## **WARHAMMER 40,000**

**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.**

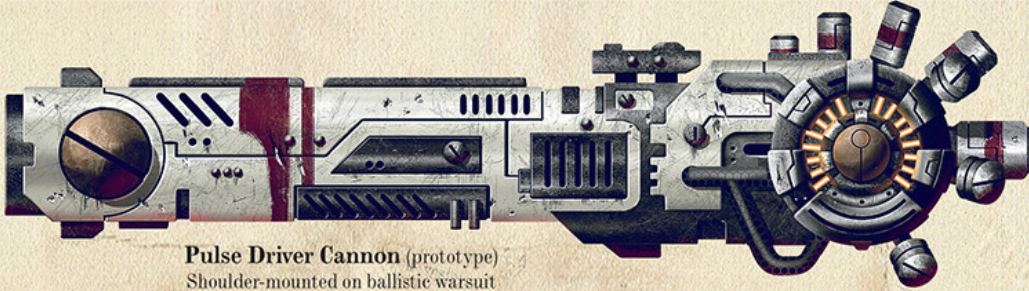
**To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and 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.**



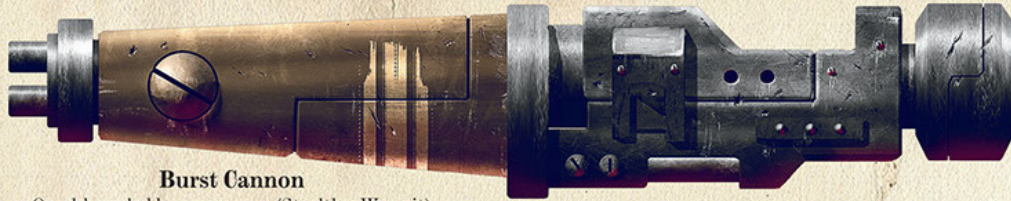
# BLADES OF DAMOCLES

## XENOTECH ANALYSIS: DAL'YTH SEPT

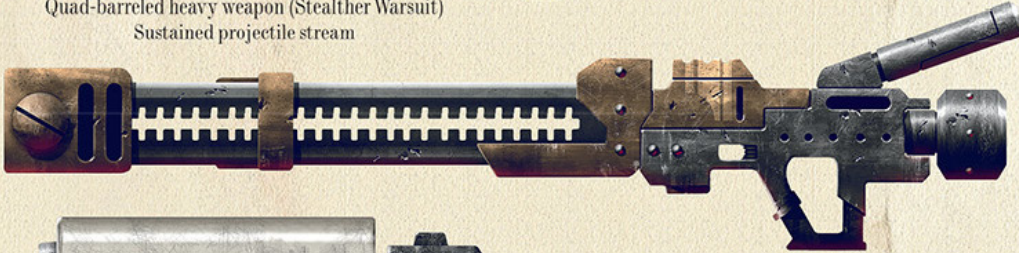
During the latter stages of Operation Pluto and the subsequent strikes across Dal'yth, a wide variety of tau wartechnology was encountered. Its heretical nature is yet to be fully comprehended, though preliminary conclusions are detailed here. Also included are pict-skull records of xenos commanders encountered in battle.



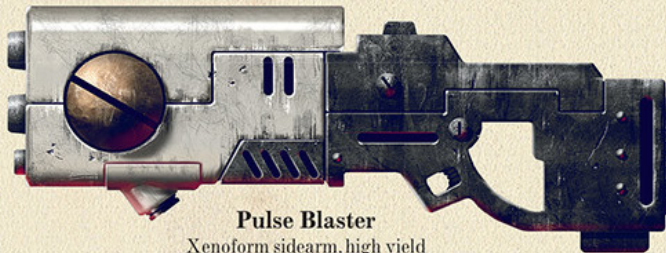
**Pulse Driver Cannon** (prototype)  
Shoulder-mounted on ballistic warsuit  
Capable of destroying Titan-class assets  
Particle accelerator and plasma containment systems



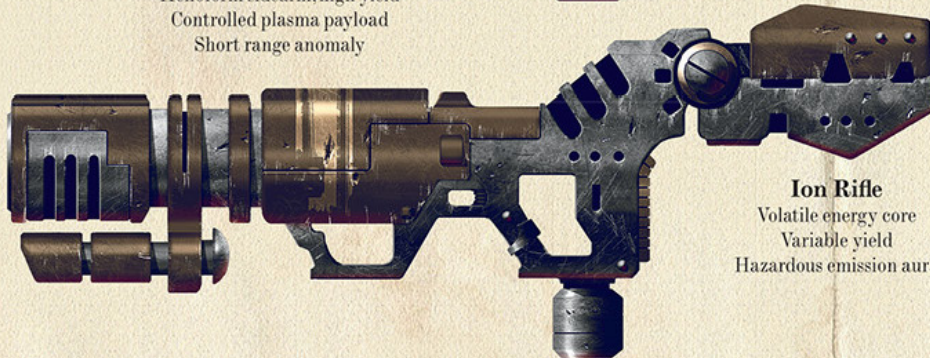
**Burst Cannon**  
Quad-barreled heavy weapon (Stealthers Warsuit)  
Sustained projectile stream



**Rail Rifle**  
Hypervelocity solid shot  
Electromagnetic catalyst  
Infantry anti-armour weapon



**Pulse Blaster**  
Xenoform sidearm, high yield  
Controlled plasma payload  
Short range anomaly



**Ion Rifle**  
Volatile energy core  
Variable yield  
Hazardous emission aura

### **‘Commander Bravestorm’**

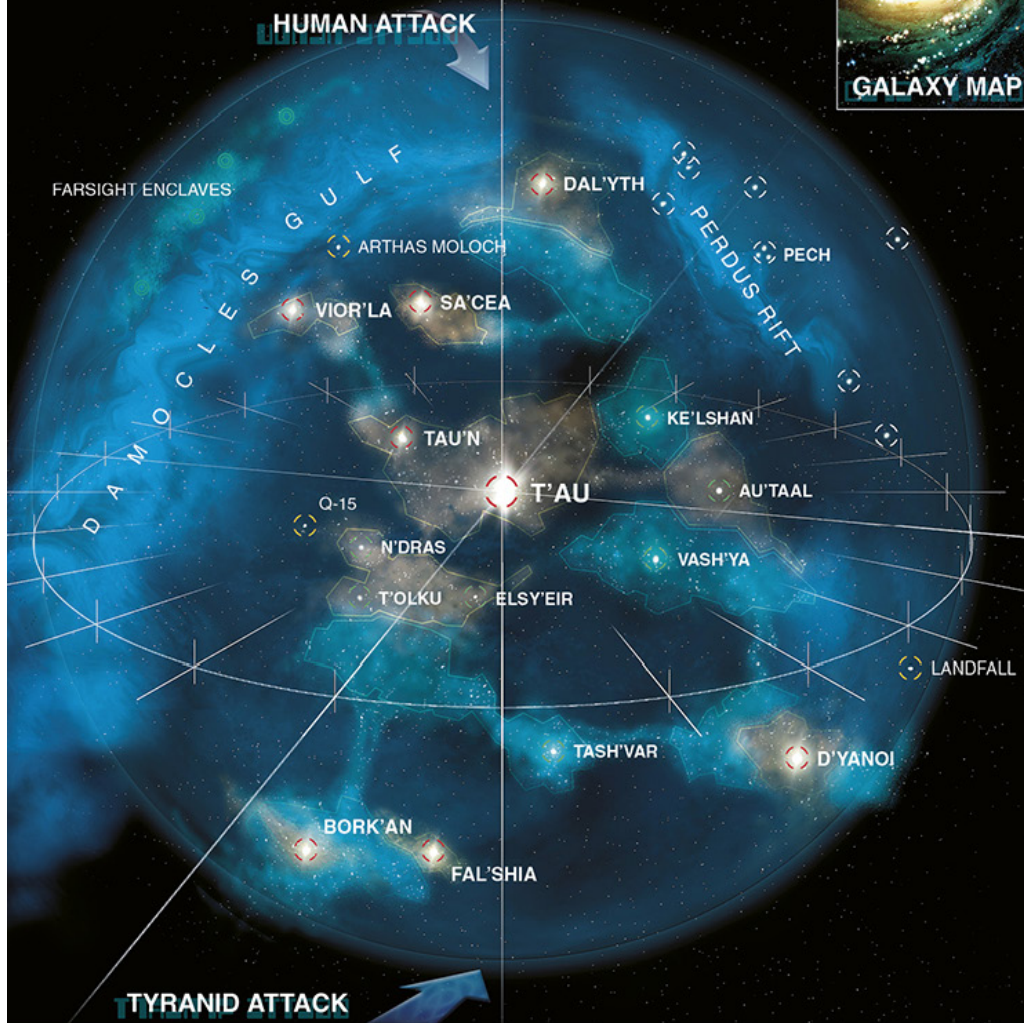
Dal’yth battle leader  
Non-standard warsuit (c.f. Farsight colours, c.f. iridium)  
Plasma rifle, flamer, shield generator



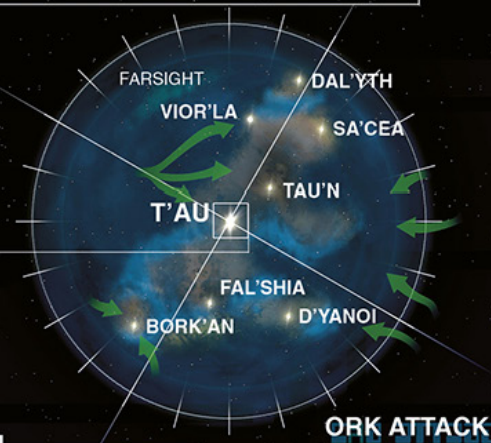
### **‘Commander Brightsword’**

Subsidiary battle leader (anomalous)  
Duellist/anti-armour specialist  
Twin fusion blades (c.f. melta)

# THE TAU EMPIRE



- MAJOR SEPT - WORLDS
- LESSER SEPT - WORLDS
- KROOT WORLDS
- ARTEFACT WORLDS
- 1st PHASE COLONIES (pop. 100,000+)
- 2nd PHASE COLONIES (pop. 10-10,000)



## **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

### ***The Ultramarines***

#### **Squad Numitor, Eighth Company, 'The Calgarians'**

NUMITOR, Assault Sergeant of the Calgarians

MAGROS, Battle-brother, plasma pistol specialist

DUOLOR, Battle-brother, plasma pistol specialist

TRONDORIS, Battle-brother, eviscerator specialist

GOLOTAN, Battle-brother

AORDUS, Battle-brother

VECTAS, Battle-brother

ANTEC, Battle-brother

DOMINASTOS, Battle-brother

CRASTEC, Battle-brother

#### **Squad Sicarius, Eighth Company, 'The Conquerors'**

SICARIUS, Assault Sergeant of the Conquerors

GLAVIUS, Combat Squad Leader

KAETOROS, Battle-brother, flamer specialist

AUSTOS, Battle-brother, flamer specialist

VELETAN, Battle-brother, auspex specialist

IONSIAN, Battle-brother

COLNID, Battle-brother

DENTURIS, Battle-brother

DALATON, Battle-brother

ENDRION, Battle-brother

### **Command Structure**

ATHEUS, Captain of the Eighth Company

UTICOS, Chaplain Reclusiarch

DREKOS, Apothecary

ENITOR, Veteran

ZAETUS, Standard Bearer

VELLU, Veteran (later Company Champion)

OMNID, Techmarine

ELIXUS, Epistolary Librarian

### ***The Astra Militarum***

DUGGAN, Commissar Lord

VYKOLA, Primaris Psyker

### **122<sup>ND</sup> Baleghast Castellans**

KINOSTEN, Acting Sergeant, Ontova Platoon

NORDGHA, Master of Ordnance

MALAGREA, Astropath

### ***The Tau Empire***

FARSIGHT, Supreme Commander, a.k.a. O'Shovah,  
Mont'ka-Shoh

AUN'VA, Ethereal Master

SHADOWSUN, Commander, a.k.a. O'Shaserra, Kauyon-Shas

O'VESA, Master Scientist, a.k.a. the Stone Dragon

BRIGHTSWORD, Commander

SHA'VASTOS, Commander of Arkunasha

BRAVESTORM, Commander of Dal'yth

SHA'KAN'THAS, Tutor, Mont'yr Battle Dome

PURETIDE, Supreme Master of the Fire Caste

OB'LOTAI 3-0, Shas'vre AI engram, a.k.a. the Warghost

Y'ELDI, Air caste pilot



# CHAPTER ONE

## INVASION/THE FALLING SPEAR

Jorus Numitor grinned fiercely as the Thunderhawk's metal door pistoned open. The gunship's interior filled with blazing violet light, and a gale force wind punched into him, but it only got his blood up all the more. Leaning forward, the sergeant ran into the hurricane and leaped, triggering his jump pack and boosting away with his assault squad close behind.

The *Sword of Calth* banked as it roared overhead, its wingtip passing inches from Numitor's jump pack. He turned as he flew, now falling backwards, and counted his brothers off as they hurtled through the sky in his wake. All present and correct, nine runes flashing green in his peripherals.

*'Atheus will pounce on that one day, sergeant,'* voxed Aordus. *'Supposed to debark from the tailgate into dead air on a drop like this.'*

*'Captain Atheus can tuck himself in an evil-smelling drop pod,'* shouted Numitor, mirth bubbling through his words as he turned back into a leaning dive. *'Orbital insertion's a waste of a good view!'*

Aordus laughed, and even over the crackling vox Numitor heard the frustration and boredom of their two-month

transit sloughing away. He felt it too; the ice around his soul was melting, turned to liquid anticipation by the prospect of battle and the breathtaking vista below.

Dal'yth's cloudbanks were truly magnificent. Violet and white, they stretched out like a realm of organic sky-castles, lit from within by strobing flashes of electricity. The Ultramarines straightened into close formation and plummeted headlong toward them.

This is what the Adeptus Astartes were made to do, thought Numitor. Not to meditate in silence, or to train endlessly in the dark bowels of a strike cruiser, but to bring death from above – sudden, loud, and in great measure. He took off his helm and mag-clamped it to his waist, revelling in the feeling of air blasting up into his face and tugging at the dense strip of hair that ran down his shaven scalp like a crest.

Nearby, Aordus shook his head at the flagrant breach of drop protocol.

Contrails scarred the skies ahead as the T-shaped aircraft of the tau duelled with box-nosed Thunderhawk and Stormraven gunships. Plummeting drop pods cut through their winding vapour trails, forming a lateral grid that cut the sky and gave shape to the squad's otherwise abstract fall.

Here and there airbursts blossomed, fire-lit smoke spreading in the cold air wherever a missile or interceptor shot hit home. Even those distant signs of conflict made Numitor's chest feel tight. Not long now, the sergeant told himself, as if comforting the beast rousing to wakefulness in his soul.

Not long.

Squad Numitor burst from the cloudbanks to witness the birth of a planetary war. Tessellating hex-zones each large enough to accommodate a hive city trammelled the indigo wilderness. Smoothly contoured buildings jutted from each junction point, lights glittering in their thousands wherever

the ivory edifices reached up from the wider superstructures. The landscape of the tau sept world had been almost perverse in its order, but that was changing fast – the Imperium’s pre-invasion firestorm had torn ragged wounds across its surface. Megatonnes of ordnance were hurled from low orbit to break open the drop zones in the distance. Even those warheads detonated by tau flak were raining fire upon the cities below.

Numitor did not replace his helm. The chances of getting decapitated by sky-shrapnel were slim, and that was a gamble he was willing to take. It was worth it to drink in the spectacle of explosions blossoming below, to feel the blood-pounding rush of air hinting at the storm of violence to come. The tempestuous forces of the drop pulled at his skin, shook his bones and made his eyes and nose sting with sensation. He plunged through a high cloud and out again, needles of cold stinging his skin. It felt like a baptism.

The Ultramarines drop pod assault followed close behind the falling ordnance intended to clear a path for Operation Pluto. Livid fires billowed from shattered hexodomes and parallel plumes of dark smoke slanted into the skies from the black-rimmed craters that scarred the city’s alien symmetry. In his peripheral vision, Numitor could see dozens of gunships diving in near-vertical vectors, the throaty roars of their engines audible even over the thunder of freefall and the bass crump of ordnance.

The Imperial craft slammed through a thinly spread drone blockade to scatter enemy fighter craft like raptors slicing through a prey-flock. Coming out of their dives as they reached their drop coordinates, each gunship opened its doors and disgorged the Assault Marines inside. Numitor’s squad had been the first to make the drop, launching a good few seconds before Squad Sicarius, and even with the long freefall they would reach the planet first. He knew it was wrong to find joy in that, for it mattered little in truth. He smiled nonetheless.

'Beachhead established in quadrant Zeta Tert, Gel'bryn City,' said Aordus. 'Good place to start.'

'We'll be fighting long before we get there,' shouted Numitor. 'Look sharp, brothers. Hunter-killers incoming. On my mark.'

A cluster of four wide, flat-bodied missiles blazed upwards from an intact hexodome.

'Scatter!' ordered Numitor. His men reacted a second before the seeker missiles reached their position. They triggered their jump packs simultaneously, blazing out in a ten-pointed star that saw the tau missiles sail harmlessly through the middle of their formation.

Three more of the xenotech warheads hurtled upwards. Numitor flipped and boosted straight down, swiping the fingertips of his power fist into the leading missile moments before it could strike Brother Duolor. It detonated with mind-numbing force as the other two shot past, missing their mark. The sergeant was flung outward, flailing and burning, but the flames found no purchase on his ceramite. He tucked into a somersault before righting his vector with a blast of his jump pack.

Trailing smoke, Numitor heaved in a great draught of air – not the stale, recycled air of a spaceship hold, but the cold, pure blast of freefall. He roared with the sheer catharsis of it. Elation flooded his body, despite the burning pain in the side of his face, despite the chemical tang of incendiaries in his multi-lung. His vox buzzed like a trapped insect, abruptly pulling him back to his senses.

'*Sergeant,*' said Aordus, '*do we proceed to Zeta Tert?*'

'Hold course,' called out Numitor, craning his head to look upward. 'Zeta Tert, squad! Adjust vectors accordingly.'

High above, three remaining missiles looped around, doubling back in tight parabolas to close on the sergeant's squad.

'Ha!' shouted Numitor triumphantly. 'I thought as much. Ready pistols!'

The sergeant turned in mid-fall to face the night sky and

the blunt-nosed missiles rocketing towards them. He unclamped his bolt pistol and snapped off three shots in close succession, his back to the ground even though his freefall was at terminal velocity. Numitor's squad followed his lead. Mass-reactive bolts hurtled upwards, the last volley catching the incoming missiles a spear's throw from their position. A canopy of fire bloomed above them, red and yellow against the darkening purple sky.

Nodding in satisfaction, Numitor turned back to his headlong descent.

From the hexodomes below tracer fire spat high, each stream stuttering phosphor-white. Black clouds of flak boomed as tau gunners intercepted the storm of Space Marine insertion craft hammering towards the xenos landscape. To their east flank, a cluster of hunter-missiles slammed into a plummeting drop pod. Numitor felt the blast wave of the explosion as it sent cherry-red metal scything in all directions.

Flailing Space Marines fell burning from the wreckage towards the planet's surface.

They had fifteen seconds, if that.

'Intercept that stricken squad!' ordered Numitor, leaning into a diagonal vector and waving his squad to follow. He boosted hard, drawing his arms in close to streamline his body and angling his hands to fine-tune his path. His unit, close behind him, did likewise.

Nine seconds left.

A trio of falling Tactical Marines had righted themselves as best they could and were aiming their bolters downward, determined to take some kind of toll on the tau world before their deaths. The Tactical squad's sergeant stretched out to catch one of his brothers by the arm as he pinwheeled past, yanking him in close. Numitor and his squad dived into their midst, each clamping an outstretched hand onto a falling battle-brother. There was no way Numitor and his squad could stop them entirely, pull them out of harm's way, but they were still Assault

Marines of the Eighth, the masters of the jump drop. This was their sky to rule.

‘Hard diagonal, due west!’ shouted Numitor.

With a burst of his jump pack engines at full yield, Numitor yanked the Tactical Marine’s descent into a sharp westward course. His squad did the same, their power armour preventing their arms from being ripped out of their sockets by the sudden weight. Slowly, agonisingly, their efforts bore fruit.

Three seconds.

‘Breakfall!’ shouted Numitor. ‘Ready!’

A bulbous white tower loomed suddenly upwards, its giant mushroom canopy studded with strange antennae. Numitor heaved hard, twisting his body so his jump pack bolstered the motion as he and his squad flung their battle-brothers sidelong towards the tau building’s upper slope.

The Tactical Marines struck it hard, but their armour took much of the impact. As they slid downward, they each drew their combat knives and drove them deep into the building’s curving roof, turning their skidding descent into a series of sharp halts.

By the time the Space Marines had mag-locked their boots onto the alloy of the building’s roof, Numitor had landed in their midst, and was already boosting back upwards. He caught a fifth falling battle-brother by the backpack and slowed his descent enough for him to hit the cream-coloured roof crumpled, but alive. The rest of Squad Numitor had touched down nearby, wispy circles of exhaust expanding around each of their landing sites. Pulse rounds shot from the balcony of a taller tau building to punch into their midst. The Tactical Marines turned their shoulders into the incoming fire, bolters aimed to launch a devastating counter-attack.

‘That was non-Codex drop procedure,’ said one of the rescued Space Marines.

The Tactical Marine sergeant snapped off a shot with his bolter, and a distant explosion mingled with xenos screams.

‘We’re alive, ingrate,’ he growled to his squadmate, ‘so make it count.’ He turned to Numitor between shots. ‘My thanks, brother. Antelion of the Fifth.’

‘I’m Numitor, Eighth Company. But if your friend reports the drop deviation, I’m Sergeant Cato Sicarius.’

Antelion laughed. ‘Now him I’ve heard of.’

Numitor nodded, but in truth his focus was already on the battle below.

‘Right, let’s get to it,’ he said, replacing his helm and slamming a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. ‘Brothers, make ready to join the fray. Cato is likely ankle-deep in blood already.’

Sergeant Cato Sicarius bellowed a wordless war cry, gunning his jump pack as he blasted shoulder-first towards a squadron of glider-like xenocraft. Energy streams spat from the tail-mounted quad turret of each tau fighter. They detonated explosively amongst his squad, one lucky shot sending Brother Endrion spiralling from the sky in a spray of blood.

Two more of the incandescent beams punched into Sicarius’ pauldron, vaporising chunks of ceramite and knocking him off kilter. He righted his charge within heartbeats, lips pulled back into a grimace of contempt, but it was too late. The aircraft had already hurtled past, the whine of their engines rising as they turned back for another strafing run.

A hot ache bled through Sicarius’ shoulder socket. ‘You’ve no idea who you are dealing with,’ he snarled under his breath. ‘You’re all going to die.’

‘Well said, sergeant,’ said Glavius, Sicarius’ de facto second in command. The sergeant clicked impatiently over the vox in response. The pain in his shoulder was dulling, but in his eyes it was still a symptom of failure.

On some level, Cato Sicarius knew and appreciated what was at stake upon Dal’yth. The war they were fighting here was no conventional crusade, but a battle for knowledge,

hard won in the crucible of war. Two advanced civilisations were pitted against one another, and the sky was already filling with the fires of conflict.

‘Vespertine was a skirmish compared to this,’ said Glavius.

‘Good,’ said Sicarius. ‘A true test of our mettle, then.’ Here, each force was seeking not only to overcome the foe, but also to learn their strengths – and more importantly, weaknesses – in the process. ‘This is a race, Glavius,’ said Sicarius, ‘a race for understanding. Whoever wins it will secure victory not just here, but on a dozen worlds besides.’

With this site as the primary drop zone, there was every chance the battle for Gel’bryn City would determine the fate of the entire war. Taking the largest metropolis on the eastern seaboard would give them a commanding position, allowing them to dominate everything between the dropsite and the mountains to the north. As a sergeant, Sicarius was content to leave the wider campaign to the likes of Lord Calgar and Chief Librarian Tigurius, but here he was in his element. Drop invasions were his meat and drink.

He was made to conquer, and conquer he would.

The tau squadrons were coming back fast, veering around the tall antennae of a comms building for another pass. The two rearmost craft detached disc-like drones, machine intelligences much like those Sicarius had encountered on Vespertine. Their underslung ion guns thickened the firepower already searing the air.

Sicarius kept in the foremost pilot’s blind spot until the last moment, then launched up hard at top speed to catch its left wing and scrabble atop it. Gripping the front of the wing tight, he drew his Talassarian broadsword, thumbed the activation rune, and carved away the cockpit with a single broad sweep. Blood flew from the bisected head of the pilot inside. The fighter’s veering arc slowly turned into a dive.

‘Meagre creatures, these,’ said the sergeant, letting go of the wing and allowing himself to slide free. ‘Even weaker

than the ground clades.'

'Sergeant,' came the vox from his squadmate Ionsian. 'Inbound fighters.'

'Mark them for me,' said Sicarius, drawing his pistol as he fell. Energy weapon fire spat through the air towards him, but he twisted away from it.

'Now, sergeant!' said Ionsian, boosting past to draw the fire of the enemy pilot.

Sicarius' target-runes flashed bright. He raised his plasma pistol and pulled the trigger, its grip painfully hot even through the ceramite banding of his gauntlet. His shot was true. It took a passing fighter under the nosecone, burning through its lightweight alien alloys to consume the tau inside.

The aircraft wobbled, veered, and crashed into the vanes of the distant communications array with force enough to tear the entire structure down into the battle below.

Numitor would have enjoyed that wrecking ball display, thought Sicarius, checking the chrono runes in his helm.

It was almost a shame he was taking so long to join in.

Sicarius took in the rest of the Eighth as they invaded the city, some by gunship, others by bulk lander. They were reinforced right and left by their warrior kin from the battle companies. Drop pods hurtled out of the skies, smashing through the alien hyperplastic of the tau hexodomes to release Space Marine squads into the smooth suburban landscapes beneath. Their assault had caught the tau unprepared. Small wonder; the brute force and speed of a Space Marine planetstrike was almost impossible to counter.

'Numitor, attend me,' voxed Sicarius, 'I cannot see you, brother.'

*'Attend you? I think not,' crackled the reply. 'Besides, we took a detour. Look to the intersection nearest the reservoir.'*

'Ah yes,' said Sicarius, signalling his squad to form up around him. 'Got you. How fares the slaughter?'

‘It is everything I had hoped for.’

Sicarius gave a short bark of laughter. ‘Good hunting, then,’ he replied, ‘though I can see this being over far too quickly.’

‘There’s a whole planet of them, Cato. You will get your chance to shine.’

‘There’s a small empire, *Jorus*, not one paltry planet,’ replied Sicarius. ‘And likely not a single decent swordsman amongst them.’

‘We’ll have a challenge on our hands soon enough,’ said Numitor. ‘Take an altitude. Look at the interlinks of each district and tell me what you see.’

Sicarius signed off without a word. He triggered his jump pack, launching himself up to the landing platform jutting from a geometric hexodome and scanning the interstitial spars, brow furrowed.

Within each spar was a long, silver magnorail transmotive. The vehicles were moving with impressive speed. Sicarius could make out tau warriors inside the nearest. Hundreds stood in each transport, strapping on grenade harnesses and checking their long-barrelled guns. Couched atop each cylindrical section of the transmotive were the xenos warsuits the Eighth had encountered on Vespertine. The soulless creations combined the firepower of a Dreadnought with the agility of an Assault Marine.

Thousands of tau soldiers inbound, then. Sicarius counted the transmotive carriages and did a quick calculation. Tens of thousands, in fact.

Without exception, they were converging on the Eighth Company’s landing site.

Shas’o Dal’yth Ko’vash Kha’drel, better known as Commander Bravestorm, blink-clicked a hostiles filter on his battlesuit’s command suite. His sensors detected barely a hundred enemy warriors in this hex. They were so few in number, these proud Space Marine invaders. It was almost a shame the war would be over so soon.

Thus far, fewer than two *gue'ron'sha* cadre-equivalents – known to the Imperials as companies, according to his autotrans – had made planetfall. By the time the last interhex transmotive had reached each dropsite the Space Marine invasion would be contained, cauterised and eradicated. Bravestorm had ensured his counter-crisis cadres were inbound as swiftly as possible. In the space of a single *rotaa*, the earth caste would have completed any necessary renovations, and Dal'yth society would return to normal. Did the humans truly expect to strike at the heart of the tau empire with so meagre a force, and somehow prevail?

The commander checked his cadre's readiness symbols. All teams showed gold, whether buckled into the interior of the transmotive, or – as he and his other battlesuit teams were – ejector-locked into their roof cradles. His prototype XV8-02 shifted gently as the transmotive shot through a hex interstice to take a more direct course to the primary site of the invasion. The velocity barely changed, the transport's progress silent apart for a low thrum of electromagnetic generators.

Bravestorm had originally assumed the Imperium's blunt attack was a feint, a distraction to keep the fire caste occupied whilst the true strike fell elsewhere. He had apportioned his forces accordingly, distributing them evenly across the planet's surface and coordinating with the other castes to ensure they could react quickly wherever the real blow fell. And yet no matter how many times he ran the air caste's data through his analyticals, the answer was the same. Every orbital craft of the *gue'la* fleet had aligned with a major city, and fired its invasion force vertically downwards with only the most perfunctory of bombardments to pave the way. Bulk landers were following much the same trajectory in their wake. The attack had all the subtlety of a meteor shower.

'They strike at Dal'yth's heart,' Bravestorm transmitted over the command-level cadre-net, 'just as a savage kroot

might jab his spear at a battlesuit's chest, unaware that there, the armour is thickest of all.'

'Their tactics are primitive, honoured Bravestorm,' came the response from Commander Farsight. The famous warrior's stoic features glowed on a sub-screen in Bravestorm's command cocoon. 'But some of their technologies are very advanced. Their interstellar transit speaks of far greater minds behind their warrior castes.'

'I concur. I shall neutralise those invaders nearest my location and transmit my findings on the cadre-net for further analysis.'

'Do so, with my thanks. I have every confidence in your resolve.'

Bravestorm eye-flicked a shorthand sign of respect. Today, he and his fellow commanders would impart a lesson, a lesson the defenders of Vespertine, caught out by the sheer alacrity of that first Imperial assault, had failed to teach. It was an immortal truth - one Bravestorm had learned shortly after birth and had been quietly reinforcing since he was old enough to speak.

It was the tau race's destiny to rule the stars, and theirs alone.

'Entering effective weapons range in sixty-two microdecs, commander,' said Bravestorm. 'All teams primed and ready.'

'Excellent. I am making haste to join you,' replied Farsight. 'That which we presume to conquer, we must first understand.'

'Master Puretide still speaks through his pupil.'

'Of course. As he speaks through us all. For the Greater Good, Commander Bravestorm.'

'For the *Tau'va*.' Bravestorm made the sign of the impeccable kill and signed off.

The magnorail transmotive carved around another interstice at blurring speed. Atop its ejection cradle, Bravestorm fought to keep his sensor suite working smoothly. The panorama of war unfolding before them was

so intense even his hyper-advanced battlesuit was struggling to keep up with the ballistics data flooding through it.

The air above the invasion site was filled with flak bursts, tracer fire, engine contrails and hurtling Imperial drop craft. The crystalline shards of broken hexodomes speared into the twilight. Each had been shattered by one of the pod-like landers the gue'ron'sha warships had hurled towards Gel'bryn City.

The headlong assault was proving an effective stratagem, brutal in its simplicity. Maximum force delivered at a concentrated point was a modus the fire caste made extensive use of themselves. The Imperials sought to break the shield wall, and once inside, capitalise. Though Bravestorm felt awkward and unclean at the thought, the directness of the Imperial mindset appealed to part of his soul. No negotiation here, no dance of veiled threat and false intelligence – just war, pitiless and direct.

Still, initial success or no, this alleged 'Imperium of Man' would pay for its temerity in crossing the Damocles Gulf. They had sent a vanguard of scarcely a few thousand to conquer a major sept world; to Bravestorm's mind, that did not reflect well on the military strength of this would-be rival empire. Though it had struck hard at first, the human armada would likely be broken within a matter of weeks.

The interhex transmotive passed a burning, shattered dome. Flickering explosions lit the black smoke within.

'Here,' transmitted Bravestorm. 'We begin here.'

The transport slowed hard, shuddering as a series of small explosions was stitched along its length. Blue-armoured figures emerged from the smoke-shrouded sidings, bulky sidearms raised.

'All teams deploy as briefed,' said Bravestorm to the fire warrior teams inside.

Atop the transmotive, dozens of ejection cradles hissed open. Each battlesuit was hurled skyward in an explosion of

hydraulic vapour. Below, doorports slid open to allow strike teams of tau to disembark.

The air shimmered as jet packs engaged en masse. Forming up in a shallow wedge behind their commander, the battlesuits soared towards the gue'ron'sha troopers on the sidings, shoulder-mounted missile pods laying down suppressive fire to cover their advance.

The Imperials raised their guns, the blocky weapons booming as they sent miniature rockets roaring up. In Bravestorm's control cocoon, incoming fire alerts bipped insistently. Again these simple-minded invaders had attacked the largest, most obvious threat – and in doing so, wasted their best chance for survival.

The commander's gun drones moved to interpose, but Bravestorm eye-flicked them back. His XV8-02 could handle this. A heartbeat later his shield generator flared as three detonations boomed across its convex disc of energy. He deactivated the shield for the fourth shot, instead turning his shoulder unit into its path. The earth caste would thank him for the ballistics data.

The projectile detonated with a loud, punching impact, but did little more than strip a patch of synth paint from the prototype suit's iridium alloy. Rapid beeps of alarm sounded as an anti-tank missile shot from the commander's western flank. Bravestorm braced in his cocoon as the missile thumped into his suit's waist joint, sending him reeling with the blast of kinetic force but ultimately doing no more than superficial damage.

Bravestorm smiled as he brought his battlesuit back upright. He liked a fair fight more than most.

But this would have to do.

'Mass-reactive projectiles incoming, standard Imperial pattern,' said Bravestorm over the cadre-net. 'Dangerous, but within the tolerances of our combat armour. Fire warriors advance. Team Mal'caor, target the missile trooper at appended coordinates.'

Symbols of assent blinked on Bravestorm's command

suite. Below, the Imperial warriors darted left and right, firing as they moved inside the smoke of the burning hexodome. Bravestorm levelled his plasma rifles as one, his blacksun filter effortlessly piercing the pall. He swept his legs forward to trigger a firing stance and took the shots.

Two gue'ron'sha troops collapsed, heads burnt down to cauterised stumps. A barrage of plasma from the rest of his team sent three more Space Marines down hard.

One of the blue-armoured warriors hurled a grenade straight upward into the battlesuit team's midst. It detonated a hand's breadth from Bravestorm's jump unit. The blast failed to so much as dent his suit's armour, but it tore gun drone Oe-ven-3 from the sky. The helper's death was a sad loss, thought Bravestorm, but acceptable, and soon to be avenged.

Nearby, a concentrated volley thudded into Shas'ui Vosdao's battlesuit. A string of explosions tore it apart in a bloom of flame. Bravestorm cried out in denial as he steadied his flight, rolling shoulder-first in midair. He passed over the Space Marines, his plasma rifles spitting their fury. No straight kill shots this time, but a dual strike that took the legs and throwing arm from the grenade-hurler. Let him dwell on the nature of retribution as he dies in the dirt, thought the commander.

Bravestorm's thrust/vector suite glowed gold as he came down into a piston-cushioned crouch, his team following to take the ground behind him. Weapon-limbs fired bursts of plasma and stabbing salvos of missiles wherever the telltale blue of the foe was glimpsed through the smoke. The engagement was fast becoming a one-sided firefight that not even the boldest intruder could hope to win.

The surviving Space Marines withdrew towards the heart of the ruined hexodome, firing a hail of bolts at Bravestorm as they went. Every one of them hit home. The majority did little more than knock the commander's balance for a moment, but the last ricocheted upward from his knee, bypassing the shield generator's disc and detonating inside

his waist joint. The explosion tore a tiny fissure in the battlesuit's side, sending a splinter of shrapnel into the control cocoon to sizzle into Bravestorm's own thigh with a pungent smell of cooked meat.

The commander clenched his rear teeth for a moment as stimulant injectors pricked needles into the back of his neck. His suit's self-heal mechanisms had already gone to work, contingency cells bursting to fill the wound at its waist with bluish caulk that swiftly set iron-hard. Stimulant injectors took effect, the pain washing away in a wave of cooling numbness as the commander laid down a sidelong volley of plasma. It was intended as suppressive fire, but it cored a nearby Space Marine's torso nonetheless.

Ahead, the Space Marines had all but disappeared inside the ruins. Over half their squad lay dead, corpses strewn in the rubble. The whole exchange had been over before the first of the cadre's fire warrior teams had made it into pulse carbine range.

Ten Space Marines, sent to conquer an entire hexodome. The arrogance of it beggared belief.

'Today, my comrades,' transmitted Bravestorm over the cadre-net, striding forward with his weapons systems levelled at the breach, 'today, we shall play the role of teacher. All teams, pursue and destroy.'

A high-pitched whine from above became a roar, then a deafening boom. The ground shook hard, jolting Bravestorm even with his command cocoon's dampeners set to combat mode. A bulky blue invasion pod had crashed into the smoking undergrowth of the magnorail siding behind them, large enough to hold a Broadside battlesuit with room to spare. Ramp-like hull sections fell flat against the earth, clouds of violet dust swirling around them. A barrage of flak burst outward, baffling Bravestorm's sensor suite with a storm of light and noise. On reflex the commander shot upward in a graceful leap, repulsor jet pack carrying him above the blue-armoured craft. The rest

of his team followed his example without needing to be told – all bar the hotheaded Shas'ui Fal'ras, who instead levelled his fusion blaster and plasma rifle at the craft's interior.

The thing that stormed out of the invasion pod was truly monstrous. Twice the size of a battlesuit and wider than it was tall, it was a hideous caricature of the Hero's Mantle. It looked like a walking tank rather than a piloted suit, and it had articulated claws in place of ranged weapon systems.

'Some kind of heavy war drone,' transmitted Bravestorm. 'No living thing could survive that impact. Analyse at range, then take it down.'

Splayed feet clanged as the machine crunched down the hull plates of its insertion craft. Flak blasted from frontal launchers that bracketed a slab-like midsection. Fal'ras fell backwards, opening fire. His plasma bolts sizzled ineffectually across the machine's monolithic hull. Bravestorm and the rest of his team added fire from above. The volley scorched the thing, melting small dents into its hide, but achieved little more.

Fal'ras waited for it to clear the transport and fired his fusion blaster, confident of a point-blank kill. Searing columns of superheated energy shot out, gouging a deep groove into the thing's hull and cooking off its remaining frag launchers.

The machine did not fall.

Giant claws shot forward with piston quickness. There was a tearing shriek of metal, and Fal'ras' battlesuit was caught, impaled upon the whirring grinder inside the thing's right fist. The shas'ui came apart in hideous indignity, suit and pilot mingled horribly in sprays of sparking electricity and hot blood.

Lumbering forward, the Imperial machine made a clumsy grab for Bravestorm's leg. The commander smoothly rose out of reach before dropping sharply behind it, kicking the machine whilst it was mid-step in an attempt to overbalance it. It was like striking a loaded freight cube. He sent plasma bolts searing into the pistons at its hip,

hoping to take its leg and send it sprawling. The white-hot energies splattered away without effect.

The thing was gathering speed, charging for the staggered lines of tau infantry that had formed up near the transmotive. The strike teams pock-marked its frontal armour with streams of plasma, and Bravestorm's team added their fire. The combined fusillade turned the machine's armour from cobalt blue to burned and blasted black, but it charged forwards nonetheless.

'Controlled retreat!' shouted Bravestorm over the cadre-net. 'It's iridium-plated!'

The fire warriors moved backwards in good order, some climbing back into the transmotive as others hurled photon grenades to buy them time. The devices detonated with blinding flashes, but they had as much effect as a pin-torch shone at a rampaging krootox.

A pug-nosed Imperial gunship roared overhead, its chugging anti-personnel cannons cutting down the fire warriors gathered close by the transmotive cylinder. The team's cohesion broke, but their passage was hindered by the sprawling corpses of their comrades, and the resulting confusion cost them dear. The metal beast bore down on them, its footsteps shaking the earth.

Bravestorm punched his weapons yield to full, siphoning every iota of power from his shield generator to pour shots into the machine's flank, but the thing barrelled through plasma fire and burst cannon volley alike. He had moments left before it reached the infantry. The thought of the slaughter that would ensue made the commander's gorge rise.

Bravestorm boosted over the thing's head, spinning mid-leap to land with a crunch right in its path.

'Fight me then, monster!' he shouted, his speakers blaring his challenge loud. He levelled a double shot at the hulking thing's vision slit. The salvo did little more than scorch it. The war machine took the bait nonetheless, its entire torso swivelling at the waist as it swiped its demolition claw in a

backhand arc. The disc of Bravestorm's shield took most of the impact, but the blow connected hard nonetheless. His battlesuit flew backwards to crunch bodily into the transmotive's transit cylinder, the impact caving in the reinforced metal of its side.

Muddled pain flared in Bravestorm's head, his eyesight blurring even as his control cocoon's systems glitched and shorted. His damage display suite pulsed red, alert chimes ringing insistently. The commander rerouted power, struggling to get the suit back online.

He could feel the Imperial death-machine stomping towards him, deadly purpose in every earth-shaking step.

The sensor suite fizzed back to life, and Bravestorm set his jaw as he levelled another volley. Still it did nothing. The monster had to be built specifically to resist plasma.

The thing was lumbering on, fire warriors scrabbling away from it on all sides. He did not blame them. They had two choices - flee, or die where they stood. Though he felt revulsion to admit it, perhaps the scattering infantry had the right idea.

Wan light glinted from the Imperial walker as it stormed in close, only fifteen feet away now. Its gauntlet fist flexed wide, the drills of its demolition claw whirring.

Bravestorm crouched and triggered his jump jets, shoulder-barging the thing with all the thrust he could muster. He rebounded hard from its torso, triggering his repulsor jets to skid away through the sparse undergrowth of the magnorail siding.

The machine tried to correct its charge, but its momentum was too great. It ploughed into the transmotive with such force it bowled an entire transit section over, twisting the rest of the conveyor along its length with a hideous shriek of alloys.

Bravestorm made use of the reprieve to cast about himself, searching desperately for a weapon that could deal with such heavy armour. Above him, the aerial struggle for supremacy raged on, as many contrails of humanity's

pollutants discolouring the skies as there were clean white traces of the air caste. From the west, an Imperial gunship screamed in towards them for a strafing run, guns levelled.

This time Bravestorm was ready.

‘Form a line on these coordinates!’ Symbols of request-clarification blipped on his command suite. ‘For the Tau’va! Do it now!’

Bravestorm vaulted into the air, spinning to land atop the nearest transit cylinder’s ejection cradles. His team redeployed into a line leading away from the transmotive. Just as Bravestorm had suspected, the Imperial pilot could not resist the choice enfilade in front of him. The gunship thudded fat shells into Bravestorm’s Crisis team, knocking two of them down – but in doing so, it aligned itself with the unstoppable Imperial walker beyond.

Bravestorm’s jump jets flared as he leapt from the roof of the transmotive to soar on a collision course with the gunship. The fist-like prow passed within arm’s reach. At that precise moment the commander opened fire at point-blank range into its cockpit. The plasma bolts burned the pilot to molten sludge just as the gunship’s wing slammed hard into Bravestorm’s side. Tremendous forces tore at him – it felt as if his limbs were being wrenched from his body, but incredibly the suit’s iridium held fast.

The gunship fared much worse. With its wing buckled and its cockpit ablaze, its strafing run turned into a headlong dive. Flames coursed along its fuselage as the bull-nosed gunship hurtled down to earth. Just as the Imperial walker was freeing itself from the stricken transmotive, the ruined aircraft slammed right into it with catastrophic force.

A mangled confusion of gunship, walker and transit cylinder slewed over the magnorail track before detonating spectacularly. The explosion lit the sky, Bravestorm’s displays auto-dimming a moment before a mushrooming cloud of smoke billowed from the carnage. The twisted bodies of the gunship’s Space Marine passengers mingled with the corpses of those fire warriors caught in the transit

cylinder, tumbling down the siding in bloody confusion.

Bravestorm landed clumsily, his balance taken by the impact of the gunship's wing. He overlaid a hostiles filter as he righted himself, sending the data pulsing outward. Those of his battlesuit team still standing after the Imperial craft's pass went to work. Their plasma rifles, all but useless against the heavy walker, blasted apart the dazed Space Marines that were struggling from the gunship's wreckage.

More fire warriors emerged from the transit cylinders to either side of the wreck, pulse carbine shots cutting down those *gue'ron'sha* emerging from the hexodome's perimeter in support of their fallen kin. Here and there a wounded Imperial warrior returned fire, mass-reactive bolts punching tau infantry into the dirt, but in doing so they signed their own death warrants. Bravestorm eye-flicked target designators one after another, his weapon systems systematically destroying the remaining invaders whenever they revealed their locations. Every time his threat sensor chimed, another Space Marine was cut down.

'Commander,' came the transmission from his trusted *saz'nami* aide Et'rel, 'there are several invaders here that are well beyond threat parameters, but still technically alive.'

'Leave them,' said Bravestorm, his battlesuit picking through the rubble. 'They fought with courage and pose no further danger to us. Secure a perimeter. I have data to accrue.'

The burning wreckage of the transmotive had buckled in a great loop that dangled over the siding, and the ruined gunship had flipped over to expose the torn passenger bay beneath. In the middle of the carnage was the heavy walker, half-crumpled by the tremendous impact of the crashing aircraft.

Bravestorm hovered closer, his sensor suite on high alert for any sign of threat. There was information to be harvested here, information the earth caste would value

highly. Perhaps there were materials the Imperium made use of that surpassed even the hardness of his battlesuit's iridium alloy. Unlikely, but O'Vesa would never forgive him if he didn't at least try to find out.

Milky liquid drizzled from the crippled war machine's chest unit, bubbling and popping in the electrical fires swathing its legs. Lubricant, thought Bravestorm. He zoomed in. The fluid was shot through with blood.

Something was moving inside the torso unit. Something broken and sick.

Bravestorm held his plasma rifle steady and extruded a hand from his battlesuit's shield gauntlet. Gripping the blackened metal of the machine's midsection, he carefully lifted the flaking hull plate up and outward, leaning forward to peer inside.

The creature that stared back made his breath catch.

A twisted and grotesque figure was trapped inside, all barrel chest and atrophied stumps. It stared up at him from sunken sockets, its undisguised hatred almost palpable. Wires and tubes penetrated its horrifically abused body in a hundred places. It wheezed, red-black fluids spilling from a broken jaw that worked and gummed as if it could click back into place through willpower alone.

A glut of milky liquid poured from around its sutured waist as it jerked, spitting a goblet of half-clotted blood onto Bravestorm's ochre paintwork. Bravestorm's sensor suite performed a threat analysis as the liquid burned through his synth layer. The clot was laced with a potent acid.

The commander recoiled as the thing's stink was filtered through his olfactory relay, and the battlesuit jerked upright in response. His autotrans flashed, spool-script rendering the creature's slurred words in the tau lexicon.

'- -DIE IN PAIN - - FOREIGN WORM THING - -'

Standing upright, the commander placed a hoof-like foot upon the creature's torso and triggered the punch-cylinder under its sole. A thin tube of titanium thumped into the thing's ruined flesh before withdrawing with a neat click.

The device was intended for geological analysis, installed by the earth caste to be used whenever the tau set foot on a new world, but Bravestorm knew from experience it could read biological information just as well.

Keeping one eye on the plasma rifle's designator, he used the other to scan the assessment screen in the rounded corner of his cocoon. The necrotic thing was human, or a close derivative. Extensive tissue damage, rejuvenation scars, and...

The commander looked again in horror.

Somehow, the vile thing was over six thousand years old.

A macabre realisation crept through Bravestorm's mind. This abomination had been trapped in its armoured war-coffin long before the tau's ancestors had first emerged from their caves. What manner of enemy were they fighting upon Dal'yth?

'- - KILL ME - - VEXING FOOL - -' spooled the autotrans.  
'- - KILL ME - - OR I SHALL HUNT YOU UNTIL DEATH -  
-'

Bravestorm triggered his plasma rifle, and the creature met its final oblivion.



# CHAPTER TWO

## INTENSIFICATION/FIRE AND CARNAGE

The Eighth Company was under fire, beyond punishing in its intensity. Battlesuits hunted the smoke, armed not with the rotary cannons the Ultramarines had encountered on the outlying tau worlds, but with cylindrical weapons that spat bolts of sizzling plasma. Whenever an Assault squad leaped high it was hit by converging streams of fire, and fresh casualties would hurtle back down to smash into the xenos synthcrete. Despite the early gains of the Imperial invasion's initial attack, Operation Pluto was losing momentum fast.

Sicarius felt impatience burning at his mind. The plexiglass of the domes offered little in the way of workable cover, and the tau warsuits seemed able to pierce the fog of war with ease. His superior, Captain Atheus, had not expected so sudden a counter-attack. None of them had, in truth. With every passing minute another magnorail transmotive disgorged a battalion of tau before heading back the way it had come to collect more reinforcements. Numitor was right. The planet's defenders were converging upon them from every direction, and at speed.

There was a crackling scream of engines, and Brother Dalaton hurtled from the sky to bounce, skid and slump

against an abstract tau sculpture on Sicarius' flank. Vaporised blood steamed from the gaping hole in the Space Marine's gut. The stink of the wound was awful. Dalaton reached up towards his sergeant for a moment, shuddered, and fell back dead.

They had to redeploy. Now.

'Captain,' voxed Sicarius. 'We have to leave the landing site, by any means necessary. Apothecary Drekos, we have fallen battle-brothers in Plaza Sec Alpha.'

*'Agreed,' voxed back Atheus. 'Numitor, Antelion, disperse immediately. Concentration of assets has become our foe.'*

Sicarius was already running, waving his squad to keep low as they pounded along behind him. He saw Numitor break from the smoke across the plaza, making for the sleek white transit cylinder that had slid to a halt within the nearest interstitial spar. Sicarius broke into a full sprint, each stride spanning ten feet or more as he bounded alongside the accelerating transmotive. He drew his plasma pistol and fired, the sunburst of energy burning through the interstice wall to leave a gaping hole with glowing amber edges.

Sicarius flung himself forward, triggered his pack, and boosted across the plaza less than an arm's length from the ground. He hammered headlong through the wound in the tunnel's side and into its cylindrical interior, rebounding from the mag-transport beyond to smash awkwardly into the rubble strewn across the spar's floor. Instinctively, Sicarius grabbed hold of a jutting white bar and pulled upright. His legs had been a hand's breadth from the electromagnetic rails that would have fried his power armour's systems and left him trapped for any passing xenos to slay.

Up ahead, Sicarius saw Numitor batter through a wall section with a strong swing of his power fist. Three of the sergeant's squad put their shoulders into the breach, and the wall caved completely. Across the vox Sicarius heard Numitor laugh in satisfaction as rubble and dust cascaded

down, scattering towards the magnorail transmotive inside.

A low hum filled the interhex corridor, strange energies making the hair on Sicarius' forearms prickle inside his battleplate. Though empty, the xenos transport had powered up and was beginning to move.

'Get inside,' voxed Sicarius, 'all of you.' He loosed another shot from his plasma pistol, its incandescent energies burning into the transmotive's flank. The pistol's machine-spirit was protesting against two maximum shots without a proper cooldown. It did its job nonetheless. The shot melted a wide aperture into the transit cylinder, and Sicarius barged his way through without breaking stride.

Two of his squad made it through behind him, despite the transport's smooth acceleration. The rest were nowhere to be seen. As Numitor and his battle-brothers wrenched their way inside the transit cylinder, Sicarius turned back with his face twisted in aggravation behind his helm.

'Glavius! Veletan! Kaetoros!' barked the sergeant. 'What's taking so long?'

'Under heavy fire, sergeant,' came the response. 'Pinned down. Colnid and Denturis too.'

'Then you've missed your chance,' said Sicarius, his lips twisting. The transport was smoothly gliding away from the dropsite, leaving the majority of his squad in its wake. 'Rendezvous later if you can.' Sicarius shot a sidelong glance at Squad Numitor. The sergeant was looking right back at him, helm cocked in a silent question.

Six of Squad Numitor, to his three.

Not good enough.

The transmotive was accelerating, pulling away from the war zone as it glided into the suburbs of the city.

After a long silence, Numitor spoke.

'The steersman's unaware he's carrying hostiles.'

'If there is a steersman,' replied Sicarius.

'Hmm. Good point,' said Numitor, pulling flinders of mangled metal from the scorched exterior of his power fist. 'If this is guided by a false intelligence, so much the better.'

It'll be blindly heading back for reinforcements, taking us right into a tau war nest.'

Tau society was infested with weapons-grade drone intelligences; Sicarius and his squad had found that out the hard way on the other side of the Damocles Gulf. Their blasphemous creation of artificial life was widely seen as another compelling reason to eradicate the entire race.

As if Sicarius needed any more of a motive.

The sergeant smiled grimly, imagining the violence he would soon unleash. With luck, the transport would likely be taking them right to a tau military barracks, delivering them into the depths of a prime stronghold and giving them a chance to slaughter senior command personnel before they realised they were under attack.

'The split will be worth it,' said Sicarius, more to himself than anyone else.

'They reacted fast, overall,' said Numitor, motioning for his squadmates to take sentinel positions at the transit cylinder's edges whilst they reloaded their bolt pistols. 'Far faster than we had anticipated. Maybe they were forewarned. Psykers?'

'I doubt it,' said Sicarius. 'We've not come up against any so far, not on this side of the gulf or the other.' His lip curled in thinly veiled disgust. 'Tigurius' report to Atheus indicated that these tau are psychically inert.'

'Dead inside, then,' said Numitor quietly.

Sicarius' eyes narrowed.

'Does that disappoint you, sergeant?'

'Not at all. It's a relief, in fact. Their tech-mastery is impressive, hard enough to counter even without psychics to back it up.'

'Their weaponry is powerful indeed, and not to be underestimated,' said Sicarius, his words cold as slabs of iron. 'But it will be torn apart by the maelstrom of Imperial vengeance.'

'You sound a lot like Chaplain Uticos,' said Numitor, his tone slightly mocking. 'Equipment check, brothers.'

Sicarius turned away too, a knot of anger tight in his chest. The tau would learn not to rouse the wrath of a Talassarian.

And if Jorus Numitor learned his place in the meantime, so much the better.

The *Silent Aftermath* cruised over the water of the Dal'ythian Prime Reservoir, the Orca's blocky silhouette dancing over the rippling waves below. Bathed in the lambent glow of the transport's hold was a customised XV8 Crisis suit: statuesque, lethal, and as red as arterial blood. Its weapons systems hummed as its pilot test-ran engagement sequences and made the final adjustments to his calibration arrays.

On the battlesuit's sensor suite, a tiny blue light winked brightly.

'Breach alert,' said Commander Farsight, patching through the relevant data-package to the *Aftermath's* pilot. 'Transmotive one-two-one, out of Gel'bryn City. Set a course to intercept, Y'eldi.'

'As you wish, Commander,' said the air caste pilot. The Orca's hold filled with a gentle hissing as its quad-block engines tilted obediently. 'Although you realise this will take us away from the dropsite, delaying our research mission for an indeterminate period.'

'I appreciate that, Kor'ui Bork'an Y'eldi,' said Farsight patiently. 'We must not be hasty to engage these humans before we understand them. They are more cunning than they look.'

'I heard they were much like armoured kroot-apes,' said the pilot. 'Strong, but stupid.'

'Not so,' replied Farsight. 'Amidst the sound and fury of their main assault, they are sending a covert strike team to counter-attack via our own reinforcement channels. In doing so they have demonstrated a dangerous intellect.'

'I see. But they will fail.'

'They will. Nonetheless, it is a sound strategy. Presumably

they hope to locate our high command. By forcing us to shield our body, they hope to strike our exposed throat.'

'With the greatest respect, commander, I feel you give these brutes too much credit. Could the transmotive not simply have taken damage upon the front line?'

'I calibrated the breach alerts to respond to mass, not force. Besides,' said Farsight, 'I myself have employed similar infiltrations. Thus I must rule it out before continuing. Rest assured that Commander Shadowsun would do the same, Y'eldi.'

'I offer contrition, of course. I do not doubt your wisdom for a moment.'

Farsight blipped the symbol of the calming tide to put the matter at rest.

'We are now in macro-sensor range,' he said. 'Let us combine our processors.'

'Of course. Data communion underway.'

Farsight's distribution array expanded to show the transmotives allocated to reinforcement duty, a web of hexagons negotiated by dozens of transports conveying fire caste assets to the front line. One of the icons was steely blue instead of gold, delicate tracteries of tau text spooling next to it as its drone pilot transmitted anomaly reports.

An eye-flick, and the symbolic representation hardened into a direct visual feed. Smoke trailed like streamers in the transmotive's wake. Two large holes had been ripped in its westward hull. The vehicle's transit cylinders were empty as it retraced its path across the Prime Reservoir - empty but for hulking blue shapes standing tall in its interior.

'As I thought,' said Farsight. 'Dispatch the drones to keep them occupied, then open the hull doors. It is time I fought these gue'ron'sha face to face.'

The xenos transmotive hurtled across the tau planet at impressive speed. The wind howled in the damaged transit section with hurricane force, but it did not discomfit Numitor. Outside the broad panels of its synthglass, the

smoking pillars and flickering fires of the dropsite receded into the distance. The shattered city was soon replaced by a vast azure reservoir, the same body of water that Numitor had noted on his drop. It was so large it took up seven of the hexagons dividing the planet's crust.

The transmotive shot across the reservoir's surface, held aloft by a long support structure a little like a Macraggian viaduct. Each pillar led down to what Numitor surmised to be a water-driven power station at its base. Despite the superficial similarities, the smooth white order of the xenos structures showed no real grandeur or craftsmanship. The constructions were soulless, nothing but a gallery of shallow simulacra thronged with labour-saving devices that promised only complacency and sloth.

Numitor shook his head. These aliens were so proud of their accomplishments, so infatuated with their own technology. It would bring about their downfall, just like it had brought down the legendary eldar before them. He could hardly wait to see their empire fall. Though he would never openly admit it to Sicarius, Numitor took more pleasure in casting the works of the alien into the dust than he did in killing the xenos themselves.

There was a flicker of red in his peripheral vision, just for a moment. Numitor snapped his helm round and zoomed in. Fresh contrails hung in the air behind a distant hexodome.

'Brothers, make ready,' he voxed, the caution in his voice bringing his squad to full alert. 'I believe we are—'

The synthglass at the far end of the transit cylinder shattered inwards. A storm of energy bolts blazed through the air, several impacting on the shoulders and backpacks of Numitor's squad. Drones, at least six of them. Two of the floating discs were aiming their underslung guns right at him.

The sergeant ducked, firing two shots blind. One of his bolts found its target, detonating to tear the disc into two spinning halves. The other bolt crackled from a force shield projected by the second drone, a nimbus of light

shimmering spherical around it.

Sicarius sprinted past, his jump pack bathing Numitor in a wash of intense heat. The sergeant shot into the broken synthglass, smashing through it and carrying the shielded disc-drone into the machine behind with a loud crunch. His two squadmates followed closely, hammering through the wide oval portal at the transit cylinder's end, blocking all chance of Numitor's squad levelling accurate shots. The sounds of roaring chainswords, booming bolt pistols and crunching fists erupted as Squad Sicarius took the rest of the weapons drones apart.

On instinct, Numitor turned back to the hole he had ripped in the transit cylinder's hull. Something massive and red swept past the aperture – an enemy warsuit came into view, bigger and with a more complex silhouette than those he had encountered before. The sergeant snapped off a shot, but it detonated a metre from its target on a shimmering shield of energy.

The red warsuit extended a hand, gripped onto the front of the transit cylinder, and triggered the oblong weapon system on its right arm. A burning blade of fusion energy shot out, so bright it caused Numitor's autosenses to darken instantly.

The xenos machine swept the energy blade through the link-pistons between the two transport cylinders, cutting the transmotive in half and shearing through the maglev rail beneath. Numitor and his squad were showered with gobbets of molten metal even as they sent bolt rounds shooting towards the warsuit.

A split second later the entire transmotive bucked like a mad stallion, throwing Numitor and his squad violently against the roof. The transport jack-knifed from the rail, twisting drunkenly and jerking as the cylinder sections behind crunched in to concertina its rearmost quarter. Numitor was already making for the rip in the hull, his squad charging shoulders-first through the windows to hurtle in clouds of glassy shrapnel towards the front half of

the transmotive. Brother Crastec was taken by a trio of plasma bolts in mid-air, and a tangle of bloody limbs flailed past Numitor as he fought to correct his flight. Dominastos rattled and slammed inside the demolished transit cylinder behind them, caught in a tangle of metal and unable to escape as it plummeted into the reservoir below.

Sicarius and the remains of his squad levelled a volley at the crimson warsuit as it leapt from a twisted maglev rail to soar over the transmotive's truncated front half. The xenos warrior landed with a metal-buckling crunch atop the roof. Its lance of fusion energy punched through into the transit cylinder below, spearing Austos as he unslung his Phaeton-pattern flamer. Burning embers flew, and the battle-brother was reduced to little more than ash.

Sicarius answered with a plasma pistol shot that punched right through the transmotive's roof. The incandescent energies washed across a dome of force on the other side, a brief but intense flash of blue-white against the gloom.

Numitor's jump pack flashed warning runes in his visor. His full-burn leap had left him almost out of power. He pushed the pack to the absolute limit, arcing down alongside the transmotive as it slowed. Not good, thought Numitor. If the front half of the machine halted completely, they would be stranded in open terrain with no hope of reinforcement. He swung his legs around and mag-clamped to the side of the vehicle, pulling into a gargoyle's crouch with his bolt pistol aimed high.

There was a crimson flash as the xenos warsuit jumped, jet pack flaring, and twisted in mid-air. Its rifle dipped to send lozenges of plasma stabbing at Numitor. He swayed left, taking his own return shot as the killing energies zipped past him. The sergeant's aim was true, and his bolt shell rocketed under the warsuit's hemispherical force shield. It detonated hard, throwing the xenos off balance for a moment. The warsuit fought to stay atop the transit cylinder. Its crackling blade curved down, a wild swing that missed Numitor by a hand's breadth but carved a diagonal

furrow through the roof.

Suddenly Sicarius was there, bursting through the hole his plasma pistol had burned in the transit cylinder roof to swing his Talassarian blade hard at the warsuit's waist. The xenos raised the humming disc shield on its arm, and the sergeant's broadsword was deflected in a cascade of blinding light.

Numitor took his chance, a short push from his jump pack hurling him upwards under the tau's guard. His power fist connected hard with the warsuit's shoulder, its disruption field flaring on impact. The uppercut had enough force to tear open a tank. The arm projecting the warsuit's energy blade was ripped free in a shower of sparks as the xenos warrior was flung backwards hard, electric blue flame gouting from the ruin of its shoulder. It soared sidelong from the transmotive, jet pack blazing intermittently, but the disruptive energies of Numitor's blow still danced across its torso, and it could not correct its flight.

Arcing down, the warsuit hit the water of the reservoir below like a boulder flung from a catapult.

'Good solid hit,' said Sicarius. 'You got the scum.'

'It cost us dearly,' said Numitor. 'If they're all like that, we may be in more trouble than we thought.'

'That was no line trooper, Sergeant Numitor,' said Sicarius, a half-smile upon his lips. 'That was their war leader.'

Commander Farsight's battlesuit sank through the water, its limbs inert and its sensor panels black. Within the control cocoon, O'Shovah's fingers danced amidst firefly swarms of rogue data. He salvaged what he could from those electronic suites shorted out by the gue'ron'sha's energy gauntlet, and locked down the rest.

'They have disruptor fields,' Farsight muttered darkly as he ran cauterisation programs. 'Crude but effective.' His heart rate was elevated from the fight, his blood singing hot in his veins, but his focus remained absolute.

It had to.

Water gushed in from the twisted hole of the battlesuit's missing arm, splattering hard across Farsight's shoulder and neck. The XV8's wound-sealant - a fast-acting caulking system - had shorted out altogether, and he could feel cold liquid rising to cover his feet. If he could not get the systems back online in the next few seconds he would drown. It was no more complicated than that.

Farsight's XV8 was no ordinary Crisis suit. Amongst dozens of improvements, it had an advanced hazard suite, installed during the latter days of the Arkunasha War. The nictating membranes that sealed off his jet vents had been designed to keep out rust-storm particles, but they worked just as well against water. Without them, his suit's engines would likely have already flooded. Still, even when bone dry the engines were no use without power.

The commander searched the corners of his mind for every fragment of battlesuit science he could recall. Water flowed around the backs of his knees, chilling in its coldness, as he went over every military demonstration and procedural lecture from the earth caste he had ever witnessed. Each occasion was typified by genius-level complexity, but despite the technical jargon, Farsight had followed every one with great interest. To show that he fully comprehended them would have risked the label *vash'ya*, between spheres, and that state of mind was forbidden. Here, however, it might save his life.

Water crept up to Farsight's waist, its icy chill so intense he could no longer feel his feet. If he started to shiver, his manual dexterity would be lost, and he would be unable to operate the battlesuit at all. For the wearer of the Hero's Mantle, there were few worse foes than intense cold.

Farsight's mind flared with the sudden recall of a contingency technique that O'Vesa had once mentioned in passing. He punched in an override to his subordinate register and turned it to Base Screen, frantically tapping code-blips with quivering fingers. He crunched his hands

into fists, forcing himself to find balance before uncurling them and continuing the program. To make a mistake now was to damn himself to an inglorious death. That would erode the fire caste's morale and damage the Tau'va in the process. It could not be allowed.

The near-freezing water crept up to his throat, and his body started to spasm involuntarily. He grabbed one hand with the other in an attempt to steady it, jabbing in the last of the code with a single finger. It took three tries before he finally pressed execute.

The thrust/vector suite flared into life, the holographic doppelganger that represented his altitude flashing. Reaching into the fires within his soul, he fanned them with painful memories. Tutor Sha'kan'thas scolding him, Ob'lotai gently mocking him, Puretide pushing him to his limit. He would not fail. Not this time.

For a moment, he had focus. It was enough to set his directional jets at a quarter-pulse, two fingers gently increasing the pressure as water crept up to his chin.

The battlesuit's downward drift through the water slowed, then reversed into a gentle rise.

The water lapped at Farsight's lips as he rerouted the power wastage from his missing fusion blaster into his pack's repulsors. He triggered a pre-programmed autopilot and hugged himself hard to conserve what little warmth he had left, feeling the battlesuit lurch upwards, accelerating hard.

The sensor suite shimmered blue as the sonar vanes on its spine echo-located his surroundings. It was imperative that he find the gue'ron'sha warriors. Even should he escape the cold death that threatened to consume him, they were likely waiting above him to land the killing blow. Yet the water level in his cocoon was still rising. He had to ascend, or drown.

A hazy picture resolved upon on his command screens. There was the maglev rail, twisted and broken wreckage dangling to the south, and to the north, the remainder of

the transmotive. Two broad-shouldered silhouettes stood atop the rearmost transit cylinder, outlined in shivering blue.

Farsight took a last deep breath as the water closed over his head, but the autopilot held true.

He burst from the reservoir like a torpedo, shimmering into the light.

Numitor hauled himself onto the transmotive's roof as it slid slowly away from the site of the battle. Sicarius was already atop it, his blade pinning a disc-like shield drone to the cylinder's hull. He wrenched it free with a guttural curse.

'We should find a way to take this thing to solid ground,' said Numitor. 'Link up with the rest of our squads.'

Sicarius did not reply, but held up a cautionary finger whilst keeping his eyes fixed on the reservoir.

A plume of water burst like a geyser at the transmotive's flank. The crimson warsuit shot upwards, water sluicing behind it to form a rainbow of droplets in its wake. Its torso was canted to one side to counteract its missing arm, and the long cylinder of its plasma rifle was pointed right towards them. The weapon system spat white death as the xenos war leader arced towards the transmotive, landing upon the next carriage with a solid clang.

Numitor ducked aside just in time, avoiding the volley. It took Brother Vectas instead. The battle-brother's hoarse bark of pain became a death rattle as his lungs were blasted from his back by the deadly barrage of plasma. Numitor snapped off a shot but the warsuit deflected it easily. With the transmotive slowed to a crawl, it could pick them off at its leisure without fear of reprisal.

Sicarius boosted from the roof, his jump pack sending him flying in a great leap towards their assailant. The plasma rifle's vents glowed white as it sent more shots winging out in a spiralling pattern. Sicarius was forced to take evasive manoeuvres mid-flight, swinging his legs forward and

blasting vertically into the heavens to avoid the incoming fire.

Numitor took his chance. He scooped the sparking disc of the force-field drone from the transit cylinder's roof and leapt, borne upwards on twin plumes of flame. Another plasma volley stuttered in towards him, a wide spread all but impossible to evade. Each finger-sized bolt of energy was powerful enough to kill.

The sergeant aligned the improvised xenotech shield over his pauldron, swearing under his breath as he gunned his pack to maximum.

'Guilliman's oath, I hope this works.'

The plasma bolts splashed across the drone's stuttering forcefield, blinding in their intensity but unable to penetrate the protective disc. A second later, Numitor slammed into the red battlesuit as it was pivoting away. A storm of warring energies swathed them both as the force-field drone and the shield technology of the tau warsuit crackled in a feedback loop, filling the air with the acrid stink of burning electronics.

Numitor shoved hard, trying to earn space enough to land a solid blow. The xenos warrior rolled with the push, batting him sideways with the barrel of its plasma rifle. Then Sicarius dived down to slam feet first into the warsuit's shoulder. It reeled, and the sergeant lashed out with his tempest blade in a diagonal sweep. The tip took half the thing's head in a shower of blue sparks.

There was a blaze of light so harsh that Numitor's autosenses blanked out. His vision returned fast, but not fast enough. Sicarius was casting about for his foe, jump pack blazing intermittently to keep him aloft as he scanned the area for his prey.

Numitor looked up on instinct. There it was - the red warsuit, soaring vertically, drops of water reflecting light like tiny prisms in its wake. High above, a blocky tau aircraft was carving through the skies to intercept the warsuit's course, its four squat engines leaving curved

trails across the sky as it slid into position.

The sergeant checked his gauges, but his thruster fuel reserves were so low there was no way he could intercept. He had to land somewhere safe immediately, even if it was only at the base of one of the viaduct pillars. Given that Sicarius was not already in pursuit, his fellow sergeant evidently had the same problem. The shattered remnants of their Assault squads held their position inside the transmotive.

As the crimson warsuit slipped from their grasp it shook in mid-flight, sparks still trailing from the remains of its bisected head. Rising upwards, it made for the bay doors yawning open at the rear of the turning craft. The xenos warrior matched velocity with impressive skill, water still dripping from its legs in sprays of glittering droplets.

Numitor watched the warsuit as it turned smoothly at the apogee of its high leap, folding into a backwards crouch and leaning into the hold. It was soon swallowed by the gloom of the vehicle's interior. The aircraft made for the horizon as oblong pistons pulled the bay door closed once more, the scattered Ultramarines powerless to stop it.

Numitor caught one last glimpse of the blood-red warsuit before it vanished from sight completely.

It had its plasma rifle raised in a gesture that looked strangely like a salute.

Fluids sluiced from the XV8's purger valves, flooding the *Aftermath's* hold and causing the water level in the control cocoon to drop sharply. Inside, Farsight took great whooping breaths. His lungs were on fire and his whole body burned with intense cold. The battlesuit was shuddering in response, stamping and rattling. The commander managed to eye-flick its disengagement lock and pistons hissed as the suit sagged into standby mode.

Within the control cocoon, Farsight was still in great pain. He saw his pores flaring, tiny pink bubbles frothing in swathes across his exposed skin as the pressure differential

between reservoir and aircraft took its due.

He was not out of the inferno yet. Without decompression, the trauma of his near-drowning would prove fatal in a matter of hours.

'We're flying as low as possible,' said Kor'ui Y'eldi. 'I'll cling to the ground, make a heading back to the *Shas'ar'tol* command site.'

'De... decomp...' stammered Farsight. 'Major cas... facility... Atha'dra...'

'Atha'dra? Affirmed. Altering course now.'

As the last of the water drizzled from Farsight's battlesuit, he completed his data-compile, submitted it to O'Vesa, and allowed himself to black out.



# CHAPTER THREE

## CONSOLIDATION/PUNISHMENT

‘What in the Throne’s name were you two idiots thinking?’

Captain Atheus of the Eighth Company stood at the heart of the Ultramarines command hub, a bombed-out dome that had likely once housed a xenos dignitary. The captain’s embroidered cloak billowed and snapped in the downdraft of the Thunderhawk transporters bringing tanks to the dropsite, and the red horsehair of his crest rippled as the air swirled hot around him.

Numitor and Sicarius could not see their superior officer’s expression, but his stance left them in no doubt as to his mood. He looked as if he was about to lash out, and given the rumours of Atheus’ volatile temper, that might well be the case.

‘Lord Executioner,’ said Sicarius, ‘we dispersed as per your orders, and made use of an opportunity to strike at the heart of the xenos military.’

‘You left half your squad behind, *Sergeant* Sicarius!’ shouted Atheus. ‘And don’t pretend you two had any idea of where that transmotive was headed. Four battle-brothers died as a direct result of your actions. I had to divert a Thunderhawk gunship to unite your squad! The *Sword of Calth*, no less!’

'It was an unforgivable lapse of judgement,' said Numitor, his eyes cast down, 'on both our parts. Although...'

Numitor left the word hanging for a moment.

'Sergeant Numitor,' growled Atheus, 'Do not try my patience further. If you have something to say, say it.'

'Although we acted rashly,' continued Numitor, 'we had a chance to assassinate a key member of their war council. In that, we may have succeeded.'

'Go on,' said Atheus.

'Yes,' interrupted Sicarius before Numitor could answer. 'This one.' He drew his combat knife and threw it end over end across the ruined plaza. It struck one of the xenos propaganda hololiths, tip embedded in the wall behind - an image of a tall tau warrior standing proud before a giant red battlesuit. 'A commander hero of their warrior caste,' continued Sicarius. 'We hounded him to the point of death.'

'I know of that one all too well,' said Atheus. 'Pict-capture footage of his triumphs is projected on the clouds every night. These xenos are fond of telling themselves they are strong.'

Whilst Atheus' attention was on the hololith, Numitor scowled at Sicarius, but did not contradict his claim.

'But you do not have his corpse as proof,' said Atheus, his tone as thin and sharp as razorwire as he turned back to the sergeants. 'Nor do you have any data to verify your words.'

Neither Numitor or Sicarius was foolish enough to reply.

'You are over-fond of dramatic gestures, Sergeant Sicarius, and one day they will get you killed. Right this moment, I would consider that a fitting justice.'

The sergeants kept their peace.

'Retrieve your combat knife, sergeant. Then you will reunite with your squads, both of you.'

'Of course,' said Numitor. 'We will make all haste.'

'Bring me the corpse of this xenos war hero, and I shall consider your chosen course exonerated. Otherwise, you will act as honour and penitence dictate at all times. Is that

clear?’

Both sergeants made the sign of the aquila. ‘Aye, Lord Atheus.’

A Space Marine with weathered brown skin and six service studs in his forehead crunched through the rubble towards the Lord Executioner.

‘Enitor, well met,’ said Atheus, turning away from the sergeants. ‘Report.’

‘My lord, we have had word from the Iron Hands. Tau heavy elements are inbound on this position.’

‘Understood,’ said Atheus. ‘Disperse and engage. And sergeants,’ said the captain, looking back to Numitor and Sicarius, ‘do not lead your men astray from the Codex’s teachings in your next engagement, or I shall ensure it is the last time you do so.’

Commander Farsight was curled in a foetal ball within an earth caste healsphere no bigger than a control cocoon. Monitor nodes blinked around him, and gently hissing medivac drones pumped gels and analgesics into the sphere’s amniotic fluids. Assuage tubes jutted from between the commander’s eyes.

Eyes completely filled with blood.

Farsight could see the reflection of those paired red slits, distorted in the dim reflection of the healsphere’s curve. The symbolism was not lost on him.

*To give into anger entirely is to embrace failure. Use it, channel it, but do not become its thrall.*

As ever, the words of Master Puretide were anchored fast in his memory, a rock in the raging sea of his emotions. Over the long hours of the night he had forced his temper to a flat, simmering line, aware that to lose his cool would be to delay the healing process.

But the fire was still there, and the Imperial invaders would feel it soon enough.

Footage of the invasion thus far flickered on the curved interior of the healsphere. Autotrans relays spooled, strips

of intercepted transmission rendered in tau. Drab olive bulk-ships of tremendous size were descending behind the Imperial beachheads on Gel'bryn City's borders, their foul gaseous emissions tainting the sky. Artillery columns were fanning out into mobile gun lines, trundling behind bipedal war engines so large their tread shook rubble from the hexodomes ruined in their wake.

Here and there Farsight caught glimpses of gue'ron'sha commanders on the front line. They were easy to spot in their impractically bright war-colours, each an embodiment of over-confidence, barking out orders as they plunged into battle.

The Imperials had a grating, atavistic war-tongue. Farsight had paid close attention to it, watching the footage of Vespertine over and over again. There were patterns there, correlations in their war doctrine that spoke of a shared vocabulary. He did not have the water caste's innate facility for languages, but there were few who understood military cant better than the pupils of Puretide. Slowly, the pieces of the Imperials' crude and grunting language were falling into place.

Farsight blink-pushed the recall function. Even that tiniest of actions stung his eyes as if powdered glass had been rubbed into them. Tears of blood mingled with the healsphere's fluids, but he kept his eyes open nonetheless. There were the warriors he had fought, shimmering amongst the holographs: two red-helmed gue'ron'sha officers, one with the field gauntlet, the other with the energised sword.

Farsight eye-stabbed an override command into the healsphere's databank and made his mind ready for war. He had rested enough.

These gue'ron'sha would pay for what had happened. Pay it many times over.

Thin rain fell through the broken dome of the observation tower, pattering from Sergeant Numitor's battleplate as he

stared through a wide crack in its wall. The hex-city of Gel'bryn sprawled out before him, thick columns of smoke rising from the sites of a dozen Imperial beachheads. Water pooled around his feet, already discoloured with particles of soot.

Humanity was taking this world for its own, making its mark upon it, even down to the molecular level. The war they had brought was just the most obvious sign of its claim upon Dal'yth.

And yet, thought Numitor, the planet was far from uncontested.

In the curving city streets below them, the smoking wreckage left in the wake of each drop had already been scoured of Imperial presence. The tau counter-attack had been aggressive and sudden, the xenos military far nimbler and more potent than anyone had anticipated. The Space Marines had found worthy adversaries here. Across the Chapters assigned to the invasion, over a hundred battle-brothers had lost their lives in the first few hours of fighting.

The remnants of Squads Numitor and Sicarius had come under heavy fire even as they attempted to rendezvous with the rest of Eighth Company, and had been forced to seek shelter in the shattered dome they now occupied. It was as good a place as any to regroup, despite being miles behind enemy lines. Plexiglass-analogue panels had been crazed opaque by the explosion that had gutted the dome, and the soot that stained its interior had turned its panes black, giving the Ultramarines a measure of obfuscation from the aircraft scouring the city. Better yet, the cracks in its superstructure gave them an unparalleled view over the transmotive network and the reservoir where they had fought the crimson-suited xenos leader.

Their plan had been to follow that same vector north as swiftly as possible. Aerial transport was out of the question since Atheus had been forced to divert the *Sword of Calth* to retrieve them - Numitor was still smarting a little from

the debriefing – but he had posited following a parallel path by hijacking a different transmotive, then cutting across. It was a plan that worked well in theory. Even Sicarius had embraced it without comment.

In practice, it had been useless. Numitor had looked eagerly from the dome's vantage point to find that every one of the spars that headed in that direction had been bombed flat for at least half a mile, and had toppled into the vast reservoir below. Even now several squadrons of T-winged bombers patrolled the skies above it, the tiny dots of interceptor drones forming geometric search patterns in their wake. The tau evidently considered their own infrastructure disposable if it furthered their wider cause.

Numitor heard Sergeant Sicarius muttering something to his squad, but chose not to listen too closely. More talk about dwindling fuel reserves, no doubt; paying it heed would only aggravate their strained relationship all the more. At least in taking the measure of the city Numitor was accomplishing something.

The soulless efficiency of the place gnawed at him. It galled him not to be taking his power fist to as many of the blasted xenos structures as he could. Each was a monument to a race that considered themselves the inheritors of the stars. One by one the fires in the distance were winking out, and not because of the drizzling rain. Those infernos started by the preliminary bombardment had been deliberately located, contained, and extinguished by the machines of their builder caste.

Numitor had fought the tau before, and made his findings well known. They operated on a caste system, each assigned a particular role. The warrior caste they had come to know all too well on Vespertine, and all the more so upon Dal'yth. The builder caste, the engineers and makers of the society, were already thronged around each neutralised beachhead. He could see them teeming like insects as they began to rebuild areas purged of invaders. Curve-hulled construction machines were already lifting new

superstructures into place.

The tau's pilot caste patrolled the skies, their sleek craft glinting in the darkening firmament as they spied on more honest combatants below. The hum of their engines put Numitor's teeth on edge. No wonder the warrior caste's response times were so swift. Wherever those aircraft detected the signs of conflict, they would patch through to their armies, and before long entire platoons would converge upon the site of conflict.

Even the efforts of the diplomat caste were in evidence. Sky-holos lit the clouds, showing vid-captures of those clashes where the tau emerged as the clear victors. In an urban war, population control was almost as important as the conflict itself, a fact well known to the warriors of Ultramar. Even stark Imperial propaganda made Numitor feel vaguely uneasy. War was never clean, nor was it neat, but instead a boiling cauldron of anarchy, blood and dirt.

The more the sergeant thought about it, the more the tau's lack of humanity galled him. A planetary invasion was a terrifying event, but there was no panic in the city below, no sense of urgency and no screaming rush for self-preservation. The city was almost smug in its surety, the controlled and measured response an insult to the raw power of an Adeptus Astartes planetstrike. Did they think their false utopia so strong they could just shrug off an Imperial invasion?

'Fret not, Jorus,' said Sicarius, walking up to stand by his fellow sergeant's side. 'They shall learn to fear us soon enough.'

Numitor raised an eyebrow, impressed that Sicarius had read his thoughts so well.

'It's unnatural,' he replied. 'The whole empire is deceit writ large. It should be wiped from the stars before it spreads any further.'

'Just so. And our masters are beginning to recognise the need for its execution.' Numitor heard the smile in Sicarius' voice even over his vox. 'Take heart, brother mine. The

Eighth Company has been given the honour of wielding the axe.'

'We would wield it a lot more capably if we weren't scattered to the four winds,' said Numitor, turning from the cityscape to the Assault Marines gathered under the dome.

Eighth Company stood divided. Not even Sicarius could gainsay that. There were barely three dozen gathered in the dome where there should have been a hundred. Every one of them had already seen fierce fighting, their number reduced to an assortment of combat squads, under-strength units and even a couple of last men standing whose brothers had all been lost.

Numitor heard a distant explosion, and quickly turned back to the crack in the dome's wall. Less than three miles distant he saw the telltale flare of bolt detonations. Sharpening his visor's display, he zoomed in to focus on an Iron Hands Razorback rocking crazily in a long, arcing street. It was carved apart as he watched, thick hull melted through by a trio of ochre warsuits leaping from the roof above.

'These ones are a far cry from the warriors we fought on Vespertine,' said Numitor.

'Not so,' replied Sicarius. 'They are the same warsuit patterns, just outfitted with different weapons. Those we fought before had the tools to engage massed infantry, not elite strike forces such as ours. Their rapid-firing cannons had little in the way of power to punch through battleplate. These Dal'yth versions, on the other hand...'

'Small-bore plasma weapons, or something like it.'

'And melta analogues to boot,' agreed Sicarius.

'Perhaps they are deploying heavier elements because we threaten a core world of their empire,' said Aordus, walking over to join them.

'Or perhaps because they have learned of us,' added Numitor.

'So we strike from above,' said Aordus. 'We'll have time to make the kill before their reinforcements show up.'

'We cannot rely on vertical envelopment in every engagement, Aordus,' said Sicarius. 'Especially with our fuel reserves low. We will have to improvise.' Numitor heard a hard edge enter his fellow sergeant's tone. 'But not by using xenos tech as our own.'

'It was a single instance,' said Numitor. 'A decision in the heat of the moment. And it worked, didn't it? Without that shield generator disc, we too would likely be languishing at the bottom of that reservoir.'

'A victory won with the weapons of the foe is another kind of defeat.'

'So now he quotes Guilliman?' asked Numitor incredulously. 'After we left half our brothers behind? If we had just stuck to the Codex in the first place we could have destroyed that thing without resorting to desperate measures.'

'It was a decision in the heat of the moment,' mocked Sicarius. 'Besides, you have no right to lecture me about adhering to the Codex Astartes, Numitor. Captain Atheus made it plain he did not approve of my recent departure, and has admonished me accordingly. But I wonder how he would look upon your appropriation of xenotech?'

The sound of jump pack engines echoed around the ruined dome.

'Just leave it, Cato,' said Numitor. 'We have company. The good sort.'

Assault Marines roared down through the shattered dome in two groups of four, blue trails of fire guttering as they landed with an ear-pounding series of impacts. They straightened, mag-locking their smoking bolt pistols and gore-spattered chainswords as they greeted their brethren all around.

'Sergeant Sicarius,' said the tallest of their number, his flamer trailing wisps of smoke as he propped it against his shoulder. His power armour was scorched almost black, paint-layers flaking in the wind as if it was slowly

disintegrating.

‘Brother Kaetoros,’ said Sicarius. ‘You found us. Well met.’

‘Not well enough,’ said Kaetoros. The timbre of his voice and the aggression in his body language was obvious, but just shy of an actual challenge.

Sicarius felt Numitor step forward slightly to take position at his side. He was glad of the support, in truth. Kaetoros’ attitude was close to insubordination, and Sicarius had no wish to discipline him in front of another squad from the Eighth.

‘You left us behind,’ said Kaetoros.

‘Because you were too slow,’ replied Sicarius. He set his shoulders, drawing himself up to his full height. ‘The others thought on their feet and gained the vehicle. Why couldn’t you?’

‘We were covering Colnid and Denturis,’ he said coldly. ‘Acting as a team.’

‘It’s common enough to form combat squads in the heat of battle, Kaetoros,’ said Glavius, moving over to stand at Sicarius’ other shoulder.

‘A combat squad is formed when a full ten-strong squad is divided into two constituent five-man squads,’ quoted Brother Veletan, from Kaetoros’ side. His tone was as polished as his power armour. ‘Each component is given a separate task or duty that the greater squad could not achieve in its own right. However, sergeant, our squad was split into one group of six and one of four. Ergo...’

‘Yes, I get it, Veletan,’ hissed Sicarius. ‘Sergeants are entrusted with a degree of autonomy. I should not have to defend my decision.’ His nerves were always put on edge a little by Veletan’s habit of checking every act against the Codex Astartes. The thought of his battle-brother in a debrief with Captain Atheus did not sit well.

‘I do not see Austos here,’ said Kaetoros. ‘Did he fall?’

‘He did,’ confirmed Sicarius. ‘He was taken by a point-blank plasma blast.’

‘And was his body retrieved?’

‘No,’ admitted Sicarius. ‘His remains were not recoverable. He died fighting, may the Emperor guide his soul.’

There was a moment of silence and reflection as the Assault Marines dwelt on the loss of their brother. During the fight over the reservoir he had lost Endrion, Austos and Dalaton. The recovery of their gene-seed looked unlikely.

‘Has the captain spoken to you?’ asked Kaetoros, his anger replaced by flat pragmatism at the news of Austos’ death. ‘We cannot reach him.’

‘Atheus held court less than an hour ago,’ said Sicarius, ‘though we too have lost contact. We must presume the worst. Last time we spoke, he ordered us to cleave to the Codex at all times.’

‘The captain, wise as ever,’ said Brother Duolor, checking the readouts on his plasma pistol. His strange backwards syntax was typical of the Ultramarine garden world Iax, but Sicarius had never quite got used to it. On the oceanic planet of Talassar, anything other than classical Macraggian was frowned on to the point of practically being illegal.

‘The foe’s measure has yet to be taken, at least in full, Sergeant Sicarius,’ Duolor continued. ‘Perhaps this is not a time to improvise.’

‘Alright!’ protested Sicarius. ‘We lost Austos, yes, and some of your squad too. But I have had censure enough today. Warriors die. Space Marines die. And when pitted against the might of empires, there are times when their bodies cannot be recovered. We are no stranger to that truth.’

‘Squad Vengrus maintains that you and Numitor faced only a single warsuit,’ said Kaetoros.

‘And that single warsuit was the lord of the entire xenos warrior caste,’ said Numitor. ‘An exceptionally skilled foe, armed with the finest wargear the tau can forge. We overcame him nonetheless.’

‘Atheus has ordered us to finish what we started, and bring

back the tau leader's corpse,' said Sicarius. 'He would not have done so unless he considered the xenos warlord a priority target.'

There was silence as the sergeant's words sank in.

'We cannot stand divided,' he continued. 'Slay the enemy's command, and the rest will be cast into disarray.'

'This we know,' said Duolor. 'This the Codex teaches us.'

'When the foe is guided by a great leader, strike him down, even should the cost be high,' quoted Brother Veletan. 'Sever the head of the serpent, and the body will die.'

'Just so,' said Sicarius. 'But rest assured, our blades will find more than just the commander we fought over the reservoir.'

'Speak on,' said Kaetoros.

'If we track him down at the right moment,' said Numitor, 'he will likely be surrounded by advisors, lieutenants, and high-level operatives from the other castes.'

'And we will bring death to them all,' said Sicarius, relishing every word.

Words of grudging agreement were murmured around the interior of the dome.

'It could potentially do the entire caste system irrevocable damage, to cut the high command from each of them,' said Duolor. 'As a plan, it is sound enough.'

'So how do we find this xenos warlord?' asked Kaetoros. 'Do you have a location?'

'We have a precise bearing,' said Sicarius. 'The vector of his ship as he made his retreat in extremis, and the geostation points to take it from. He was wounded, and badly. His pilot would have made directly for a facility large enough to save his life.'

'It is also likely his officers and advisors will still attend him there,' said Numitor. 'We can extrapolate his journey, and when our path crosses a major xenostucture, we hit it with everything we have.'

'A plan has been devised for this pursuit, I presume?' said Kaetoros. 'Something that will keep xenos pilots from

simply picking us off en route?’

‘Underground,’ said Numitor. ‘We go underground. That should get us much of the way there. They’ve bombed the translocator network flat – the tau, not the Navy. That tells us they want us to stay out of that region. And if this place is anything like Vespertine, there will be a honeycomb pattern of dwelling places that run underneath the surface, even under the reservoirs. Builder-caste facilities, perhaps even an extensive subterranean arterial.’

‘It could get us out of the city, at least,’ agreed Brother Magros, moving beside Numitor to look out at the urban sprawl. ‘It is a sound course, sergeant. In all my twenty-eight years fighting the alien I have not seen a xenos metropolis with as much underground substructure as this.’

‘And you think the enemy commander you fought will still be there?’ said Kaetoros, incredulity in his tone. ‘It is unlikely he will be good enough to wait for us.’

‘Even if he has left,’ said Numitor, ‘if the place is a large enough facility to repair his command warsuit, with upper echelon presence and medicae staff that can swiftly get him back into the fray...’

‘...then when we start killing his friends,’ finished Sicarius, slamming a fist into his open palm, ‘he’ll come running soon enough.’

‘Exactly,’ said Numitor.

‘Even if we are that lucky,’ said Kaetoros, ‘we’ll have to breach a heavily defended xenos fortress to get to him. We’ll likely be outnumbered hundreds to one.’

‘We’ll find a way to deal with that en route. And since when have the Eighth ever let the numbers of the enemy stand in their way?’

Kaetoros had no answer to that.

There was a long moment of silence as the squads digested the plan and ran their own mental theoreticals.

‘Any other objections to Numitor’s course?’ asked Sicarius.

‘This time,’ said Kaetoros, his eyes boring into Sicarius’ own, ‘we stay together.’

‘Yes, brother,’ said Sicarius. ‘You have made your point, loud and clear.’

‘We are mustered, then, and we have a plan,’ said Numitor. ‘Let’s move out.’

‘Keep your eyes open for entrance points that can get us underground,’ said Sicarius. ‘Oh, and Kaetoros,’ he added, looking over his shoulder as his jump pack roared into readiness, ‘do try to keep up.’

Sicarius shot like a bullet out into the city, the rest of his squad engaging their jump packs and leaping from the shattered dome into the hexagonal plazas below.

Numitor ran two steps and threw himself after the sergeant with arms outstretched, body canted to counterbalance the weight of his power fist. A sharp blast from his jump pack and he was clear, sailing over the curving shoulders of the building in the lee of the shattered dome, then freefalling towards the debris-strewn plaza below.

Speed was one of the Eighth Company’s most potent weapons. The vigour and focus of each new assault was a combination that usually broke their enemies in the first few minutes of combat. Cato Sicarius revelled in being the fastest in his squad, but in combat Numitor could match his fellow sergeant blade to blade, for a time at least. He had tested that theory in the practice cages many times. Without his cumbersome powered gauntlet slowing him down, they were close to evenly matched.

A burst from his turbines and Numitor was alongside his fellow sergeant. They brought their legs forward as one, another blast of fuel slowing their descent at the very last second so their landing did not shiver their bones. The sudden impact of ceramite boots shattered the tau plaza’s rockcrete-like surface instead. Hairline cracks spread out with the force of each Space Marine’s landing.

In scant moments the Assault squads were airborne again, each battle-brother engaging his pack to roar in a low leap

to the other side of the plaza. Sicarius was at the fore, wan sunlight glinting from the blood red of his helm.

Numitor rejoiced in the sight of the Eighth Company racing across the city at full speed. It was a glorious sight, even with half their number scattered and slain.

The warrior lords of the Adeptus Astartes did not believe in adapting their colours to fit their environment. Ultramarines were Ultramarines, no matter the war zone. They were forever resplendent in the same lustrous blue worn by the primarch Roboute Guilliman, the Chapter's forefather and author of the sacred Codex Astartes. They would sooner peel the skin from their flesh than change their proud heraldry.

Amongst the muted ochres and whites of the Tau sept world the Ultramarines stood out, bold and stark, each flash of rich blue the sign of an invader intent on conquest. To a soulless race such as the tau it would perhaps seem illogical, even foolhardy, to present such obvious targets. But the Ultramarines cared little for the reasoning of cowards. Let the enemy know the Space Marines were coming and tremble, for they brought with them death.

By contrast, the tau warrior caste had already displayed the ability to adapt their colouration depending on environment. Some of their warsuits were protected by stealth fields that rendered them all but invisible to sensors, shimmering like mirages even to the naked eye. It was a disturbing thought.

To the xenos mindset, to go to war in so obvious a fashion as the Space Marines was to invite disaster. For one outside the Emperor's grace, it would be impossible to comprehend the glory of the Angels of Death – the pride and the conviction that came with the right to bear the heraldry of the primarchs and the martial excellence it represented.

Upon Dal'yth, the strident colours of the Space Marines would cost them dearly.

Commander Farsight led a sky full of Orca transports, each

packed to the gunwhales with his battlesuit cadres, across the outskirts of Gel'bryn City towards the last of the Imperial insertion points. He had the merest fraction of his attention devoted to the course, and it would remain that way until a pre-programmed proximity sensor blipped him. The rest was delving deep into analysis of the invasion unfolding across Dal'yth. Already there were a dozen theatres of war, but an Imperial command centre had been located by the air caste, and there was much to assess before the strike was launched.

Every jolt of the *Silent Aftermath's* passage through the turbulent skies sent agony crackling through Farsight's aching joints, a wildfire of pain across his still-healing skin that challenged his meditative state to the limit. Eager to get back into the fray, he had pulled rank on the earth caste scientists to be discharged from the healsphere prematurely. Now that decision seemed churlish at best. Still, he could not allow himself to be absent whilst asking his brightest and best to dive headlong into the conflagration of war.

Barring this last beachhead of a hundred or so intruders, the gue'ron'sha had been repelled from Gel'bryn City. The interlocking counterassault was a great victory, already touted by the water caste as indicative of the tau's supremacy over the Imperium. To say that Farsight had been instrumental in its achievement was an understatement. For once, he could look at those morale posters depicting a stylised version of his profile without feeling a nagging sense of disquiet.

The commander called up relevant footage for the vertical attack he had planned, searching for ways to optimise a top-down strike. His dispersion array showed the icons of his grid-like net of Orca transports surrounding a pair of far larger Manta missile destroyers as they came in low. Here and there an Imperial warhead would arc in towards them, but flechette arrays and electronic countermeasures tore them from the skies well before impact.

Vivid red lights flashed, an urgent beep sounding as one of the blunt-nosed warheads found its way through the defence net.

‘Open bay doors,’ said Farsight, disengaging the locks of his transport cradle. ‘I see an opportunity.’

*‘As you wish, commander,’* transmitted Kor’ui Y’eldi.

Farsight was already moving, the hangar filling with noise and pressure as he threw himself out of the passenger bay in a blast of repulsor jets. He tucked his customised XV8 battlesuit into a somersault and hit full boost to reverse direction, carving under the Orca to overtake it with his honour pennants fluttering. The dot of the Imperial seeker-missile was becoming larger and larger. When it passed into the shadow of the Orca, Farsight slashed a fusion blaster beam right through its midsection, sending the intact nosecone tumbling end over end to detonate upon an Imperial-held position far below. Farsight smiled at the irony. The drone footage of his new flight vanes and thruster array in action would be a gift for the water caste; no doubt their information optimisers would make use of it.

The commander zoomed in on the ruins below. The vivid yellow squares of Imperial drop craft marred the cityscape, smaller blue shapes dotted around them like the buds of Kan’jian peak-blossom. Not for these proud gue’ron’sha the notion of camouflage. They would rather announce their presence loud and clear in the hope their sheer belligerence would intimidate their foes.

For this, they would be made to pay.

‘Let the blade fall,’ transmitted Farsight over the cadre-net. The response was instant. Three by three the battlesuit *la’ruas* bailed out from the Orcas as they passed over the gue’ron’sha beachhead. The Mantas dispatched larger teams of five, shield drones circling around them in wide circles like electrons orbiting a nucleus.

Down they came en masse, their dispersal so neat the sight made Farsight feel genuine pride in his chest. Their numbers were impressive, reminding him of a Vior’lan

seedstorm floating to earth. On either side of him were the bodyguard teams of his fellows, the gifted young Commander Brightsword and the dauntless Bravestorm, each with readiness symbols glowing gold.

‘Where the foe strikes, strike back harder,’ said Farsight. ‘Where the swordblow is levelled, parry swiftly, the better to riposte with a killing thrust.’

‘The wisdom of Master Puretide is perhaps more relevant here than ever,’ said Bravestorm. ‘I can scarcely believe the temerity of these humans, invading in such pitiful numbers.’

‘These are not humans, Bravestorm,’ said Farsight as they burst from the cloud cover to be greeted with a vista of explosions and shattered domes. ‘These are gue’ron’sha, and they fight like armoured snowtigers.’

As if on cue the Imperial warriors below opened fire, muzzle flashes picking out not only the cobalt blue of the Space Marine vanguard but also orange and black armour emblazoned with sigils of the hammer and gauntlet. Farsight’s threat sensors blipped insistently as the tiny armour-piercing rockets favoured by the enemy warriors shot up towards them. He turned his shield generator downwards and set it to maximum, noting with satisfaction that O’Vesa’s optimisation program was still functioning smoothly. There was a triple burst as the mass-reactive bolts detonated one after another, their heat-yield swathing the invisible disc of protective force in strangely beautiful ripples of fire.

Farsight checked the icons of his battlesuit cadre with a quick scan of his left eye even as his right circle-noosed a priority marker over heavy weapon troopers arrayed in the lee of a dome. Almost all of his cadre’s icons were still gold. As per his instructions, those whose icons had downgraded to bluesteel or even copper had peeled back with their team to be swiftly replaced by direct equivalents from the second wave behind.

‘Now,’ said Farsight. A microdec later, a sleeting storm of

plasma hurtled from the skies, throwing the figures below into stark monochrome. Most of the stabbing bolts struck a Space Marine gunner from above, some impacting at an angle, some near vertical. Each direct hit burned through armour, flesh and bone before emerging sizzling from the other side. Channels of molten flesh and metal cut through the gue'ron'sha warriors, wide enough for a kroot broadspear to plunge through and not touch the sides. Some of the stricken Space Marines staggered and fell, some were caught by their comrades, while others toppled into the detritus of the shattered tau domes they were using for cover.

Incredibly, many of the fallen returned fire without a second's hesitation.

This time the mass-reactive volley was far thicker and took a greater toll. Battlesuits came apart in bursts of purple flame, shattered limbs and scything shards of jump jet flying in every direction. Farsight's eyes widened as he saw a Space Marine, halved at the waist, claw himself upright against the body of a dead comrade, raising his sidearm to send a pair of explosive bolts right at him. So surprised was the tau commander that one of the bolts got under his shield generator and struck home with a loud bang. There was a sharp kick of impact, spinning him around in mid-air and causing his damage control display to flash bright. He righted himself, sweeping his fusion blaster low to take the warrior's head in a puff of vapourised blood.

A moment later Farsight's force shield blazed bright as a lancing beam shot from the ruins to the west. The shield's data array registered it as laser cannon discharge. If these gue'ron'sha weapon teams were anything like those the tau encountered on Vespertine, solid shot projectiles would be close behind.

Almost as soon as the thought had crossed Farsight's mind he saw a missile shooting towards him on a plume of white smoke. He arced out of its path and flicked a pulse from his shield as it went past. The kinetic discharge sent it veering

into the central bulk of an open-sided drop craft that had fired moments ago, and the detonation that followed toppled the contraption into the dirt.

Aiming carefully as he sped back into position, Farsight took a stabbing shot at a wounded Space Marine hammering bolts up into the airborne ranks of the battlesuit cadre. The stream of plasma caught him in the chest, ending his life in a spitting cascade of blinding energy. As Farsight pulled away he saw a gue'ron'sha in white armour race from the shadows to his fallen comrade, only to plunge a forearm-mounted drill into his throat.

Intrigued, Farsight boosted upwards, scanning for similar sights. He soon found another white-clad warrior within sensor range, engaged in much the same ritual. He had long ago realised the medics of the Imperium wore white, but if anything these strange specialists seemed to be delivering something more like the final *mont'ka*.

There was a secret here. He could feel it. Some niggling instinct told him it was key to understanding the gue'ron'sha mindset, and perhaps, therefore, to winning the war.

Swinging his legs back in his cocoon to move his battlesuit into a sharp dive, Farsight swooped down towards the nearest white-armoured gue'ron'sha and prepared to land.

Apothecary Antaloch fought the rising urge to join the battle raging around him. The Hammers of Dorn had always been sticklers for the Codex Astartes, but in this case their armoured assault tactics had been outmanoeuvred with daunting ease. The xenos were all over them, and their weapons... their weapons were devastating.

Eyes scanning the field, Antaloch crouched low and ran over to a fallen battle-brother. The Space Marine had a smoking hole in his chest that the Apothecary could have fitted his fist through. Releasing the ravaged armour's cuirass with a practised movement, Antaloch plunged his

reductor deep into his comrade's neck. A thick churning sound grumbled under the roar of battle as Antaloch extracted the warrior's progenoid glands and stowed them with dozens of others he had flasked thus far. He memorised his fallen brother's name and honours before moving a few feet to the next of the fallen, a sprawling corpse with a stump in place of a head.

There was a crack of impact as a crimson xenos warsuit thumped down in front of Antaloch. It pressed the muzzle of its energy rifle to his helmet. The Apothecary froze. The alien assassin filled his vision, huge and lethal. Thin pennants fluttered from its armour like elongated purity seals. The figure would have dwarfed a Terminator, perhaps even a Centurion.

'It is unclear,' stated the giant in stilted Low Gothic, its hidden speakers giving it something uncannily like a real voice. 'You must know this one does not live, ministrator-medic-equivalent.'

'Aye,' growled Antaloch, 'and yet his due must be given.'

'Despite the high percentile chance of sustaining lethal damage during your ministrations.'

'Just so,' said the Apothecary. He fought a strong urge to put his hand over the precious gene-seed flasks at his waist. Even as the din of battle thundered around them, a moment of stillness passed between the two warriors.

'Your stance is defence-oriented, yet not indicative of self-preservation,' stated the xenos warsuit. Before Antaloch could reply, a pair of bolter shells detonated behind the giant figure, staggering it for a moment. It whipped a square-barrelled blaster around to obliterate the Space Marine running in behind it in a storm of searing light. Despite the distraction, its energy rifle did not move one inch from Antaloch's helm.

'A theory. During the death ritual, you recover a substance and-or information code that your warrior caste considers vital.'

Antaloch stared up at the towering figure, but said

nothing.

‘Interesting,’ said the xenos giant. ‘Proceed then, by all means.’ Raising its rifle in brief salute, the battlesuit shot up into the skies on twin tongues of flame.

The Apothecary watched the alien’s departure for a second, blinking in disbelief before patching into his command squad’s private vox-net.

‘Captain Sevelliac? When this is over, we need to talk.’

‘Stay out of reach,’ transmitted Farsight across the cadre-net. ‘Engage at maximum plasma rifle range. No closer.’ With their heavy weapons troopers taken out in the first volley, the Space Marine counter-attack was fierce, but containable. Those battlesuits compromised by the foe’s boltguns withdrew, keeping behind their comrades until shield drones could dart in to shore up their defences. The ebb and flow of his warriors was a thing of beauty, like the lapping of the tide. Farsight had envisioned a battle fought almost entirely on the vertical, a fitting counterstrike to the dramatic planetfall launched by the Imperials in the first hours of the war. And it was working.

Ahead, Commander Brightsword and his *saz’nami* bodyguards were moving forward to engage a knot of Imperials – officers, by their baroque armour and the elaborate standard one was carrying in their midst.

‘Feel the fire caste’s fury, unworthy ones!’

As he flew, Brightsword pivoted in mid-air to avoid two gouts of plasma sent boiling in his direction. The salvo narrowly missed one of his bodyguards’ gun drones to splash across the ruined dome behind. Farsight knew his student well enough to realise what would likely come next – a spectacular kill worthy of Puretide himself, and then an overextension that would land Brightsword in the teeth of the enemy guns. The commander recalibrated his thrust/vector suite and set off in close pursuit.

Pulling his battlesuit’s arms in close, Brightsword let his *saz’nami* take the rest of the Space Marines’ interceptor

fire and hurtled off wide, veering around a dome shattered like an eggshell by an Imperial drop craft. As he came in towards the enemy command group he fired his fusion blasters simultaneously and swept his arms outwards, drawing a broad X of superheated force. It not only sliced one of the gue'ron'sha in half at the waist but also bisected the standard, sending it toppling towards the debris strewn below. A killing blow tactic, perfectly executed - and yet he had slain only a champion, not the warlord he protected.

Farsight soared in close. The standard bearer dropped his gun and lunged, deftly catching the upper section of the banner's shortened pole to hoist it upright once more - only for Farsight's own fusion blaster to carve a diagonal across his centre mass. The scything beam took his right arm and most of his shoulder. The Space Marine let his gun fall away and grabbed the standard with his left hand instead, ensuring it did not touch the ground. It was a feat of stamina and stubbornness that typified the gue'ron'sha mindset. Yet it was the crested officer with the turbine unit - a captain, judging by the metallic crown signifying his rank - that had O'Shovah's attention. Just as Brightsword roared overhead the Space Marine leaped backwards and fired his jet pack, rocketing up at an oblique angle with his two-handed greataxe carving around in a crackling arc.

'Below you!' shouted Farsight. His protege turned mid-leap, cutting one jet engine and boosting the other so he flipped in a spiral - but the Space Marine was still close behind. The greataxe thunked into Brightsword's engine unit just as he planted his feet upon a disabled gunrig platform and sprang skyward once more. Farsight's reaction shot went wide. The gue'ron'sha rode the sudden change of direction with a blast from his own jet pack, ripping his greataxe free with a twist of his body.

Brightsword tucked into a somersault and brought his fusion blasters slashing under and up. The Space Marine tried to twist away, but one of the swipes of superheated energy burned right through his wrist, cauterising the

wound in the process. The greataxe flew wide, the disembodied hand still gripping tight near the end of its haft. The enemy warlord did not cry out, but instead pulled a pistol from his belt and smacked a shot into Brightsword's sensor array, sending his battlesuit reeling. The young commander fought to regain control as the gue'ron'sha retrieved his axe, severed hand and all.

Farsight touched down on a ruined drop craft and sprang away, a blast of force bringing him on an intercept course. Brightsword tended to break left under pressure. If the gue'ron'sha went after him Farsight would be waiting to capitalise, firing solution ready.

A ruby red beam of light stabbed out in Brightsword's wake, missing him by a fraction of an inch. More laser cannon fire. The young commander had escaped death by a heartbeat.

Farsight heard the Imperial warlord shout something, his staccato barks unintelligible over the din of battle.

'- - NO - - DO NOT SHOOT - - HE IS MINE - -' spooled Farsight's autotrans as the battlesuit made sense of the alien words.

O'Shovah watched as the Space Marine and Brightsword veered left, coming into his battlesuit's gunsights. Charging, the enemy warrior shoulder-barged Brightsword away to leave himself in open sky. A ninety-four percentile kill probability flashed gold on Farsight's target lock.

A moment before eye-flicking the shot, O'Shovah dissolved his firing solution. The autotrans was never wrong. If the Space Marine considered it an honour duel, so be it.

Brightsword span in a tight spiral, the air burning around him as he slashed and stabbed with his fusion blasters. Somehow the gue'ron'sha captain evaded them, twisting and boosting out of harm's way where the fusion beams cut in close. Brightsword slashed his signature X, the tail of the latter beam catching the Space Marine only to dissolve in a blazing flare of light. An Imperial force field, inefficient but effective.

The Space Marine was hurled back by the energy discharge, but pivoted to brace feet-first on the sheer wall of a transmission tower. He pushed away hard to boost over the curving transmotive sweeprail ahead. Focused on attack as ever, Brightsword's careening trajectory forced him to go under the arch rather than over it.

Farsight saw the gambit a moment too late. In nudging Brightsword towards the sweeprail arch, the gue'ron'sha captain had ensured where the young commander would emerge. There was a blur of blue as the captain dropped from the other side of the curving arch and disappeared from sight, axe flaring lightning in an overarm swipe.

Farsight's breath caught in his throat, the alert signals of his bio-monitor station spiking in response. Running three steps up the spar of a fallen transit spire, he bounded over the transmotive sweeprail. Numbers and trajectories raced through his mind, the destiny of his young prodigy sliding along a knife edge of probability.

Brightsword's battlesuit had crashed headlong into the scree of a half-demolished youth training facility. The Space Marine warlord's crackling greataxe was embedded deep in the XV8's plexus hatch, its broad blade sunk over a foot into the armour. Though his disembodied hand was still uselessly gripping the weapon's haft, the Space Marine had proven lethal even when crippled.

On Farsight's distribution array, Brightsword's icon turned the charcoal grey of death.

Farsight crunched into the rubble, his vision clouded with grief. He had a clear shot on the captain's back for the second time that day, and this time the kill-shot probability was in the ninety-ninth percentile.

Still he did not take it.

The gue'ron'sha captain planted a foot on his kill, tore one-handed at the axe, and it came free in an arc of crimson, unbalancing him for a moment. Blood fountained from Brightsword's torn battlesuit, pulsed, and then stopped.

The captain turned, tau gore spattered across his regal

blue armour, to stare down the barrels of Farsight's guns. The lifeless red vision slits of his helm were writ large upon the commander's target lock.

Now, the killing blow would fall.

'- - YOU'RE NEXT ALIEN WRETCH - -' spooled the autotrans. Then the Space Marine leaped into a shoulder charge.

He was not quick enough. Farsight fired both weapons systems at once, and the gue'ron'sha captain's chest exploded in a cloud of superheated blood.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### ELEVATION/SHELTER IN THE STORM

‘Listen, brothers,’ said Numitor, crouching at the side of a rubble-strewn street. ‘A low hum. Isolate it and tell me what you find.’

‘Engines,’ replied Duolor. ‘Perhaps four, five separate.’

‘I thought as much,’ said Numitor. ‘Look to the skies. We have incoming.’

As soon as the words had left the sergeant’s mouth the purr of distant engines grew to a loud, insistent roar. A squadron of ochre xenocraft arced from behind the largest of the bio-domes fringing the plaza. They flew towards Eighth Company even as the Assault Marines sprinted towards the coordinates sent by their sergeants.

Underslung beneath each of the aircraft was a crackling sphere of energy, so bright it forced the photolenses of those viewing it to dim it to bearable levels.

‘Bombers,’ said Numitor, his tone urgent. ‘Seek cover!’

No sooner had the words left Numitor’s lips than a squadron of aircraft sped over the nearest hexodome. They passed overhead, flickering red beams panning across the Space Marines in the open.

A moment later, three miniature suns fell from the skies, burning bright arcs that left white trails in the air.

‘Scatter!’ shouted Numitor.

The payloads dropped into the midst of the Assault Marines as they careened headlong for cover. The initial explosion sent gouts of plasma that carpeted great swathes of the plaza with burning, fizzling energy. Those caught in the blast found ceramite, flesh and bone melting away into bubbling ruin.

Brother Antec gave a bellow of pain, raising the stumps that were all that remained of his arms. The molten length of his chainsword draped over the wreckage of his left leg. Golotan covered his face with his forearm as he staggered, lit with white fire, to slam hard into the wreckage of an unrecovered drop pod. He rolled in the indigo foliage until the flames were extinguished, ceramite flaking as he struggled to get up.

‘The operational parameters of our jump packs are exceeded,’ voxed Veletan. ‘They are simply too high to intercept. Without support, our best hope is escape.’

‘No,’ growled Sicarius. ‘Glavius, uncouple your pack. I have need of it.’

Stunned, Glavius slowed his pace and looked to Numitor. Sicarius clanged the hilt of his tempest blade from his squad-mate’s pauldron. ‘I said uncouple your pack, brother!’

The tau aircraft were already coming about for another pass, the spinning generators beneath each craft already spinning incandescent energies into spheres of killing plasma. Drones peeled off from their wings, firing afterburners to hurtle back around for a strafing run.

Glavius mag-locked his pistol and chainsword to his belt, releasing the chest clip of his jump pack’s bandolier straps and swinging the entire apparatus over to his sergeant. Sicarius took it without a word, holding it under his arm and blasting straight upwards on stuttering columns of flame to land on a twisted spar of metal jutting from a comms tower above.

Numitor grimaced. Veletan was right; without dedicated

anti-air firepower they were at the mercy of the Tau bombers until they could find a way underground. Yet Sicarius was intent on more heroics, likely risking more Space Marine lives in the process. His intent was obvious enough; he was already swapping his own pack, finally drained of fuel, with the pack he had requisitioned from Glavius. Clearly he intended to engage the tau aircraft no matter the cost.

Tempting as it was to leave Sicarius behind, they could not split their forces again, not so soon after their tenuous regroup in the shattered tower. By leaving Glavius earthbound, Numitor's fellow sergeant had forced their hand. They had no option but to fight - fight against an enemy far out of their reach, an adversary capable of killing them from low orbit if necessary without fear of retaliation.

To his mounting horror, Numitor realised he had no idea how.

The ominous purr of incoming xenocraft grew louder. Looking up at the skies, Numitor saw the flicker of wingtips between two smaller hexodomes. He tried to recall the wisdom of the Codex Astartes that dealt with anti-air doctrine, but with more aircraft closing in, nothing short of a battle demi-company would be enough to extricate them from their plight.

'Veletan!' he voxed. 'What's your theoretical?'

'When shorn of ground-to-air capability, take cover whilst bringing allied assets to bear,' recited Veletan. 'If none are nearby, make haste to a rendezvous point.'

'Allied assets,' muttered Numitor. After the evacuation from Gel'bryn City, the nearest Ultramarine presence was at least an hour away. There was no way they could make it there alive with the tau bombers hounding them.

Another trio of crackling plasma spheres fell from the skies. Several of Numitor's squad leaped high on tongues of flame, taking shots with their bolt pistols at the apogee of their ascent, but they were way out of range. Aordus left it a moment too long to veer away from the return fire and

was sent hurtling away by an explosion of plasma energy. He cracked awkwardly into a curved walkway, the front of his power armour melted away to expose the steaming black carapace beneath.

‘Get under the gantry,’ shouted Numitor, diving for cover as the bombers cut around a shallow hexodome for another attack run. The rest of his squad followed, catching on to the sergeant’s plan to dart from cover to cover until they reached the larger hexodome ahead. They were gambling that they would reach it in time, but it was the best chance they had.

Not all of Sicarius’ squad were with him.

‘Brother Kaetoros!’

Kaetoros, unmistakeable in his badly scorched armour, was pounding along the far side of the plaza. His flamer drizzled blue droplets of excess promethium, the flickering spots of heat that marked his progress lingering on Numitor’s auto-senses. They were presumably just as visible to the tau aircraft high above.

‘Trust me!’ voxed Kaetoros. ‘We won’t clear the plaza otherwise!’

Numitor cursed as Sicarius’ flamer-wielding squadmate skidded to a halt almost half a mile away. Flakes of burnt paint eddied in his wake. Kaetoros raised the weapon to his chest and poured a long gout of burning promethium into the missing side portal of a fallen tau grav-tank; by Numitor’s reckoning it was a casualty of the opening invasion, laid low by a well-aimed missile. The flaming promethium splashed around inside the tank, burning electricals and plastics alike until a thick column of black smoke poured from the stricken vehicle’s side hatch. The interior of the tank caught fire and soon it was billowing clouds of choking pollutant into the air.

Kaetoros boosted away a split second before a crackling sphere of plasma splashed down where he had been standing. Turning in mid-flight, he landed feet-first under the spar of a fallen balcony, sticking close to the wall. His

scorched-black power armour blended with the shadows, making him appear more like a stealth-conscious Raven Guard than a proud Ultramarine.

Overhead, the xenocraft squadron circled above the soot-belching tank, intent on finishing off the prey they had seen nearby. Plasma bombs rained down, chewing great chunks from the building next to the grav-tank and causing a landslide of rubble to crash into the street. Kaetoros had already slid away; if it were not for the rune on Numitor's visor, he would have lost the flamer operative's position altogether.

The distraction had bought them time - not much, but perhaps enough.

'With me,' said Numitor to his brothers, breaking left and heading for an upright, lozenge-shaped structure. Atop it was the mushroom dome so common in tau architecture. His squad followed close behind, running as fast as they could across the plaza towards the cover.

Out of nowhere came a pair of tau strike fighters, the quad-barrelled turrets under their tails spitting white fury. The first fighter's strafing run cut across the leading squad, pitching Trondoris from his feet. The bladesman's eviscerator clattered from his hands. The second aircraft's plasma volley struck Numitor's legs as he hurled himself forward into the shadow of the tau building, searing pain burning the backs of his knees. He put it out of his mind, his enhanced nervous system already quashing the agony with a rush of hyperdrenaline.

Trondoris scrambled to retrieve his outsized chainblade, but the quad turret underslung beneath the rearmost xenocraft swivelled around and spat bright ion fire, forcing him to yank his arms back or lose his hands entirely. Magros ran in close instead, scooping the eviscerator up in both hands and hurling it sidelong towards its owner even as he hurtled away once more.

With Kaetoros' distraction spent, the tau bombers were already heading back for a fresh pass. Their

manoeuvrability was daunting, the closeness of their formation impressive even to an Ultramarine.

The stragglers of squads Numitor and Sicarius got to shelter, darting under the eaves of a building with a raised transmotive rail around its perimeter just as the xenocraft reached them. A cluster of plasma spheres came raining down. One landed half a dozen feet from Numitor, the blast wave of its explosion hurling him sidelong across the plaza. The other two smashed into the maglev rail above them, burning straight through the graceful arcs of its supports.

With an ominous squeal of protesting alloys, an entire section of the transit arc came crashing down. The Assault Marines leaped away at the last instant before the slew of rubble could bury them alive. Colnid, one of Sicarius' squad, was a heartbeat too slow, and was sent sprawling as a boulder-sized lump of rock smacked into his shoulder. His jump pack malfunctioned, its stabbing fires sending him careening across the plaza and smashing him into a smooth, abstract sculpture.

Above, Sicarius was leaping from balcony-spur to domed roof, his borrowed jump pack burning fuel in great gouts of flame as he sought to climb into range for a killing strike. Numitor shook his head in bewilderment. Already the sergeant was out of close vox range, leaving his squad to face the punitive attack runs of the tau without orders. The pilots were paying him little mind, and rightly so; even the highest building spire was still nowhere near their attack runs.

Somewhere inside Numitor's mind, he could hear his brother asking if he had any better ideas. In truth, he did not.

Veering through the skies towards Sicarius' position came a far larger tau aircraft, not elegant like the fighters and bombers that harried them, but lumpen and solid. It looked like its boxy hold could have held an entire demi-company. Thruster engines on each corner swivelled to landing positions. Numitor recognised the type from the battle at

the reservoir - a xenos bulker, presumably filled with enough of their warrior caste to finish what the pilots above had started.

With a wordless cry, Sergeant Sicarius leaped from his position behind the curving spar of a nearby building. The alien sun of Dal'yth glinted on his sword. Landing with a loud clang on the roof of the tau lander, he brought his blade curving down two-handed, slashing through the gimbal of the rear right engine to send the entire thruster tumbling away. The lander, struggling to avoid crashing into the city's domes, adjusted its course upwards in a broad, smoking spiral.

A spiral that would soon bring it close to the tau bomber squadron.

Numitor shook his head, this time in awe. Sicarius, having bought the last surge of altitude he needed by the damaged craft's evasive manoeuvre, blasted from the top of the transport with Glavius' jump pack. His plasma pistol sent incandescent bursts of energy behind him to bullseye the lander's other rear engine even as he surged higher. The lander, fatally wounded, dragged its heavy hindquarters through the sky. Its struggling glide accelerated into a downward dive as Sicarius shot upwards and away, expending fuel at a massive rate. His leap crested just as the tau bomber squadron veered around him in an attempt to evade.

Sicarius pivoted, lashing out to carve the tip from one bomber's wing even as it deployed its attendant drones. He boosted backwards as the disc-machines spat deadly ion energy from their rifles. Pistol aimed between his feet, Sicarius made his shot even as his sidelong flight took him towards the next bomber. A fist-sized ball of plasma caught the nearest drone full on, turning it into a hovering pillar of flame.

Mag-clamping his pistol to his waist, Sicarius was already upon the next aircraft, reaching out to grab the elegant lateral bar that linked its wingtip to its tail. The jolt of the

xenocraft's passage would have torn a normal man's arm from its socket, but Sicarius was of the Adeptus Astartes, built for power as well as speed. Cutting his pack turbines, Sicarius let his dead weight drag the bomber away from the last of its squadron. Its pilot struggled to compensate, jerking back against the downwards pull.

A weapons drone hovered in close – too close. The sergeant lashed out with a foot and caught it under its broad rim, sending it spinning away with its rifle spitting curls of haywire energy.

The tau pilot was on the verge of losing control, veering back towards his squadron-mate to compensate for the massive weight hanging from his wing. In doing so he unwittingly sealed his squadron's fate. Sicarius put his shoulder to the lateral bar of the fighter's fuselage and blasted his borrowed pack at full burn, turning his dead weight into a sudden sharp push. Then the sergeant let go, dropping feet-first to land in a clatter of ceramite on a nearby roof.

The aircraft, already leaning hard, found itself peeling off at a steep angle with the sudden reversal of force upon its wing. Careening, it crashed into its squadmate and sent them both tumbling away into the city below. The flames from the double explosion lit the skies.

A flash of shock and pain slammed across Numitor's mind as three vicious impacts struck him side on, sending him sprawling. His eyes burned as he tried to make sense of what had happened, pushing himself upright and launching back on instinct as another strafing run scorched the plaza a matter of inches away. Static filled his vision. His armour's machine-spirit had been driven into a recuperative coma, so he wrenched his dented helm free, trusting to his own senses despite the ringing blow that had shaken him.

Numitor squinted up, the words of the Codex reverberating through his head. *Rank hath its privileges, but with them come dangers too numerous to count.*

No wonder he was attracting so much fire. He wore a red helm where the rank and file wore blue.

Sure enough, two of the tau strike fighters were bearing down on him. Their underslung tail guns spat as they stitched a deadly crossfire towards him. He triggered his jump pack. It was unresponsive, a dead weight on his back.

A billowing white contrail shot up from a low domed roof to the right. Numitor caught sight of a flashing black missile at its tip. It slammed into the cockpit of the first strike fighter. A thunderous explosion saw the top half of the xenocraft torn away, a spray of blood amongst the mangled wreckage. The fighter craft flew apart under the force of its own torque, causing the second fighter to disengage, its attack run aborted as it shot overhead into the heart of the city.

'Tactical squad, Fifth Company!' shouted Trondoris across the plaza, pointing at the dome above.

A red-helmed figure stood the edge of the sloping roof. Behind him, a heavy weapons specialist held his missile launcher vertical as the servo arm on his backpack slid another flakk missile inside. Seeing Numitor no longer wearing his helm, the sergeant took off his own and called down into the plaza.

'Squad Antelion pays its debts!'

Numitor laughed in disbelief. Squad Antelion, the same unit he and his men had saved from an ignominious death during the freefall of their initial planetstrike.

'And quickly, it seems,' hollered back Numitor. 'Beware these ones, sergeant. They'll pick you out as an officer if they see that red helm!'

'The bombers just pass over us,' Antelion shouted back. 'There's another squadron in this sector. Seen us two or three times now. They sent drones, but we dealt with them easily enough. They won't bomb us, for some reason. It's you they're after!'

Something about Antelion's claim did not ring true with Numitor. An elite infantry squad, unsupported and exposed

on a featureless dome; they were a prime target if ever there was one. The tau had shown no compunction about tearing down the architecture of their own city - no doubt the pilots were given clearance to bomb whatever target they deemed necessary. Little surprise, given the speed with which the builder caste were throwing up more structures in the wake of the initial strikes.

So why weren't they bombing Squad Antelion, exposed as they were on the roof above?

The words of the Codex filtered through Numitor's mind once more, even without Veletan to remind him of them.

*When civilian casualties can be avoided, do so. When they cannot, act without hesitation.*

Perhaps the tau had a similar code. Perhaps theirs was less pragmatic, and they had been ordered to avoid civilian casualties no matter the cost.

Suddenly it struck him. The shallow-domed buildings were hab-blocks, population areas that were likely still inhabited, and might lead to the honeycomb of tunnels and corridors housing the majority of the tau citizenry.

'Trondoris, vox all squads!' shouted Numitor, 'we need to get into that dome under Antelion, and fast.'

The battle-brothers of the Eighth Company shot across the plaza, a fresh squadron of xenocraft bombers coming in at speed behind them. Numitor gritted his teeth, expecting a deadly impact any moment. The ragged muster in the low dome's shadow had cost them precious seconds.

'Vertical vector,' Veletan was muttering. 'Thrust... assume velocity constant... maximum charge... parabolic crest... trajectory's close enough...'

'Veletan, shut up and concentrate,' said Duolor.

'I am concentrating,' said Veletan. Turning suddenly, the warrior braced for a moment and leaped back the way they had come. A plasma sphere detonated ten feet beneath him just as the Assault Marine fired his jump pack to maximum, the bow wave of the explosion launching him high into the

air. His pistol whined to full output, its power cells glowing bright blue. At the crest of his bolstered leap, Veletan punched the plasma pistol upward and took a single shot at the last of the tau bombers to hurtle overhead.

His timing was impeccable. Just when the bomb generator underneath the craft clicked open to release its own ball of plasma, the searing energies of Veletan's shot struck the pulse bomb itself, overloading it in a spectacular blaze of force. The malfunction consumed the entire rearwards section of the bomber with a thunderclap boom that reverberated across the city sector.

Veletan fell back to the street, legs still trailing flame, as the front section of the craft hurtled downwards. It careened over the rest of Squad Numitor and struck the side of Antelion's building with force enough to smash straight through the wall. Cracks shuddered out from the impact as the wreckage ploughed to a jumbled halt in the darkness beyond.

Numitor could hardly believe the opportunity unfolding before them, but had no desire to see Veletan's consummate display of skill wasted. He charged forwards, his men following. From the right came Sicarius, pounding across the plaza on foot. Having made it back down from his aerial attack, he was leading a gathering of battle-brothers - including Glavius, Kaetoros and the remainder of Squad Antelion - in a headlong run towards the shattered wall. The other squads of Eighth Company were close behind. Numitor sprinted for the opening that led into the civilian building, Sicarius and his men close on his heels.

Numitor pushed into the lee of the building and fought through the rubble and smoke to the safety of the interior.

Perhaps there was hope for their plan after all, he thought. They would find the tau commanders they sought, and bring death to any who stood in their way.



# CHAPTER FIVE

## INSERTION/WHAT LIES BENEATH

Por'el Aman'te looked at the ceiling with wide eyes as another explosion shook the walls of her underground home. A tracery of cracks had spread across it, daunting in their symbolism. Bombs were falling, high above.

Gel'bryn City was taking great punishment. Aman'te had told Dal'yth's people their planet would survive, and would tell them a thousand times over if necessary. But during a recent databrief she had seen the footage of the Imperial invasion of Vespertine, witnessing the horrific violence meted out by humanity's shock troops. A tiny part of her was unworthy enough to think that her words of reassurance might just be outright lies.

Not many of Dal'yth's thriving water caste lived under the planet's surface. Most of her kind preferred the hubbub of the city plazas, and took residences in the most populous of regions. But Aman'te was not like most of her kind.

She cast a glance towards her liquid sculptures, arranged with great care upon the table. They were both her secret shame and her greatest joy, a constant symbol of the dichotomy at the centre of her soul. Ripples flowed across their surfaces, their shimmering light reflected upon the ceiling as the deep bass of explosions boomed above.

It was unheard of for one of the water caste to pursue the art of sculpture. Acts of material creation were the exclusive province of the earth caste. Aman'te, driven by something inside her, had created them nonetheless. Something in her mind's eye had called them into being, and she had been inspired to give them form, much like tau lifedonors were sometimes inspired to seek out the generation farms in the labyrinthine earth caste complexes beyond.

The strange multiplicity of her skillset was why she had never experienced the blessed union of the *ta'lissera* with her voice-team, and why she never would. It was a connection so deep that her bond-mates would uncover her secret in a matter of a few rotaa.

For a tau even to show aptitude in the arts of another caste was forbidden, let alone to hone that talent until it rivalled their birth-given skills. To stray between castes was to risk being named vash'ya, a mark of disgrace and censure that could not be erased. It was a far graver sentence than the empty loneliness Aman'te had embraced as a precaution. Even a water caste ambassador had no chance of talking their way out of that.

If the ethereals confirmed the accusation, the matter was settled, and the punishment inevitable. Those so named were taken away, ostensibly for attunement to the sacred tenets of the Tau'va. In Aman'te's experience such individuals rarely came back, and those that did were so bereft of nuance they made the intelligences of their drone minders look sophisticated by comparison.

She had secreted a pulse pistol in her quarters, a long time ago, just in case they came for her in the night.

Something massive struck the complex walls above, shaking dust from the ceiling and making Aman'te start. The cracks in the ceiling grew wider still. A thought bubbled up to the surface of Aman'te's consciousness. Perhaps it would be better for the ceiling to come down on her. To bury her and her sculptures forever so that none

could know of her caste-treason.

The far wall of her chambers collapsed in an explosion of rubble, and she screamed nonetheless.

A giant burst through, horrific in proportion. At first she mistook it for a demolitions machine, for it was fully twice her size, and it had a bulbous convex head emblazoned with a strange icon. Then the thing turned, and she realised that what she had mistaken for a head was actually shoulder armour, a pauldron that had hidden a grotesque face.

Eyes full of hatred stared down from a knotted mass of muscle and fury, as intense as the worst of nightmares. Rivets had been punched into the thing's crested head, and a thin gruel of blood and spit ran from its wound-like mouth. It growled like an animal, raising a boxy pistol so crude and heavy it could break her without firing a shot.

Aman'te screamed again, scrabbling back on all fours and kicking over an oval table so it stood between her and the creature. Her precious water sculptures splashed and spilled, sent flying as she huddled behind her improvised shield. There was a loud bang, a rush of air, and an explosion so powerful it sent the table rocketing backwards. Aman'te was taken with it, her senses stolen by the stunning power of that single shot.

On instinct Aman'te thrust both feet outward, uncurling hard. She tumbled through the iris-like aperture that led to her corridor, the oval table crashing back into the room she had left. A muffled, animal roar came from behind it as she got to her feet, bloody and dazed. Her hearing was swirling back from the ringing impact that had taken it, clearing enough for her to make out guttural syllables on the cusp of understanding.

To a fire warrior, the grunting dialect would have been unintelligible, but all water caste tau prided themselves on being able to decipher even the most alien of languages. Since news had reached her of the coming invasion, Aman'te had studied the Imperial tongue well.

‘This way!’ the creature was shouting. ‘More vermin, and more tunnels behind!’

Aman’té creased her brow hard, bringing a measure of clarity to her senses. Darting left, she half staggered and half ran down the corridor towards the communal quarters where the subsystem’s earth caste work teams dwelt. Sounds of crashing destruction came from behind her, stark light sending shadows dancing madly ahead. Halfway down the tunnel was her aural workroom, the gateway to the audience chambers, and beyond that, the prototype laboratories of the earth caste. There was still a chance she could get out alive, patch a message through to the fire caste, maybe even alert the earth caste in time for them to bring their defences online. She could still contribute to the Greater Good one last time.

But the monstrous things were close behind her, and getting closer.

First, she would have to reach the pulse pistol she had secreted in her meditation chamber.

Sergeant Numitor stormed through the gloom of the tau hab-complex, delicate porcelain crunching under the heavy ceramite tread of his boots. There had been a small tau lifeform up ahead, an unarmed civilian making fear-sounds as it tried to escape. Numitor had followed it at speed. Likely it would lead him to its fellows, or attempt to raise the alarm.

The sergeant saw a circular door ahead, iris closed at his approach. There was a flicker of motion beyond it. He wrenched a boxy sculpture-thing from a nearby shelf and hurled it so it caught in the closing petals of the door, jamming it open. Lowering his shoulder, he charged, pushing a half-second burst of thrust through his pack to bolster his momentum.

Numitor struck the jammed door apparatus with such force the entire thing came loose in a crash of splintering xenoplastics. He scrambled through with half the

doorframe caught upon his backpack. Growling in irritation, the sergeant reached back with his power fist to tear it free in a juddering mess of splinters.

‘You shall not escape, xenos,’ he shouted, storming forward with anger writ large upon his features.

The tau civilian was lying close at hand, fallen on the far side of the room amidst a confusion of shattered plastics. Its dark almond eyes were open wide in some alien approximation of terror. Numitor’s lips curled back involuntarily at the sight of it. The tau was little larger than a Calthan youth, with a malnourished look to it. Its long, frail fingers reached towards him imploringly. It smelled of meadow flowers over the antiseptic tang of bleach, and the beat of its heart stuttered on the cusp of his hearing.

‘Wait, sire warrior!’ it said in perfect High Gothic. ‘I am no threat to you. I am regarded poorly even amongst my own kind!’

Numitor’s brow furrowed. The creature’s voice was... strangely human. Somehow, it was speaking with the tones of a young woman, and with a Macraggian accent at that.

‘You have the bearing of a knight, sire,’ it said, its accent becoming even more refined. ‘An honoured and noble warrior tradition. I see it in the heraldic devices you wear. They are the marks of your forefathers, are they not?’

Numitor raised his pistol, debating whether or not to waste another bolt. The creature knew too much about them already, that was plain.

‘Would your forefathers be proud to see you cut down a helpless, unarmed female?’ asked the young tau, her honeyed voice all innocence but for the barest hint of reproach. ‘Would the king amongst kings you must venerate be impressed? He whose code you follow?’

Numitor thought of Roboute Guilliman in that instant, of how the primarch would have acted in this situation.

In truth, he was unsure.

Aman’té had the creature’s eyes fixed on hers, its repulsive

face twisted in crude caricature as warring emotions passed across it.

She could do this. She had it partially entangled in her *fu'llasso* already.

Her hand crept slowly, painfully, to subtly press-click the cabinet where she had hidden her pulse pistol. At this range it would take a single pull of the trigger, especially if she was lucky enough to make a head shot.

The human warrior was mighty indeed, but slow of wit. It wore its psyche plainly on its features. Even though it was bestial in appearance, it was dressed in armour that bore honour markings and medallions, giving hints of a warrior brotherhood that valued glory and accomplishment. It was a simple, unsubtle angle she had taken, to play to the monster's twisted sense of justice, but it was proving effective. Already the creature was hesitating, bound by the contradictions of its own value system.

It was as the Golden Ambassador had once said. Notions and codes can stay a killer's hand as effectively as any net.

Perhaps it would be enough.

'I am nothing to a lord such as you,' she continued, her deft fingers finding the handle of the pulse pistol and curling to bring it inch by inch into her grip. 'Our own warrior caste does not match itself against harmless civilians. Instead, they seek to engage the strongest foes they can find, the better to win true glory.'

The brute was listening. If she could hold its attention for a few more moments...

Numitor stared down at the tau civilian. The creature was a weakling, almost despicable, but part of him had to concede it had a point. If the Space Marines were to kill the planet's civilians as well as its military, the campaign on Dal'yth would soon grind to halt. Perhaps his energies were better spent elsewhere.

'Many of our warrior caste dwell just beyond this chamber,' the young female continued, 'worthier opponents

for a true knight, who values honour and skill. Would you instead choose to sully your hands with the blood of unarmed civilians?’

She brought a blocky pistol out from nowhere, whipping it towards Numitor’s head.

‘Yes,’ said Cato Sicarius, barrelling past his fellow sergeant to stamp the creature hard into the floor. Numitor heard its ribs break into flinders within its chest. Sicarius spat on its corpse, pushing onwards into the gloom.

Shaking himself free of the creature’s mental manipulation, Numitor set off after his brother, the clatter and stamp of charging Ultramarines close behind him.

A thousand admiring eyes were fixed on Commander Farsight as he walked stiffly to the disc-like hover drone at the heart of the holothatre. A million more watched him over the caste-net.

Shadowsun, to Farsight’s immense relief, was not amongst those present.

Ovoid transmitter drones triangulated the footage of the commander’s every movement. The ramrod-straight backs of his officers straightened a little further as he passed. It was a mark of great respect that they attended in person instead of by holographic representation. He could see the water caste’s claims already – the pupil of Puretide descends once more to dispense his wisdom, the hero of Arkunasha gathers his chosen warriors to repel the vicious human invaders from the sept world of Dal’yth.

The truth of his recent near death, however, they kept hidden.

The hollow glory of the moment was bitter in Farsight’s mouth, but it was nothing to the agonies coursing across his body. Tight fists of pain filled his lungs, clenching with each step. Even his pores hurt. He kept his expression studiously neutral. To show weakness now was to dishonour the fire caste, and to do direct harm to the morale of the entire war effort.

The chamber's central hover drone dipped as he approached, a small mercy that allowed him to step onto it with relative ease. He was glad of the rigid curving spar holding the data suite array, and held onto it for support, stifling a painful cough as he straightened his back. He scanned the eyes of the fire caste officers in the front row. None had creases of concern on their features; he had not shown weakness yet. Tutor Sha'kanthas was amongst them, his face as sour and unlikeable as ever, but the rest of them practically glowed with pride, thrilled by the honour of being so close to a pupil of Master Puretide.

So far, so good.

'Greetings in the name of the Tau'va, comrades,' said Farsight softly. His words carried across the theatre, and the massed ranks of officers responded in kind, each making the sign of the Greater Good.

On the balcony high above them all, the ethereal Aun'Dreca nodded once. Flanking him were the images of the absent ethereals Aun'Tefan and Aun'Tipiya, attending by holopresence, the unwavering attention of the two females almost as daunting as that of the delegate attending in person. Aun'Dreca gestured with thin fingers for Farsight to continue.

'War has come to us once more, my friends.'

There was a susurrations of excitement in the audience. Farsight saw the glow of bloodlust on the faces of many officers in the front row; it was held in check, but present nonetheless.

'Here we fight a race possessed of great resource. Do not be fooled by the paucity of troops they have committed thus far. By my estimations we have encountered but a fraction of their strength. Worse still, their starships are using unknown methods to punch through our outlying fleets and deploy their troops on core sept soil.'

Behind Farsight, a complex holographic array glowed into bright life. Por'o Kais of the water caste had adopted the commander's suggestions as to how the fire caste best

assimilated information, and the multi-part display was fashioned and compartmentalised like the control screens of a battlesuit.

The central section showed footage of ornate Imperial craft barging through the void. Each boasted cannons large and numerous enough to shatter a kroot warsphere. Distribution arrays showed the fleet's entry point into tau space, a glowing wound in the fabric of space. Wedge-fronted Imperial craft pushed out from the roiling rift like swords bursting through a split gut.

'We do not know what strange technology they used to penetrate straight into the First Sphere,' said Farsight. 'The earth caste have not seen its like. Yet that is a riddle for another day. The humans are here now, upon Dal'yth, and in ever greater numbers. That is what matters.'

The fire caste officers nodded, many thinning their lips in signs of aggression. Farsight felt the heat of their keenness; in their hearts, they wanted to be out there with the cadres on the front line. But their minds sought wisdom and unity first, and they paid rapt attention to every word of their commander's brief. It was a sight to make even an ethereal proud.

'So far we have held the invaders at bay,' continued Farsight. 'The air caste have maintained overall control of low orbit, and our own Sky Ray gunships have added their might to the struggle for Dal'yth's airspace. Over a singe rotaa, hundreds of the rudimentary aircraft that serve as the gue'la skyforce have been shot down.'

The holograms behind the commander showed a textbook air caste deployment, staggered picket lines of craft linked by a perfect distribution of aerial drones. Footage of an Imperial squadron slid into focus, veering away from the trawling net of air caste hunters only to be taken out with grim efficiency by streaking seeker missiles from below.

The scenes cut expertly to the wallowing, fat-bellied shape of an Imperial bomber, its cargo bays pregnant with death. A squadron of Razorshark fighters emerged from behind a

sensor tower, quad ion rifles cutting the wings from the giant aircraft even as it disgorged a clumsy tumble of cylindrical bombs. Interceptor drones detached from the Sun Sharks in the fighters' wake, diving low after the falling bombs and detonating them in a string of harmless explosions across the sky.

A spasm of pain passed through Farsight's body and he felt his spine twitch hard. He turned the involuntary movement into a half-twist, making it look like he was taking a moment to watch the footage playing behind him.

Two Razorsharks harried a darting Imperial flyer that had been separated from its squadron, a blunt-winged craft with a class designation that translated as 'Thunderbolt'. The tau strike fighters neatly bisected the fleeing aircraft, their underslung guns turning its wreckage into little more than scattering debris as they traced a spiral path around its plummeting descent.

The footage did not show the mighty gue'ron'sha craft that had dived headlong towards Dal'yth's surface, pugnacious attack ships that smashed holes through the air caste's defences with the ease of a krootox punching through thin ice. In places it seemed the Imperial gunships were actively seeking collision, forcing the matrix of tau fighters to evade in disarray. There was plenty more material highlighting the sheer strength of the gue'ron'sha attack, but little of it need reach Farsight's fellow officers. Not yet, at any rate. Morale could be a delicate thing.

'The earth caste's transmotive network is working at near peak efficiency,' continued Farsight. The holograms showed sleek silver carriages disgorging pristine fire warrior strike teams, the scorched skies of Gel'bryn City behind them. 'By conveying cadre support to each assailed hexodome as and when the Imperials strike, we are quickly neutralising the pods that form the gue'ron'sha's favoured invasion vectors.'

A veteran officer made the sign of will-to-speak from the front row. Farsight unfurled a palm in return.

‘It is a fine thing to see the invasion in hand,’ said a tall, distinguished tau veteran in full parade dress. Commander Sha’vastos, an old friend of Farsight’s. Despite his age he made the deferential gesture of the enquiring student, finger curled and head cocked to one side. ‘Might I ask as to the water caste’s efforts?’

‘Of course, Commander Sha’vastos,’ said Farsight, grateful for the interjection. It was important the other officers felt they could ask questions of their leader, especially in a time of open war, and his old Arkunashan ally had thrown open the floor. ‘The water caste maintains the flow of critical intelligence across Dal’yth and beyond. Many of these holograms will be broadcast to the population at large, in order to lessen the psychological impact of the invasion. I am given to understand some of them include a handsome young commander in a rather striking red battlesuit.’

Quiet mirth trickled through the holotheatre; they had all heard of the human flaw of vanity, and found it endlessly entertaining. Even the ethereal Aun’Dreca smiled, recognising that humour was sometimes a necessary tool. Though Farsight grinned ruefully, he felt nothing but aches and exhaustion behind his mask of levity.

For a moment, he let a fraction of his pain show. The room fell silent.

‘The castes fight in unison, for the ethereals guide and watch over us all,’ said Farsight, his words carrying the ring of conviction as he made the opened hands of unbound respect. ‘As it is now, and as it ever shall be. With the unbreakable shield of true unity we will repel these invaders. Together we prevail, no matter the legions they throw at us. And those legions are manifold.’

The holograms behind Farsight became the view outside Gel’bryn’s serried domes, flickering and fading to monochrome as if taken from an ancient source – a deft touch from the water caste, intended to highlight the anachronistic, hidebound nature of the foes marching from the cavernous holds of Imperial bulk landers.

Rank upon rank of gue'la soldiers strode forward, armoured in the grey-green of dead vegetation. Their faces were waxy masks of ignorance and contempt. Held against each human's shoulder was a primitive rifle, a weak and inefficient laser weapon much like those the tau had encountered on the far side of the Damocles Gulf. A vicious-looking blade jutted from each rifle's barrel, as if the bearers thought of their firearms as spears rather than as precision tools of ranged warfare. The fire caste too carried blades - known as bonding knives, they represented unity and hope, symbolising the sacred team-bond of the ta'lissera. They were rarely, if ever, drawn from their scabbards.

'By a warrior's tools you shall know him,' quoted Farsight solemnly. 'Just as the fire caste are defined by the Hero's Mantle we all aspire to master, the Imperial soldiery is represented by the crude weapons you see here. In their hearts, they do not intend to engage at range, but to scrabble around in murderous close-quarters combat, stabbing and slashing. The most perfunctory of uniforms is the only thing separating them from their primitive, ape-like ancestors.'

A ripple of disquiet filled the holothatre.

'Such a barbaric race has no place upon a core sept world,' continued Farsight. 'They have no role in the universe other than to be brought to heel, culled and consigned to slow oblivion.'

There were murmurs of assent. Many turned into cries of awe and confusion as the drone-camera hologram panned back. Behind the serried ranks of gue'la troopers strode immense, broad-shouldered war engines with gigantic cannons in place of arms. They were crude effigies built in mockery of the noble battlesuit, colossi born of a race that respected only brute strength.

'These bipedal war engines are classified by their owners as "god-machines",' said Farsight. 'They may appear indomitable at first glance, but already one has been

neutralised by precision strike from the Manta missile destroyers of the illustrious Admiral Li'mau Teng.'

In the holograms behind Farsight, a burning goliath toppled onto the indigo wasteland outside Via'mesh'la. The bright fires of its demise threw the commander into silhouette.

'A warrior who wears his strength openly is easily countered,' quoted Commander Starflame from the midst of the audience.

'Just so,' said Farsight. 'And though six of these behemoths are inbound upon our cities, they are predictable. It is not these engines of war the fire caste must seek to counter, but the gue'ron'sha, those warriors the humans call Space Marines, whose strikes are sudden and powerful. Their insertion craft are simple enough, but mercilessly effective. Though it pains me to say it, these Space Marines are experts in the application of pure force at a single point.'

At this, the holograms showed the angular teardrop of an Imperial drop craft slamming through the glass curve of a hexodome. Upon impact its hull split into five sections, two blue-armoured gue'ron'sha emerging from each opening with sidearms blazing. Fire warriors positioned amongst the rubble were cut down in a series of messy explosions, though the water caste data teams had taken the liberty of editing out the blood.

'The gue'ron'sha wear armour that cannot be pierced by the shot of the pulse rifle, nor shattered by the salvos of the burst cannon. Yet their weakness is as clear as a mountain stream. They are too few in number to effect more than shock assaults. Once deployed, these strike forces are committed to a single war zone, unless their air cover pulls them out.'

Farsight saw many solemn nods in the holothatre, and no few expressions of disdain.

'By forcing the Space Marines to launch the spear of their assault and then ensuring our cadres withdraw before their blow can fall, we rob the gue'ron'sha of the military targets

they are so keen to destroy. The air caste and our own fighter squadrons will work in tandem, stranding each gue'ron'sha attack without hope of recovery.'

'A wise plan, Commander Farsight,' said Commander Bravestorm from the front row. 'It is typical of the Imperial mindset to trust in strength alone. I myself fought a flightless battlesuit equivalent clad in armour thicker than an Orca's hull - it was powerful indeed, but slow to manoeuvre.'

Seizing the opportunity, Farsight eye-flicked the holo to show drone-captured footage of Bravestorm's triumph over the Imperial walker. He complemented it by appending scenes of battlesuits blasting holes right through the torsos of Imperial shock troops.

'They are resilient, these Space Marines, but they can be killed. Equip your suits with plasma rifles and fusion blasters wherever possible. As a guideline, any time you face gue'ron'sha, treat them not as infantry, but as squadrons of enemy tanks.'

He paused a moment to let the concept sink in.

'We have the right weapons to overcome these warmongering trespassers. We are gathering knowledge of their weaknesses. There is no reason why we cannot repel the humans within a few rotaa of focused effort.'

A chorus of approval filled the auditorium, many of the fire caste officers making the sign of unalloyed assent.

'The efforts of Commanders Brightsword and Bravestorm thus far have been exemplary,' continued Farsight. 'As a result, recent air caste sweeps have confirmed that the gue'ron'sha have been repelled from Gel'bryn City...'

At this, cheers filled the holothatre. On the balcony, Aun'Dreca inclined his head in a subtle gesture of disapproval. Farsight made the lateral line of silence, and his fellow officers fell still.

'They have been repelled, for now,' said Farsight, anger simmering in his voice, 'but a new attack gathers outside Gel'bryn in force. We have slowed it down with missile

strikes from the hills, hunted and put down their outriders with overlapping sweeps of our stealth teams. But the main body remains intact, and still numbers in the tens of millions.'

A pulse of pain twitched in his lungs at the thought, making his eyes widen involuntarily. He saw a shadow of concern cross the faces of Bravestorm and Sha'vastos; they had learned to be perceptive over the years.

'We must study them, stall them, break them apart, and then,' Farsight's breath caught for a moment, 'and then bring down the sword. They have great numbers still to commit, in orbit as well as planetside. Yet we have an entire empire to draw upon, able to focus its efforts fully on the conflict at hand.'

The holograms behind Farsight showed the wider Tau Empire, its space lanes highlighted gold. Assets were inbound from a dozen worlds.

'We will observe the Imperial army's strengths, exploit its blindness, optimise our countermeasures, and defeat it beyond question. The killing blow will fall, again and again, until this new chapter in the ascendance of the Tau'va is lit with glory.'

The footage behind Farsight showed a hundred battlesuits descending from a crystal blue sky, sunlight glinting from every burnished plane. They opened fire in blistering unison. The atmosphere in the room was tense with the thrill of anticipation, dry tinder waiting for a final spark.

A voice cut through the jubilant atmosphere like an ice-cold knife.

'No.'

An athletic female warrior emerged from the iris door at the far end of the holothatre, tall and proud. Her sleek head was crested with a red scalp lock that trailed behind her like a whip, the bands upon it symbols denoting a major military victory.

There were many, many bands crowning her smooth pate. Commander Shadowsun had arrived.

Farsight felt his nerves jolt as his former team-mate Shadowsun emerged into the light. Despite the bulk of her signature XV22 stealth battlesuit, she loped down the centre of the holothatre with the grace of a hunting cat. Her scalp lock had even more honorific bands than he had seen in the latest water caste stills. Behind her came an entourage – three specialist drones and two shas'ui, their own stealth battlesuits compact but imposing. Farsight noticed wisps of steam emanating from her fusion blasters, still cooling from some recent engagement. Even O'Shaserra was not unscrupulous enough to have fired them before her grand entrance just for effect.

At least, not the Kauyon-Shas he remembered from Mount Kan'ji.

Every one of the officers in the holothatre had turned to look at the visitor in their midst, whispers of surprise rustling through them like wind through a field of crops. The breach of etiquette was quickly forgotten, washed away by Shadowsun's aura of sheer confidence and self-belief. She strode up to the command dais and interposed herself between Farsight and the audience, standing head and shoulders taller than him in her battlesuit and largely blocking him from sight.

Farsight looked up at Aun'Dreca, his blood uncomfortably hot in his veins, but the ethereal merely made a gentle beckoning gesture to proceed.

'Commander Shadowsun,' said Farsight to his fellow officer's back. 'This is an unexpected pleasure. Please, take a seat; my address is almost complete.'

O'Shaserra ignored him. 'The time for talk is over,' she said without turning, her stern tones cutting the last of the audience's susurrus into silence. 'Optimised *kauyon* plans have long been in place upon Dal'yth. We should enact them, not stall in order to devise more. Our people are dying. So now we act. As of this moment, the fire caste reserve cadres join those in the field.'

Farsight heard not a single voice raised in contradiction.

He looked to the holograph display behind him, but it was blank. All focus was on Shadowsun.

'The fire caste is the current target of these Imperial shock troops,' O'Shaserra continued, 'so we shall relocate into less populous areas. Lure them into traps that minimise collateral damage. We wage a mobile war, following the planet's rotation so that we remain upon its dark side at all times.'

A few mutters of assent came from the audience, dotted with louder outbursts of approval.

'We engineer confusion. We draw the enemy out. Piece by piece, we crush him in our grip. Starflame, you will form the polar point of the pincer to my equatorial. O'Sarakan, you will perform breaker strikes until relieved. O'Soara, put some cohesion into the Pra'yen refugees and rejoin Bravestorm's retaliation cadres at Dal'ryu.'

Farsight frowned, his outward expression the merest shadow of the storm raging inside. What did she think she was doing? How could she betray him like this? Their friendly rivalry had turned sour many years ago, and she had been distant and cold ever since. But this public division was a new low.

The feelings catching in his throat were so intense Farsight had to force down the urge to cough. Unbidden, his hand strayed to the hilt of his ceremonial sword as O'Shaserra outlined her orders. Gone was the introspective strategist he had grown to admire, the ever-patient warrioress who had sat in the snows of Mount Kan'ji for long days until her prey passed within striking distance. This was not the Shadowsun famous across the empire for her cold and deadly deliberations. Here instead was a paragon of the Code of Fire, alive with the thrill of delivering a long-planned kauyon – the certain and lethal denouement of a carefully laid trap.

Farsight told himself it was compassion, of a sort, that had driven her to humiliate him in such a fashion. Tau lives were being lost. If she could minimise those tragedies with

decisiveness and efficiency, she would do so without hesitation.

How their roles had changed.

‘Too much time has been spent here,’ continued O’Shaserra. ‘If any refinements to these plans are necessary, we can effect them over the cadre-net as we deploy. Move out.’

Shadowsun strode back down the centre aisle of the holothatre towards the exit, her entourage in her wake. Farsight found his fists clenching as a full half of his emergency conclave stood and followed her out, already talking into headpiece beads to coordinate their forces. His skin burned, and this time not because he had exited the healsphere too soon.

‘That will be all,’ he said to the uncertain officers that remained. ‘I have appended details of your individual briefings via data transmission. We shall combine our efforts with Commander Shadowsun as best we can. For the Greater Good.’

‘For the Greater Good,’ echoed Farsight’s commanders.

But the fire he had lit inside them was no longer there.

Tutor Sha’kan’tas was among the last to leave the holothatre. He had lingered long to savour the taste of Farsight’s embarrassment, and fought hard to keep a smile from spreading across his features as he walked past a pair of fire caste officers earnestly discussing which of their two leaders had the better approach to victory. Dal’yth’s defenders might stand divided, they might even suffer for it at the hands of the Imperial invaders, but if it meant that Farsight lost enough status to be removed from command then Tutor Sha’kan’tas considered it more than worth it.

Ever since mentoring the vaunted prodigy in the Mont’yr Battle Dome, Tutor Sha’kan’tas had seen the peril O’Shovah posed to the Tau’va. Since the inception of the Code of Fire, every cadet had followed the same path – and to break it, to show preference to one individual over the

whole, was to invite disaster. For the fire caste to entertain the concept that a single young warrior knew better than his tutors, and by extension the ethereals, was deeply wrong.

In the corridor ahead, Tutor Sha'kan'thas saw O'Vesa of the earth caste stumping along on his thick legs, struggling to match the confident stride of Commander Bravestorm. The genius-level scientist was well known to Sha'kan'thas from the rust deserts of Arkunasha. His prototypes had helped Farsight turn a disaster of a campaign into a hard-fought but glorious victory. The ten-year campaign had seen El'Vesa promoted to O'Vesa, given the honorific name Stone Dragon, and elevated to the upper tiers of his caste. In terms of intellect, he was a genius without doubt. Yet in terms of politics, he was an oblivious buffoon.

'It is of course possible to achieve greater energy yield, but risky in the extreme,' O'Vesa was saying to Bravestorm. 'You say even a direct hit from a fusion blaster failed to neutralise this war machine?'

Tutor Sha'kan'thas accelerated his stride as the two continued their conversation. He transmitted a greeting-blip to O'Vesa's data wand, simultaneously activating the recorder-discus hidden in the flat of his palm.

'Ah, Tutor Sha'kan'thas,' said O'Vesa, his flat slab of a face broken by a gentle smile as he turned in the corridor. 'I see you survived the Argap Plateau withdrawal.'

Bravestorm held up the open palms of welcome. 'An honour to see you, tutor,' he said, his veil of politeness not quite covering his irritation at being interrupted. 'And congratulations on having fought alongside Commander Farsight.'

'Yes,' said Tutor Sha'kan'thas. 'Arkunasha. A great victory. Perhaps ten tau'cyr too late, but notable nonetheless. A moment of your time, Stone Dragon?'

'Certainly,' said O'Vesa with a distant look in his eye. Commander Bravestorm made the sign of future paths crossing, and strode off down the corridor.

‘Were you present at Farsight’s briefing?’ asked the tutor.

‘I was. It was a rare privilege to be present at a fire caste gathering.’

‘A rousing call to arms, was it not?’

‘It was informative on a surface level,’ said O’Vesa, ‘though I prefer to dig deeper. Imperial technology is of great interest to the earth caste. This war offers an unparalleled chance to study it.’

‘Of course. And Farsight’s skill as an orator is impressive, you must agree. One need only have witnessed today’s inspiring address to see that, or his famous speech to the air caste at Zephyrpeak.’

‘I fear I am not qualified to judge, but yes, they tell me Commander Farsight’s skills at diplomacy are highly advanced.’

‘Would you say they are the equal of the water caste?’

‘It is possible. The commander’s skill sets are... admirable.’

‘Skill sets, you say? Do you mean those outside the remit of the fire caste?’

A moment of awkward silence passed between them. As Tutor Sha’kan’thas had hoped, the Stone Dragon could not help but fill it.

‘Commander Farsight is a singular individual, and I respect him greatly. Only yesterday he restarted a malfunctioning battlesuit’s systems whilst it was waterlogged in the Gel’bryn Reservoir. That is a feat which most worker-level weapons scientists would find difficult to achieve.’

‘How illuminating,’ said Tutor Sha’kan’thas, his eyes narrowing. There it was, the chink in the prodigy’s armour, laid wide open by a trusted friend. ‘With such talents in the arts of the other castes, would you say that Commander Farsight’s true nature is vash’ya?’

O’Vesa started back as if he had been slapped. ‘I would say... I would say I have little expertise on such matters,’ stammered the scientist. ‘Would you excuse me, tutor. I

have weapons tests to oversee, and Commander Bravestorm's prototype request to investigate.'

Tutor Sha'kan'thas watched O'Vesa bow, turn and hurry away. His lips pressed into a tight smile. The Stone Dragon clearly thought O'Shovah to be between spheres, even if he lacked the courage to say it outright.

How fitting that Farsight's threat to the Tau'va should be undone by his own genius.



## CHAPTER SIX

### INTRUSION/TRIAL BY EARTH

The smell of the underground corridors stung at the back of Numitor's sinuses, alien counterseptic mingling with the ice-cold tang of liquid nitrogen. Every footstep echoed loudly. The advance of Squad Numitor's battle-brothers sounded like the rumble of an oncoming storm, caught and amplified as it rolled down the curving white corridors that led from the civilian housing area deeper into the labyrinth.

No matter, thought Numitor. The Eighth Company cared little for stealth. Neither did their brothers in the Fifth, come to that; Antelion's squad were making just as much noise as his own. The Ultramarines existed to bring glorious destruction, not to skulk like assassins – and once the leaders of the enemy military had fallen, they would fulfil that duty in great measure.

In the middle distance a wide circular door gave a soft chime. The light array above it winked red, and curved metal panels slid to bar the passage of the oncoming Space Marines. Already striding forward, Sicarius raised his plasma pistol. The barrel was dangerously close to Numitor's head; he closed his eyes on reflex, not a moment too soon.

There was a crackling roar, a wash of intense heat, and the

smell of burning hair - the stubble on Numitor's scalp, judging by the stinging pain across the side of his head. His vision was a white blur for a moment, then a tracery of blood vessels faded away to leave his sight unmarred. He ground his teeth, stifling his reprimand. Duty came first, and the Eighth could ill afford more division.

Ahead, a glowing, yellow-white circle had been burned right through the door. Sicarius was already walking towards it, checking for hostiles before elbowing through the opening in a spattering of molten gobbets. Numitor climbed through after him, the rest of the strike force close behind.

A well-lit corridor stretched out before them, glowing lumens ranged along its curving ceiling. Interspersed along its length were tall, lozenge-shaped doors with portholes of transparent material down their centre lines.

With Sicarius so keen to take the vanguard, Numitor took stock of his surroundings, the better to watch for potential ambush. He paused at one of the porthole windows as he walked past and peered inside. The sight beyond filled him with an unnameable loathing.

A quartet of wide pillars rose up to a cloud of ivory-hued vapour. Girdling them at six evenly-spaced heights were wide, splaying wheels with spokes that leant gently downwards, each turning slowly in contra-rotation to the one below. Upon each spoke was a curving, glass-fronted pod. Inside each was the barest flicker of movement. Something tiny was twitching inside each of the containers.

Incubator carousels, each with an infant tau lifeform inside.

Four pillars, four castes. Presumably the geometric markings adorning each pillar corresponded to the elements that made up the tau race. Their newborn were engineered, then, rather than raised from childbirth by natural parents. Just like these tau to pervert the miracle of life into an automated process, thought Numitor, no doubt as far removed from their own natural life cycle as they

could possibly make it. To a warrior from the traditionalist arcologies of Calth, the notion was disgusting in the extreme.

One of the nearest pods revolved so it sat directly in Numitor's line of vision. The tau inside it was no bigger than a bolter clip, its thin limbs crossed across its chest like the relief sculpture upon a Blood Angels' sarcophagus. Unlike a human infant, its head and limbs were in perfect proportion to those of adult tau life forms. Humanoid, but so very far from a true human that it made the sergeant feel sick to look upon it.

There was other movement too, in the back of the chamber, a flash of white in the far reaches of the room. Numitor itched with the urge to act, his blood singing as his augmented nervous system dumped a fresh batch of stimulants into his veins. Out of the ivory mist came a disc-like drone, larger than those he had encountered at the reservoir. It had underslung manipulator limbs, scopes and syringes, somehow reminding Numitor of an Apothecary's narthecium and reductor. One of the appendages contained a milky fluid that dripped from a long valve-tipped pipette.

Numitor half-saw and half-felt a blue line of light flicker across his features as the drone's sensor array scanned him for an identity match. His hand was already reaching for a grenade when the machine's alarm rang loud, its limb-apparatus jerking in automated panic. The infant tau in the pods started squalling as one, their meditative repose replaced by clawing, thrashing frenzy. They hammered tiny fists on the glass fronts of their incubators, the sound rolling together into the far-distant rumble of wars to come.

Two more drones emerged from the gloom. Pulse weapons, stocky and lethal, projected from under the lip of their disc-like bodies. They came towards the door at pace.

Numitor drew back his power fist and put all his weight behind the punch, slamming it through the plexiglass with a jolting impact that sprayed shattered fragments across the incubator room. A plasma shot took layers of ceramite

from his knuckles as one of the drones stitched the door with burning white light. Wrenching his fist back out, Numitor stuck his bolt pistol through with his forearm braced on the edge of the porthole. The drones were easy targets – two placed shots, two detonations, and they were blown to pieces. The larger monitor drone was caught in the second explosion and flew in a wide spiral through the air, trailing smoke as its carer-limbs twitched senselessly beneath.

‘Sergeant,’ said Duolor, ‘the true fight does not lie here. We must continue onward, if we are not to be left behind.’

‘Of course,’ replied Numitor, shutting his eyes tight for a moment before heading down the corridor after Squad Sicarius. ‘Of course. There will be far stranger sights to come.’

Sicarius, some distance ahead, patched through on the vox.

*‘Numitor, get up here. We’re keeping true to your heading. It’s led us into a warren all right. There’s enough in the way of xenos cogitators here to make a tech-priest choke.’*

Ignoring the stab of annoyance he felt at his brother’s tone, Numitor motioned for his squad to follow him, breaking into a loping run along the widening corridors. He passed through the mangled remains of another vault-like door, emerging into a sterile, white-walled chamber so large it could have acted as a hangar for a dozen Thunderhawks.

At the chamber’s heart were a number of console stations hovering at waist height. Sicarius and his squad were gathered loosely around them. Each console took the form of a wide torus clustered with hololiths. The images coruscating across them were many and varied, but they all had one thing in common – they were without exception devoted to the artefacts of war.

Along the walls of the long chamber were wide, window-like viewscreens, each long enough for a score of observers to peer inside at once. An oval door-portal stood to the side

of each one. Numitor paced along the chamber's length, hazard-scanning as he went. The drone attack in the interstitial corridor had flooded his system with the sharp buzz of hyperdrenaline, and even with the area secured by Sicarius' Conquerors, he was still more than ready to fight. Any tau that appeared would meet a sudden and grisly death.

Through one of the window screens Numitor saw an Imperial city, all ruined archways and shattered buttresses. Broken street-lumens adorned every corner; from no few of them, scarecrow bodies hung by the neck, turning limply in an invisible breeze. A crude representation of the two-headed eagle was stencil-sprayed onto every flat surface. Numitor noticed the aquila's head that represented vigilance and justice wore a stylised hood like that of a hunting bird; no doubt some xenos technician's idea of wry commentary.

In the middle distance were the burnt-out shells of vehicles fashioned in the likeness of Astra Militarum battle tanks. The entire environment had been constructed to be reminiscent of an Imperial manufactorum district, even down to the scatterings of bullet casings strewn through the streets.

'Training environment,' said Numitor. Nearby, Trondoris grunted in agreement, hefting his eviscerator and looking through the window for signs of life before reluctantly moving away.

The next room's window screen was dark, but Numitor's sharpened vision penetrated the gloom easily enough. He was looking across the pale, cratered surface of a moon. Through some artifice of light, it extended impossibly far in all directions; there was even a gentle curve to the horizon. Broken Imperial landers dotted the lunar sprawl. Amongst them were blackened corpses stretching their claws towards the uncaring void.

'Stop gawping and get up here,' said Sicarius, motioning towards the window at the far end of the gallery-like

chamber. 'We're out of options. This is the only way to continue if we want to stick to your original path.'

Numitor approached the window around which Squad Sicarius was clustered. Beyond it was a thick green jungle, wreathed in diaphanous clouds of mist. The sergeant peered between the vine-choked trunks that led to the sprawling canopy high above, but he could see no end to the swathes of vegetation stretching into the distance.

The idea of plunging into an underground jungle grown specifically as a weapons testing ground did not sit well with Numitor, but Sicarius had a point - if they were to continue their heading along the projected course, they would have to venture into that artificial worldscape and find a way out of the other side.

'Right,' said Numitor, flexing his power fist and smashing the plexiglass viewscreen into jagged shards. 'Let's get started.'

Squads Sicarius, Numitor and Antelion trudged through the sludgy morass of the jungle floor. As well as its tangled mat of thorny vegetation, the artificial environment was thick with peaty black muck that clung to their battleplate up to the ankle. Every one of the Ultramarines looked around at the slightest sign of movement. There was plenty of it for them to take in, far too much to allow for any clear threat-scan. The place was filled with the hooting, calling and buzzing of a hundred different species.

Numitor noticed something strange about the jungle's fauna - every creature larger than his fist had four triple-jointed claws and a powerful, jutting beak. Most of the truly avian species boasted a profusion of brightly coloured quills from the back of their heads, crests that shook with a percussive rattle every time the Space Marines passed close by. Here and there a long-limbed gibbon-like creature brachiated through the canopy. These too had a vicious avian cast to them, their heads more like those of hawks than simians. Three had come at him, shrieking, but his

backhand slap had broken the largest one's neck and sent it crashing into a tree. The creatures had left the Eighth alone since then.

The ape-like animals reminded the sergeant of something, something he'd read about in connection with the tau, but he could not place it.

Not with the grumbles of his battle-brothers vying for his attention.

'A world of sterility and order,' said Kaetoros, looking pointedly at Numitor, 'and the Eighth still manages to find a sea of foul-smelling muck to traipse through.'

'We've come this far,' he replied. 'Do you wish to turn back?'

By way of answer, Kaetoros merely shouldered his flamer and increased his pace.

'There is undoubtedly a quicker way to proceed than this,' said Veletan, 'but not necessarily a more expedient one. We are not native to the planet, and hence we cannot factor in its kill zones.'

'Quite,' added Numitor. 'When the Adeptus Astartes find their way barred, they forge a new path.'

'I do not recall that proverb,' said Veletan, an edge of uncertainty to his voice. The warrior was stoic enough to walk across a magma field without complaint, but the idea of Imperial doctrine he had not committed to memory filled him with deep unease.

'It was first said by one Sergeant Numitor, I believe,' Numitor replied airily.

Veletan looked at him askance before continuing on.

In the middle distance, Sicarius was crouching over a flak-armoured corpse sprawled face down in a clearing. Even from this far away, Numitor could see it had half of its torso blasted away, the ruddy hue of cooked meat festering under its shattered chestplate. He angled his course towards it.

At Numitor's approach, Sicarius grabbed the cadaver roughly by the shoulder and turned it over. A hideous doll's mask stared back. It had a child's sketch of a face, but

wrought in flesh and skin.

‘Vat grown, by the look of it,’ said Sicarius, prodding at the thing’s pallid neck. ‘Some artificial facsimile of a human.’

‘Supposed to be an Imperial Guardsman, I’d wager,’ said Numitor. ‘The science division of their builder caste was testing weapons suites against us before we even arrived. No wonder the native platoons always have the right weapons for the kill.’

Something ugly occurred to Numitor. He turned to Sicarius, his tone grave.

‘Like as not, we’ll find some armoured meat-puppets supposed to represent the Adeptus Astartes.’

Sicarius met Numitor’s gaze.

‘Like as not, brother,’ he replied, ‘we will be playing that role ourselves.’

Surrounded by the cushioned upholstery of his analysis cradle, O’Vesa watched the gue’ron’sha intruders from a dozen angles at once. Below him, the battlesuit hangar bustled with life. He had devised two new weapon prototypes in answer to Commander Bravestorm’s request, overseen the latest iterations of the neuroscience engram division, and had ensured his experimental battlesuits were ready for deployment in the unlikely event he got clearance for his field test.

But when the intrusion alarms had sounded, he had not obeyed standard evacuation protocols like the others. Instead he had retired to his sanctum for a moment of meditation, tapping in a hidden override to ensure nobody came looking for him. The gue’ron’sha held no fear for him. In truth, he feared ignorance far more.

Within a matter of seconds he had found himself clicking through the cadre-net’s images, assessing the tapestry of war unfolding across the planet and working out how the Imperial strike teams had located his base of operations. Understanding, as ever, was key to victory. The first of the clashing empires to truly comprehend the mindset and

capabilities of the other would secure a critical advantage in every theatre of war. It was a thrilling situation, despite the immediate peril that faced Dal'yth. If there was one area of expertise O'Vesa enjoyed exploring more than any other, it was the science of warfare, and an opportunity to put so many of his projects into practice at once was rare.

Not since Arkunasha had he felt so alive.

In parsing the various spectacles of war that the fire caste's cadre-net had accumulated, O'Vesa had spotted the telltale blue of several Ultramarines warriors making their way through the alphanumeric city hexes. Each of them had a large, bulky backpack - a simple and relatively compact jet propulsion system, by the look of it, capable of holding even a Space Marine's great bulk aloft. They were presumably vanguard troopers, their wargear suites intended to function as primitive versions of the Hero's Mantle.

Their evolving distribution pattern had unspooled before him, and he had run a quick trajectory calculation in his head. The trail of corpses they had left in their wake, tau and Imperial alike, had begun at a crash site - the resting place of an air caste fighter that had demolished the side of a civilian hexcomplex.

That complex joined arterial passageways that led to the hangar in which he currently worked.

O'Vesa unconsciously made the twin fists of fortunate acquisition, his broad teeth showing in a broad smile. The Imperial shock troopers had made straight for the earth caste testing labs. In doing so they had triggered a series of intrusion alarms and a wide-scale withdrawal of personnel. Perhaps their intent was to strike at the workers that kept the city alive, or the scientists that supplied war materiel to the fire caste. He could see why. Without the labours of the earth caste, tau society would soon grind to a halt.

O'Vesa pursed his lips, fingers steepling under his chin. Then again, to weaken the firmament of the Tau'va would take months to achieve - months the Imperium could ill

afford with the castes united against them. They had to be after a more specific goal.

The scientist extrapolated the invader-group's trajectory, extending it all the way to Mount Kan'ji. He drew in a sharp breath as he realised it would cross Atha'dra, a set of five command towers used as a base of operations by all of the tau castes as well as several prominent ethereals. They could not be allowed to reach it. They could not even get close.

The gue'ron'sha strike force, bolstered by a unit of ground-borne elites they had joined forces with in the Plaza of Boundless Potential, had carved a direct path through Gel'bryn's underground sprawl. They had barged their way through a water caste guest suite, a series of meditation chambers and a genetics farm to reach the earth caste laboratories beyond. The genetics farm had been compromised beyond recovery; O'Vesa mentally wrote it off without the slightest twinge of regret.

Like raging krootoxen the Space Marines had crashed through every sealed door and bulkhead in their path, reaching the weapons testing facilities with disturbing ease before smashing their way into O'Vesa's favourite war zone, the Pech dense terrain simulator.

'A prime opportunity,' said O'Vesa, punching up a ground-level view of his latest creations. 'Prototypes are made to be tested, after all.' Giant battlesuits loomed in the darkness, menacing guardian statues waiting for their master's summons.

O'Vesa picked up a data wand and sketched a series of symbols upon the smallest of the screens. There was a purr of hidden motors, a hiss of stale air, and a sleek black drone slid out from the console to his right. Red lights winked upon the machine's perimeter, an aura of threat emanating from its every hidden panel.

'Ah, Ob'lotai,' said O'Vesa. 'I have a job for you, faithful helper. An engagement your battle parameters should encompass without too much impediment. What do you say

to a swift kauyon?’

Sicarius ripped another serpent’s nest of vines from the canopy above. Around him, his squad slashed their chainswords through clumps of vegetation to force a path through the jungle. His scabbard was fouled with muck, the same black slime that was baked on to the outer layers of his armour.

The sergeant was already sick of the sweltering jungle. Numitor had led them into a humid hellhole, more reminiscent of Catachan than the ordered tessellations of Dal’yth’s surface. In theory, the idea of fighting right into the tau command zone was sound enough, and at first Sicarius had seen Numitor’s plan as the most direct and brutal way to make an impact on the war at large. In practice, he wasn’t sure if he would prefer going overground after all, even if it meant plasma spheres raining out of the sky.

Something winked in the distance, just for a moment, a light on the edge of vision. Sicarius felt his senses sharpen and his blood thunder with hyperdrenaline. He held up an open hand, staying the advance of his squad.

‘Veletan,’ he hissed, ‘awaken your auspex. There’s something up ahead.’

The familiar swooping click of Veletan’s handheld scanner-engine panned across the jungle, its machine-spirit hungrily searching the undergrowth for major life signs.

‘Unknown ident,’ said Veletan, ‘on the cusp of effective range. It’s a single set of readings, sergeant. I believe it to be the emission betrayals of a xenos warsuit, and a large one. It is stationary, however. I can only theorise it is-’

The jungle suddenly came alive, hundreds of birds and insects bursting from nowhere as something shot through the trees towards them. Sicarius caught sight of a cluster of white missiles haring around the dense vegetation to slam into their midst, detonating hard against Glavius just as he turned his shoulder. The explosion sent him flying back to

slam into a vine-clad tree trunk.

Just as Sicarius drew his sword, another missile shot through the foliage to strike him full in the chest, pitching him backwards in a ringing blast of noise and light. He felt a moment of weightlessness before he slammed hard into the sludge. He rolled to one side on instinct, another blunt missile thudding into the mulch before detonating with a wet thump that would have taken his legs had he not moved aside.

A thousand hot needles danced along Sicarius' spine as the pain of the initial strike filtered through. It just made his bad mood worsen. He shot up with a roar, pistol held high, and blasted the black gunk from his jump pack with a blaze of flame. Another volley of missiles was veering through the jungle towards them, jinking and curving to avoid every liana and frond as they hurtled closer. Sicarius leaned hard to one side as a pair of warheads shot towards him; they missed his throat by a finger's breadth.

'Get in close, damn it!' shouted the sergeant. His squad were swift to obey. Kaetoros, mid-leap, cleared away a swathe of vegetation with a gout of blazing promethium before landing in a shower of embers. Ionsian boosted forward, bolt pistol blasting a brittle curtain of vines to tatters as his battle-brothers followed behind. Numitor rocketed past with blurring speed, driving his crackling power fist right through the trunk of a tree to send it toppling over.

Sicarius saw a tiny sliver of ochre in the distance, the telltale colour of the tau warrior caste. 'Got you,' he snarled, leaning forward to barrel through the dense foliage on twin tongues of flame. A trio of missiles arced in towards him, too fast for him to dodge.

Numitor's fallen tree came crashing down on top of them, the quicksilver projectiles unable to avoid the profusion of branches and thorny tendrils suddenly in their flight path. The triple thud of the missiles' demise blasted splinters and vines in all directions. Sicarius spared a glance in his fellow

sergeant's direction, glad of his foresight.

Numitor had ripped a vast slab of the fallen tree's hollow trunk away, using it as a primitive mantlet as he advanced. Squad Antelion were close behind him, splashing through the mire and slashing vines with their combat knives as they fought to keep up. Missiles detonated upon the hard bark of Numitor's improvised barrier, tearing it to flinders. Too little too late, thought Sicarius. The sergeant and his allies were well within engagement range now.

Thumbing his plasma pistol's activation rune, Sicarius leapt onto an outcrop of rock and boosted forward again. Ahead, the patch of ochre he had seen resolved into one of the gunner warsuits that Vespertine's Astra Militarum platoons had called Broadships. More missiles shot from the war machine's shoulder-mounted launchers, from the drones hovering at its shoulders, and from the boxy gauntlets it had in place of hands. It was laying down a barrage of firepower that an entire Devastator squad would struggle to match.

Worse still, every missile seemed to have a mind of its own. Two of them peeled off to intercept Sicarius, but this time he was ready for them. He raised his pistol, and a burning sphere of plasma blitzed through the vegetation towards them. It didn't hit them directly, but at maximum discharge, it didn't need to. The sheer blast wave of heat that came from his shot was so intense that both of the deadly cylinders cooked off well before impact.

Suddenly the sergeant was clear. The Broadship suit was standing motionless amongst the trees with a black drone brushing up against its antenna. Triggering maximum burst, Sicarius shot between two thick trunks to hit the battlesuit with the force of an azure thunderbolt. His tempest blade, held out like a spear, plunged deep into the torso unit to impale whatever foul excuse for a warrior hid within. Sicarius was rewarded with a fountain of sparks. The haywire energies played across the giant machine's front, the drone hovering nearby zipping straight up out of

harm's way.

The roar of a powerful chainsword came from below as Trondoris shot in towards them. With a cry of righteous hatred, he swung his two-handed eviscerator into the waist of the malfunctioning Broadside. The giant toothed blade juddered and jerked as Trondoris ground it through alloy and cable, his every muscle straining for the kill.

With a sharp crack, the machine's torso fell back, salvos firing upwards at random from its missile gauntlets as its top half toppled backwards into the mire.

Sicarius gave a cry of triumph, grinning fiercely behind his helm as he savoured the taste of victory. Trondoris rammed his eviscerator point-first into the suit's disembodied torso, hoping to churn the pilot within into ragged meat. The swordsman scowled, looking up at Sicarius in puzzlement as his blade found no purchase.

'There's nothing in there,' he said.

There was a shimmer from Sicarius' flank, and Trondoris evaporated in a sizzling cloud of blood.

The xenos warsuit that came looming out of the jungle was huge, easily twice the size of the Broadside walker. Gun-shapes flickered on its hulking shoulders, and fingers of plasma burned through the vegetation to stab into the Space Marines advancing around Numitor. The warsuit's surface constantly rippled with green, brown and black striations that echoed the foliage behind it to an uncanny degree and made it almost impossible to delineate.

The technological dervish emitted a low hum that set Sicarius' teeth on edge even within his helm. Glitches danced across his readouts, fuzzing his targeting runes and turning his long-range vox to gibberish. A morass of blurring symbols danced across his vision, disturbingly reminiscent of the scrapcode feared by the Machine God's faithful.

Sicarius wrenched his faulty helm from his head with a growl of impatience, slamming it onto his belt with a clang.

Every one of his squad was casting about for the assailant that had vaporised Trondoris, muzzles whipping right and left as they desperately sought for the source of the plasma fire that had pulsed from the trees.

Incredulity jolted through Sicarius' mind. The thing was right there! How could his brothers not see it? Revealed from its ambush site, the machine was gigantic, a shifting miasma of colour taller than a gun bunker. Then it struck him. The warsuit was somehow baffling its electronic presence, projecting camouflage signals so potent they were invisible even to auspex scans. It moved with almost silent grace through the dense vegetation; all that Sicarius could make out was a susurrus of white noise as it slid from trunk to trunk.

'Helms off!' shouted Sicarius, raising his pistol to send a ball of plasma searing towards the strange apparition. 'It is invisible to machine-spirits!'

The monstrosity was already boosting up and over the shot, levelling the massive cannon-shaped silhouette of its right arm before firing a shot of its own. Sicarius hurled himself sideways a split second before a column of intense blue fire stabbed down. The blast incinerated the vegetation beneath him and sent up a cloud of scalding grey steam.

'Quickly!' Sicarius yelled as he vaulted behind a fallen tree. 'Take your helms off, all squads! Hunt with the naked eye!'

Glavius was the first to obey. Mag-clamping his helm to his waist, he recoiled in shock at the sheer size of the xenos warsuit suddenly visible before him. He took a bolt pistol shot on reflex, but the round went wide, winging something else entirely – the black disc-drone hovering between the trees. It gave a blurt of xenos tech-gibberish as it struggled to remain airborne.

Squad Antelion, adapting to the new threat with fluid competence, opened fire. Those near enough to hear Sicarius' order took off their helms and formed a loose

skirmish line, loosing a fusillade of mass-reactive bolts from behind tree boles and moss-covered rocks. The ghost suit turned towards them with alarming swiftness, raising the blunt stub of an arm to send out a swarm of tiny projectiles.

Impossibly, the miniature seekers collided head-on with every one of the tactical squad's bolts, detonating them in a string of mid-air pyrotechnics. Not a single shot hit home. Then the giant warsuit returned fire, weapon arm projecting a column of white fire that incinerated two Ultramarines as it leaped back between the trees.

Right into the path of Jorus Numitor.

With a defiant yell, Numitor slammed his power fist home into the battlesuit's knee joint. The blow tore away its lower leg in a gout of clear fluid and crackling sparks. With its shroud-tech disrupted, the giant's disembodied limb flickered ochre and white as it toppled into the muck.

Reeling from Numitor's attack, the warsuit engaged the jet engine array at its back and shot vertically upwards, bursting through the jungle canopy in a shower of loose vegetation.

'After it!' shouted Sicarius, soaring upwards on a column of blue fire. All of his squad bar Glavius, still lumbered with his sergeant's empty jump pack, launched themselves after him.

There was a moment of thrashing green-black motion, and Sicarius blasted into the warm haze of artificial sunshine atop the canopy. A cloud of jade mantids billowed around him as he cast about for his prey. Every time one of his squad burst from the foliage to join him above the canopy the sergeant span around, pistol levelled, but the tau warsuit was nowhere to be seen. Sicarius shut down his jump pack engines, coming to rest on a thick and twisted bough as he scrutinised the horizon for any signs that would betray his quarry.

Numitor joined them in an explosion of leafy fronds. His expression was that of the hunter whose spear had already pierced the prey, eager to finish the kill.

‘It’s gone, brother,’ said Sicarius. ‘No sign of it.’

He shaped quite another message with his fingers, however, using the sea-cant of the Talassarian ocean gangs – a language he had taught Numitor years ago during the doldrums of an interstellar haul.

Watch. The. Insects.

Numitor gave a slight nod. Suddenly his eyes widened.

Sicarius was already turning as a cloud of scintillating mantids flocked upwards on his flank. He leapt to the side, pistol roaring as he sent a blazing white fireball right past the column of fusion energy searing the air in his wake. The plasma bolt connected with the shimmering ghost image behind the mantid swarm. Burning liquid splashed across the warsuit’s hull. Its camouflage systems shorted, flickered through a dozen colours, and died altogether to reveal an ochre monstrosity missing a lower limb.

The thunder of bolt pistols echoed loud as Squads Numitor and Sicarius opened fire. One mass-reactive shot after another cratered the ghost suit’s carapace, each explosion so fierce it would have ripped an unarmoured tau in half. The warsuit was punched off balance, flailing a club-like arm against Kaetoros’ jetting gout of promethium.

Numitor came in fast from its blind side and struck it with a thunderous uppercut. The thing was hurled backwards, smashing through the canopy in a cacophony of snapping timber to crash down into the black mire beneath. Looking down, Sicarius could just make out a drone darting in to press its antennae against those of the fallen giant. He made to take a kill shot, but his plasma pistol had yet to recharge.

‘Is it dead?’ asked Numitor.

‘Aye,’ replied Sicarius, ‘it’s dead.’

‘Good. We must be on the right track if these are the creatures they send to stop us.’

‘Perhaps,’ agreed Magros. ‘Perhaps these tau are merely testing us. Seeking to take our measure, just as we seek to take theirs.’

‘Then they shall find us more deadly than they ever imagined,’ said Sicarius, turning and dropping back down through the canopy without a backward glance.

The Stone Dragon watched the intruders upon a bank of curving screens, a hemisphere of images that curved around the front of his analysis cradle. His eyes, darting and flickering rapidly, controlled the flow of information cascading across the displays. A slight smile creased the wrinkled, noseless slab below.

On the upper left was displayed the double waveform of the trespassers’ heartbeats and the breathing patterns of their multiple lungs. They had inbuilt redundancies for their vital organs, noted O’Vesa approvingly. Whoever had designed this warrior species knew his craft. On the upper right screens were displayed the flatlining signals of the prototype they had just shattered. The up-scaled Stealth suit had been tentatively named the XV98, later nicknamed the Ghostkeel by his aides. The name had stuck – the battlesuit had been inspired by O’Shaserra’s analogies concerning Kan’jian spirits, after all, and it was all but invisible to sensors. Its electronic countermeasures had worked well, up to a point, as had its mirage generators. The Mantle was still a long way from perfect, and the impromptu kauyon ambush had been only a partial success. Still, it had been more than worth it for the data harvest.

The flood of logistics information harnessed by O’Vesa’s analysis cradle was not theoretical data, nor the conclusions of a puppet war waged against the earth caste’s best estimates. This was the real thing. Empirical evidence, intoxicating in its purity.

One of the trespassing gue’ron’sha was speaking to its fellows in short sentences, curt and efficient. The spooling autotrans underneath each intruder’s image made a decent job of converting it to the tau language, though O’Vesa would have to bring a member of the water caste into his confidence if he wished to understand the finer points of

their speech. No matter, he thought. Their actions spoke loudly enough by themselves.

As he watched, the warriors with the bulky flight packs removed their helms. Even the Ghostkeel prototype was a formidable terror weapon against such superstitious foes. The idiocy of the invaders leaving their most vital location vulnerable would have surprised O'Vesa, had he not already witnessed these strange, impulsive creatures acting with little more intellect than an ork.

Straying into a network of the enemy's weapons testing arenas showed a fatal lack of wisdom in itself. O'Vesa was more than willing to make use of it, and would broadcast his findings across Dal'yth and beyond.

A tiny screed of data played across the mantle-screen of the suite. It was Ob'lotai, blipping the signal of his approach. O'Vesa sat upright, got out of the arch-backed viewing station, and bowed deeply to the shiny black disc hovering towards him.

'Ah, Helper Ob'lotai,' said the Stone Dragon, 'a fine performance out there.'

'I think not,' replied the drone in a disappointed monotone. 'Only a single casualty, and a cutting-edge battlesuit lost. Clearly death has not improved my martial skillset.'

'One confirmed kill, yes,' said O'Vesa, 'but think of the data, my friend!' The earth caste scientist's eyes were alight with the glow of enthusiasm. 'In many ways, I'm glad we gave these gue'ron'sha a chance to do so much. Actual battle data from a wide variety of weapons over more than six microdecs of engagement - and not a single tau life lost in the process! That is truly a great success.'

Ob'lotai wobbled the disc of his fuselage from side to side in grudging agreement.

'Every parameter has been recorded and properly marshalled,' continued O'Vesa. 'It is only awaiting compilation before I sign it over to the fire caste for the betterment of the war effort. This is a breakthrough,

Warghost, nothing less.'

'If you say so,' said Ob'lotai. 'Though next time I shall take a far greater toll.'

'Of course you will,' said O'Vesa indulgently, passing the tip of his data wand over the drone's forward lip. A series of green-blue lights winked along its length as Ob'lotai's own data harvest cascaded into the earth caste databanks.

'I believe there is yet more opportunity to be exploited, if you are willing,' said O'Vesa.

'Of course. Information is the key to victory. Should my sentience be damaged beyond recovery, I shall die once more in the name of the Greater Good.'

'And who could ask more? But this time, my faithful helper, you shall not go alone. It is time our false Pech fought back.'

'I see,' said Ob'lotai doubtfully. 'Did Commander Farsight not condemn the active elements of the Pech project as a dangerous precedent?

'He did indeed. Technically, however, he holds no influence over earth caste protocols. And whilst we have such an unparalleled chance to put our guests to the test, it would be counter-intuitive not to use it.'

'In this instance, perhaps it is forgivable. To test the capabilities of the foe, rather than the weapon.'

'Quite so. In fact, there is another early-model prototype we might wish to try out whilst the data flows so freely. I am sure honoured Fio'o Bork'an Ishu'ron will forgive us once he has seen the field data we accrue.'

The drone Ob'lotai bobbed a foot higher in the air.

'The KV120?'

'The very same,' replied O'Vesa.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### EXTRACTION/TO BLIND A GOLIATH

Sicarius fought through the jungle with a face like thunder. The thin creepers tugging at his armoured legs snapped with each stride. Progress was slow - painfully so for a member of the Eighth, more used to ground-eating leaps than the grim trudge of the Tactical Marines. Worse, they had yet to find any evidence their course was still true. Many of his squad had already replaced their helmets, thinking the danger of the chameleonic warsuit had passed, but Sicarius was not so sure.

Nearby, Numitor shouldered through a curtain of brittle lianas, power fist swinging idly at his side. A crude weapon, massively powerful, but blunt and slow next to a blade. Its very design invited an enemy swordsman to strike first before the wearer could level a blow. Sicarius had always seen it as an outward sign of Numitor's attitude: let one's adversaries prove themselves guilty before meting out the punishment. One day that philosophy would get the sergeant killed, leaving Sicarius in an unrivalled position for captaincy after Atheus himself.

The thought made Sicarius feel a number of conflicting emotions.

'No sign of any more xenos,' said Numitor, threat-checking

the canopy just to be sure.

‘Hmm,’ said Sicarius. ‘You have a strategy in mind for exiting this place? It feels like we’re wasting time here.’

‘Keep on this heading until we get to an exit, or a wall – either way, we smash our way out.’

Sicarius shook his head and spat a thin stream of saliva by way of answer. It hit a broad tangle of roots, and burned part way through with a hiss of potent acid. Sicarius ripped it the rest of the way with a cutting motion of his hand; he would not stoop to using his ancestral tempest blade to hack down vegetation. Even to risk fouling a chainsword was beneath such a weapon, and the tempest blade was a relic of Talassar, so finely made that the rest of the squad’s weapons looked thuggish and blunt by comparison. Another metaphor, perhaps. There were times when he fought better alone.

Sicarius’ brow knotted in aggravation. Unhelmed, he could feel the gaze of Sergeant Antelion on the back of his head. No doubt the Ultramarine was silently judging the Eighth’s departure from the main battle plan, and he did not like it at all.

Up ahead, an overhang of rock jutted from between two minor waterfalls. There was a deeper darkness beneath it, a cave shrouded by overgrowth. Behind the twisted vines covering its entrance it was easily as large as a gunship’s void hangar.

‘Colnid, Veletan, scout that cave,’ said Sicarius. ‘Then debrief inside. All of us. We have much to discuss.’

Numitor met Sicarius’ gaze before relaying the message to his own squad. Antelion gave a curt nod, gesturing for his squad to form up around him and follow him up the incline to the cave’s mouth.

‘Sergeant Sicarius is right,’ said Antelion as the three squads assembled in the gloom of the cave. ‘We must assess and amend our approach. Captain Atheus’ plan did not anticipate such high levels of tech. We cannot afford to stumble into the tau’s gunsights.’

The assembled squads began to check their wargear, their movements smooth and economical. Sicarius barely paid attention as his hands went through his own weapons drill, practised a thousand times and more. The cave, dank with mildew and slime, echoed with clicks and hisses as bolt cartridges were locked into place, dwindling fuel reserves optimised, and helms replaced.

‘Keep your helms off until we’re in open ground, squad,’ said Sicarius, the steel in his voice brooking no argument. ‘That thing compromised us somehow, used some haywire pulse that has scrambled our comms and auspex alike. There will likely be more hidden assets in here with us, probably interference based.’

‘Camouflage,’ said Kaetoros, ‘is the colour of cowardice.’

‘Dorn’s words rather than Guilliman’s, but still true enough,’ said Sicarius. His flat, once-handsome features were serious and cold. ‘The ambush warsuits of the tau are invisible to augur cogitators. The naked eye is our best weapon against them.’

‘You’re de-helming your entire squad?’ asked Antelion.

‘You heard my reasoning, sergeant. Besides, the larger ones have firepower enough to burn through six inches of ceramite. That’s a killshot, whether the head is protected or not.’

‘So acuity is our best defence,’ said Glavius.

‘Aye,’ said Sicarius. ‘So we must rely on the senses the Emperor gave us. Furthermore, with our promethium reserves depleted, our ammunition running low and no sign of resupply, it looks as if we will be working closely with Squad Antelion. De-helm and introduce yourselves.’

His unit made to obey. Glavius, his helm already mag-locked at his belt and his face set in an expression of puffed obedience, stood all the straighter. ‘Ignacio Glavius of the Eighth,’ he said, saluting sharply.

Sicarius shifted stance to take the weight off his bad knee and to better look at those of his squad still joining them, meeting their gaze one by one as they lifted their helms.

Glavius moved into a similar stance behind him.

Kaetoros was next, his helmet shedding flakes of scorched paintwork as he pulled it free to reveal the severely burned skin beneath. Taut and unwholesome, his complexion was like a map of some alien continent rendered in off-white, pink and red. It was healing quickly enough, but still sticky with fluid after the engagement with the tau bombers in the plaza. 'Locon Kaetoros, flamer specialist,' said the warrior, his ironic half-smile quickly turning into a wince of pain. 'Feels good to get some cool air on these little gifts from the tau, I'll not lie to you.'

Sicarius fought to keep his expression neutral. Kaetoros was never handsome in the first place, but the blackening of his armour and the facial disfigurements him look more like a filthy traitor than a proud Ultramarine. There was something wild in his eyes, something bitter and dangerous behind a facade of controlled pain.

'Vortico Ionsian,' said the stern figure behind Kaetoros. His stance was statue-straight, his skin pale to the point of albinism - more like one of Corax's sons than Guilliman's. A third eye was tattooed in purple ink on his forehead, the icon stark and clean. Sicarius had long believed it hinted at a history as a Navigator House juve, but had never cared enough to ask. 'This air is foul to me,' said Ionsian dolefully, nostrils flaring, 'but breathable. I will forsake my helm.'

'I am Daelios Veletan.' The speaker's eyes scanned the jungle outside the cave, meeting Sicarius' gaze only for the most fleeting of moments. Veletan was obsessed with protocol, one of the reasons Sicarius valued him. He was obviously uncomfortable without his helm. Come to think of it, Sicarius couldn't remember the last time he had set eyes on Veletan's clean, angular features. 'To de-helm in a hostile environment contradicts the teachings of the Codex,' said the Space Marine quietly. 'Yet I respect the authority of my sergeant, and thus I comply. However, once we leave the confines of this jungle, I recommend an immediate reappraisal.'

‘Just deal with it, Daelios.’ Colnid grinned up at his squadmate from his kneeling stance, his jump pack detached in front of him as he tightened its harness and cut away damaged material with his combat knife. He met Sicarius’ unwavering gaze, and stood quickly. He sketched a small salute to the assembling Ultramarines before returning to his work, using the tip of his combat knife as an improvised driver-head to detach a damaged overplate. ‘Alucidan Colnid,’ he said. ‘Earthbound and not enjoying it, not one bit.’

Sicarius cast an expectant glance at Denturis. He was helping Colnid turn the faulty jump pack on its end so he could clear the turbines. Denturis’ blades were propped against the cave wall; having lost his bolt pistol in action, he had taken to wielding not only his own chainsword, but also that of his fallen comrade Endrion.

‘Deccus Denturis.’ The Ultramarine rested Colnid’s jump pack against his hip for a moment to make the sign of the aquila. ‘One day I hope to join a Tactical squad myself,’ he said, looking at Antelion and inclining his head in respect. ‘For now, though, it’s whatever works best. If that means slogging through some xenos worldscaper’s idea of Catachan, so be it.’

‘Get through this,’ said Sergeant Antelion, ‘and you’re in with a good chance. I have Atheus’ ear.’ He came forward, his men taking as many steps in perfect formation behind him, two ranks of five. They held their bolters with ready ease, muzzles canted sharply downwards.

‘I am Doricus Thaeos Antelion,’ said the sergeant. ‘Ultramarines Fifth Company. And with respect, Sergeant Sicarius,’ he said, ‘I intend to leave my helm in place as per the Codex. My armour is ancient, and its machine-spirit easily angered. Besides, there are no doubt adversaries out here of a more conventional nature, enemies that may be marked and countered by more conventional doctrine.’

‘Cleave to the teachings, then,’ said Sicarius, ‘even if they do not apply here.’

‘Do not apply?’ said Antelion, drawing up to his full height. ‘Do you dare to infer that Guilliman’s wisdom is unfit?’

Sicarius’ nostrils flared, opening his mouth to retort before Numitor interrupted.

‘Pleased to meet you all, I’m Jorus Numitor.’ He stepped forward with a huge and insincere smile until he was shoulder to shoulder with Sicarius. A shaft of sunlight glinted from the crested dome of his head. ‘Sergeant of the Eighth, and leader of the Calgarians. I shall be enjoying the sensation of the wind in my hair. My squad, however, will remain Codex compliant. I prefer them with their heads intact. Purely for aesthetic reasons, you understand.’

‘Illuminating.’ Antelion did not break eye contact with Sicarius for a long moment, but as Numitor extended a hand, he finally broke away, turning his shoulder to Sicarius and clapping his gauntlet over Numitor’s forearm in a traditional warrior handshake.

‘Numitor, yes,’ he said. ‘We met in battle at the landing site.’

‘That we did, brother,’ said Numitor, ‘when the 4th Company stepped in to save your unit from a long and invariably fatal drop. Not Codex methods, of course, but effective. You and your men are living proof of that.’

‘I realise what you are saying,’ intoned Antelion, ‘though I have already thanked you for your aid. Do not think to hold it as debt over me, nor to use it as a tool to cast doubt upon the Primarch’s teachings. We will work together only for as long as necessary. The tau pilot caste is lethal, true enough, and I approve of finding a vector of approach that avoids enemy airspace. But straying into a weapons testing zone...’ He paused, head cocked. ‘I fear we have gone from the hearth into the furnace.’

‘Thank you for your confidence,’ said Numitor, casting a baleful glare over at his fellow sergeant of the Eighth. Sicarius noticed him make a tiny beckoning motion with his finger towards one of his squad.

‘Elio Magros,’ said the nearest Assault Marine, taking the

hint. 'Been with the Eighth for twenty-eight years now.'

'So still a stripling,' said Sicarius.

'Long enough for Techmarine Omnid to trust me with a plasma pistol,' said Magros with a wry chuckle. His blunt features twisted as he hefted the massive chain-toothed blade he had recovered from the forest mulch. 'I prefer to hit hard. Speaking of which, Trondoris has no more use for his eviscerator. I've trained with greatswords before, and this isn't that different.'

'Take it, then, Magros,' said Numitor softly. 'Do Brother Trondoris proud.'

'Aye,' said Magros. 'That I shall, sergeant. He will be avenged tenfold.'

Duolor was placating his own plasma pistol's machine-spirit with a tiny syringe of blessed oils when Sicarius' gaze fell upon him. 'Duolor?'

'At your service, sergeants, I am Envictus Duolor of Iax.' He straightened. 'By my count at least, there is no fault in your methods, Sergeants Numitor and Sicarius. An enemy we can actually fight is well chosen, for there will be conflict, no matter the path.'

'Quite,' said Numitor.

'Iaxan word-mangling,' said Sicarius quietly to Antelion. 'He never says something simply if he can say it backwards instead.'

'Aordus,' said the hulking Assault Marine behind Duolor, the chestplate of his armour a molten mess. It had been severely compromised since the pulse bombs dropped on Squad Numitor in the battle at the plaza. He snapped off a blackened spur of ceramite with a growl of displeasure, battering the sharp edge flush with a bunched fist. 'Thellacos Dontae Aordus. Oevrian Greatspire. Jump drop specialist.' He motioned absently to the figure on his right. 'And this is Kaeric Golotan.'

Golotan merely nodded, a typical enough gesture for the near-silent Ultramarine. His helm was at his waist, revealing a cleft palette that twisted his features into a

perpetual sneer. The scar was a relic of a lictor hunt upon Talassar, and it gave a drool-thick slur to his words – the Ultramarine only spoke when absolutely necessary, a laudable aspect of his character. It had been Sicarius' own blade that finally dispatched the hunter-killer organism; he knew Golotan wanted nothing more than to repay the debt one day, for all warriors from Talassar shared a common view of honour. Yet the fates had not ordained it. Atheus had assigned Golotan to Numitor's unit instead.

Probably a good thing, thought Sicarius. At least there was one right-thinking warrior in that squad.

'I said for our squad to leave helms on, Golotan,' said Numitor.

Golotan turned, eyes cold, and slowly replaced his helm without a word.

'Our enemies are no doubt busy preparing another surprise for us,' said Antelion, 'so I'll make our part quick. Left to right, we have Daen, Throcious, Hereclor, Anaclystos, Clavius, Aurius, Thantus, Gaelocor with the missile launcher, and Natoros with the meltagun. I suggest you commit those names to memory, Squad Sicarius, as you won't have your helm displays to remind you.'

There was an awkward silence for a moment, broken only by hissing and cawing from the jungle outside the cave. There was a distant crack of snapping wood. As one, the Assault and Tactical Marines moved to the edges of the cave, scanning the dense foliage below for assailants.

There was nothing there, not even a rustle of artificial wind.

'Onwards, then,' said Sicarius. 'Same course.'

Weapons held at the ready, the Ultramarines moved out.

In the depths of the cave, a tiny chameleon drone whirred upwards, its sensor array refocusing as it floated silently out after the intruders.

A dozen sets of eyes tracked the Space Marines as they tramped out of the cave and on through the humid

vegetation of the false jungle. The trespassers were massively built, optimised for strength instead of stealth. Many of them had forsaken caution entirely. Their cobalt battle armour was garish against the greens and yellows of the carefully cultivated vegetation. Rich streams of data poured from them into the night, and the hunting pack analysed each screed for the attack to come.

Quills twitched in the foliage, shifting colour subtly. Every nuance was a sign to the rest of the pack that could not be misinterpreted. These intruders would fight hard. A kauyon was the best option, using the Giant's Mantle as the final component.

Soundlessly, the host of long-limbed hunters climbed up the vine-wreathed trunks into the forest canopy, every movement so fluid and dextrous that not a single leaf shivered in their wake.

Soon it would be time to feed.

'There it is again,' said Numitor.

'It's whatever passes for fauna around here, nothing more,' said Sicarius. 'Or else it would have struck by now.'

'Don't be so sure. Something's stalking us, I can feel it. Smell it, even. Can't you pick it up? Something oily and foul on the wind?'

'I do my best to filter out your unpleasant odour, Numitor.'

'Emperor's sake, Cato,' said Numitor. 'Focus. We're low on bolt clips and promethium, and we've lost too many brothers already. The last thing we need is to walk blindly into a combat we don't need to fight.'

'The sergeant is right,' said Antelion. 'Weapons ready. Intermittent idents on the auspex. Thirty-eight signals, by my count, ambush pattern. Look to the trees.'

'Emperor's teeth,' swore Sicarius softly. Numitor met his gaze for a moment, but there was no way Sicarius would admit his mistake and replace his helm - just as there was no way Numitor would undercut his old friend's decision by donning his own. Sicarius lifted his ancestral sword and

took off at a run, leaving Numitor behind. It took a great physical effort not to sprint off after him.

‘Show yourselves, cowards,’ shouted Sicarius, his squad pounding through the jungle in his wake. ‘Your death comes for you!’

‘There,’ called Anaclystos, his bolter barking as he sent two shells rocketing into the undergrowth. ‘Up in the clearing!’

There was a muffled thump in the distance, and a flash of yellow light. Two more of Antelion’s squad took firing stances and snapped off shots, a cluster of explosions flaring behind iron-hard trunks and draping tendrils.

The air filled with clicks and shrieks as a score of gangle-limbed bipeds dropped from the trees, many leaping down to smash feet-first into the Ultramarines. Several were caught unawares and bowled into the peaty foliage. Their attackers thrashed atop them, gouging with claws and stabbing with long, curved knives. Colnid was knocked from his feet, but fired his pistol underarm as he fell, blasting his assailant backwards. Then the barrel of the bolt pistol gave a pair of dry clicks.

‘I’m out!’

As Colnid cast around for support Numitor saw a blade thump into the back of his neck, gouging away a flap of bloody skin and sending him staggering away. Ionsian charged in, but another of the creatures dropped from the trees to land crouched on the big warrior’s jump pack. It threw back its head and shrieked in triumph, its awl-like tongue wiggling, before sinking its beak into Ionsian’s pale scalp. The Space Marine roared in pain and leant back hard, triggering a stuttering burst of power from his jump pack to slam backward against a nearby thorn oak. Numitor saw thick bark spines punch through Ionsian’s attacker in a dozen places. Each javelin-thick barb bit so deep that when Ionsian dropped back down to his feet, the xenos ambusher remained hanging in place like some cursed pagan effigy.

Kroot. A cannibal thrall-race of the Tau Empire, according

to the pre-war brief. Barbaric mercenaries with an insatiable hunger for warm flesh.

Numitor was already moving, bulling forward towards a thicket of vegetation that shivered and waved. Sure enough, two of the long-quilled creatures could be seen within. The muzzles of their long rifles were pointed at Numitor's head. He ducked fast, and a crackling bolt of energy burnt past his ear. The second struck home, slamming into the cables of his breastplate. The stink of burning permaplastic filled the sergeant's nostrils, but he was too elated to care. This was a foe he understood, and knew how to kill. He would charge down a hundred of them and not break stride.

Numitor hit the thicket of foliage like an industrial ram, a clawing sweep of his power fist tearing away a massive swathe of vegetation. A xenos mercenary seeking shelter in the thicket's midst took Numitor's outstretched fingers full in the ribcage. It went down in a spray of black fluids. Numitor was already on the second creature, batting its long-barrelled rifle aside with his bolt pistol before firing point blank. There was a boom and a backwash of heat as the bolt burst its cranium, sending wet fibrous matter and fizzing sparks in all directions. Bionics, thought Numitor as he span for another target. Not unusual for a mercenary caste, and irrelevant when an explosive bolt hit home.

The clearing around Numitor seethed with violence. Every one of the Ultramarines was either engaged in a close-quarter firefight or was battling in frantic melee combat with a tall, beaked warrior. The kroot they had encountered on Vespertine had been rapacious carnivores, strung with trophy-cords and pouches containing the remains of those they had overcome in battle. These ones hooted and cackled as they fired blazing bullets of energy from their long rifles. Others whipped the bladed shafts of the guns around, using the spikes that jutted from stock and muzzle as combinations of axe and bayonet. Numitor laughed in contempt as a potent cocktail of chemostimulants

invigorated his system. Such primitive weapons had little hope of felling a Space Marine.

Sicarius went on the attack again, his tempest blade describing a perfect figure-of-eight as he drove his attack home into a knot of xenos gunmen. With him was Denturis, twin chainswords slashing arms from shoulders and heads from necks. The warrior grace that marked his sergeant's attacks was absent, but the results were much the same.

Veletan was standing bolt upright nearby with his chainsword at guard stance, firing his bolt pistol with impressive precision into the kroot trying to charge him down. Each shot sent a body tumbling back as if yanked away by an invisible hand before the bolt detonated, splattering each target's central mass in a flash of light and spraying black liquids.

There was a metallic clang to Numitor's right as a spry kroot warrior smacked its gun-stave into Glavius' battleplate. The blow, aimed for the throat, rebounded from the Ultramarine's slim gorget. Glavius quickly slashed through the long rifle with a backhand sweep of his roaring chainsword, splinters of hardwood flying even as the tip of his blade caught the creature's beak. The kroot was pulled suddenly forward, the chewing teeth ripping its skull into splinters. The scent of burning electrics filled the air, and a confusion of multicoloured sparks hissed from the alien's ruined head.

Nearby, thick smoke wisped from the corpses left in Duolor's wake. The Iaxian punched a mercenary from its feet with the hilt of his recharging plasma pistol before mag-locking it to his belt and smoothly drawing a combat knife instead. Colnid, low on ammo, was fighting with chainsword and fist. He smashed a kroot's throat with a sharp jabbing punch before taking its head with a sweep of his chainsword. Gore jetted from the gristly stump of its neck as it toppled away.

Numitor was charging to aid his brothers when sleek quadrupedal forms darted through the jungle, shivering the

greenery. The sergeant saw one of the things clearly for a moment, a long-beaked xenohound near the size of a horse. Another followed it, then a third, all moving uncannily fast. Numitor loosed a snap shot at the closest, but the creature had already slipped past.

There was a prickling at the back of Numitor's neck. Suddenly he was slammed from behind, pitching forward and curling his shoulder on instinct. He hit the ground at a good angle, rolling with the blow. Another heavy impact sent him sprawling. The creature that had bowled him over was a hideous fusion of raptor and hunting hound, lean and evil of aspect. Jagged jaws yawned towards him.

Numitor clubbed the hound-creature's heavy head with a sidelong swipe from his bolt pistol. The thing's bite missed him by a hand's breadth. That split second's respite was all the sergeant needed. He reached up with his power glove and grabbed the thing around the midriff before making a fist. It was crushed into halves, bisected in an uncoiling heap of spooling wires and crackling orbs that squished between Numitor's fingers. Dark fluids sluiced from its torn innards to foul the Space Marine's armour.

Another kroot hound leaped from his blind spot, but the battle instincts of the Adeptus Astartes were ingrained in every cell and synapse, and Numitor backhanded the creature so hard it burst. Unclean liquids splattered his armour once again. One side was completely black with the stuff, his Ultramarine heraldry hidden by a strange oily slick. It smelled not only of gore, but of lubricant, long-chain synthetics and microhydraulic oils. These kroot seemed to be muscle and bone, but inhabiting them were heretical machine intelligences, more like the drones they had encountered in the cradle chamber than living, sentient creatures.

It made little difference. They would die, artificial or not.

There was a bellow from the other side of the clearing, inhuman and loud. A snatch of shouted Talassarian battle cant followed, then another roar. Numitor sprang into a

crouch, bolt pistol tracking movement nearby. He blasted a kroot mercenary off-balance just as the creature swung its rifle-blade at the back of Kaetoros' skull. The xenos sprawled forward, then physically burst apart as the bolt in its torso exploded. Kaetoros' flaking pauldron was spattered with vile fluids. The flamer specialist raised his weapon and a spear of ignited promethium stabbed out. It sent a nearby knot of kroot staggering away, aflame. Kaetoros dipped his shoulder into the roaring fire of his killshot, burning the unclean alien filth from his scorched armour before turning back towards Numitor.

'Only half a flask left,' said Kaetoros. 'We'll be kicking them to death at this rate.'

Numitor hustled past a kroot corpse, its skull laid open by a chainsword slash to reveal the circuitry beneath. He had seen a similar sight on sacred Macragge; the aftermath of a training regime involving the blade-servitors of ancient practice cages. Like the servitors, these kroot creatures were not true warriors, but test subjects - puppet troops devised only for theoretical conflicts.

Numitor's mind raced. Did the tau have plans to make war upon their long-standing allies, the kroot? Did they seek to master every eventuality, every possible clash before it even started?

Perhaps, said a nagging voice in Numitor's mind, this nascent xenos empire was a true danger after all.

The choking black smoke of Kaetoros' flamer shot cleared for a moment, and Numitor was yanked back to the present. Ahead, Sicarius was fighting off three stave-armed mercenaries, two of whom were pressing home a berserk attack from opposing flanks. The third hooked a four-clawed hand around Sicarius' wrist, pulling his tempest blade from his grip. The sergeant shot it in the face with his plasma pistol, the roaring column of energy taking its head and boring a hole in the tree trunk beyond. Without missing a beat he pressed the red-hot barrel into the throat of the second kroot warrior. There was a strangled squawk as the

xenos creature fell backwards. The kroot on Sicarius' flank came in hard. The sergeant ducked, driving an elbow into its solar plexus before stabbing up with the edge of his hand to crush its windpipe. The creature spasmed and clawed as it leaned in, its beak snapping in desperation at Sicarius' temple.

Numitor aimed, about to take an intervention shot. Sicarius suddenly swung away, letting the creature topple forward before coming back in to grab it in a headlock. With a twist, he tore its quilled skull from its neck.

Something flashed in the foliage to Numitor's right, a series of dark silhouettes running along a thin gully. He snapped off a round, but the bolt found nothing. Its detonation sent up a spray of mud with a dull thump. There was a cackling caw from the right. Three of Antelion's men levelled their bolters and sent a deafening volley of explosions into the foliage, ripping apart a wide area but not spilling so much as a drop of blood.

Numitor saw another flash of movement in the canopy above. He raised his bolt pistol, but the weapon's weight betrayed the fact he was running dangerously low on ammunition.

'Killshots and bladework only!' he shouted. 'They're deliberately draining our ammo!'

There was another roar from up ahead, much closer this time. Charging out of the jungle came something muscular and hideous, a bellowing krootoid giant that bore down upon Sicarius with shocking speed. Its boulder-like head was capped with a blunt beak, jagged and grey with two vivid yellow stripes down its length. Porcine eyes glimmered with malice. Its shoulders were thick bulwarks of muscle; Numitor could feel as well as hear the *thump-thump, thump-thump* of its galloping lope across the jungle floor.

As Numitor watched, two of Squad Antelion tracked the thing smoothly with the barrels of their bolters. The creature's flanks were already bleeding from cratered bolt

wounds when another shot hit home, all but tearing the krootoid's right hind leg from its hip.

The beast roared in pain and rage, the sound strangely metallic, but still its rampage would not be halted. Careening forward, it smashed Golotan aside into a tree. The Ultramarine dropped and rolled into a nest of briars without a sound. Still bellowing, the giant leaped over him, crashing through a curtain of long-dead vines, a monster on the rampage. The beast's trunk-thick arms swung as it brought huge fists to bear.

Two more kroot warriors vaulted from the trees to attack Sicarius. Recovering his tempest blade from the forest floor with a deft flick of his foot, the sergeant thrust the tip through the ribcage of one of his assailants. Two-handed, he brought the shuddering kroot-corpse around into the path of the oncoming monstrosity, simultaneously kicking the second xenos mercenary in the stomach so hard that Numitor heard its spine break.

Sicarius dropped to one knee and leaned blade-first into the charge of the giant krootoid. The beast was fast enough to veer aside, its massive block of a fist slamming in towards the sergeant's pauldron, but Sicarius was already moving. The creature's roundhouse blow clipped him, rocking him back, but he rode the force of the impact. The point of his tempest blade came up to impale the charging monstrosity through the mouth, the creature's own colossal weight driving the blade further into its brain until the tip burst bloodily from the back of its head.

Numitor blinked in stunned admiration, then forced himself to focus. 'Inbound!' Antelion was shouting. 'Warsuit, macro class!'

There was a sudden bass crack, so loud it felt like Numitor's skull had split down the middle. Then the world was light and noise. The sergeant's every sense was consumed in a maelstrom of sensation. Blinking hard with his ears still ringing, Numitor cleared his vision to see a dozen tree trunks falling. The air was thick with splinters

and evaporated mulch.

A crater had appeared at the battle's edge, high-sided and even. It was almost as wide as the clearing itself, and nothing was left within its geometrically perfect confines other than a few wisps of vaporised matter.

Something loomed in the distance, partially hidden by the trees. Some kind of war engine glinted amongst the foliage, far larger than the machines they had fought in Gel'bryn City. This monstrosity did not hover above the ground, nor did it move adroitly to avoid retaliation.

It was far too massive for that.

'Get in close!' shouted Antelion, his bolter shots chewing layers of ablative armour from the enormous machine. 'Don't let it draw a bead on you!'

The Eighth Company were quick to obey. Power-armoured figures pounded through the jungle, some barrelling through cordons of kroot warriors with chainswords slashing whilst others fired from the hip as they sprinted towards the new threat. The warsuit launched a salvo of arm-length missiles that soared through the trees, winding like desert snakes as they sought a kill. Numitor hurdled a fallen tree trunk, diving out of the path of one missile only to cross two kroot hounds that burst from the undergrowth to leap at his heels. A second missile clipped his pauldron, jarring him hard and forcing him into a sudden dive. Deflected by the curvature of Numitor's shoulder armour, the warhead detonated in the foliage behind, blasting one of the kroot hounds to stringy ruin and sending the other tumbling away.

There was the telltale whoosh of more missiles inbound. Numitor tucked his shoulder into a combat roll, came up, and burst through a cluster of hanging lianas. Vaulting a swampy morass, he splashed down to skid unsteadily in the black mire, clapping his gauntlet around a thick sapling and using his momentum to pivot hard into a new direction. A heartbeat later a third sleek-bodied missile blasted the sapling to pieces, throwing him forward with concussive

force. He pinballed from a pair of thornos to spin around hard. He looked up, and up again.

Before Numitor was a silver-skinned tau walker that was closer to a titan in size than the warsuits he had seen on Vespertine. The giant machine was squat-bodied but enormous, a pair of tiny sensor heads cresting a torso the size of a command bunker. Its legs were splayed wide like those of a wrestler anticipating an opponent's charge, piston-driven dewclaws giving more stability to compensate for a devastating recoil. Its barrel chest was flanked by two boxy missile arrays, jutting warheads arranged grid-like in each fascia. The weapons systems were so huge that even with arms spread wide, Numitor could not have spanned the distance of a single launcher's frontage. Auxiliary guns were fused to the flanks and underside of each missile array, whilst still more bristled atop them.

But it was the weapon on the warsuit's shoulder that robbed Numitor of his battle-calm. Rectangular in cross-section, the primary cannon was a good ten metres in length, a massively up-scaled version of the pulse rifle used by the tau's line infantry. The air shimmered around the gun's generator cores. Leaves blackened in the canopy only a few metres above it as the cannon's generator system shed its excess heat. Numitor felt his throat tighten. A weapon like that belonged on a spacecraft, not on the front line. A single direct hit could sign the death warrant for the entire strike force.

The low thrum of the warsuit's primary weapon system rose slowly to a crescendo, bringing a cold clarity to Numitor's adrenalin-fuelled state. The gun was pivoting, the machine waddling backwards with ground-shaking footsteps in an attempt to get a clear shot. He had to move, and fast. With a flare of his stuttering jump pack, Numitor hurled himself between the trees.

A blast of light and sound, sudden and terrible. The sergeant was sent sprawling through the air as if swatted by some wrathful god. He smashed bodily into a thornos,

tumbling down and turning groggily as he scrambled on hands and knees into the undergrowth. Another crater had suddenly appeared behind him, identical in size and aspect to the steaming hole that had been torn on the other side of the clearing.

Now, whilst the main weapon was recharging. Now was the time to strike.

Numitor coaxed the last burst of speed from his jump pack, feeling the lightness of its empty fuel cells as faltering turbines turned his charge into a headlong leap. A pair of missiles shot from the giant warsuit's arm-arrays, contrails of heat distortion rippling behind them as they veered in. Numitor grinned like a death's head as he twisted in mid-flight. The twin missiles came within a fraction of an inch on either side of him, crashing into the foliage behind to detonate with a spectacular boom.

The giant machine was a preposterous asset to deploy in such dense terrain, its slow and clumsy progress through the forest in stark contrast to the cybernetic kroot warriors that had slipped through without hindrance. All around the goliath were trees that had been shouldered aside, some lying diagonal with roots half-torn from the ground, others flattened completely. The destruction was a testament to the raw power the xenos scientists had at their disposal, and it did not bode well.

Numitor ran along a thin culvert, Squad Antelion hustling forward in his wake. The tau warsuit was in sight up ahead, bringing its guns to bear once more. The sergeant launched up to spring from an outcrop of rock with his power fist raised. Bolts of plasma flashed past him from the warsuit's auxiliary systems. Its torso loomed before him, a cliff of dull silver alloy. Numitor put everything he had into a wide haymaker, the power fist connecting with such force it blasted a crater in the thing's chest and sent a spider's web of cracks racing across its alloy shielding.

The artillery machine did not so much as flinch.

There was a high-pitched whine from the grotesquely

large cannon upon the warsuit's shoulder, and a flash of light so intense Numitor's autosenses cut out altogether. When they recovered, the stink of burnt foliage and cooked flesh filled the air. The status runes of brothers Hereclor, Clavius, Daen, and Aurius had winked out, replaced by tiny skulls.

Numitor staggered back into the mulch, choking steam boiling from the mud under his jump pack's exhausted turbines. Four battle-brothers slain in a single shot. Cover was no use against such staggering power; to advance cautiously was to die.

'Close!' shouted Numitor. 'Get within its reach before it recharges!'

A bluish blur flickered in Numitor's peripheral vision; Sicarius was leaping and bounding towards the warsuit with his blade drawn. A pair of missiles hissed in, detonating hard upon the sergeant's chest and hip. Sicarius sprawled in a heap of limbs, an expression of pure rage on his face.

There was a clanking hiss as the giant warsuit disengaged its stabiliser pistons and raised a clawed foot directly above Sicarius. The spears of light lancing down onto the dappled floor of the jungle were blocked out by the titan's sheer mass. With a cry, Sicarius rolled sidelong into the lee of a moss-clad boulder at the last moment. The giant foot crunched the upper portion of the boulder into rubble, but failed to crush the Space Marine beneath.

Numitor took his chance, scrambling from his hiding place to race into the creature's blind spot. He saw a chance of victory, slim but definite - an elder thorn oak leaned drunkenly, one side chewed away by the blinding energy backwash of the warsuit's main cannon. Numitor bunched his fist and swung, his upper body's entire weight behind the blow. There was a loud crack as the tree shattered at its weakest point. The smell of burning wood filled Numitor's nostrils. As the upper portion of the tree toppled, Numitor disengaged his power fist's disruption field, grabbed a stout

branch and pulled the trunk over with all of his weight. The tree's downward course changed, bringing it crashing onto the giant warsuit's shoulder.

The machine, having disengaged its stabilisers in an attempt to crush Sicarius underfoot, staggered backwards under the impact.

And struck not a tree, nor a rock, but a wall of nothing at all.

A flicker of light ran coursing into the distance, the false jungle's reaches fizzing and glitching to reveal smooth beige walls that curved around a wide periphery. Numitor's eyes widened in hope. They had reached the edge of the testing zone, its endless depths nothing but a hologram intended to simulate a wider environment.

Here was the key. Here was escape. Perhaps had the Eighth been able to muster a combined assault on the goliath, with supporting fire from Squad Antelion, they could have brought it down. The kroot they could certainly overcome, even with their muscular beasts of burden and hunting hounds. But with the giant on one side and the xenos mercenaries on another, escape was fast becoming their only chance of survival.

'Here!' shouted Numitor. 'Squad Numitor, Squad Antelion, charge it!'

Within moments his brothers had come crashing through the jungle, darting forwards whilst the goliath suit struggled to bring its guns to bear once more. Numitor leaped, power fist hammering into the warsuit's stabiliser array with such force that the entire hydraulic anchor was torn free. He glanced back to see Gaelocor kneeling by a fallen log, the blunt tube of his missile launcher glinting in the emerald gloom. There was a hollow thump and a whoosh as a krak missile rocketed out, detonating hard on the giant machine's sensor-head and tearing it free in a confusion of fizzling wires.

Natoros was already sprinting under the war machine's blind spot, meltagun tight against his body. Numitor aimed

his bolt pistol wide and sent a mass-reactive shell into the jungle where the warsuit had crashed into the invisible wall. The bolt's detonation caused concentric circles of energy to flash across the wall's hololithic camouflage. Natoros needed no more prompting. He shot not at the warsuit, but at the barrier beyond – the distinctive hiss of his melta shot grew to a screaming crescendo as the thermal weapon turned a wide area of the holo-plated wall into a mess of bubbling black plastic. Through the smoking hole shone a wan light, and an amber horizon that reminded Numitor of the Vespertine wastes.

Kaetoros, Glavius and Veletan were already rushing forward, jump packs trailing greasy black smoke. The rest of the Eighth weren't far behind, taking their chance to sprint forward whilst the goliath warsuit was still reeling from Gaelocor's krak missile. To the right, Sicarius came crashing through a thicket of carnivorous plants in a spray of thick plant sap. A trio of kroot hounds snapped on his heels. The sergeant span in a low crouch, the tip of his tempest blade taking one beast in the jaw and another in the throat. The last one pounced, but met Sicarius' fist coming the other way, the xenohound's beak coming apart as the ceramite gauntlet smashed home. The sergeant spat on the thing's remains.

'Cato!' shouted Numitor. 'For the love of the Emperor, get over here!'

The rear wall was swathed in billowing smoke. Natoros' melta had torn a wide oval portal, its edges still glowing amber, through to the room beyond. Numitor cried out in elation as he leapt over a fallen tree, ducked another, and swung around a thicket of grasper-vines to reach the hololith wall. He was the first to plunge straight through the bubbling aperture and into the environment beyond.

The sergeant came face to face with a crest-helmed Ultramarine, bolter raised. The gun's muzzle was a few feet from his unprotected face.

'Wait, brother,' said Numitor in confusion. 'We are of the

Eighth!’

Then the Ultramarine fired, and the sergeant’s world came apart.



# CHAPTER EIGHT

REFLECTION/TRIAL BY DOPPELGANGER

‘Resourceful, these ones,’ said O’Vesa to himself, his data wand skimming over the sea of information that poured across the myriad screens of his analysis cradle. ‘Resourceful, and lucky.’ He mentally chided himself at the very idea. ‘Although that is a barbaric notion unbecoming of the earth caste,’ he muttered.

The test subjects had shown an incredible degree of aptitude. No doubt it was the legacy of their maker’s stringent genetics program, complemented by a comprehensive training regime – luck had nothing to do with it.

‘Remain calm,’ O’Vesa whispered. ‘Remain rational. Superstition is the enemy of the Tau’va.’

In truth, an unfamiliar emotion was coursing through his mind, hot and uncomfortable. The feeling was frightening and strangely empowering at the same time. The intruders had overcome not one but two of his most prized prototypes, and badly damaged the holographic suite of the Pech hostile environment program in the process. Nothing that could not be fixed, and the rich harvest of data he had gleaned would more than make up for their loss. Also, he reminded himself, no tau lives had been lost. Even Helper

Ob'lotai's program could be recovered from the compromised KV120 prototype. All in all, his initiative had proven a worthy sacrifice and a noble furtherance of the Greater Good.

So why did he feel like smashing his fist into the screen?

'They seek to escape,' O'Vesa muttered to himself. 'Right into the arms of their brethren. Escape, oh yes.'

His lips turned upwards in a thin smile as a suite of twenty identical datasigns spiked under his wand.

'But perhaps not the kind they would hope for.'

Sicarius shoulder-charged Numitor hard, smashing him aside and taking the killing bolt on his pauldron instead. It was not the first time he had taken a hit from a bolt shell, but its detonation still hurt like hell. He turned with the impact and pivoted in a sweeping circle, his tempest blade lashing out to take the barrel from the Space Marine's bolter before he could fire another shot.

'We're on the same side, damn you!' shouted Numitor as he scrabbled upward from the sand. Shock and protest mingled in his voice. Nine more unidentified Ultramarines were converging on their positions, bolters raised to the shoulder. Sicarius readied his blade. That was the gun-stance of tau line infantry, not that of the Adeptus Astartes.

These were not allies, this was not a case of mistaken identity: this was the twisted science of the tau writ large.

Sicarius read the battlefield at a glance. In the middle distance, the silhouettes of incoming Assault Marines were getting closer, gaining on the much closer Tactical Marines. They were hurtling over a wasteland of crushed amber and verdigrised brass, vaulting bombed-out ruins that jutted at odd angles. Sicarius remembered the crunch of that shattered amber underfoot, the memory fresh from when he had crossed swords with the tau for the first time. The war zone was a perfect replica of Vespertine's suburban desolation. Now, however, it was his own brethren he would fight.

Sicarius noted with satisfaction that Numitor was still hesitant. So be it; he would lead instead. Lead as he was born to do.

The sergeant stepped in close to the Space Marine he had just disarmed even as the warrior reached for bolt pistol and grenade. He could hear the pin slide from the grenade's collar with a tiny chink. The air filled with the din of thudding gunfire as the Space Marines ahead opened fire, but Sicarius was already under the disarmed warrior's guard. By dropping low and putting his shoulder under his foe's breastplate, he lifted him bodily from his feet, cutting the hand that clutched the grenade from his wrist with a quick lateral slash of his sword. He felt his improvised shield shudder hard as a bolt volley took its toll, gouging great holes in the Space Marine's power pack and dense flesh alike.

As the disembodied hand clutching the live grenade dropped towards the dust, Sicarius punted it hard with the toe of his armoured boot. It hurtled into the tight ranks of the bolter-armed Space Marines ahead before detonating right on cue, punching five of them from their feet in a storm of frag-shrapnel.

It was all the chance the Ultramarines needed. Diving through the aperture that Natoros had made in the wall, Squad Sicarius fanned out and mounted a massed charge. Covering fire came from those members of Squad Antelion still beyond the impromptu portal, bolter muzzles flashing in the gloom. Their aim was true. Three more of the oncoming Space Marine gun line took bolter rounds to the head and neck, pitching them into the dust. Those still standing opened fire. A bolt winged Sicarius in the thigh, sending a burst of vivid pain through the old war wound in his knee. He channelled the pain into a roar of anger, hefting the dying Space Marine he was using as a shield as he charged. The enemy assault squad was bounding in close now, their movements uncannily synchronised. Sicarius felt raw hatred at the sight. It was a parody of

Ultramarine battle doctrine, paper-thin and devoid of any true tactical awareness.

‘Robots, sergeant?’ shouted Glavius, a note of confusion in his voice.

‘Simulacra!’ bellowed Sicarius. ‘Lethal force, no mercy!’

The false Assault squad opened fire with bolt pistols as they flew in, chainswords revving. Four of the Space Marines Sicarius had taken down with the frag grenade had assumed gun crouches now, their bolters still held in rifleman positions.

‘Jump!’ shouted Kaetoros just before the enemy squad opened fire in unison. Glavius and Veletan vaulted high over the low volley, the servos in their power armour boosting their formidable strength. They cleared five feet even with their jump packs holding nothing but fumes, landing with a crunch to charge on without breaking stride. Swiftly, Kaetoros closed in from the flank, flamer gouting a long tongue of promethium that caught the four closest Space Marines in its fiery embrace. The volatile, sticky fuel clung to their power armour as it burned with the ferocity of an industrial furnace. Three went down, swathed in rippling waves of violet flame. Kaetoros grunted in satisfaction before pulling a krak grenade and hurling it backhand toward the fourth. The Space Marine turned, bolter outstretched, only for the krak grenade to detonate upon him, ripping half his torso away and sending him toppling backward. Gouting black fluid and greenish-yellow lubricant poured from the crackling cavity of his chest.

Then the rest of Squad Sicarius joined the fight. Veletan kicked aside the bolter that was swinging towards him, knocking it wide and stepping in to place the muzzle of his bolt pistol under the helm of his adversary. He fired a bolt straight up, blasting apart his foe’s head from the inside in a storm of ceramite and bone.

To Sicarius’ right Denturis cleaved low with his paired chainswords, taking the legs from two of the false Ultramarines. Stepping forward, he reversed his grips and

knelt to drive the gnawing, blunt points of his blades downwards, one through each of the fallen warriors' gorget seals. Throats and spines were torn apart in a double spray of black blood. Nearby, Colnid barged another to the ground before putting one bolt pistol shell into the gut and one through the eye socket.

'An insult to the primarchs,' he said.

'Look up,' ordered Sicarius. 'You have incoming!'

A roar from above, and a pair of the fake Space Marines smashed Colnid from his feet, their own chainblades screaming a high-pitched whine that put Sicarius' teeth on edge. Another two landed close by with a crunching thud, bolt pistols booming. Colnid was sent skidding through the dust as the explosions tore into him. Sicarius saw a spray of crimson jet out as the second explosive bolt found its mark, tearing his squadmate's leg from his hip in welter of blood. Colnid did not cry out, but instead took a shot with his own bolt pistol that slammed into the side of the closest Space Marine and sent him spinning away.

From Sicarius' left came Magros, his battle cry mingling with the throaty roar of his inherited eviscerator. The great blade came round hard, chewing right through one of the fake Assault Marines to send the gory halves of his body tumbling to the sand. Magros kept swinging, the blade juddering into the spine of the next Space Marine. There was a metallic screech as the eviscerator caught hard in the ceramite armour of the warrior's flank. Magros was yanked forward, but kept his grip, shoulder-barging his adversary with such force he knocked him over before freeing the protesting blade. Numitor heard a loud snap as Magros stamped on his foe's helm, sparks crackling from a gorget bent at an unnatural angle.

Two more false Ultramarines slammed down, intent on the kill. Hurling aside his bolt-chewed corpse shield, Sicarius span around to bat the barrel of his plasma pistol into the flat of the nearest foe's chainsword, forcing it out wide. The Space Marine pushed back hard on reflex, his strength

impressive, but he only succeeded in putting the plasma pistol's barrel in line with his helm. Sicarius laughed harshly as he pulled the trigger of the ancient weapon, taking his foe's head from his neck. Spatters of molten flesh and metal sizzled across the sergeant's armour with a pleasing hiss.

Sergeant Sicarius felt a crushing impact as a red-helmed sergeant veered from the sky to slam into his flank. Together they barrelled into the confusion of corpses littering the sands. The flash of a bolt nearby blinded Sicarius for a second, and the enemy sergeant brought his boot down onto the tempest blade, pinning it flat. Sicarius brought his plasma pistol round instead and pulled the trigger. It was still recharging from its last shot, and yielded nothing but an annoyed buzz. His adversary's chainblade revved loud as it came down hard towards his unprotected face.

To die sprawling upon the blade of an impostor puppet would be a grave ignominy.

There was a flash of azure, and Numitor's power fist slammed into the enemy sergeant with such force it all but ripped him in two. The blow sent him sideways with a mauled flank and a broken spine. Sicarius' vision filled with red light as Kaetoros knocked the last of the enemy Assault Marines from the sky with a spear of ignited promethium. The stink of the volatile chemical seemed almost pleasant. Numitor stepped past Sicarius to shoot the enemy sergeant's chainsword from his hand in a puff of dark fluids, kicking the bolt pistol from his adversary's grip. Rising, Sicarius severed the warrior's arms with artful flicks of his tempest blade. All around the two sergeants was the high whine of Squad Sicarius' chainswords chewing through ceramite, and the grizzling growl of those that had made it through to the flesh and bone beneath.

In seconds, the battle was over.

'He's all yours, if you want him,' said Numitor, backhanding the enemy sergeant into the sand and sending

his helm spinning free.

‘Just kill the blasted thing,’ said Sicarius. ‘And it’s not a ‘he’. It’s a facsimile, a test-servitor. It’s not worthy of my blade.’

Numitor grinned. ‘The blade that was under its boot a moment ago? Still, as you wish,’ he said. A chopping motion ended whatever poor excuse for a life the simulacrum had called its own.

Sicarius got to his feet, taking care not to put too much weight on his knee. Glancing down at the mockery of a Space Marine in the dirt below him, Sicarius felt a sickness in his soul. The face that stared back, glassy-eyed and dense, was a lacerated slab of flesh as dull and devoid of wit as a dead ogryn. Something in its jaw, in its broad forehead, was far too close to the face he saw in the mirror after his meditations.

He shot Numitor a dark look.

‘These tau must die,’ he said coldly. ‘All of them.’

‘If this is what the tau believe the Emperor’s finest to be,’ said Glavius, ‘it’s no wonder we’re making gains across the planet.’

‘Making gains?’ said Numitor, ‘how do you know that?’

‘We’re Space Marines,’ he said, his expression one of mild affront. ‘The Angels of Death. You should take pride in that, Numitor. Let it inform your philosophy.’

Numitor cast a wary glance back at the ragged hole of burned plastic that led back to the mock jungle. Ionsian stood on guard, the big man as unflinching as a servitor, but he still half-expected the sound of tau missiles to fill the air at any moment. He turned back to Glavius, shoulders straight.

‘The fact I don’t let complacency interfere with my awareness is a large part of why I am sergeant, *Brother* Glavius, and you are not.’

‘And yet your squad now numbers only four, to our seven.’

‘Have a care with your tone, Glavius,’ said Numitor. ‘It’s

more like six and a half, anyway.'

Nearby, Colnid was cauterising the ragged stump that had once been his leg with the hissing barrel of Duolor's plasma pistol. 'I heard that, sergeant,' he said through gritted teeth. 'Where's Apothecary Drekos when you need him? I'm making a real mess of this.'

'It'll heal,' said Sicarius. 'Just get on with it.'

Denturis had laid aside his weapons to saw a lower leg from one of the fallen Space Marines with his combat knife. Chainswords were incredibly destructive weapons, designed to chew through flesh and bone in the blink of an eye. They were devised to mutilate and butcher, and made poor surgeon's tools even in the hands of a skilled bladesman.

'Colnid,' said Denturis, wiping the worst of the black gunk from the salvaged leg's knee joint and offering it to his squad mate. 'It's the right shape, at least. Maybe bind it on? It might take some of the weight.'

Colnid smiled up at his battle-brother's optimism. 'Thank you, Denturis. I'll splint it on. And use this as a walking stick if I have to,' he said, motioning to his chainsword. 'Better the cane than the crutch, remember? If it's good enough for old Uncle Rytricus...'

'...then it's a rare thing indeed,' finished Denturis with a chuckle. He offered Colnid a hand up, pulling his brother upright. 'Airborne, the leg won't matter so much,' he continued, 'though the landing is going to hurt.'

'But we can't get airborne,' said Ionsian, stern and statue-like as he stood on guard, eyes fixed on the horizon. 'We couldn't fill an altar chalice with our fuel reserves, even if we pooled everything we have left.'

'Don't be so sure,' said Kaetoros. He was prising armour plates from the jump packs of the facsimile Assault Marines, laying them around himself in a neat circle. Veletan was examining each in turn, hurling some away, but leaving the rest in place. Kaetoros dipped a blackened finger into a jump pack's fuel reservoir and took it back

out, sniffing the droplet of liquid that clung to his finger and even putting a tiny amount on his tongue. His face, already taut and disfigured, twisted further.

‘Promethium. Or close enough. Tastes... a little cleaner, in fact.’

‘We cannot use the wargear of the enemy!’ protested Magros. ‘It’s heresy. Out of the question. In all my twenty-eight years as an Ultramarine I’ve never...’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Sicarius. ‘Laudable xenophobia, Magros. And quite correct. We will not be using tainted alien technology as a substitute for the wargear blessed by our own Techmarines.’

There was an awkward silence. Many of the Ultramarines were running on fumes, their battleplate severely compromised and their ammunition stores all but dry after the intensity of the invasion thus far. Golotan and Kaetoros were especially in dire need of re-supply. The former had taken a pulse bomb explosion to the chest, his plate shot through with a tracery of cracks that would betray him at the first true impact, whilst the latter was scorched to the point that most of his armour’s outer layer had charred away.

‘Actually,’ said Veletan, ‘I’m running some tests, and... well, it appears that this *is* Imperial wargear. Specifically, the battleplate of the Third and Sixth companies. It’s been tampered with, but it’s still functional. Better than functional. Much of it is in prime condition.’

‘Third and Sixth,’ said Numitor. ‘We fought alongside them on Vespertine, on the other side of the Damocles Gulf. Could the tau have stripped those we left behind in order to make their simulations as realistic as possible?’

‘Theoretically,’ said Veletan. ‘Likely, in fact. In an active war zone our Apothecaries would have recovered the fallen’s progenoid glands and little else. There’s every reason why the tau would seek to understand and even replicate Imperial war materiel.’

‘Disgusting,’ said Magros. ‘To defile our sacred wargear,

using it to armour some vat-grown approximation of an Adeptus Astartes, that's bad enough. But then to set them against us? It beggars belief.'

'From a certain scientific point of view,' said Veletan, 'it makes a lot of sense. Know thine enemy.'

Magros strode up to Veletan and grabbed him by the gorget, yanking him to his feet. 'I cannot believe you said that, Veletan,' he said. 'You who claim to understand the Codex inside and out. Explain to me how defiling the dead makes a lot of sense.'

Veletan broke Magros' grip with a quick shrug of his forearms. 'You are a slave to sentiment as ever,' he said, his tone flat. 'The Codex is based on logic, not emotion. Maybe you can train with the Scouts for another twenty-eight years, if they'll let you back in.'

Magros bared his teeth in a grimace at Veletan's self-righteous tone. Numitor stepped forward and interceded, placing his powered gauntlet on the warrior's pauldron with a loud clang.

'Come on, brothers,' he said. 'You are both right. We resupply here, we claim that which is the Chapter's property. Better we use this wargear than carry it, further harming our cause, or leave it here for xenos drones to pick over.'

'We need the fuel, Magros,' added Denturis.

'Those with the wit to adapt soon take wing,' continued Veletan. 'As the Codex teaches us.'

Numitor detached his own damaged pauldron and salvaged an intact equivalent, mag-clamps thunking as he broke it free from the rest of its battleplate. 'Kaetoros, spare Magros the last of your flamer fuel if you think you can repurpose the promethium analogue. I could use a full tank and a field repair, and I'm not the only one. Golotan is about to fall apart entirely.'

Golotan cocked his head but said nothing, wise enough to know that Numitor's change of subject was intended to diffuse a dangerous situation.

‘Once we have completed our kill strike and returned to the heart of the operation,’ continued Numitor, ‘we’ll ensure the battleplate we take, the promethium we siphon, and even the bolt rounds left in our magazines are fully blessed and reconsecrated. Until then, Brother Magros, we do what we were born to do. Survive, and wage war. In the name of Macragge and the Emperor.’

Magros stood silent for a moment before looking away and walking over to join Ionsian on watch. The rest of the Eighth began to quickly and efficiently strip away battleplate and siphon fuel from the jump packs of their simulacrum assailants.

Within a few minutes both squads were refuelled, their armour mismatched but whole once more and their ammunition supplies full twice over.

Numitor noticed that Kaetoros had not replaced a single plate of his scorched black ceramite. The flamer specialist was standing with arms crossed, scowling at his battle-brothers as they went about their work. Numitor caught Sicarius’ eye, making the question mark gesture of Talassarian sea-cant. Sicarius gave a curt nod and strode over to Kaetoros.

‘Well?’ asked Sicarius as the others completed their resupply one by one.

‘I’ll not join the corpse-harvest, if it’s all the same,’ came the reply. ‘I prefer to wear my scars with pride.’

Swiftly, the Ultramarine turned to meet Sicarius’ gaze. There was a fire in his eyes that took even Numitor aback for a moment.

‘They help me remember,’ said Kaetoros darkly.

Sicarius, Numitor and Antelion jogged at pace across the dunes of the fake Vespertine, their squads in close formation behind them. They moved with fluid grace despite their size, for the machine-spirits of their wargear had been appeased – shattered battleplate had been stripped away and replaced, fuel cells replenished and

weapons reloaded. Even Sicarius had found a spoiled plasma cartridge that he had managed to coax back into life as a replacement for his near-spent original. Galvanised by their success, the Ultramarines were making good speed. Guns twitched upwards at every new shadow on the horizon.

Sicarius was too stubborn to replace his helm, but Numitor, now constantly listening for the whoosh of incoming missiles, had donned his, the better to keep a vigil. He watched his visor's readouts for the slightest ghost of an electronic signature. After the close encounter with the doppelganger Space Marines, he was not feeling quite as invulnerable as usual.

A quick exchange between the sergeants had determined their best chance of making progress was to keep moving. With enemy weapons scientists sending ever larger and deadlier warsuits their way, they had no real choice. They were trusting in Veletan's auspex to keep them on course as they hustled from ruin to ruin.

Before the hour was out Numitor's visor started portraying anomalies at the edge of its scrying range. The readings up ahead fuzzed, crackling and shorting out whenever he looked directly into the distance.

'Veletan, are you getting this?'

'Yes, Sergeant Numitor,' replied the logistician. 'Auspex anomalies, very much like those I detected in the jungle. It could be the perimeter of this testing zone, or simply interference from the electronic countermeasures of the stealth warsuit.'

'It's the perimeter,' said Sicarius. He shot Numitor a black look before raising his plasma pistol and letting fly a shot, a sphere of incandescent light hurtling into the distance before detonating with a crack against nothing at all. The impact left a scorch mark hanging in the air, holographic projections shorting around its periphery where the electromagnetic charge of the plasma had burned out circuitry. 'See? Antelion, get Natoros up here and take out

the perimeter wall. The sooner we're free of this place, the better. We should be back in the war effort proper by now, not skulking around like rats in some xenos laboratory.'

Antelion motioned his meltagunner forward, and Natoros aimed his weapon at the weakness in the wall that Sicarius had made with his plasma pistol. The meltagun hissed as it sent a column of superheated air to burn a hole through the hyperdense plastic of the periphery wall. The stink of burning polymers and bubbling circuitry filling the air once more.

A thick shaft of light streamed through. Numitor stepped forwards into the unknown, photolenses dimming to dark crimson.

A vast swathe of wasteland stretched out around Gel'bryn City. It was majestic, thought Numitor - for an alien world, at least.

The edge of the earth caste complex was a sloping lip running around the circumference of the testing facility. Beyond it was a sharp cliff of ivory plummeting down to a sea of indigo wilderness. The middle distance was dotted with sparkling lakes and the swells of small mountains. On the horizon was a vast, snow-capped peak with a series of sheer faces that looked all but impossible to climb, even for a Space Marine. Perhaps their quarry would flee there, thought the sergeant, and give him a chance to find out.

Numitor shook his head. No doubt they would find the xenos commander they sought languishing in a med-bay rather than ready for war in his crimson warsuit, and the glorious duel he hoped for would be disappointingly brief. Right now, however, he would settle for a victory of any kind. The sting of failure, of the loss of his brethren, still lingered. This was not the Ultramarines' way of war. The Eighth were far from the teachings of the Codex Astartes, and getting further away with every passing hour.

At maximum zoom, he could see the target they were heading for - a cluster of tall hexagonal buildings, the

vague heat-haze shimmer of energy discharge blurring around them. The out-city command headquarters, with any luck. It correlated with their headings, despite looking much like a dozen smaller xenos structures dotted around Gel'bryn's outskirts.

The magnitude of the journey ahead through enemy territory was daunting, even to one of the Eighth Company. They had lost too many battle-brothers already. But Captain Atheus had made his feelings more than clear. Only by killing the red-suited xenos warlord and bringing back his head could they make amends for their earlier mistakes.

'I note we're still more than a hundred miles from our destination,' said Kaetoros dully.

'We've refuelled, haven't we?' replied Numitor, a shade too fast. 'Why, are you tiring?'

'Tiring of unnecessary risks, perhaps. We're out on a limb here, with no armoured support or air cover to back us up. We've lost Austos, Dalaton and Endrion, good men all. Warriors I fought with, trained with...' he paused, head bowed, '...considered friends for over twelve years. As for your squad? Halved in the space of a day.' Kaetoros swept an arm back at the Ultramarines emerging from the complex behind. 'Antelion's? Shattered by that cursed artillery machine in the jungle. Until we can get our machine-spirits exorcised and our vox restored, the chances of their gene-seed being recovered are slim to none. Face it, Numitor. They are lost to us, and likely lost to the Chapter.'

Numitor said nothing, silenced by the brutal honesty of Kaetoros' summation.

'Such is the nature of war,' said Sicarius, his tone sepulchral. 'Such is the fate of us all, sooner or later.'

Distant explosions thumped, way back in the heart of the city. There was a faint scream of tortured metal on the edge of hearing, the last protestation of a collapsing building. Gel'bryn was taking a hammering from Imperial and tau alike.

Numitor's great pauldron-clad shoulders slumped. Kaetoros had a point. The idea of fighting in a purely reactive fashion still made him cringe, but it galled him to think of the lives he had lost in so short a space of time. Other companies, other Chapters, were still back there, fighting to the death whilst Squads Numitor and Sicarius got further and further away from the front.

'And what have we gained in exchange for these grievous losses, sergeant?' continued Kaetoros. 'A few dozen miles made towards an uncertain objective? A few gallons of xenos-tainted promethium?'

'We have knowledge,' said Veletan.

'Priceless, if put to good use,' said Duolor.

'But they have knowledge of us in turn,' countered Kaetoros. 'Far more detailed and comprehensive than ours, if that was truly a wartech facility - technical data likely to be broadcast across the entire tau empire.'

'A distinct possibility,' muttered Magros, 'And with the Hammers of Dorn employing the same manoeuvres they always use, they'll be learning our tactics fast.'

'Those warsuits we fought, in the jungle,' said Aordus, 'the big ones. They weren't detailed in the vox-brief, but we took them down nonetheless. There's every chance we've figured out how to beat their cutting edge war machines, their secret weapons, before they were even sanctioned for deployment.'

'What if they aren't deployed at all? If they were just prototypes?' said Kaetoros. 'The tau are cunning. They're no Hammers, they won't play the same trick twice. If they practice puppet wars even against their allies, Emperor only knows how much veritas they hold on their foes.'

'A good idea to head for their command posts, then,' said Glavius. 'We'd be wasted in a block-by-block war of attrition anyway. Leave that sort of warfare to the Astra Militarum. We take out their high command, and all their precious knowledge isn't nearly so useful.'

'My thanks, Glavius,' said Numitor. 'That was my

reasoning.'

'Let us make a start, then,' said Colnid, tightening the bolter straps that held his prosthetic leg in place. 'The xenos war leaders won't remain wrong-footed for long.'

Denturis gave a snort, glancing at his squad-mate's prosthesis. Colnid bared his teeth in a smile that was as much threat as it was camaraderie.

'Aye,' said Numitor. 'You are right, Colnid.' He turned to see the rest of their composite group gathered around him, several of Sicarius' squad standing with the tips of their boots over the ledge. The sheer drop below would have been dizzying to lesser warriors. With their jump packs replenished, the Assault Marines could make a controlled descent just fine, but there was no way that Antelion's squad could make it.

'Sergeant Antelion...'

'I know. We must part here. Thanks to that xenos ghost-machine, we will have to send a flakk missile up as a signal the next time an Imperial gunship squadron passes close by. With luck they will retrieve us.'

Antelion slung his bolter, motioning to his heavy weapons trooper to cover the skies. 'Yours is a worthy cause, Sergeant Numitor. I shall put in a good word for you to Captain Atheus. Assuming our request for transport is granted, we shall rejoin you as soon as possible.'

He came to stand on the cliff's edge, standing bolt upright in front of Numitor and making the sign of the aquila.

'Until then. Emperor be with you, Jorus Numitor.'

'And with you, sergeant. Farewell.'

Nearby, Sicarius blasted from the edge of the drop without a word, his squad close behind. Diplomatic as ever, thought Numitor. The backwash of heat buffeted Numitor and Antelion, but the sergeants held their ground, watching the assault squad descend. Its passage was marked by a twin trail of foul-smelling smoke from Magros' flamer-fuelled jump pack. Easy enough to follow.

'Never mind Sicarius,' said Numitor. 'He more than makes

up for it with raw talent.'

'That is one way of looking at it,' said Antelion.

'Ha. Onward, then,' said Numitor, turning to his squad. 'Same heading. We have work to do, and I'm damned if I will let Sicarius get there first.'

The Dal'ythan gas cloud bathed the ruins of Gel'bryn City in wan blue light. It swirled and sparkled in the night sky - beauty incarnate to a poet, and a source of boundless energy to a pioneer. To the hunters of the Ultramarines Tenth Company, it was a nuisance that could get them all killed.

Five strong-limbed Scouts swung from hand-hold to hand-hold under the elegant arch of a transmotive sweep, huffs of exertion the only noise as they slowly made their way over the shattered warscape below. Six and a half miles they had come from the dropsite, all without touching the ground. To make their way across open terrain would mean being spotted by a patrol drone, or worse, a pilot caste squadron on the prowl. Death would follow soon after, merciless and sudden.

Three nights they had searched. Whenever the low purr of engines or the flicker of a multi-spectral scanner alerted them to an airborne tau patrol, they had hung still, muscles burning to the point of numbness, and waited for the danger to pass. Chameleoline fatigues blurred their outlines, baffling the visual spectrum, and the machine-spirits of their wargear were rendered dormant so as not to betray their presence to enemy auspexes. The Scouts in turn had scanned the rubble for the blue armour of their fallen brothers. They had found no few corpses, and they had marked every one for later recovery by the Chapter's Apothecaries. Thus far, none of them had been the cadaver they searched for, the find that would allow them to turn back for the dropsite, exhausted but successful.

Until now.

With a curled fist and a jabbing finger, Scout Sergeant

Thradius ordered his brothers to move hand over hand to the shadowed wedge where the transmotive sweep met the ground. He moved out, dropping the last five metres to land on the wreckage of a dropship with a muffled crunch.

There, slumped against the curving cliff of a xenos building, were the remains of Captain Atheus. He had been slain by a weapon of such galling power it had bored right through his chest, down through his guts, and out the base of his spine to chew a deep hole into the wall beyond. Thradius nodded as his suspicions were confirmed; whatever had killed the captain of the Eighth had been taller by far, and armed with cutting edge xenos weaponry.

Atheus' face was waxen and pale under the light of the gas cloud. Twin trails of dried blood lined his chin, its deep red appearing black. The captain's face bore a look of consternation and pride, his jaw set and his brow furrowed even in death.

And there was the axe of the Lord Executioner, lying discarded as if it were no more than a common blade.

Checking the skies for tau patrols, the lead scout pulled his chameleoline cloak from his waist and tucked it around his shoulders. He scooped a handful of rock dust from the lee of a shattered slab, padded it onto his face, and rubbed it into his hair. Behind him, his squad followed suit. As Space Marines, it was always galling to cover their heraldic colours, but the tau patrols would no doubt have calibrated their sensors to spot them. There were times when the Tenth Company was called upon to fulfil missions the rest of the Chapter would struggle to achieve.

Thradius motioned for his men to stay and cover him, beckoning Overius to accompany him with a point and a curled finger. The two Scouts padded forward in a crouch, moving from the toppled wall of a building to the burnt-out hulk of a tau transport. A quick shuffling run, and they were over to Atheus' body. Thradius picked up the cadaver by the arm, crouched, and - and with a great heave - turned it over his back so the immense dead weight was

borne upon his spine. Overius retrieved the greataxe, and together they padded back the way they came. Along the way Thridius saw that the disembodied hand of Captain Atheus still grasped the ancient weapon's haft, locked tight by death's own grip. Stubborn, even in death.

Just as the two Scouts were halfway across open ground they heard the sound of a tau drone, soft but getting louder. Thridius darted a glare at Overius, eyes wide, and they both froze. The drone came closer. The hum of its engines was not that of the usual blasphemous gun-machine, but the bass thrum of a far larger reconnaissance type. Thridius saw it round the corner, a heavy disc with a wide column of scanners, ammunition slots and gun workings hanging from its midsection. The device would scry them in seconds, and before a minute had passed they would be taking heavy fire.

There was a dull pop as Brother Leovitus took his shot, the tiny flicker of his sniper rifle's muzzle just visible in Thridius' peripheral vision. The shot struck home where the underside of the drone's disc met its midsection, and the machine was suddenly swathed with purple electricity. It emitted a strange screech, veering to one side before its scryer-lights and beams shorted out and turned black. Its anti-grav engines went next. The drone crashed into the rubble, thin streams of smoke hissing from its fuselage.

Thridius turned to Leovitus and nodded curtly before hauling Atheus' body back into the shelter of the transmotive sweep. Crouching, his brothers helped take the weight.

'Nice shot, Leovitus,' whispered the sergeant, 'my thanks. But they will soon notice it's gone. We must make haste. Donturos, inform Lord Calgar that the captain's body has been retrieved, and the axe with it. Then observe silence protocols until we are safely back.'

A nod of confirmation, a rustle of chameleoline, and the Scouts of the Tenth Company melted away into the shadows once more.



## CHAPTER NINE

### EXTRAPOLATION/THE MAILED FIST STRIKES

Sergeant Kinosten swore blue murder as another volley of pulse rifle fire streaked overhead. For a split second the neat white beams of energy illuminated the filthy, half-starved platoon of Astra Militarum under Kinosten's command.

His had been a field promotion, of a sort. Commander Anatol and Sergeant Dvorjedt had both been kind enough to get their spines shot out during the last sally up Gun Ridge, and the men didn't trust the wizened astropath Malagrea enough to turn their back on her. Kinosten was the only remaining member of Ontova Platoon's command echelon who was anything like a leader. So now he was holed up in the cratered mess of a buried xenos hab with forty-eight of the 122nd Baleghast Castellans looking to him for a way out.

The promotion he had always hankered after now seemed the worst of all possible curses. Despite the drill sergeant persona he put forward and the torrents of foul invective that frequently spilled from his stubble-framed lips, part of him still felt scared enough to fill a bucket.

'Acting Sergeant Kinosten,' said the regiment's master of ordnance, Deletei Nordgha. Kinosten just ignored him,

staring back toward the Imperial lines with the haunted look of a shellshock victim. Inside he was fighting the urge to curl a fist.

‘Kinosten! I am speaking to you!’

How he hated Nordgha. Always criticising, always more than eager to call down a bombardment on the front line – never mind the poor bloody infantry that might be fighting there – and half the time more interested in his hairstyle and the sheen of his heirloom breastplate than the lives at stake around him.

‘Acting Sergeant Kinosten,’ said Nordgha again, his tone insistent, ‘I must speak with you.’

‘What?’ roared Kinosten, his fear boiled away by the heat of his rage.

‘We are still pinned down. What is your plan? Advance in the Emperor’s name, I presume?’

‘Advance?’ said Kinosten, his voice practically a screech. ‘If I give the order to advance, fifty men die in the space of a few seconds! Have you not been paying attention, you oil-haired fool? Have you seen what those xenos freaks are using? Their line infantry, their *line infantry*, are carrying plasma weapons that make *this*,’ Kinosten grabbed the flak armour over his chest and shook it with a vigour close to frenzy, ‘look like one of your wife’s moth-eaten camisoles!’

Nordgha bristled, his jowls wobbling as he tried to recoil from Kinosten’s wrath and puff himself up at the same time.

‘We have plenty of ammunition, surely,’ said Nordgha lamely, ‘I’ve seen it back there.’

Kinosten felt his vision flare white. He smacked the heels of his hands into his face over and over as the intensity of his rage overwhelmed him.

‘It’s the wrong bloody kind! The devil-sucking Munitorum sent us Triplex Phall pattern. We might as well shove ration packs in our sockets for all the good it will do! We’ve recharged every damn cell we have ten times over! There’s *nothing left!*’

‘Sir,’ said Private Feindhast, ‘perhaps if we...’

‘Perhaps if we *what*, Feindhast?’ shouted Kinosten, his eyes bulging as he thrust his face within an inch of his weak-chinned subordinate. ‘Perhaps if we retreated to Theta Tert, so Duggan can put a bolt pistol shell in the back of my head for cowardice? Perhaps if we threw ourselves into the teeth of the enemy fire, so we can die together in each other’s arms?’ Thin strings of spittle flew from the sergeant’s mouth, lacing the private’s cheek. ‘Perhaps if you had more brains than a flophouse runt you’d realise we’re already dead!’

‘Sir,’ whispered Feindhast, his eyes screwed up and his face the colour of a corpse. ‘Please don’t shoot me. Please.’

‘For the love of spite, Feindhast, I’m not going to shoot you,’ said Kinosten, some of his incandescent anger ebbing away as he saw genuine fear in the private’s features. ‘Just say your damned piece.’

‘It’s just... if we haven’t got ammo, and we haven’t got a chance in a firefight... maybe we could try these?’ He held up a long piece of steel, a faint glint on its edge.

It took Kinosten a moment to realise it was a bayonet.

‘Right,’ said Kinosten. ‘Bayonet charge. Against the most technologically advanced foe we’ve ever seen.’

Another hissing storm of pulse rifle fire crackled overhead. They heard the loud crump of an engine going up in the middle distance.

‘We might as well go out strong, sarge,’ said Doriev, Feindhast’s bunkmate, coming up to place a meaty hand on Nordgha’s well-polished epaulettes. ‘Maybe get Buttons here to call down a barrage as we go.’

A long moment of silence stretched out, the expressions of the assembled Guardsmen grey and serious. Nordgha gave an almost imperceptible nod, his face pale in the gloom.

‘The Emperor protects,’ muttered Kinosten for the first time in weeks. ‘I just hope the old bastard’s got a soft spot for lunatics.’

Commander Farsight surveyed the data-compiles of the previous night's fighting with a growing sense of unease. The Imperial war machine, portrayed by the water caste as lumbering and predictable, had proved to be anything but.

The Imperial invasion force was throwing tidal waves of military force into Damocles with every new day. Gue'ron'sha spearheads had been launched against several major cities across the northern hemisphere of Dal'yth, their attacks so sudden that the fire caste had struggled to reply in time. Every one of the assaults had made significant gains.

In the areas outside the cities, Shadowsun was working hard to keep the Imperials from establishing supply lines by striking at the hundreds-strong columns of tanks that prowled through the indigo wilderness. Keeping to the dark side of the planet, her stealth cadres were rarely seen, but Farsight could extrapolate their positions easily enough from the destruction they left in their wake. He had watched the drone captures six times already. Watching O'Shaserra work - even at one step removed - never lost its lustre.

Confusion reigned in a dozen hex-sectors as the gue'la tried to fight back, their armoured columns brought to a choking standstill. The wreckage of their vanguard blasted a new path through nearby magnorail tunnels so they could give pursuit. Farsight smiled wryly. They had about as much chance of catching Shadowsun's stealth cadres as he had of getting an apology for her behaviour in the audience chamber.

Over the last few nights Farsight had done everything in his power to help her. He had even personally led mont'ka battlesuit spearheads to deliver the killing blow when the gue'ron'sha had taken the bait by attempting to relieve the beleaguered tanker columns. The complementary strategies of kauyon and mont'ka had been extremely effective, but the two commanders had yet to communicate face to face. They knew each other so well that in practice

they did not need to.

Farsight spooled through the latest footage from Via'mesh'la. The tau's stranglehold on the war zone had been broken by an infantry charge. Not by Space Marines, but by simple gue'la infantry. Some of them had made it to close quarters, despite the overlapping fire lanes of the cadre defending the ridge.

Stony-faced, Farsight watched drone footage of human troopers charging through a killing field of pulse rifle fire and orbital bombardments. Their rough, barking orders were becoming familiar sounds to him, the simple war cries those of a backwards tribe grown impossibly numerous. Perhaps one in six of the human attackers survived to gain the ridge. Those who made it through set about themselves with their primitive spear-like rifles as if gripped by a rabid frenzy, stabbing and slashing to wreak absolute ruin on the fire warriors behind the tidewall.

What a waste, thought Farsight. After the harrowing ten-year crusade against the orks of Arkunasha, his personal cadre trained in close-quarters doctrine every dawn, but the rest of the tau military still considered it a distraction from the true art of war. At Via'mesh'la they had paid the price.

It was far from the only disaster emerging from the shadows as the days crept by. Disturbing reports of unarmed Imperials making uncategorisable kills were flooding the datanets, as confusing as they were illogical. Farsight was beginning to feel his grip on the Dal'yth operation weakening, and he knew from bitter experience the ethereals would be quick to reach the same conclusion.

As the thought of censure crossed O'Shovah's mind, a screen on his datasuite glowed. The personal icon-script of the Stone Dragon was overlaid on the symbol denoting the earth caste - a disc cresting a halved oblong that signified order, unity and strength. He eye-flicked the assent code and turned to face the screen's microcamera.

'Commander Farsight, greetings!' said O'Vesa, broad teeth

bared in an approximation of a smile. 'I have news for you.'

Farsight's eyes narrowed. Something about the scientist's body language was strange: he was leaning forward rather than back, and his smile seemed fixed. The earth caste were never much good at concealing their emotions; O'Shovah had long held the theory it was because they were so very unused to them. They famously had very little in the way of empathy. On Arkunasha, O'Vesa had proved so thoughtless he had antagonised Farsight to the point of violence.

'Don't tell me,' said Farsight. 'This is the kind of news better imparted in person.'

'Indeed it is!' said O'Vesa, his face lighting up for a moment before becoming deadly serious once more. 'A matter of some delicacy.'

'Very well. I need your advice on something anyway. I shall make haste to your location. I can be there in a matter of decs if you stay put.'

'Excellent,' said O'Vesa. 'I think we are approaching a crux point in the history of Dal'yth.'

'I concur,' said Farsight. 'The Imperials are more resourceful than we thought. We will need to reply in kind.'

'Resources, commander,' said O'Vesa, 'are something I am well placed to help with.'

Having turned down the offer of a saz'nami escort for the hundredth time, Farsight marched down the corridors of the Gel'bryn Prototype Complex. His heels clacked with a precise metronomic tempo on the steel-hard thermoplastic. To walk alone, to stride with purpose at a precise pace, always helped him think – and to steady his heartbeat. Just as well, he thought. Dealing with O'Vesa was usually to invite a nasty surprise, even if the genius scientist had a lot to offer the Tau'va.

The corridors of the complex were scrupulously clean, and the crisp scents of antiseptic and ozone hung in the air. Every route and information point was ordered and clear. It

was the same across Dal'yth; every other facility given over to the scientists and workers of the earth caste was a haven of logic and order.

Farsight nearly choked in shock when he passed through the iris doors to the weapons testing environments to be greeted by fizzing sparks and a veil of thin smoke.

'Commander Farsight,' said an earth caste worker, his broad, wrinkled features creasing in an expression somewhere between awe and terror. 'My sincere apologies for the status of this interstitial passageway. I... I shall fetch O'Vesa to honour you immediately.'

'No need, Por'el Mayatan,' said a voice from the far end of the chamber. 'I have fetched myself.'

Outwardly serious, Farsight smiled with his eyes at the gawping worker before approaching his old colleague.

As he moved in to the complex, he could not help but look through the lozenge-shaped windows at its smoke-shrouded testing chambers. Beyond was a jungle analogue, wisps of cordite floating through its shattered observation pane. A few hundred metres away the lunar deathscape, which Farsight knew to be a favourite testing environment of O'Vesa's for its stark simplicity, had its airlock open. Two worker-scientists escorted a hover-slab bearing a ruined facsimile of a gue'ron'sha through its doors.

'The Stone Dragon breathes fire, I see,' said Farsight.

'No,' said O'Vesa awkwardly, 'this is not my doing, Commander. Technically speaking. We had some uninvited guests. I admit I may have... capitalised upon the opportunity. Follow me. I will ensure that I provide optimum summation of the relevant incidents.'

'The raw information itself would be more useful,' said Farsight.

'Of course, of course. You shall have it all in due time. For the Greater Good.'

O'Vesa turned, waving his data wand across an iris portal's scanner oval and passing through to the area beyond. Farsight followed him through a wide vestibule

that led to a far larger chamber. Everything from stealth-tech chameleosuits to XV88 weapon cradles lined the vestibule's walls. Banks of experimental software connected to factory-grey battlesuits through thick fibre-optic cables and flickering antennae dumps. It was quite a sight, but it was the chamber beyond that set a fire in the commander's heart.

The main section of the subterranean hangar was truly cavernous, easily the largest Farsight had ever seen. The central workspace was nine floors deep, wide enough to accommodate an entire coalition with room to spare. A series of slope-walled mezzanines stretched around its perimeter, each with observation windows leading to smaller experimentation facilities.

Several battlesuits of immense size were being constructed in the depths of the hangar, so large their piston-lined skeletons and motive units could have lifted a Hammerhead tank as easily as Farsight would shoulder a rifle. One was a true giant, squat-bodied and broad. Its arms, such as they were, housed massive missile banks that could have cleared a city's skies of enemy air power in a matter of minutes.

Farsight was already running calculations and theoretical approaches, devising new and exciting mont'kas. The giant battlesuits were the keystone on which truly majestic military strategies could be built. Underneath the cerebral thrill of it, he felt a genuine emotional charge, like a naive young cadet seeing a Crisis suit up close for the first time.

'I only wish I had whole rotas to spend in here,' said Farsight sadly, 'but my immediate duty to the Tau'va calls. We must confer.'

'We are nearly at our destination,' said O'Vesa, waddling over to another vestibule chamber with a dual door. 'You will need to present your bio-sign here, I'm afraid. Only ethereals and those of the highest rank who also have special dispensation may enter. I myself have permanent access.'

‘Fascinating,’ said Farsight dully, clicking his fingers dismissively in front of the oval sensor pad. A moment later the door lights turned from grey to gold; the sensor software had detected the still-living skin cells he had dislodged with his gesture and analysed their genetic structure in a heartbeat. O’Vesa pursed his lips in disapproval and placed a thumb respectfully on the pad, his own light turning gold in response.

A moment later both doors irised open and Farsight slid inside. Another vestibule, this time without signage of any sort, leading to a corridor lined with black window ports. The lack of information presented here struck Farsight as odd, given the earth caste’s obsession with it. Somehow it was more disturbing than the sight of a corpse-strewn battlefield. There was a lack of honesty here, he could feel it.

O’Vesa led Farsight down a long corridor. As he passed each window, the scientist tapped each blacked-out lozenge with his data wand to render it briefly transparent, blink-capturing the status of his projects in the process.

Aware that he was likely under scrutiny, Farsight carefully kept his face neutral and his eyes front – one of them, at any rate. The other he slid to observe the windows as he passed. The earth caste genius led him on, oblivious. Though O’Vesa seemed to think such matters beyond a simple warrior, Farsight had been given reasons to mistrust O’Vesa in the past, and suspected that even a microdec’s glimpse of what lay beyond the black apertures could be incredibly revealing.

One glance afforded a snapshot of strange, wiry nests of cables and neurode discs wrapped around floating spheres. Another showed a magnificent hoverdrone dais with a regal ethereal seated in profile upon it; the image shed light as a hologram rather than reflecting it. Further down the corridor Farsight caught sight of a massive cannon the length of the entire room, oblong in cross section and replete with glowing power sources.

As O'Vesa turned a corner and took a different corridor, another lozenge window was rendered briefly transparent to reveal a series of tall glass cylinders. Each held a slumbering tau with tubes and wires jutting from its skin, its eyes, its scalp. The nearest, though he could have been no more than twelve years of age, was the spitting image of Commander Brightsword.

This time Farsight could not keep silent.

'Honoured O'Vesa... was that Commander Brightsword in there?'

'In a manner of speaking,' said O'Vesa. 'That particular donor has been voluntarily involved in our hypergenics program for many kai'rotaa now. Just as well, really. I need an individual to test a pair of counter-intuitive weapons I have devised, and he has precisely the right mindset.'

Farsight kept his peace, though he felt his blood grow hot at the implications. Unless the clone had been brought from inception to full maturity in the space of a few days, it had existed – and perhaps even had a sentient mind – whilst the original Commander Brightsword had still been alive. It was against all the rules of scientific reproduction, as far as Farsight understood, and it made him feel very uncomfortable. He would not put such unsanctioned experimentation past O'Vesa, though; not after what he did to Farsight's mentor Ob'lotai, reborn as the artificial intelligence the fire caste called Warghost. Even now, many kai'rotaa later, that was not a matter he cared to think about for too long.

Farsight realised one of his hands had subconsciously strayed to the hilt of his bonding knife, and hurriedly clasped them in front of him. He forced down his anger. Those were old wounds, not to be reopened, not here at any rate.

'Ah, here we are,' said O'Vesa. 'The analysis suite. The data I gleaned from our guests is still raw, but I have made batch copies nonetheless.'

'You keep using that term, "guests". I assume you are

telling me a number of gue'ron'sha gained access to your facility.'

'That is correct. They gained access through the subterranean commune Ver'haya Nineteen Five. Observe, if you will, the anomalous behaviour I recorded when they faced one of our water caste.'

At this O'Vesa played footage of a squad of cobalt-armoured Space Marines demolishing a tau magister's living space. He heard the grunting battle cant of the gue'ron'sha, recognising most of the syllables and even the odd word from his studies. One of their number dealt the killing blow to the water caste magister by stamping on her chest just as she pulled a pulse pistol on his comrade.

Farsight scowled. A moment before the kill, it had seemed like another of the warriors – his red helm of rank obvious despite the dim light – had been reticent to land a blow.

'Compile this for me, if you would. It may bear closer inspection.'

'Of course.'

'So they broke into a commune, then found their way in here. Given you are analysing their data rather than their remains, I can only surmise they cut their way free.'

'I sent stealth drones after them, and made Commander Shadowsun aware of their presence,' said O'Vesa reasonably. 'The matter is in hand.'

'You told Commander Shadowsun instead of me?' said Farsight.

'I did indeed.'

'Despite everything we achieved together on Arkunasha.'

'Why, yes. It felt like the right thing to do.'

A long silence filled the analysis chamber.

'That footage is a mere prologue, in any case,' blustered O'Vesa. 'Look at the data trail they left behind in the testing zones!' He made his way over to an analysis cradle that was already rendering a dozen types of data upon its broad, flat holoscreens, and brought up a dozen more with a flick of his wand. Despite his simmering emotions, Farsight

couldn't help but divert an eye in its direction.

The analysis cradle detailed everything from the material tolerances of the Imperial war-tech to ballistics reports and weapons parameters. There were even remote radiosopic autopsies assessing the physiology of the Space Marines. Used correctly, it was enough information to give the fire caste a real edge, and revitalise his own analysis projects regarding their war capabilities. Farsight could feel himself becoming elated at the thought, the fires of anger flickering to be replaced by those of enthusiasm.

'This is fascinating,' said Farsight. This time he really meant it. 'O'Vesa, this is of paramount importance to the war effort. You are standing on the crest of a silver mountain here.'

'I believe I am, yes.'

More images flitted past - scenes of the Space Marines fighting a Broadside, a warband of cybernetic kroot, a macrostealth suit, and a ballistics unit of truly colossal size.

'These prototypes need refining, of course,' said O'Vesa.

'I wonder to which you are referring, O'Vesa,' said Farsight, his tone flat and cold. 'The unsanctioned battlesuits, or the facsimile kroot I specifically advised you not to construct?'

O'Vesa turned away, tinkering with his data wand.

'If the Shapers get word you are analysing their kindreds in such detail, let alone making programmable analogues of their people,' said Farsight, 'you will have endangered our relationship with our closest allies, and in doing so, weakened the entire Tau Empire.'

'I merely sought to harness as much relevant data as possible,' protested O'Vesa, 'I leave political matters to the water caste. As should you.'

Technically, the scientist had a point. Farsight put the matter aside, resolving to come back to it once the immediate conflicts were resolved. He motioned for O'Vesa to continue, and the gue'ron'sha continued hacking their way through the artificial version of the kroot home world.

Halfway through the footage, Farsight noted many of the Space Marines removing their helmets. There were several clear captures of their faces.

‘This was harnessed by a chameleodrone as they conferred in what we call the safe cave,’ said O’Vesa. ‘An area specifically designated for opportunistic recording.’

Two of them, Farsight recognised. They were the same warriors he had engaged at the reservoir. His hands curled into fists at the memory.

The images played on, now showing the lunar deathscape. The Space Marines were fighting hard, engaging the gue’ron’sha simulacra O’Vesa had assembled after Vespertine. Explosive bolts shattered ablative armour, gauntleted fists cracked into faceplates, and chain-toothed swords chewed through artificial limbs in showers of sparks. By the look of it, the invaders were outclassing their supposed analogues completely.

‘These gue’ron’sha fight with merciless skill,’ said Farsight, ‘but with little in the way of subtlety.’

‘I imagine it was not easy for you to watch them attack the unarmed magister,’ replied O’Vesa. ‘Would that act be considered dishonourable conduct by your caste?’

Farsight nodded slightly, deep in thought. That footage was curious. He could not shake the suspicion that one of the Space Marines had been reticent to strike the magister down before the other officer stepped in to make the killing blow.

Only a few rotaa ago, a kind of honour had been shown by the captain that had duelled Brightsword. The Space Marine had called off his support firepower, and that action had indirectly cost him his life. Farsight had held his own fire in response, allowing the two warriors to fight, one on one, to the death.

A small part of his soul questioned whether he would have stayed his hand if the Space Marine had not commanded his own allies to cease fire first. His decision had resulted in Brightsword’s demise, robbing the fire caste of a great

champion, but he had died well, in the service of the Tau'va. The duel had been fought fairly, not through formal agreement, but through some unspoken warrior ideals shared by human and tau alike.

Though Farsight had spared the life of a gue'ron'sha medic earlier in the battle, he had not hesitated to capitalise on the aftermath of the honour duel, slaying the crippled captain moments after its conclusion. Perhaps it was he that had shown a weakness of the soul that day. Perhaps the gue'ron'sha code was more stringent than he thought.

And yet the image of a booted foot crushing the life from the helpless water caste magister was hard to forget.

'Would you care for a compile of this data now, despite the fact it is still pre-assimilation?' said O'Vesa, waving a notation hoverdisc towards Farsight. 'Once it is properly sorted and analysed, I shall of course make it widely available through the proper channels. Still, I know your talents are diverse enough to make use of the raw data.'

'My thanks,' said Farsight, bowing formally as he received the disc in both hands. In truth he was taken aback. For the genius scientist to part with his data harvest before he had thoroughly analysed and quantified it was sacrifice indeed. It was akin to a fire warrior parting with a powerful prototype weapon before having a chance to test it in battle.

'Oh, speaking of your diverse talents,' said O'Vesa. 'Tutor Sha'kan'thas was asking after you. A question regarding whether your gifts are, in fact, rather too widely spread for the Greater Good.'

'What?' said Farsight, a cold splash of fear hitting his chest. The very concept of blending castes was taboo. For an officer to be accused of straddling those lines was severe indeed. In the event Tutor Sha'kan'thas' claim reached the ethereals, Farsight could be stripped of rank – and perhaps even subjected to the deadly trial that awaited all those branded vash'ya.

The commander steeled himself, compartmentalising the news and forcing focus upon his thoughts. Personal considerations were nothing next to the wider war effort. 'Tutor Sha'kan'thas can wait,' he said. 'There is a war raging outside, and my first duty is to the safety of my people. Tell me where these rogue gue'ron'sha squads went. I shall lead a team after them myself and contain them before they do any more damage to our domain.'

'Naturally I extrapolated their course. There is a very high degree of probability they are heading for the Ath'adra Command Facility.'

Farsight felt his fear intensify dramatically, skin prickling with anxiety.

'Ath'adra? Are you sure?'

'Within reasonable parameters,' said O'Vesa. 'Does that alarm you? You seem alarmed.'

'The ethereal council is meeting there,' muttered Farsight, turning on his heel and running towards the door.

Tutor Sha'kan'thas ran through his arguments once more, reassuring himself their causal paths were proof against even the most discerning observations. Farsight was vash'ya, he was certain of it. He had known there was something wrong with that upstart from the beginning, back at the Mont'yr battle dome. At first, he had mistaken it for genius, and encouraged his student in every way. It had been he who had given the aspiring fire warrior his first name element - *Shoh*, meaning 'inner light' - in response to his superb insight.

But Shoh had proven too precocious, too cunning, and had destabilised an entire batch of cadets as a result. Not only had he flouted regulations by forcing his induction several kai'rotaa before it was due, he had memorised and exploited every facet of his instructors' preferred war-styles, then used that knowledge to unpick every new simulation like a master thief unpicking a lock. Before long it had become disruptive. The youngster had solved the

tutors' convoluted training challenges with the ease of a kroothound sniffing out a dead body.

That disruption had not gone unnoticed by Shas'ar'tol high command. Two rotaa later, Shoh had the rank of shas'la conferred upon him by none other than Commander Puretide himself, and Tutor Sha'kan'thas and his peers had been relieved of their duties, sent to the front line against the Arachen of the Western Veil.

Sha'kan'thas had survived, one way or another. He eventually won back his former title, though he had been told he would never rise further in his field. Meanwhile he had watched with bitter ire as Shoh swiftly rose to the rank of commander - far too swiftly for the Greater Good. In the process the prodigy had proven himself capable to the point of arrogance, excelling in every field. He had shown the flair of a gifted orator when addressing his cadres, both at Zephyrpeak and here on Dal'yth. Perhaps worse still, he had usurped the duties of the earth caste when he field-repaired his own malfunctioning battlesuit under the waters of Dal'yth Reservoir. One incident was more than enough for an enquiry, but both together were ironclad evidence of Farsight blurring the caste lines.

Tutor Sha'kan'thas had sequestered evidence of the Zephyrpeak incident from the fire caste's archive, and had corroboration of the reservoir anomaly from his brief interview with O'Vesa. The latter was held on the recorder-discus he now held in his clammy palms. O'Vesa the Stone Dragon was held in such high regard in his field, with a long-held reputation for unflinching honesty and for having all the political acumen of a gun drone. Farsight was between castes all right - even O'Vesa had said as much. For all Tutor Sha'kan'thas knew, the commander was a natural pilot as well.

The tutor heard the hiss of a door irising open up ahead, and found himself sitting bolt upright, a trickle of sweat making its uncomfortable way down his spine. A tall female ethereal drifted into the corridor. Held aloft by an elegant

repulsor belt, she glided toward him with the sign of greetings-in-adversity.

A strange feeling of doubt wormed its way into the tutor's mind. He desperately wanted the dangerous firebrand Farsight put in his place, ideally to have him demoted for the good of the Tau'va. But should the hearing go *too* well...

Tutor Sha'kan'thas put the dark thought from his mind. As always, the ethereal caste would do the right thing for the Greater Good. Their wisdom was unimpeachable.

So why did he feel like he was holding a sharpened knife instead of a recorder-disc?



# CHAPTER TEN

## PREDATION/THE HIDDEN THREAT

In the deep black void beyond the Eastern Fringe, a living cataclysm glinted against the night.

At first it was only the outrider elements that reflected starlight from ice-crusts carapaces, but as the sands of time trickled on, a trillion dormant bio-forms emerged from the nothingness.

No lights winked upon the prows of the ships of this sentient armada. No engines growled in the darkness. Even the most acute waystations utilised by the Ultramar and Tau Empires found it all but indistinguishable from stellar debris.

The bio-fleet moved slowly, well under the speeds that triggered alert responses. It drifted forward with inhuman patience. Its coming was all but silent, invisible to a wide range of sensor spectrums. By the time it was detected, it would be far too late.

The killing cold of interstellar travel still clung to the bio-fleet, but as it neared the light and warmth of the star systems ahead, instinctive biological reactions brought its myriad organs and composite lifeforms to wakefulness. Ice sheets cracked and sloughed away. Nictating eyelids slid back over pupils the size of bio-domes. As the drifting

grotesquerie began to focus, innumerable eyes gleamed blackly in the void.

Cold. Deadly. Insatiable.

Spread before the bio-fleet was a banquet of life stretching from the tip of one spiral arm to the other. Light-year swathes of biomass, all waiting to to be claimed. The fleet would consume it all, leaving nothing but barren rock and childless stars in its wake. No real delineation would be drawn between human, Space Marine or tau, nor between plant, insect, or bacteria. To the fleet it was all just biomass to devour, to assimilate, to spawn again as new organisms ready for the next invasion.

Everything before it, from the microscopic to the gigantic, was perceived the same way.

As prey.

Farsight ran headlong down the wide oval corridor, calling up the cadre-net on his headset as he went. Startled earth caste functionaries stumbled back as he barged past, their postures first of protocolic shock, and then, when they realised who it was shouldering his way through the throng, of contrite deference. On towards the Orca hangars he went, constantly barking orders to his sub-commanders and bringing aerial assets into place.

Two tall, wide-shouldered tau in the robes of the ethereal guard stepped into the corridor. When they crossed their ritual duelling halberds together to bar his path, Farsight knew that something was very wrong. A pair of air caste pilots hurried past them, making the sign of unavoidable contrition with their steepled fingers. Farsight used the momentary obstruction to brush his communion bead open with the back of his hand as he made a gesture of greeting. Tau of all castes were stopping their business along the corridor, gathering in a loose circle to witness the spectacle.

'Commander O'Shovah,' said the eldest of the two ethereal guard, his polite smile wrinkling the folds at the corner of

his eyes. 'It is an honour to meet you in person. I am Shas'tral Fue'larrakan, and this is Shas'tral Oa'manita. We are to escort you to the audience sphere of Dal'yth's Subterranean Hypercomplex, where you will answer to the esteemed ethereals Aun'Tipiya, Guardian of New Horizons, and Aun'Tefan, Bringer of Fresh Truths.'

'We will accompany you only as an honour guard, of course,' added Shas'tral Oa'manita. Farsight fought back a frown; their crossed halberds conveyed quite another message.

'You do not understand, esteemed ones,' replied Farsight, his fists unconsciously bunching. 'I am honoured by this audience. But it is imperative we reinforce Ath'adra immediately. Other masters are in danger.'

'It is you who lacks understanding,' said the ethereal guard. 'Leave the safety of the ethereal caste to those charged with it, commander, and be content. We are fully appraised of the situation upon Dal'yth. You will accompany us immediately. If you do not comply, we will be forced to act in a fashion that results in your personal detriment.'

'Very well,' said Farsight, his shoulders stiffening. 'Lead on.' Rubbing his upper lip, he subtly closed his communion bead to the commander level cadre-net. Hopefully his allies had already heard enough.

He forced his anger down, a tight ball of fury in his throat, and mentally prepared for the worst.

Farsight sat buckled into the rear of the Orca *New Unity*, fighting to keep his calm as it hummed through the skies of Dal'yth. The safety harness he wore felt as if it was tight upon his chest, the restraints of a captive rather than the precautions taken to protect an honoured guest. Ahead, the two ethereal guards that formed his escort sat with their ceremonial halberds close at hand, both looking vaguely in Farsight's direction whilst studiously avoiding eye contact. The atmosphere was tense, and he felt naked and vulnerable without his battlesuit.

'You do not understand the gravity of the situation,' said Farsight. 'There are elements of the gue'ron'sha invasion force that have escaped the Gel'bryn perimeter. Even now they are heading for Ath'adra. Their intent is to slay our high command, I am sure of it.'

The ethereal guards remained as silent as ever, their faces impassive.

'You sit in judgement, so sure of yourselves,' continued O'Shovah, 'so sure of your duty, and the righteousness of your actions. Yet you are failing. With every dec that slides past, you fail the ethereal caste all the more.'

That got a reaction. Shas'tral Oa'manita's face soured as he turned to face Farsight full on.

'Perhaps it is you who have failed, Commander Farsight. Ask yourself this. Would you be escorted to answer for your conduct if you had acted as the Greater Good required?'

'I cannot believe this,' said O'Shovah. 'The ethereals at Ath'adra are in great danger. You talk of the Tau'va, but their survival is of utmost importance to it. You of all people should appreciate that. Should they die, my cadres and I will not be held responsible.'

'We have already contacted the cadre-net,' said Shas'tral Fue'larrakan, his soft voice seeming incongruous given his tall warrior's physique. 'The matter of the gue'ron'sha strike force to which you refer has been brought to the attention of Commander Shadowsun. Our ethereal majesties therefore consider it taken care of. Instead of focusing on events beyond your own sphere of influence,' at this the ethereal guards shared a quick glance, 'perhaps you should refocus your energies on your current predicament.'

Farsight's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing more on the subject. He had a strong suspicion there had been formal allegations of incompetence made against him - incompetence, or worse. O'Vesa's words were still fresh in his mind. What other reason was there for him being called to attend the celestial masters under the direct supervision

of an ethereal honour guard?

There were those in the fire caste who would see him torn down, stripped of his rank and influence. By leaving his comms channel open when the ethereal guard had first come for him, he had ensured there was at least a chance he had supporters at the hearing as well as detractors. Even without them he could argue his case strongly enough. Within a few rotaa, he told himself, he would be back in the fray, leading the fire caste of Dal'yth to a glorious and lasting victory over the overconfident, bullish humans.

Fue'larrakan met his gaze, just for the briefest of seconds. There was nothing there but disappointment.

Farsight sat back in the shadows, hands folded in his lap, and waited. He was outwardly calm, an expression of utmost serenity upon his features.

His heart was racing so hard it felt like it might burst.

Farsight closed his eyes, just for a moment. How had it come to this?

After the Orca *New Unity* had touched down, the commander had been led through the tall oval doors of the Gel'bryn Subterranean Hypercomplex, each portal silently opening as he and the ethereal guard approached it. There he had been shown to the vast underground sprawl that lay halfway between Gel'bryn Central and Via'mesh'la, where his escort had doubled in size. Two cadre fireblades had walked with him and the ethereal guards, the gathering somewhere between an honour escort and a prison detail.

As they passed the hypercomplex's med facility, a hover-slab bearing the blackened corpse of a tau warrior was guided along the corridor towards them by two expressionless earth caste orderlies. One made the sign of the Tau'va as Farsight's delegation walked past. Farsight absently returned the sign, only to notice the warrior lying on the slab was somehow still alive. A withered black wreck with much of his badly-burned flesh coated in antiseptic

gel, he was reaching out and gesturing frantically.

'A moment,' said Farsight. 'This one has something important to say.'

The ethereal guard looked at one another for a moment. To their credit, they stopped, turning to watch O'Shovah with halberds held ready.

'A microdec, no more,' said Shas'tral Oa'manita.

Farsight glanced at the data readout on the hover slab. This one would die soon. 'What is it, comrade?' he said. 'How can I help?'

His blood froze in his veins. The grotesque wreck of a tau on the slab was listed as Commander Bravestorm.

'I... hav hhailed gyou...' said Bravestorm, lidless eyes bulging horribly as he struggled to form words with his black slit of a mouth, 'O'hheysa... Glackhunder Gneesa...'

Farsight turned in puzzlement to one of the earth caste orderlies. 'What is he saying, fio'la? What happened to him?'

'The commander was recovered at Blackthunder Mesa,' replied the orderly. 'He and his shas'vres were field-testing prototypes supplied by the Stone Dragon.'

'Coded designation "Onager gauntlet",' said the other orderly.

'Anti-armour devices,' continued the first, 'used upon a massed gue'la armoured company. Bravestorm and his team closed with the super-heavy assets guarding the artillery. They physically tore out their power cores. Twenty-six bombard tanks were destroyed before the Imperials sent walker engines to retaliate.'

'The macro-class walkers,' the second orderly said, his tone almost reverent.

'In doing so, the commander and his team saved the youth cadres at the training centres of Dal'ryu from being buried alive. He is well-named, it seems.'

Bravestorm waved a hook of fused bone at Farsight, his body shuddering with the effort of communicating.

'Gney chhired... gney chhired ong gneir owng!'

Farsight needed no translation this time. To wreak this vengeance, the Imperial walkers had committed the worst of crimes. They had fired on their own side.

Was there no act too barbaric for these creatures to commit in the name of victory?

‘We must leave,’ said Shas’tal Oa’manita. ‘The ethereals must not be kept waiting.’

‘You served the fire caste long and well, my friend,’ said Farsight, taking Bravestorm’s gel-slicked claw in the cupped hands of utmost respect. ‘Now rest and be at peace.’

He turned to the earth caste workers once more. ‘Do everything you can to save him. Ensure he wants for nothing.’

‘Of course,’ said the workers in unison.

‘We leave,’ said Shas’tal Fue’larrakan fiercely as he stepped forward. ‘This instant.’

Farsight made the sign of peace-well-earned, meeting Bravestorm’s gaze before turning away and following the ethereal guard deeper into the complex.

There had been no fear in the crippled commander’s eyes. Only a burning need for vengeance.

Commander Farsight’s honour guard reached a spherical audience chamber large enough to seat two thousand tau. Around the lower half were ranged row upon row of high-backed delegation thrones, and in the middle, a raised dais where speakers took it in turns to address those gathered.

Right now, that dais was occupied by Por’o Dal’yth Mesme, a tall water caste ambassador trying his hardest not to look pleased with himself. He was staring up at an empty section of the chamber, adoration writ upon his features.

Farsight looked up as a circular door at the top of the sphere irised open. A quartet of advanced shield drones drifted out, forming a crackling repulsor field between them. Then came a hover throne, elaborate yet graceful.

Seated atop the disc-like device was a slender, elderly

ethereal. Farsight's breath caught in his throat as he realised whom it was he was looking at.

'Here to illuminate us is our most gracious leader,' said the water caste speaker. 'Scholar of the Undying Spirit, Speaker of Great Truths, and Shining Light - the Ethereal Master Aun'Va.'

The audience stood as one, their backs ramrod straight and their eyes fixed on the legend in their midst. Farsight managed to tear his gaze away, just for a moment, to look around. Every tau looked shocked to their core, some delighted, some awestruck. The only exceptions were the water caste ambassador and the two female ethereals hovering high on repulsor belts in the innermost ring of the sphere. Aun'Va was here on Dal'yth; he was a numinous being second only in purity to the Ethereal Supreme himself, Aun'Wei. For him to come to the planet without the usual ceremony, to arrive without the usual joyful water caste broadcasts, was unprecedented.

'Do not fear,' said the Ethereal Master as he descended on a glowing repulsor field that lit his serene features from below. Even the sound of his voice was like cool healing gel applied to the heated minds of every tau present. 'This audience chamber is as I wish it to be.'

Those in the audience sphere felt relief flood through them, instantly content that all was well.

'I am here on Dal'yth to lead through you, my most trusted aides,' said Aun'Va. His hover throne lowered him to just above the two female ethereals, one on either flank. 'I intend to monitor the gue'la first hand. They are a fascinating species and I feel it is high time I took their measure.'

Many of the gathered tau murmured in quiet appreciation.

'Aun'Tipiya, Aun'Tefan, proceed,' said Aun'Va, motioning to the ethereals below. The two celestial dignitaries drifted forward, both making the sign of the Tau'va with their delicate fingers. One was slightly taller and a few tau'cyr older than the other, but the aura of tranquillity they

shared was identical.

‘The Ethereal Master has grave concerns,’ said the elder, Aun’Tipiya.

‘Commander Farsight,’ said the younger ethereal, Aun’Tefan. ‘As overall commander of Dal’yth’s defence, you stand accused of allowing alien invaders to establish a significant presence upon a primary sept world.’

Farsight felt an electric jolt of shame run through him. To have such an accusation levelled upon him, especially in the presence of the Ethereal Master Aun’Va, was nigh unbearable.

A pair of elaborator drones slid smoothly from the dais in the centre of the chamber, projecting a three-dimensional hologram into the heart of the audience sphere.

‘The gue’la attack has penetrated sept space to an unforgivable extent,’ continued Aun’Tefan, raising a data wand to slide through three-dimensional tableaux of the wider Dal’yth space lanes. Huge cathedral ships wallowed in the murk of outer space, giant armoured whales that made the swift tau craft firing at their flanks look like minnows by comparison. ‘The *kor’vattr* have sent fleets from the other septs, but it will be some rotaa before they arrive. For this, the admirals of the air caste are being called to account in their turn.’

‘Yet here, before the guidance of the Ethereal Master,’ said Aun’Tipiya, her fingers entwining in her twin scalplocks, ‘we shall discuss the conduct of the fire caste.’

Aun’Tipiya’s data wand scrolled the hologram projections through scenes of utter carnage, the bulky forms of Imperial Space Marines fighting through the firestorms of their own creation. ‘The war effort upon Dal’yth does not progress as required by the Tau’va, nor is a resolution in sight.’

The audience shifted uneasily in their concave seats. Farsight risked a quick look around. He spotted Commander Sha’vastos there amongst them, wearing his usual formal regalia, and O’Vesa, representing the earth

caste as part of the elemental council. He was reassured somewhat by their presence. At least some of the faces amongst the audience were friendly.

Then Farsight saw who was seated across from them, and his spirits dropped. Tutor Sha'kan'thas, his pinched face as bitter as a rotting lemon.

'The gue'la attack is pugnacious and blunt, but effective,' said Aun'Tipiya. 'Gel'bryn itself, though initially cleared, has been the target of renewed attack. A concentrated strike from the drop craft utilised across the planet saw the fire caste withdraw in order to conserve resources. Within the last rotaa, the city has been officially declared fallen.'

The vivid hologram projected by the elaborator drones showed footage of white-armoured gue'la bikers engaged in a running battle with a Pathfinder cadre escorting a speeding transmotive. Their wheeled machines were earthbound - laughably simple in their design - though the skill with which their riders leaped, skidded and slid through the rubble of the city outskirts was admittedly impressive. Their sheer bulk and brutish design allowed them to shrug off much of the pulse fire that the Pathfinder cadre's transports sent winging into them. Farsight grimaced as the careening transmotive was hit hard by potent energy weapons from a group of three-wheeled bikes, the resultant explosion sending it slewing from the maglev track in a spray of molten metal gobbets.

A full half of the gue'ron'sha bikers were shot down with cold efficiency as a battlesuit group descended to counter-attack from above, and the Pathfinders used the fallen transmotive to anchor their flank as they joined the counter-attack. For a moment, it seemed the tau might snatch victory, but once the other half of the white-armoured riders engaged their enemies at close quarters, they cut down fire warrior and battlesuit alike. None were left alive.

Aun'Tefan continued, her tone sombre. 'Four other major cities have since been cut off - Dal'ryu, Via'mesh'la,

Mel'vanlui and Var'isar. They have also been declared lost.'

'With the greatest and most profound respect,' said Commander Sha'vastos, standing with his hands crossed over his heart in the gesture of indulgence implored, 'the war is still in its opening phases. Commander Farsight has won great gains against the Imperial attack, and overcome them in person on many separate occasions. Just as with his victories upon Arkunasha, I feel sure he is finding the measure of our enemies in order to inflict lasting defeat.'

'Thank you, Commander,' said Aun'Tipiya. Her tone did not convey gratitude, and neither did her expression. The old veteran sat down quickly, colour draining from his face. 'We do not lightly condemn those who risk their lives for the Greater Good,' she continued, 'but this is not Arkunasha. This is a core sept world, with two hundred times the population density of that desert planet. In a matter of a few nights, a fifth of that population has been lost.'

Farsight hung his head.

'You have to understand our position, Commander Sha'vastos,' she continued. 'The Arkunasha War was a great victory, but it was won over the course of thirteen tau'cyr. A whole generation of fire warriors, yet to be born at the war's beginning, fought at its conclusion. It was a far-flung colony, and the enemies we faced there had no spacecraft, no naval presence whatsoever.'

The ethereal gestured to the hologram of Dal'yth Sept's beleaguered space lanes before continuing.

'Here, today, we fight quite another foe. One that is brutal, merciless, and with technology so arcane we cannot counter it. They are bolstered by unthinking faith in their Emperor - a monarchical tyrant that abandoned reason long ago. Their numbers are such that they brushed aside our own kor'vattra navy as if it were cobwebs, and now they land their teeming hordes upon sept soil with every new day. They infest our airspace, the ruins of our cities, even the commune tunnels beneath them. Their shock

troopers are near equal in might to our battlesuit pilots, and they are determined to win at any cost.'

The holograms changed, this time showing an armoured host of black and silver war machines. Each primitive-looking vehicle was emblazoned with a stylised ebon gauntlet upon a field of white. The mechanised spearhead was taking heavy fire from the hunter cadre that had been sent to stop them, railgun rounds whip-cracking through the air to slam through the Space Marine vehicles front to back. Some of those hit, still swathed in fire, ground onwards, shrugging off great smoking wounds that would have reduced a Hammerhead gunship to scrap metal.

Farsight was startled to note the gue'ron'sha equivalents of the earth caste strode alongside the injured machines, tending to them with strange exoskeletal pincers even in the midst of enemy fire. The front of the vehicle spearhead ground on, fanning out and accelerating to engage the interdiction cadre just as a gue'ron'sha infantry ambush closed off their retreat from amongst the shattered ruins of an earth caste hospital. There was a string of detonations as the jaws of the trap closed, and the hunter cadre came apart in flame.

'The ethereal council has enough evidence to conclude that the current metastrategies are found wanting,' said Aun'Tipiya. 'As are those individuals assigned to its leadership.' She looked pointedly at Farsight and Commander Sha'vastos. 'Already several of that group have given their lives for the Tau'va, Commander Brightsword amongst them. Commander Bravestorm is in a critical condition, kept alive only by the finest efforts of the earth caste.'

'Those currently in the field are exempt from censure, for the time being,' said Aun'Tefan. 'We have reports of jet-pack-equipped gue'ron'sha operatives at large in the wastes, roaming outside the perimeters the fire caste have established as live war zones. Commander Shadowsun has been tasked with their destruction. It was judged

counterproductive to call her back to Gel'bryn City for this hearing.'

'As for the wider defence,' added Aun'Tipiya, 'decisive actions are called for, and swiftly. In challenging times, unusual measures must be taken. Our celestial majesty Aun'Va will outline his great plans in due course.'

Farsight held his breath, anticipating the blow to come.

'First, we will address the accusations of vash'ya that have been levelled upon you, Commander Farsight,' said Aun'Tefan. 'We need not tell you how grave an affront this is to our way of life.'

Here it comes, thought Farsight. In the past, those found guilty of being vash'ya had faced the most severe of punishments. Given how the hearing was going thus far, his life expectancy could be measured in decs.

'Before your arrival, this hearing determined that the allegations of inter-caste activity have a basis in truth. Tutor Sha'kan'thas gave a compelling testimony.'

'My thanks,' said the tutor from across the audience sphere. He stood up with a posture of confidence and took a formal bow, but Farsight saw a lack of surety beyond it. Here was a soul plagued by doubt, but who was too far down the path he had chosen to turn back.

'Holofootage of Farsight's rallying speech at Zephyrpeak has been assessed by the water caste, and found to have many of their diplomatic techniques evident within it,' said Aun'Tefan. 'The accusation between spheres there stands.'

'Alone it would not be enough to condemn you, given your exemplary record,' said Aun'Tipiya, 'yet there is more.'

Farsight said nothing, aware that to speak out would likely damn him further.

'At Tutor Sha'kan'thas' formal request,' continued the elder of the two females, 'Chief Scientist O'Vesa has analysed and assessed your actions at the Gel'bryn reservoir. His report concludes that your field repair of your customised XV8, upon which you still insist on displaying unsanctioned colours, was a work of rare

excellence and perspicacity under extreme pressure.'

'In a member of the earth caste, this would be laudable,' said Aun'Tefan, 'Perhaps even formally recognised as exemplary. In a member of the fire caste, however, it shows a weakness of character that sets an unforgivable precedent. It may even damage the very fabric of the Tau'va.'

At this, the Ethereal Master nodded sagely.

'As such, that incident has been struck from any and all records,' said Aun'Tipiya. 'The truth of your selfishness must remain forever shrouded.'

'I was about to drown!' blurted Farsight, his skin flushing dark. 'Is that how I should have best served the Greater Good? By letting my control cocoon fill to the point where my battlesuit became a tomb? By letting the wisdom that Master Puretide has beaten into me sink without trace?' He turned to the dignitaries seated in the front row, his face like thunder. 'Damn you to a lonely death, Sha'kan'thas!' he shouted, 'And you, O'Vesa! You were supposed to be my allies!'

The silence that followed Farsight's outburst was total. All eyes were on Farsight; he felt he was about to suffocate, even though his breath was coming in short, shallow gasps.

Aun'Va's gaze fell upon him, the weight of his disapproval crushing in its intensity. There was something else there, too, but Farsight could not place it.

Triumph, perhaps.

'Commander Farsight speaks of Master Puretide's wisdom,' said Aun'Va, his tones solemn. 'It is possible that he has located the crux of the matter. Perhaps that is the key to victory - to follow the paths that Puretide has shown us in their totality, not in part.'

The other two ethereals drifted backwards, their robes fanning out as they took position behind their leader.

'Then it is agreed,' said Aun'Va. 'You shall go to your famous teacher, O'Shovah of Vior'la. Go in exile and disgrace. Go to him and bring back his unsurpassed

insights on the nature of war.'

Farsight stood, stunned and silent, as the Ethereal Master spoke on.

'But you will not bring back only a portion of his wisdom this time, the portion that best suits your own outlook.'

Aun'Va turned his hover throne slightly so he could look directly at Farsight. The full force of his authority made Farsight want to shrivel into his seat and disappear.

'You shall retrieve all of Master Puretide's knowledge,' said Aun'Va. 'Every last thought. Our esteemed comrade O'Vesa has a device that will aid you in this quest.'

The Ethereal Master pointed a slim finger towards the earth caste scientist. O'Vesa dutifully held up a black oval casket roughly half the size of a drone. It drifted across the spherical chamber, hovering in front of Farsight until he numbly accepted it with the cupped hands of the gift received. He felt like hurling the thing away. His hands were shaking as badly as when he had escaped from the lethal depths of the Gel'bryn reservoir.

'Do this thing, in the name of the Tau'va,' said the Ethereal Master. 'Bring us the sum total of Master Puretide's mind, that we may turn the tide. Do so, and you may yet redeem yourself.'

Farsight felt something like hope flare inside him, but at Aun'Va's next proclamation, it froze like flash frost.

'If you fail us, Commander Farsight,' he said, 'then you will be put to death.'



# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## REBELLION/THE HUNTERS IN THE DARK

The Eighth Company squads splashed through the sodden wilderness in loose formation, the lockstep of their initial march left long behind. Numitor could see the heat haze shimmering around their backpacks, not from the engagement of the engines, but as a by-product of their fierce self-recycling metabolism. It was the only thing that had kept the Ultramarines moving through the Dal'ythan hexwastes for the last few days.

Colnid, with one of his lower legs replaced by an empty prosthesis, was slowing them down. Not by much, for as a youth he had trained long in the mountains of Macragge, but the drag factor was still noticeable. Sicarius, his knee wound aggravated by the long days of marching through uneven terrain, was hiding a slight limp of his own. The first few times Colnid had to stop to rebind his false leg, the delay niggled at the tempers of his brothers, and Sicarius had made a show of being impatient, despite the fact he was likely glad of the reprieve. Numitor knew better than to mention it. Lately even the slightest setback or criticism had become like acid upon the nerves. Even Veletan was anxious to be back in the fight, no matter how.

Indigo bladegrass waved at shin height, the inch of water

at its roots splishing with each footstep. The grass was sharp enough to slash open an unarmoured foot or tendon, but it did nothing more than part with a whisper at the Space Marines' passing. Here and there the three-headed skeleton of a water hydra lay in pieces. Thick scarlet centipedes cracked the bone with iron-hard mandibles to get to the marrow beneath. The carnivorous insects startled at the Space Marines' approach, soundlessly sliding away into the waters.

Cato Sicarius kicked a ribcage into a spray of spinning bones, droplets of water shimmering prism-like in the sunlight.

'This is futile,' he said to Numitor as the sergeant approached. 'Even if this course is true, by the time we reach our destination, the war will be over.'

'Throne's sake, Cato. It has been less than a week. Do you want to go back to Gel'bryn and report to Atheus in disgrace?'

'At least we would be in the fray,' muttered Sicarius, casting a black look towards Colnid. 'Instead of slogging through the middle of nowhere at three-quarter pace.'

Numitor sighed heavily. 'You want to leave Colnid behind, perhaps?'

Sicarius frowned, but did not reply.

'What other option do we really have?' continued Numitor. 'If we head back and follow the edges of the hex structures, there is a high chance we will be bombed to death before we even see a recovery craft. Colnid is one of us, and we all agreed on this course back in Gel'bryn. So start acting like a leader for once.'

Sicarius span around before stepping up chest to chest with Numitor. His face was twisted, deep lines on either side of soured lips.

'Insult me like that again,' he growled, 'and I will leave you sprawling in the dirt.'

'Perhaps,' said Numitor, his tone cold under a mask of ambivalence, 'perhaps not.'

Kaetoros splashed towards them at a jog, flamer swinging heavily from its strap. 'Problem, sergeants?'

'Yes,' said Sicarius. 'I need your flamer.' He yanked Kaetoros' weapon from him so hard the strap broke. Kaetoros recoiled as if he had been struck, but Sicarius had already turned away and triggered the ignition rune.

A blue finger of flame hissed from the weapon's pilot valve. Sicarius sent a roaring spear of promethium out to the right, letting it drizzle down twenty paces distant before bringing it closer by a few metres.

Numitor stepped back in shock as Sicarius lifted the flamer once more and brought its nozzle around in a wide arc, angling it so the promethium traced a wide horseshoe around their route of advance. Burning fluid gouted in shocking measure, half a canister used up in a matter of seconds. Sicarius completed his horseshoe shape with a last lance of fire to the left, mirroring the spar at the other end.

'What in the Emperor's name are you doing?' protested Kaetoros.

'It's upside down,' said Numitor as realisation dawned. 'But it's the Chapter symbol.'

'He is... he is *gambling*,' said Veletan.

'We are Ultramarines,' shouted Sicarius, punching a fist on his breastplate as the primarch's symbol burned high around him, 'We apologise to no one. We hide from no one. Let the enemy come. We will fight, as we were born to do!'

'This is risky,' murmured Magros. 'If the xenos pilot caste see this first...'

Numitor scanned the skies, the tiredness suddenly gone from his limbs. 'Not if,' he said. 'When. Squad Numitor! We go around this! New heading, wide berth on my lead!'

The sergeant ran around the edge of the burning symbol and the wall of billowing smoke that poured up from it, motioning for his men to keep up. Half of Squad Sicarius looked set to follow him. The fire was already spreading. Sicarius slammed the requisitioned flamer back against

Kaetoros' breastplate and waved his squad on a parallel course.

The first aircraft we see had better be ours, Numitor thought. Out in the wilderness, they could not hope to bring another enemy squadron low. There was no way such a conflagration could burn away on such a well-patrolled world without being seen by someone.

The wind picked up as the squads circumvented Sicarius' signal fires, blowing the choking black fumes of the promethium fire westward.

After a few minutes Numitor saw something disturbing the smoke. Not something clear, but more like an absence of form, an unseen obstruction causing the billowing clouds to dissipate. There was definitely something out there, but he could not place it. Not an aircraft, that was for sure. Something low and sleek.

'Eyes west,' said Numitor. 'We are being watched.'

The first sign of contact was not airborne, nor was it the ghostly shapes in the smoke. A few hours after the fire-signal had burned low behind them, a smudge of boxy shapes on the horizon resolved into a trio of Chimera transports. Behind them came a pair of snub-turreted Leman Russ Demolishers, one of which trailed smoke from a wound in its flank. It was a pitiful excuse for an armoured column, but to the Eighth, it was manna from the Emperor himself.

'They will have comms,' said Sicarius as he turned to Numitor, eyes alight. He waved his squad to form up. 'Squad, form up on me. This is the turning point, I can feel it.'

Numitor nodded, a slow smile spreading across his features as the stress of the last few days ebbed away. 'You are lucky as well as headstrong, Cato Sicarius.'

The Astra Militarum were the last sight the sergeant had expected to see this far out from the main urban war zones, but they were welcome. It was always strange, talking to

unaugmented humans. The distance between the Space Marines and the raw ranks of humanity felt far more pronounced when they were standing side by side, and the awe plastered across the face of the common Imperial Guardsman was usually tinged with fear. Their instinctual deference at being presented with mankind's finest guardians sometimes left mortal men on the verge of grovelling. Numitor found it amusing, in a way, and deeply disquieting in another.

At least these ones were warriors, Numitor told himself. The Astra Militarum vehicles had evidently seen a lot of battle. Plasma scars had dug deep gouges into their flanks, and here and there a rosette of black soot marked a missile detonation that had failed to breach the front armour. The command Chimera looked sound enough – it had a long whip-aerial bent across its length, and from this distance at least, its comms array seemed intact. There was hope here – if not for requisitioning the patrol entirely, then at least for patching in to the Adeptus Astartes vox network. Once they contacted Captain Atheus, they could rendezvous with air support and escape the attention of the tau pilot caste altogether.

The top hatches of the Chimera clanked open, and Numitor saw a whiskered face peer out at them. He held up an open hand in greeting and tapped the vox grill of his helmet, a mute indication of their vox transmission being down.

The transport's hatch clanged shut. The Chimera began to veer away, its rear exhaust gouting smoke as it accelerated out of the patrol column. The rearmost transport slewed around to face them instead, turret tracking. One of the Leman Russ Demolishers ground around to face them until Numitor was staring right at its wide black maw.

'What in Guilliman's name are they-'

Sicarius triggered his jump pack, the turbines roaring as he blasted into a long-range leap. He came down in a staggered run a few metres away from the lead Chimera

and stepped in front of it, banging hard on the personnel carrier's scarred hull before peering through the vision slit. Numitor chuckled despite himself. His fellow sergeant's uncompromisingly direct approach was sometimes exactly the right path.

'Etiquette was never his strong point,' said Veletan, walking up to stand at Numitor's side.

'You could say that,' replied Numitor. 'That said, you could say that about a lot of us in the Eighth.'

'Yield, for we are Adeptus Astartes!' shouted Sicarius, pounding his fist on the Chimera's sloped hull. 'Eighth Company of the Ultramarines Chapter. There are no hostiles in engagement range. Open up and report!'

'Come on,' said Numitor to Veletan. 'Let's get over there.' He motioned for the rest of his squad to follow, sending a curt nod towards the remainder of Squad Sicarius as well. The Space Marines set off at combat pace, not willing to expend any more pack fuel than necessary.

As Numitor covered the last few metres to the armoured patrol, the top hatch of the command Chimera gave a metallic squeal and opened up completely.

'High time,' growled Sicarius.

A stressed-looking Guardsman wearing sergeant pips, his close-shaved hair grey despite his years, leaned out to look down at the Ultramarines. From behind him a portly, middle-aged man with a starched collar peered out.

'What is it?' said the sergeant. 'What do you want?'

Sicarius took a step back in shock, nostrils flaring and eyes wide.

'Have a care, soldier,' he said, his tone cold and dangerous, 'or you'll not need a commissar to punish your insolence. You can point that tank's turret elsewhere.'

The sergeant's face paled visibly. He waved frantically to the Demolisher, and its main gun pivoted away.

'I didn't... there's no need for that,' the officer said hurriedly. 'Shell shock, nothing more. My heartfelt apologies, brother-sergeant...?'

'I believe this heroic individual's name is Sergeant Sicarius,' said the grey-uniformed officer behind him. He brushed a speck of spall from the medal on his chest. 'And this is Jorus Numitor, unless I'm mistaken. If I may interject, I am Deletei Nordgha, of the One Hundred and Twenty-Second Baleghast Castellans.'

'I'm Sergeant Alect Kinosten,' said the grey-haired officer.

'Acting sergeant,' corrected Nordgha.

'Baleghast,' said Numitor. 'I have not heard of it. But you have heard of us, clearly.'

'As a master of ordnance, I make it a priority to familiarise myself with every front-line war brief I can obtain,' said Nordgha. 'Especially concerning vanguard troops. Cuts down on the likelihood of... unfortunate miscommunications. It is common practice for the captains of the Ultramarines to make their rosters known to the higher echelons of the Astra Militarum structure, and-'

'-and he talks too much when he's nervous,' interrupted Kinosten.

'Evidently,' said Numitor.

'And why are you not with the rest of your division?' asked Sicarius.

'We're on patrol,' said Kinosten. Behind him, Numitor saw something in Nordgha's body language, a slight stiffening of posture.

'Patrol from where?'

'We're on autonomous pattern, rearguarding the hexwastes,' replied the sergeant. 'It is a true honour to meet the fabled warriors of Ultramar. Is there any assistance we can offer to you?'

'We need your vox,' said Sicarius.

'Ah, right,' said Kinosten. 'Yours not working, then? Machine-spirits angry?'

'Worse than that,' said Veletan from behind Numitor. 'They have been scrambled by xenos wartech. It is a subject we have learned a great deal about over the last seven days, six hours and fourteen minutes.'

'In truth it is a relief to finally rejoin the Imperial war machine,' said Numitor. 'We have to report back if we are to continue our mission at pace.'

'Well, the *Vodhjanoi* here's taken a good few hits,' said Kinosten, 'her hailer's got the vox-grems bad. In fact, all of our comms are shot, even Nordgha's. We must have been hit by the same xenotech as you.'

'Is that so,' said Numitor.

'Yes, sir,' said Kinosten, meeting his gaze unflinchingly. 'It is.'

Numitor was quietly impressed. Not many humans could look a Space Marine in the eye for long. These particular *Astra Militarum* were different from the norm, somehow, but he couldn't place it.

'You will get out of your vehicle,' said Sicarius, 'and you will allow us to placate its machine-spirit so we can contact our brothers.' He stepped forward, hand on the hilt of his tempest blade. 'Or would you rather I threw you out?'

There was a moment of stilted silence. Kinosten's expression darkened, and he ducked back inside the Chimera, pulling Nordgha back with him before closing the hatch.

The rear door of the transport clanged open. Sergeant Kinosten was the first out, closely followed by two Guardsmen, both openly gawping at the Space Marines before them, then Nordgha. The master of ordnance helped an elderly woman out of the Chimera, clad in emerald robes and thin to the point of emaciation. Numitor was briefly taken aback when he noticed she had no eyes in her sockets.

'Astrosavant Malagrea,' she said, turning to face him as she straightened up. 'No need to stare.'

Numitor quickly looked away.

'I meant no offence,' he said. 'You have a striking aspect.'

'Don't mind the hag, sir,' said the next Guardsman to clamber out of the tank. 'She's only happy when she's making people feel uncomfortable.'

'You're not fit to talk to them, Victo,' said Sergeant Kinosten. The Guardsman looked away, swinging a black-barrelled plasma gun around from his back and popping a wad of what smelled like Catachan tobacco into his mouth.

Behind the plasma gunner came the last of the squad. A bald man, he wore dome goggles and a gas mask, presumably to protect himself from the backwash of heat from the flamer held protectively to his chest. The strange behaviour of the Guardsmen, coupled with the fact they all had their guns unslung, made Numitor feel even more unsure of the situation. His hand strayed to check his bolt pistol, just for a moment.

The other squads were clambering out of their Chimeras too, the Astra Militarum troopers forming up in loose groups with lasguns at the ready. At least half of them were nursing crippled limbs, and several had plasma burns. Most of them had blood-encrusted bayonets attached to the ends of their rifles, and many openly held grenades.

Something wasn't right.

'Sicarius,' said Numitor under his breath, 'I think they are-'

'I'm handling it, Numitor,' growled Sicarius, motioning Glavius toward to the command Chimera. 'Glavius, get on that vox and raise company command. We have to report back.'

Glavius nodded, hastening to the empty personnel carrier. The Space Marine had to disengage and detach his jump pack just to fit inside, and then had to crawl on his hands and knees to get to the vox in the front.

'I told you,' said Kinosten. 'The vox is out.'

Numitor's hand moved slowly to unclip his bolt pistol from its holster.

'It... it has been sabotaged, sergeant,' came Glavius' muffled voice from inside the Chimera. 'Most of these wires have been cut through.'

Sicarius grabbed Kinosten by the throat and slammed him up against the side of the *Vodhjanoi*.

'You are deserters!' barked Sicarius. 'I knew it! Do you want to die in disgrace?'

'Don't...' choked Kinosten, 'We...'

'It was the tau on the ridge!' gabbled Nordgha. 'We broke them! We did our duty, didn't we? We turned the tide at Via'mesh'la, by ourselves! Don't we deserve a reprieve? Then they sent in their warsuits... we didn't stand a chance! We're more use to you alive, surely, and...'

'Silence!' shouted Sicarius, veins bulging in his forehead. 'You are all cowards, traitors to the Emperor's name! You deserve to die, every one of you. Do you really think you could stop us? Do you think thirty lasguns is enough to stop two squads of Ultramarines?'

'Especially,' said Numitor, 'when they've got no ammo clips.'

'What?' said Sicarius.

'There are no clips in their lasguns.'

Kinosten, choking and turning purple as he tried in vain to prise Sicarius' gauntlet from his neck, hammered his heels against the side of the Chimera in a spasmodic tattoo.

'Got... wrong... ammo...' the Astra Militarum sergeant gasped. A bitter, burbling laugh escaped from his blood-flecked lips.

'Just let him go, Sicarius,' said Numitor. 'They never intended to fire upon us. These men are beaten already.'

'They will be,' came the reply. 'Severely. And this one at the very least will face summary execution from his commissar.'

There was a chorus of dissenting grumbles from the massed Guardsmen.

'Let him go,' said the largest of their number, a scarred brute with skin like boot leather.

'You heard Reytek,' said a scrawny, rat-faced private with a missing ear. He was visibly shaking. 'Let the sarge go. Please.'

One of the Leman Russ Demolishers reversed, its turret angling.

Sicarius gave a barking laugh, long and loud. Numitor did not like its tone one bit. 'When Captain Atheus gets wind of this,' said Sicarius, 'you are all for the gallows.'

'Captain Atheus is dead,' said the astrosavant Malagrea softly. 'Slain by a xenos war leader.'

'What? You lie!'

Malagrea shook her head, her expression solemn.

Numitor felt stunned as the news sank in. It had the ring of truth to it. There was something else bothering him, too, in the middle distance. A faint but high-pitched whine, like that of an engine.

Numitor tapped his fellow sergeant's forearm and put a cupped hand to his ear. Sicarius cocked his head, absently letting Kinosten slump to the ground. The Militarum officer sucked in wheezing gasps of air that turned to whooping lungfuls as his windpipe reopened.

Then the Baleghast Castellans began to die.

A few metres from Kinosten, Victro danced like a puppet and came apart in a shower of blood. Struck twice by glowing bolts of energy, his plasma gun detonated in a blinding flash to throw gobbets of superheated liquid in all directions. Reytek went down a moment after as his guts were blown out of his back, his twitching fingers reflexively pulling the pin from the frag grenade he had grabbed from his belt.

Bedlam erupted all around, the screams of the burned and the dying filling the dusk air. A dozen of the Astra Militarum were mown down in the space of a few seconds. Reytek's abandoned grenade went off, and another three Guardsmen were shredded apart.

Numitor took three punching impacts on his pauldron. He darted forward on reflex, another volley of shots almost spinning him over into the bladegrass, and regained his balance just as a storm of pulse fire hammered into the side of the Chimera where he had been standing a heartbeat before.

'Ambush! From the west!'

Sicarius blasted into the air, jump pack roaring. Glavius, Ionsian and Veletan followed close after him, their own packs spitting blue flame. Almost as soon as they left the shelter of the armoured column, three volleys of pulse bolts converged upon them in a deadly crossfire, sending Ionsian and Veletan careening back to earth in blazes of white flame.

Using the Chimera as cover, Numitor leant out into the gloom for a second. The second Chimera in the column was rocking dangerously, taking heavy impacts as its turret tracked around to spit ruby beams of multilaser fire into the distance.

‘And from the east!’ he shouted. ‘We are surrounded!’

The sergeant quick-scanned the horizon, but saw nothing other than shimmers and flickers of light in the dusk. Part of him burned with the desire to trigger his jump pack and boost out there, to close down the enemy gun lines with bolt pistol and power fist, but some instinct held him back. The tau were cunning, and judging by the fate of Ionsian and Veletan, they were out there waiting for them to do just that.

Three Imperial Guardsmen ran around the back of the second Chimera, footsteps splashing, only to be met by a volley of hissing plasma. Glowing wounds burst in their backs as unseen ambushers mowed them down. There was a flicker of light in Numitor’s peripheral vision, coming from over a narrow ridge to the west. Sicarius had seen it too. He was already on an intercept course, angling in mid-flight with a flare of jets. Glavius, close on his heels, was punched from the air by two streaming volleys of plasma bolts. Trailing smoke, he corkscrewed to earth, slamming hard into a swathe of razorgrass with a splash of brackish water.

‘Throne, they’re taking us apart,’ said Numitor.

Sicarius roared as he hurtled feet first through a curving stream of energy rounds, taking fire but coming in hard nonetheless. He slammed into a hazy shape, lashing out

with his sword to catch another and send it sprawling in a blur of malfunctioning holotech. Then he was lost to Numitor's sight behind a low ridge, a strobing flash of energy lighting the gloom in the middle distance.

'Tau stealthers!' he said over the vox. 'Squad, get over here!'

'Hold your position,' shouted Numitor, 'we cannot afford to-'

The command Chimera's engine exploded with a bass crump, sending Astra Militarum and Adeptus Astartes flying left and right. Shrapnel pinged from Numitor's legs and hips as he staggered into a marksman's crouch, firing his bolt pistol into the east. He could see no clear target, and bolt ammunition was not to be wasted, but even suppression fire was worth something if they were to gain any sort of control.

'We have to get in there and engage,' said Magros. 'We're badly outranged!'

'No,' said Numitor, 'that's exactly what they want us to do. We go out in the open, we will be caught in a crossfire. These tau know how to bait a trap.'

'Sergeant, we have no choice,' shouted Magros. 'Sicarius is already out there!'

'Cato!' shouted Numitor over the vox. 'What's going on?'

There was no reply.

'For Throne's sake,' cursed the sergeant. 'Kinosten, get the *Vodhjanoi* moving, and get that third Chimera rolling behind it. The Demolishers on either side. Form a box. Leave room for the rest of us in between. The tanks can take a little more punishment.'

Kinosten, his throat still red where Sicarius throttled him, looked incredulous. Numitor stepped towards him, eyes burning with intensity. 'Just do it, sergeant. Drive the damned tank yourself if you have to, and maybe the Commissariat doesn't need to hear about your little detour.'

'Right,' croaked the sergeant, nodding frantically and grabbing his gas-masked comrade's uniform. 'Dektro, you

heard the man,' he said, pushing the bald flamer operative in the direction of the third Chimera. 'Get over to the *Vorzht* and pull her in behind the *Vodhjanoi*. Suppressive fire from the turrets until we've nothing left to shoot.'

Dektro nodded and span round, the fuel tanks on his back sloshing as he sent a stream of burning fuel arcing across the gap between the first and third Chimeras. He and two of Kinosten's command squad ran, crouching, behind the wall of flame, using it as impromptu cover as they made it across the gap to the farthest personnel carrier and relayed Numitor's orders. A hail of enemy fire chased them where the barrier of fire was thinnest, tearing apart the last of the three Guard troopers. Numitor winced, sending a bolt shell winging out into the twilight where he estimated the shots had come from, but the dull bang of contact did not follow.

One after another, the Astra Militarum tanks ground forward, the *Vorzht* pulling in behind the *Vodhjanoi* and the Leman Russ Demolishers on either side. Keeping low, the Guardsmen and the Ultramarines massed in between. Numitor led his Assault Marines at the front, forming a wall of ceramite before the flak-armoured Guardsmen and moving at a jog. They took enfilading fire through the gaps in the box formation, but each had their pauldrons turned into the firepower, and none of them went down.

Behind them came the ragged remains of Kinosten's platoon, Dektro hauling the half-panicked Malagrea in their midst as they moved out west. The turrets of the Chimeras tracked around, spraying thick ruby beams of multilaser fire into the west. The Leman Russes vented their wrath, sponson-mounted heavy bolters chugging out firepower brutal enough to blast a battlesuit to pieces.

Numitor strained to hear the telltale bang of the mass-reactive bolts detonating amongst the foe. Still nothing.

It was like fighting ghosts.

Sicarius ran headlong through the waterlogged field, chasing the shimmering shapes that flitted just out of

reach. Every time one of the things opened fire a spray of white energy would reveal its location, and Sicarius would sprint towards it or loose a shot from his plasma pistol, only to find nothing there. He itched to trigger his jump pack, to leap high and come down upon these xenos insects with crushing violence, but he knew that by doing so he would be making himself a priority target – a mistake that had already cost Ionsian, Glavius and Veletan badly.

The sergeant could not shake the feeling he was being led further and further away from the rest of the Imperial troops, but he couldn't retreat now. The more frustrated he got, the less it seemed to matter. There was killing to be done, and his blood sang with the need for it.

Ahead, one of the tau stealthers was in plain sight, firing back into the main fray from behind a thicket of razorgrass. The alien warsuit had taken a multilaser hit, by the look of its scorched and bulbous torso, its outline rendered visible by its malfunctioning chameleonic.

Sicarius grinned fiercely. The warsuit had not seen him. He held his tempest blade out wide, charging in to cut the damned thing in two.

Heavy impacts struck him from behind, the intense heat of plasma bolts burning across his lower back. More came in from the right, taking his legs away and leaving him crashing mid-sprint to the ground. Yet more hit his arm, blasting the tempest blade from his hand and sending pain flaring up to his shoulder.

The sergeant pushed himself upright, sending a plasma pistol shot towards the visible suit, but it had disappeared entirely. Another volley struck him, sending him skidding through the watery mud of the razorgrass field.

The world around him dimmed as pain wracked his body, a dozen injuries fighting for his attention at once. Grey fog clouded his vision, threatening to pull him into its nothingness.

Then the warsuit that had baited him into the crossfire reappeared, just out of reach. The quad-barrelled cannon

that formed its right arm was pointed squarely at Sicarius' head.

'Got him,' said Numitor, pulling Glavius' unconscious form from the muddy grass and propping him against the *Vodhjanoi*. They were still under heavy fire, and the Demolishers were taking a pounding on either side of them. But the rolling box formation was slowly getting them towards the cover of the ridge ahead, allowing them to recover their wounded along the way.

'Glavius!' shouted Numitor, slamming him back against the steel hull of the personnel carrier. 'Back on your feet! We have to find Sicarius!'

Numitor was swatted from behind so hard that he slammed into his battle-brother, a blinding light taking his vision for a moment.

He turned back to see a scene from a demented killer's abattoir.

The *Loita* had exploded with such shocking force it had cut apart a full half of those Astra Militarum troopers sheltering in its lee. The Demolisher itself had been neatly cut in three pieces by some kind of fusion beam that had gone through engine and fuel tank at the same time. The searing lines still glowed white, yellow and red where the xenos weapon had carved it apart.

Lit by the fires of the tank's demise, a dozen Guardsmen lay in the shallow water, horrifically wounded. Great wedges of shrapnel pierced faces and necks, still-burning tanker fuel turned men to floundering charcoal effigies and soldiers bawled like children as they gazed in horrified disbelief at the squirting stumps that had once been their limbs. Malagrea sobbed through a mask of blood, scrawny legs cut in a hundred places by a stumble through the razorglass. One pink hand grasped a blackened, bony claw.

Numitor felt something watching him. He looked up, eyes still wide with shock.

Hovering beyond the burning wreckage of the tank was a

diabolic figure. It was a female tau, but at that moment it appeared to Numitor's stunned senses more like a daemon in the flames. Xenos camo-tech made the figure's elegant white battlesuit appear like a mantle of fire, the disc-like drones on either side of her glowing like familiar spirits. A long and decorated scalplock swayed in the thermals. Her eyes bored into his, the intensity of her contempt obvious despite her inhuman features.

Numitor saw red. With a roar, he leaped at the alien warrior, his jump pack firing. She swept away from his bullish charge and up into the skies.

Then Malagrea's sobbing turned into a scream, and Numitor fell into blackness.

Waves of nameless energy broke across the Eighth, battering their minds as a stormy ocean batters a weak swimmer. The screaming drove hot nails of pain into Numitor's body, his mind, his soul. He felt his ears fill with scalding liquid and his eyeballs swell as hundreds of tiny capillaries burst to fill the whites with blood.

The sound was horribly eloquent, conjuring unstoppable visions in Numitor's mind. Shattered panes of stained glass, each depicting a different atrocity, were stabbed hard into his psyche. He heard the screams of a coven of witches trapped in a burning building, of a generation of newborns pushed into the cruel cold of the real world, of a thousand sudden and violent deaths thrust upon the ignorant and the unprepared. They blurred together into a horrifying cacophony, roiling back and forth, robbing all conscious thought and making Numitor's eyes roll back into his head.

Drooling froth bubbled from his lips as he saw a vision of a giant spherical room, rank upon rank of psykers strapped to its insides, their souls drained by the impossible sentience at the cavernous chamber's heart. This was the home of true agony, of the most hideous sacrifice. Against this, physical pain seemed a gentle and compassionate friend.

Then, in an instant, it was over. Numitor felt as if his brain had been submerged in ice water as consciousness returned, his senses awakening just as his jump pack leap came to an ungraceful end. He landed in a tumbled heap in the mud, but swiftly got back upright with his bolt pistol aimed and ready. His hand, for the first time since his initiation into the Adeptus Astartes, was shaking like that of a palsied old man.

The sergeant forced himself to focus. Years of hypnotically reinforced training fell back into place, restoring order to his aching soul like slabs of thick ferrocrete covering an unquiet grave.

Around him was a charnel house. Those already grievously wounded, whether because of old wounds, the one-sided firefight, or the explosion of the Chimera, had been pushed over the threshold. Apart from the crackling pop of a burnt-out Chimera hull and the occasional low groan, the razorgrass field was silent. Not a single gunshot marred the strange atmosphere of disbelief.

‘Sergeant?’ said Aordus as he stepped closer to stand in front of Numitor. ‘Are you sound?’

‘I am if the tau are all dead,’ said Numitor, ‘but somehow I doubt that.’

‘Then you’ll want a look at this,’ said Aordus, pointing out into the fields.

Numitor frowned, using his lenses’ magnocular function to scan the periphery of the firefight. At first he thought Aordus was pointing out pale rock formations, but then he saw them for what they were – the bodies of tau stealthers, their bulbous battlesuits slumped lifeless as if they had simply fallen dead where they stood.

A shiver crept across Numitor’s crested scalp as he realised that was exactly what had happened.

‘A psychic attack, then? From that one they called the Hag?’

Aordus nodded. ‘Malagrea, her name is. She lost a hand when the Demolisher went up.’

'Is she bleeding out?'

'I saw to her. It's ugly, but she'll live.'

'Good work. She's... she's good at her job, it seems.'

'Used the pain, maybe.'

'Yes,' said Numitor softly. 'All of it. More than we could ever understand. Have Squad Sicarius reported in?'

'Not yet,' said Aordus. 'Searching now.'

'Do so,' said Numitor. 'I shall join you.'

The two Assault Marines moved off to join the search. At first Numitor walked as if in a daze, but as the ordered, concentric circles of their recovery pattern gave him focus, he found his surety returning. There was a strange kind of comfort in the mundanity of repetitive tasks.

'Magros, Duolor,' said Numitor, 'keep vigil. The rest of us, regroup duty.'

Glavius was first to be found, shaking his head in disbelief as he checked the integrity of his stricken battleplate. Four dark scorch marks, each wider than Numitor's hand, surrounded the areas where the tau cannonades had taken chunks out of his ceramite armour. Yet still the battleplate's integrity held.

'Four more on the back,' said Glavius, his tone shaky. 'I'm lucky to be alive.'

'Praise the Machine God,' said Numitor drily. 'Next time don't be so quick to jump into the jaws of a trap.'

'Hmmp. Tell that to Sicarius.'

'I will if I can find him.'

'Congratulations,' said Cato Sicarius as he splashed up through the razorglass. 'You found him.'

The sergeant was a mess. Almost every slab-like plate of his armour bore a deep gouge or a smoking hole, the cobalt blue of the Ultramarines heraldry blistered and blackened. Layered ceramite was visible where plates had shattered and broken away, and subcutaneous wiring fizzed sparks whenever the sergeant took a limping step.

'Looking worse for wear, Cato,' said Numitor. 'Not a good idea to go haring off like that against an unseen foe.'

'I used to know a brave and fearless warrior named Jorus Numitor,' said Sicarius gruffly. 'You would have liked him. I'm not sure he'd have liked you so much.'

'Well, maybe he's grown a little wiser.'

'Maybe he's forgotten his Codex Astartes,' said Sicarius. 'When the enemy's reach is long, and yours is short...'

'Close the distance and wrest victory from his grip,' finished Numitor. 'I know that well enough, but I'm not sure I remember the next part saying "charge like a maddened grox into the teeth of the enemy guns". And how did your victory-wresting go, by the way?'

'I took heavy fire, and they almost killed me,' said Sicarius, all trace of levity gone. 'Then... then came that scream. My head's still ringing fit to burst. But at least the xenos fared worse.'

'That they did,' said Numitor.

Sicarius strode past one of the fallen tau, spitting on its corpse. The acid in his saliva burned a hissing hole in the sensor plate that formed the alien warsuit's face. Numitor walked after him, shaking his head in warning when Glavius tried to follow.

As the two sergeants walked out of earshot, Numitor spoke once more. 'You left half your squad, Cato.'

'I know,' said Sicarius. 'It was a mistake. I acknowledge that. It won't happen again.'

Numitor said nothing in response.

'Is Glavius still able to fight?' asked Sicarius.

'He's in a better state than you, certainly. Tough, that one.'

'In body, at least.'

'Who better to teach him independent thought than you? After this, even he will think twice about blindly following your lead.'

'I imagine so,' said Sicarius.

A long silence stretched between the two sergeants as they stared out across the waving razorglass.

'I cannot believe Atheus is really dead,' said Sicarius.

Numitor gave a tired sigh. 'I think Malagrea was telling

the truth. You could tell by her demeanour. A sad loss to the Chapter.'

'I know. It's just...'

'What is it, old friend?' asked Numitor softly.

'With him dead,' said Sicarius, 'who will be promoted to captain in his stead?'

Numitor stared at his fellow warrior for a second. Then he shook his head in disbelief, turning away from Sicarius and walking back to the rest of his squad.

'They had us trapped, trussed and ready to kill,' said Kaetoros. 'When we hunted for them, they faded away. When we stayed put, they hammered us from all sides. When we took to the skies, they caught us in a crossfire. We cannot fight like this.'

'It does look like they have our measure,' agreed Veletan. 'From a tactical viewpoint, they had us out-planned and outgunned from the start.'

'Until Malagrea joined the fight,' said Numitor. 'We owe her our thanks.'

The wizened old astropath, still clutching the wrist of her blackened and claw-like hand, gave a curt nod of acknowledgement. She had managed to keep a dignified expression since the impromptu gathering began, but Numitor could see she was still in a lot of pain.

'Is it possible the tau have no experience of psychic attack?' Numitor asked her. 'Or are particularly vulnerable to it?'

Malagrea inclined her head. 'I would not be surprised. These creatures are not soulless, as such-' At this she gave an involuntary shiver, followed by a grimace of pain. 'But they have little in the way of spirit. Their will is communal. Individually, it is easy enough to overcome.'

'Have you knowledge of any other psykers, in your battlegroup?' asked Numitor. 'It could be that's our best shot at disrupting the tau war machine before it repels the invasion altogether.'

Kinosten and Nordgha exchanged a look.

‘Do we know any psykers, he asks,’ said Nordgha. ‘Haven’t you heard the stories about the Baleghast Castellans?’

‘Enlighten us,’ growled Sicarius.

‘We’re the One Hundred and Twenty-Second Baleghast Castellans,’ said Nordgha. ‘Between us and the One Hundred and Twenty-Third, we’ve got more psykers per platoon than any other regiment in the Gel’bryn theatre.’

‘It is true,’ agreed Malagrea in her thin, quavering voice. ‘We are... lucky enough to have not only Primaris Psyker Vykola Herat, but the three-man mindchoirs sanctioned by the Scholastica Psykana.’

‘Can you get us to them?’ said Numitor. ‘Marshal as many as possible, and rendezvous within reach?’

‘In theory, yes,’ said Sergeant Kinosten, his voice still hoarse from Sicarius’ violence, ‘though your friend there seems hell bent on seeing us lined up in front of a commissar’s bolt pistol. After escaping a tau ambush I’m not feeling so keen on death by court martial.’

‘That can wait. And there’s still a chance you will redeem yourselves.’

Kinosten raised an eyebrow.

‘If we can gather as many psykers as possible in one place,’ continued Numitor, ‘we’ll have an advantage that even the tau have no way of anticipating. We strike a vicious blow, and we take their finest commanders out in one fell swoop. We already know where to find them.’

‘A commendable concept, sergeant,’ said Veletan, ‘But these deserters have sabotaged every one of the tanks’ voxes, not just the one examined by Brother Glavius, in order to escape detection.’

‘There are other ways to communicate,’ said Malagrea, brushing her lank hair behind her ears. ‘I specialise in them.’

‘Then get it done,’ said Numitor. ‘Send a psychic message, gather your kin, and we’ll conveniently forget to mention your platoon’s... lapse of judgement. Won’t we, Sergeant

Sicarius?’

The Talassarian bladesman stared at Numitor for a long time, his expression sour. Then he gave a curt nod.

‘Then it’s agreed,’ said Numitor, extending a hand clad in ceramite. Kinosten grasped his forearm as best he could in the warrior’s handshake. The Imperial Guardsman’s muscled arm seemed like that of a child in comparison to Numitor’s.

‘But if you betray us, Sergeant Kinosten,’ said Numitor, ‘if you even think of straying from this path...’ The Ultramarine sank his fingers into Kinosten’s flesh and squeezed hard, pulling him in close enough to smell the sharp tang of human fear. ‘...I will crush you limb by bloody limb, and every one of your men will hang.’



# CHAPTER TWELVE

## BETRAYAL/THE PRODIGAL RETURN

Farsight looked up the mountain path to the tallest of Kan'ji's perilous peaks. Tiny puffs of condensation misted in front of his olfactory fissure as he caught his breath. The snow-capped mound was swathed in morning mist, but he could make out the buildings dotting its sides as patchy shadows in the distance.

The commander stopped for a moment to revel in the crispness of the air. It had been a punishing climb. The aching in his lungs and the hot feeling of exertion under his skin was all too familiar. It was a by-product of an altitude that he had learned to appreciate, even enjoy, over the harsh tau'cyr he had spent here. Despite the circumstances, it was good to be back.

Looking back down the slope, Farsight saw the Devilfish that had brought him pivot and turn away, gliding silently along the crevasse that led back to Gel'bryn City. It had felt very much like cheating, riding in the TY7 to the sloping shoulders of the peak before climbing the rest of the way. He had been told that only the worthy made it to the top, and laboured hard to prove it. To his knowledge, this was the first time a student of the master had simply been transported there.

Farsight watched the Devilfish fade from view over the lower mountain slopes, where gnarled *ovidu* trees spread their carpets of mauve blossom in the springtime.

No going back now.

Shouldering the long military satchel he had been given on his departure, Farsight walked up the slope towards the mountain peak. By the side of the path, patches of winter snow glowed and glistened with the pinks and oranges of the dawn.

Farsight walked on past the simple huts of the first Kan'jian pioneers, humble wooden constructions built to last. Each had housed a dozen of the fire caste's finest over the years. Farsight had mended several of the roofs himself, and received a beating for it. It was not for the leaders of the Tau'va to rest in comfort, Master Puretide had said – nor to take the work of other castes upon himself, come to that. How true that was. Perhaps if he had remembered it, he would not be here now.

Farsight followed the path along the banks of the ice river, where the Master had made him stand one-legged in the freezing water before making him hobble into an *icho* stick duel against Kauyon-Shas. He had fought her with his feet bare and one eye still swollen closed by the bruise of their fistfight the night before. Seeing that as a great injustice at the time, he had railed against it, especially after she had unceremoniously dumped him right back in the river at duel's end. She could beat him even on his best day, and they both knew it. But learning to fight at a disadvantage had saved Farsight's life on many occasions since, and thousands of fire caste lives to boot.

Up past the Seeing Tree he walked, half-expecting Monat-Kais to still be meditating up there with eyes closed. What secrets the distant young tau had kept behind those hooded lids. He was a silent inspiration to all those who followed the *monat's* lonely path, but only Farsight and Shadowsun really knew him, and even then, there were depths they dared not plumb.

Not since the night of the failed ta'lissera.

Walking onward, the commander passed the sloping grove where Kauyon-Shas had taught him to look in two directions at once. There he had caught two of the drifting leaves she had dropped, twirling them into a bird in flight and offering them to her as a gift. She had been the best of rivals, seeing each new challenge as a chance to spin her traps like the arctic spiders she admired so much. Her lethal patience had served her well; in time, the young warrioress had become one of the fiercest and most widely respected leaders in the tau empire.

And there, atop the mountain, was the mentor who had taught them both – them, and entire generations of the fire caste.

The warrior sage was seated with his back to Farsight, crosslegged upon a simple hover-throne discoloured by use. He was looking out across the Grey Crevasse to the waterfalls of amethyst-hued water that cascaded down the opposite peak. It was the same position he had been sitting in when Farsight had first met him so many tau'cyr ago. His poise was perfect, his body so still he could have been one of Kauyon-Shas' ghosts.

A few spots of chill rain fell from the skies, quickly growing into a light spattering. Farsight felt his skin pucker, the old sensation of trepidation rising in his throat. He pushed it down, straightening his back. He was a well-respected commander of the fire caste now, not some awestruck student.

'Come forward, Mont'ka-Shoh,' said Master Puretide without looking. 'I can hear you back there, failing to control your breathing.'

Farsight forced himself to calm. The disapproving tone of his master's voice still had a potent affect on his mood, and part of him already felt chastened.

'You forget your focal rhythms,' continued Master Puretide. 'It is like listening to a wounded boar, snuffling away. Kauyon-Shas would have spitted you long ago. Were

she ever here.'

'It is good to see you too, master,' smiled Farsight, stepping forward and kneeling in the posture of the supplicant-bearing-his-sword. 'You have not changed, I note.'

Puretide turned in his throne, fingers laced in the gesture of elder-accepting-the-gift. His face was as craggy and lined as the cliff opposite, deep lines in his upper lip leading to a thin slit of a mouth. Eyes as hard as diamonds glinted under a noble brow. He looked old, older than any tau Farsight had ever seen, but still strong.

'Time has been kind to you, Mont'ka-Shoh,' said the old warrior. 'Your bearing is that of the hero.'

'If I have earned that accolade,' said Farsight, 'it is only because of the application of your wisdom. The fire caste would be a shadow of its current incarnation without you.'

'I have trained so many, since I took residence here,' sighed Master Puretide. 'Thirteen tau'cyr I have spent on this mountain, with the young and the naive my only companions. I remember them all, every detail. Yet you are the first to come back to me.'

Farsight felt something writhe in the pit of his stomach. Suddenly the contents of the satchel over his shoulder felt heavy and awkward.

'I had forgotten how beautiful it was here.'

'I doubt that, young warrior. You were never one to forget. I always knew your star would rise high, ever since I met you. A raw cadet, back then, but still outwitting your tutors daily at Battle Dome Mont'yr.' The war-sage's face cracked into a wrinkled smile. 'One of them in particular did not take kindly to it.'

'He still doesn't,' said Farsight. The thought of Tutor Sha'kan'thas made his blood sting in his veins, but he pushed the emotion down. That one did not belong here, not even in spirit.

'My most recent students told me of your victory at Arkunasha,' said Master Puretide. 'A true son of Vior'la,

setting the storm against the foe. An apt echo of your sept's own trial by fire.'

'Too many good warriors died to the orks there,' said Farsight. 'I cannot consider it a victory.'

'Do not let the guilt consume you. The *be'gel* are not easily defeated. Their ways are strange.'

'Master... it seems we have encountered an even stranger foe in the gue'la.'

Puretide frowned, turning back to the crevasse and closing his eyes. 'I have seen the fires in the sky. They seek to push a blade of doubt into the heart of the Tau Empire.'

'I will not allow it,' said Farsight.

'So you come here. To seek my help.'

Farsight swallowed. 'Yes. For the Greater Good.'

'My soul longs to fight, in truth,' said Puretide. 'And yet I laid down my guns long ago. I shall not wear the Hero's Mantle again.'

'I would not ask it of you,' said Farsight. 'But... the great ethereals, master. They wish to harness your wisdom in as many ways as possible. They have tasked the earth caste with this, as well as the fire.'

'And yet you walk the monat's path to reach me,' said Puretide. 'You have that within you, the power of one. Yet you must learn to fight with kauyon, monat and mont'ka, if you are to fulfil your destiny. To bait, to decoy, to guide foes as well as friends along the paths of fate. These are things Kauyon-Shas understands within her soul. But I fear you never will, not truly. Just as she will never truly understand the mont'ka.'

'The victory of the mind is to consider the whole, not its constituent parts,' quoted Farsight.

'Just so,' nodded Puretide. 'Easy to repeat, not so easy to achieve. Take the gue'la invader's mind into your own, my child. Study the stone-shape of his thoughts from the ripples that flow from their impact. You must form the *da'thle'vral*, the mirror that shows the weakness. Then, and only then, will you will prevail. To secure victory, the wise

must adapt.'

'There is little time for study, master,' said Farsight. 'This is not a war confined to a single world, like Arkunasha. The gue'la, their warships come from nowhere. They pour more of their filth upon Dal'yth with every new night. If they win here, they will not stop until the entire Tau Empire is shattered and our destiny cast into the void.'

'And so you wish to win in haste,' said Puretide, his expression sour. 'Just as you always did.'

'No, master,' said Farsight. 'I realise that patience is key. Yet the ethereals bade me take a different path.'

Puretide said nothing, his expression unreadable. The thin, cold rain was turning to tiny flakes of snow, dancing and whirling as it came down around them.

'Master, the gue'la are here, on this planet!' protested Farsight. 'The invaders' beachhead is less than two rotaa from where we now sit together, talking as if I had never left!' His face felt hot, despite the cold wind playing around them. 'With a determined push, their strike troopers could take this mountain tonight,' said Farsight, 'and kill you where you sit! Does that not affect your philosophy? Do you not care for victory any more?'

The venerable warrior just looked at Farsight as if the answer was obvious. The habit was just as infuriating as the first night he had spent on the mountain, but this time, the stakes were far, far higher.

Just as Farsight's simmering anger was about to boil over completely, the master spoke.

'If I die, child, then it will be because my time has come.'

'And what if Dal'yth dies with you? I cannot allow it.'

Farsight swung the satchel from over his shoulder, releasing the strip that held it closed, and pulling out a disc-shaped cryocasket. He slid a finger around its circumference and it hissed open. As he gingerly took out the contents, a latticework device made of dangling wires and tiny circular pads, the device writhed slightly. It reminded Farsight uncomfortably of a Dal'ythan jellyfish.

‘This is a recording device,’ said Farsight. ‘You must wear it, master. It will capture your wisdom, the better to distribute it amongst the commanders of the Tau’va. We need your help, and we need it now.’

‘So they wish to take my mind,’ said Puretide. ‘I knew this day would come. But I did not expect it would be you that brought it to me.’

Farsight made the gesture of the unworthy student. ‘In truth I do not know their full intent, master. I only relay it on behalf of the Shas’ar’tol.’

The ancient sage looked sidelong at Farsight, his expression timeless.

‘Do not bring me falsehoods, Shoh.’

The ugly sensation in the commander’s gut was getting stronger. He suddenly felt as if he wanted to choke out the contents of his stomachs, but clamped it down.

‘I only do as I am ordered,’ said Farsight. ‘As the ethereals have asked of me.’

Puretide turned in his hover-throne to face his student, his face a stoic mask. ‘Do what you must, then,’ he said. ‘In the name of the Tau’va.’

Taking the jellyfish device and spreading it out with his fingers as O’Vesa had shown him, Farsight draped it upon his mentor’s bald pate with the utmost care. It was a strange reversal, for the student to treat the master in such a fashion. In his mind’s eye, a memory flashed of the ceremonial ending of their training upon Mount Kan’ji. The master had finger-traced the crown of the new commander upon Farsight’s head in a mixture of blood and ash. Kauyon-Shas had been next, then Monat-Kais. It had been a day of joy, celebration and relief.

The opposite to what Farsight now felt inside.

Steeling himself, the commander began pressing the discs onto the neural sites as he had been instructed. All the while, the serpentine feeling of disquiet slithered in his gut.

Puretide looked up at him, his eyes swimming with sadness and regret. In those dark pools were the

reflections of a soul steeped in decades of contemplation.

‘Our race will walk dark paths, one day,’ he said. ‘Dark paths indeed.’

Farsight did not reply, but inside his heart felt as if it were shrivelling. He touched the device’s activation node, and a tiny needle behind it extruded, poised over his master’s brain.

At the last moment his mentor shot a hand up and grabbed him by the wrist, pulling him close.

‘Do not trust them all, my child,’ whispered Puretide. ‘Do not trust them all.’

Then Farsight pushed the node all the way in with the faintest of clicks, and Puretide’s eyes rolled back into his head, as white as the snowflakes drifting down from the troubled skies.

Commander Sha’vastos leaned back into the ovoid med-slab, its cushioned recesses as welcoming as a soft bed. Proud to be part of this new phase of the tau’s military evolution, he smiled broadly at his fellow commanders and at the earth caste scientists bustling around them as they placed long needles under the skin of their subjects’ scalps.

The door portal hissed open, and all those tau not strapped to a med-slab stood to attention, averting their eyes as the Ethereal Master himself stepped into the chamber. Every muscle in Sha’vastos’ body strained to stand bolt upright in salute, to make the sign of the Tau’va and progress through the full seven obeisances, but he was strapped down so securely he could do no more than twitch. He forced himself to adopt an expression of humble awe instead.

Aun’Va swept further in, his ceremonial guards on either side as he exchanged soft words with the chief scientist, O’Vesa. Commander Sha’vastos felt weak with wonder. It was the very greatest of honours to have a member of the ethereal caste watch over him as his operation was performed, let alone to meet Aun’Va, Master of the Undying

Light, in person. He could hardly believe his fortune.

Soon he would scale the peaks of military perfection. It was a noble dream, to be spotless in the philosophies of war. He had always been in awe of the legendary Master Puretide, always looked to him as the epitome of what the fire caste could achieve. To be made one with all that wisdom, and to live as that which he had always most admired... and all before the greatest embodiment of the Tau'va who had ever lived. It was a dizzying thrill just to think about it.

An earth caste scientist stepped into the commander's line of vision, notation disc blinking in his palm.

'Do you, Commander Shas'vastos, consent to this procedure in the name of the Tau'va?'

There was really only one answer, and Sha'vastos was pleased to give it.

'Of course.'

Sha'vastos glanced at O'Vesa, hoping for reassurance. The squat luminary of the earth caste simply peered at him as if he was an interesting species of insect. Behind the earth caste scientist the commander could see a processor bank with a long, tall cylinder of blue liquid atop it. Inside that was the neural crown that had harnessed the sum total of Master Puretide's wisdom. The wire-thing moved gently in its liquid suspension, motes of light trickling down its translucent appendages as it transmitted its data to the engram arrays below. It was strange, to think that the best of the fire caste's long and proud warrior tradition could be represented in such a fashion. Strange and a little unsettling.

Sha'vastos looked back to Aun'Va, and his doubts vanished completely.

This was absolutely the right thing to do.

'Do you have any questions before we begin the procedure?' said the earth caste scientist, gently taking a sliver of biotech from the bottom of the engram array with a pair of repulsor field tweezers. Perhaps the size of a

fingernail, the device had a nest of hairline wires bristling from its sides.

'I only wish to register my profound delight in being allowed to participate in this new furtherance of the Greater Good,' said Sha'vastos.

'Very well,' replied the scientist, pressing a panel upon the wall. He selected a laser scalpel from the small rack of instruments that hissed out. 'Then let us begin.'

'I echo Sha'vastos' sentiment, of course,' said Shas'o Myen, the female commander in the next alcove. 'Is it possible, in theory, for the engram neurochip to be removed at a later date?'

It was all Sha'vastos could do not to laugh. What a simple-minded fool she had proved herself to be, asking such a question in the presence of his Ethereal Majesty. The very idea of wanting to relinquish the strategic brilliance that Master Puretide's engram would transfer to them... it was anathema to good sense.

'Remove it?' said O'Vesa, his grey slab of a face wrinkling in the middle. 'Well, yes, of course we could remove it. The side effects would be significant, of course. Once the chip is embedded, the neurological structure of the brain is changed permanently. The host would likely be changed behaviourally, well below operational parameters in fact. But the chip itself would likely survive intact.' He smiled broadly, showing flat teeth. 'We build these things to last, you know.'

'And will all of Master Puretide's magnificence be transferred intact, O'Vesa?' asked Aun'Va, his purring tones as soft as moonlight on silk.

'That remains to be seen,' said the master scientist awkwardly. 'It is, after all, an experimental procedure. If I could have access to Master Puretide's actual brain, perhaps remove it from its housing, then I could ensure-'

'We shall continue with the current engram plan, for now,' said Aun'Va. 'Proceed. Let the Swords of Puretide be drawn, and the Tau'va rise magnificently from the flames

upon Dal'yth.'

Sha'vastos' horror at the grotesque surgeries O'Vesa had been suggesting faded away, washed into cool tranquility by the liquid tones of the Ethereal Master. Aun'Va's voice was more soothing than that of any water caste ambassador; Sha'vastos could listen to it from dawn until dusk and still drink in his every word.

'Initiating,' said the scientist in the commander's peripheral vision. Sha'vastos first felt a series of sharp pricks in his skull as the med-slab's anaesthetic needles sank deep, then nothing. His vision dimmed to grey, but his sense of smell remained. The scent of seared flesh and burning bone filled his olfactory fissure as the top of his head was cut away. Then his senses blurred together as one.

Sha'vastos could actually see the smell of singed hair, taste the monochrome of shifting lights, and feel the spoken words caressing his opened cranium as the earth caste scientists talked through the procedure. A kaleidoscope of colours whirled across his mind, each a different melody in a symphony of pain. Then the biochip's tiny wires stretched out into his brain, and his consciousness dwindled away completely, subsumed by that of a warrior he had always admired but never met. Unbidden, words rose to the surface, and bubbled out.

'Do noth trusst them all, my child,' slurred the commander through a mouthful of stringy drool. 'Do noth trusst...'

At the back of the med-bay, seen only by Sha'vastos' milk-white and sightless orbs, Aun'Va's eyes narrowed to thin and calculating slits.



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## FORTIFICATION/THE ARMoured ISLAND

On the outskirts of Via'mesh'la was the 'instant fortress' zone codified as Munitorum Zone Theta Tert. An elongated octagon in shape, its every corner bristled with autonomous weaponry. The area had been hastily cleared over the last two days. Already it was bustling with Imperial troops and armour.

Under the supervision of a cabal of engineers, the half-mile wide area had been blasted flat by demolitions charges and industrial-grade seismic drills. Around the rudimentary base's edges were chunks of smooth tau architecture shattered into unrecognisable ruin. Amongst a thin haze of dust and smoke, Sentinel power lifters and piston-armed servitors still laboured to flatten the scatterings of tumbled buildings.

On the corners of the octagon were rockcrete drop-bastions, reassuring icons of safety and solidity with the Imperial eagle emblazoned upon their sea-green flanks. Guardsmen kept vigil from their roofs, staring sullenly up at the domes and balconies of the curving tau buildings that constituted the periphery. Each bastion was topped with an Icarus quad-gun. As many of the giant autocannon arrays were trained upon the ivory roofs and the broken

stretch of transmotive sweeprail to the west as were tracked up to the cloudy sky.

Inside the bastions, platoons of Guardsmen rested, ate their rations or tended their wounds, adding an all-too-human stink to the soulless interiors of each prefabricated keep. Between each of these strongholds stretched aegis lines that formed the outer perimeter, battlement sections lowered into place by the same wide-bellied drop ships that had placed the bastions. There were gaps at the cardinal points of the barricades; two more bastions bracketed them like the towers of a gatehouse. Through these gate sites, columns of smoke-belching tanks ground into the complex and fanned out, guided to areas designated by monotask servitors that gestured repetitively with the lumen rods built into their skeletal limbs.

Theta Tert formed the centre of a Munitorum beachhead. It was built to follow one of the fabled Standard Template Constructs, ancient blueprints devised to be of optimum utility no matter the war zone they were employed in, one of a dozen such zones established across Dal'yth's surface since the main Imperial invasion had struck. Already half a regiment of Imperial Guard had mustered there. Transports as well as battle tanks were crunching through drifts of white gravel as they repositioned for refuelling and rearming at the bays next to the armoured promethium silos. A pair of Vendetta gunships sat idle in the north-east corner, lascannons jutting from their engine-tipped wings.

The tang of cordite and electrical discharge filtered through the choking pall of dust, so thick it lingered on the tongue. In the last few minutes, the noise of brutal industry had abated to the point that the distant rumble of explosions was clearly audible in the distance. Hour by hour the tension of being in an active war zone increased. It was visible in the hunched shoulders of every Navy pilot and Astra Militarum trooper hustling to reach his designated muster point.

Sergeant Numitor stepped from the side of the Baleghast

Chimera *Vorzht* whilst it rolled into its designated position, his feet crunching into the thin layer of debris that covered the drop zone. After six hours clinging to the tank's siderail with his feet braced a hand's breadth from its grinding wheels, he was profoundly glad to be back on firm ground. The four remaining members of his squad followed his example, quickly forming up into standard Codex dispersal.

Behind them, Kinosten, Nordgha and the tattered remnants of their command squad emerged from the *Vodhjanoi*. The survivors of his platoon emerged from the Chimeras after them, their hangdog expressions those of men beaten beyond the point of desperation and back again. A hesitant young private who had introduced himself as Feindhast ran across to a set of olive-hued crates stencilled with ammo codes, delving in to lift out handfuls of lasgun clips with a disbelieving shout.

'Brother Duolor,' said Numitor, 'that bulk case next to the fortunate Private Feindhast looks very much like it bears the ammunition code for bolt pistol clips. Open it and distribute them to whoever needs them. If you can find some plasma cells or promethium flasks, so much the better.'

'Understood, of course,' said Duolor, hastening to obey.

'Brother Magros, find the vox hub, get as much up-to-date veritas as you can, and make a full report. The full truth about the Castellans can wait, though.'

'Aye, sergeant,' said Magros, nodding before moving away at combat pace.

A strident voice rang out. 'And find out who they are considering for captaincy of the Eighth!'

Sicarius had disembarked from a transport close by, his squad pacing after him as he overtook Numitor and inspected the complex at a glance. No doubt looking for someone to butt heads with, thought Numitor.

He did not have to wait long.

A commissar in a billowing black trenchcoat was crossing the beachhead zone, fist clenched around the hilt of an

active and well-used power sword that sparked with the energies of an overcharged disruption cell. The officer was huge; his neck was thick and corded, with taut tendons leading up to a bald bullet of a head. Heavy brows loomed over two sunken eyes, dark eyelids pulled back to reveal crystal blue eyes that could pierce a man's soul.

Numitor saw Sergeant Kinosten shrink back as if struck as the commissar bore down upon them. Snapping off the briefest of salutes to the Space Marines that stood within arm's reach, the commissar did not stop until he had walked to within an inch of Kinosten's nose. To his credit, the sergeant held his gaze, though he looked on the brink of bolting for the safety of his Chimera. The bald officer staring him down was almost as tall as a Space Marine, and with a good few slabs of muscle to go with it.

'And where in seven hells have you cowards been?' hissed the black-uniformed officer. He raised his power sword and held its point close enough to Kinosten's jaw that the faint smell of burning stubble reached Numitor through his grilled helm. 'Desertion is punishable by summary execution, Kinosten. Give me one reason why I should not simply cut your head from your neck where you stand.'

To Numitor's shock, it was Veletan that stepped in first.

'For one, perhaps because Astra Militarum field regulations outline such executions should be performed with the pistol, not the blade.'

The black-clad officer looked askance at Veletan. He unclipped a bolt pistol from under his cloak, his shock at being addressed directly by a Space Marine overshadowed with annoyance at having his interrogation interrupted.

'Two,' continued the Ultramarine, 'because these men and women are not traitors.'

'What is your name and company?' said the commissar, his voice low and dangerous.

'Daelios Veletan, Eighth Company of the Ultramarines.'

Numitor frowned within his helm, but said nothing. Veletan was the best of them when it came to matters of

Imperial law.

‘Ontova Platoon is under military arrest, by the authority of the Imperial Commissariat,’ said the officer. ‘With all due respect, I alone shall determine whether or not these fugitives are traitors to the Imperium.’

‘Not without hearing the extenuating circumstances first,’ said Veletan. ‘They have good reason for their delay. We are thin enough on troops as it is, let alone good armour. This can all be explained, commissar...?’

‘*Lord* commissar,’ growled the officer, ‘and it’s Duggan.’

There was a roar of engines in the middle distance, so loud and throaty Numitor felt certain it could only have come from an Imperial war machine. A black-flanked Valkyrie emblazoned with the symbol of the Scholastica Psykana carved overhead in a tight circle, the vectored engines on its wingtips angling as it completed a vertical landing less than fifty metres away. Dust and smoke billowed across Imperial Guardsman and Space Marine alike, forcing the diplomatic standoff to pause until the mighty aircraft had settled.

‘Great,’ snarled Duggan, his lips taut across his teeth. ‘The freaks have arrived.’

Duolor took advantage of the distraction to hand Numitor a pair of bolt pistol clips, passing the rest of his haul to his fellow warriors one by one.

‘Brother Veletan,’ said Duggan as he turned back. ‘I believe you were about to tell me why an absent-without-leave platoon has returned to us in the illustrious company of two squads of the Ultramarines Eighth Company.’

Sergeant Sicarius was next to step forward. ‘Our vox was out. I called for assistance by sending up a smoke signal, and they answered. We were stranded in uncharted territory, and these good men and women were first to attend us. I am profoundly glad they did, for the wastelands are crawling with tau stealthers. Without Sergeant Kinosten and his platoon, it is likely we would not have made back it to Imperial territory at all.’

Duggan stared up at Sicarius, but detected nothing more than truth in his words – unvarnished, blunt and honest as a battering ram. It was a language the lord commissar clearly respected, for his aggressive stance became more at ease.

Numitor was impressed, too. He had expected Sicarius to simply browbeat the man with rank and lineage. But this was an Imperial commissar, and a lord at that – a graduate of the Schola Progenium, and one of the bravest men in the Imperium. Intimidation tactics would almost certainly have backfired.

‘We learned a vital truth about the tau during that ambush, I believe,’ said Numitor.

Duggan raised an eyebrow. ‘And before you distract me with that truth, sergeant, would you care to explain why you did not simply long-range vox for aid? And why we could not reach the One Hundred and Twenty-Second with vox imperatives of our own?’

‘Xenotech,’ said Numitor and Kinosten at the same time.

Duggan looked somewhere between disbelief and mounting anger. He was opening his mouth to ask further questions when the side doors of the black-hulled Valkyrie rolled back with a clang, and several greatcoat-clad figures emerged.

Numitor had never seen a stranger collection of souls.

At the head of the ragged entourage was a slender, androgynous female with hair braided into an elaborate crown like a blonde basket upon her scalp. A greatcoat with gold frogging flapped around her long legs. Her skin was a warm bronze, and she had a tarot card tattooed on her otherwise spotless forehead. Numitor was surprised to recognise it; it looked like one of the high arcana he had learned of in his classical elucidations upon Macragge. Frowning, he triggered his optic enhancers. Sure enough, the card showed the Shebyte Queen, bedecked in gold catskins as she danced with a skeletal king. The image of the cybernetic female on the card smiled slyly at him and

blew Numitor a kiss. He blinked in surprise, and the image was gone.

‘Primaris psyker, sir,’ said Kinosten at Numitor’s side. ‘She’s the best on the planet, but we try not to let her faze us. She only plays on it.’

The tattoo was not the only thing about the woman that was disturbing. Her facial features were symmetrical in every way, to the smallest degree.

‘What the hell is Vykola doing here?’ grumbled Lord Commissar Duggan. ‘Gauge must be out of his mind, sanctioning this. I’ll be out of bolt shells before dawn.’

Behind the gamine woman that led them came a trio of what could only be sanctioned psykers. There was nothing of the soldier about their formation, for each was more peculiar than the last. Holding long staffs tipped with the eye of the Scholastica Psykana, they shambled in Vykola’s wake as she strode towards Kinosten and the ragged remnants of his command group.

‘Greetings, gentlemen,’ she said to the gathering of warriors, sketching a small bow. ‘And Malagrea, you old witch, well met.’ The Primaris motioned to the elderly psyker’s crippled limb. ‘What happened to you?’

‘The tau,’ said the astropath, making the sign of the evil eye with the fingers of her good hand. She pulled the sleeve of her voluminous robes up to cover the blackened claw on the other side, hissing with pain as the rough fabric rubbed upon charred flesh. ‘I made them pay, though. I will do so again.’

‘Good luck to you,’ sniffed Vykola. ‘It’s almost impossible to get close to them. Their long-range fire is like nothing I have ever seen, and they’ve taken to withdrawing at the first sign of trouble. Most unsporting.’ The androgyne stepped in close to Malagrea, gently taking her forearm. ‘Give Mamzel Vykola that for a moment, dear heart.’

Malagrea shrank away at first, but then relented. Vykola took the wizened claw in her long-fingered hands, and started to babble and yammer with a horrible, quiet

intensity. A red glow surrounded her hands, so intense Numitor felt his autosenses compensate. The Baleghast Guardsmen averted their eyes, but to their credit, not one of them flinched away.

Malagrea's skeleton became visible under the red-amber glow of her flesh, and the elderly astropath gave a keening whine of pain. She began to shake as Vykola's strange chant reached a crescendo.

Then it was done. Vykola took her delicate hands away to reveal Malagrea's crippled limb whole once more, hale and pink and utterly without blemish or wrinkle. If anything, it was more the hand of a young girl than the liver-spotted, veiny equivalent on the other side.

'Good as new, or better,' said Vykola. 'Now, I am being remiss. It is an honour to see the fabled descendants of Guilliman in the flesh. Are these proud warriors the ones who requested our presence?'

'Aye,' answered Numitor. 'Squads Numitor and Sicarius of the Eighth. I am Jorus Numitor. I requested this rendezvous.'

'It is a most unusual measure for a Space Marine to call upon the services of a Primaris and her entourage. Would the Librarius approve?'

'I have asked Malagrea to contact Epistolary Elixus, but his astropathic signature is not as well known to her as your own. We are unsure of whether he received the psymissive or not. Time is of the essence, so we may have to act before he arrives.'

'A shame,' said Vykola. 'I would relish meeting him.'

'I have a theory about the war we are fighting,' said Numitor, 'and how to strike a decisive blow against the xenos.'

'We're listening, sergeant,' said Duggan.

'We have fought from the heart of Gel'bryn since the initial landings. In doing so we have lost many of our brethren, but I promise you they did not die in vain. We have gathered critical information regarding the leadership

cadres of the enemy.'

'If we have a way to tear these xenos down, let's use it,' said Vykola.

'We wounded one of their high-level commanders,' said Numitor. 'The one emblazoned upon their propaganda images, night after night. Wounded him critically, we believe. We then monitored the course of the craft that extracted him. It made for what we had previously considered fringe facilities on the far outskirts of Dal'ythan metahex Prime Sec. We were in the process of following him there when we came across the Castellans.'

'These facilities. Medical sites, do you think?' asked Duggan.

'More than that,' said Numitor. 'A commander of that level would not withdraw to a common medical station. He would likely be taken into the care of their high command - and in doing so, betray to us the location of their headquarters.'

Vykola cocked her head, a strangely avian gesture.

'So... cut off the head, and the body will die?'

'A decisive air drop could work,' nodded Duggan.

'Especially,' said Numitor, 'when we have a way to break their defensive strategies wide open.'

'And how is that?' asked Vykola. 'Brute force, I presume?'

'Psykers,' replied the sergeant. 'These tau drill advanced tenets of warfare into their warrior caste, but in matters arcane, they come unstuck. Barring a few engagements with Nicassar dhow-ships in the space lanes around Pra'yen, there have been no recorded incidents of psychic activity in our clashes with the tau thus far. It is my belief they place an extremely low importance on esoteric warfare.'

'That tallies with my own experiences,' said Vykola. 'They seem not to have any real conception of what is possible when one opens one's mind.' She smiled, showing far too many teeth.

'So we capitalise on that,' said Numitor. 'A hard, fast strike

from the Eighth Company, allowing a concentrated core of psychics to get in close, then we unleash everything we have. They will learn, and quickly – the tau are cunning, as we know to our cost. But if we use that element of surprise at the right time, we could break open their headquarters and slay dozens of command staff in a single strike.'

'Done well,' said Duggan, 'that could be enough to tip the balance of the war, maybe break open new fronts across the entire planet.'

Nearby, Sergeant Sicarius nodded in support. 'Done well, it may be a turning point for the entire campaign.'

'We intend to find out,' said Numitor, 'but we need as many capable psykers as we can muster.'

'Then you had better meet my companions,' said Vykola. 'Remnants, castaways and scoundrels all, but currently the best Baleghast has to offer.'

The primaris twirled on her heel, extending a finely manicured hand towards the strange individuals behind her.

'My fellow biomancer first,' she said, her tarot card shifting to portray a mannequin-like shaperdoll. She motioned to a waif-like female, curled in on herself, shaking and wide-eyed in a uniform too large for her. Stringy strands of ectoplasm waved around her bald head like the mane of a gorgos from one of Macragge's ancient mosaics. 'This is Darrapor,' said Vykola, lowering her voice conspiratorially. 'A little afraid of her own power, as so many of our kind are.' She looked back at the cowering psyker with a beaming smile. 'But we get the best out of her when it counts, don't we, dear?'

The young girl grinned nervously. Thin, waving worms of psychic by-product emerged from the gaps in her teeth. Numitor grimaced, glad his expression was hidden behind his helm.

'Where are Ghurst and Godnis?' asked Malagrea, 'I can't feel their presence.'

'They didn't make it,' said Vykola sadly, her ringmaster's

flamboyance replaced with sombre resentment. 'In fact, they died badly. I will not speak of the matter here.'

Malagrea bowed her head.

'The other two are pyromancers, I'm afraid,' sighed Vykola. The tarot card on her forehead became the burning citadel of Infernal Destruction. 'Unsubtle, but extremely effective.' She motioned to a spent strike-match of a man, almost drowning in his greatcoat. 'Cobliaze,' she said, 'summoner of dark fires. Burns twice as bright, but half as long.' Cobliaze nodded in solemn acknowledgement, his eyes sad and old within sunken sockets.

'And this is Mannis.'

A young redhead with pale eyebrows and milk-white skin stepped forward, nodding in greeting. He held out a hand towards Numitor, grinning as psychic fire drizzled in streams from his fingertips.

Numitor just gazed down at the psyker, impassive and unmoving as a statue. Next to him, Sicarius turned his head and spat at a bent pipeline that jutted over the aegis line perimeter. The saliva hit the weakest point, its acidic constituents fizzling as it burnt through the weakened alloy. A second later the top half of the pipe hinged down with a loud creak to crunch into the ground half a metre from Mannis' feet. The sanctioned psyker scrabbled backward to rejoin his fellows, the rest of them enjoying a smirk at his expense.

Lord Commissar Duggan, his attention diverted from the Baleghast Castellans, walked slowly behind the trio of sanctioned psykers. He stared at the backs of their heads with such intensity it was as if he was peering into their souls - or choosing where to put a bolt round should one of their number stray from the sufferances of the Commissariat.

There was a low purr from above, and Numitor saw the distinctive T-shape of a tau fighter pass high overhead, far out of combat altitude.

'Spotter craft,' he said grimly, pointing upwards. 'Not a

good sign.'

Duggan was already running. 'Get those birds up there and take it down! Icarus fire, weapons free! Snap to it!'

The pilot of the black-hulled Valkyrie carrier was leaning from his cockpit, engaged in a debrief with a Navy attaché. He gave a salute and slid back in, the engines starting up with a coughing roar. Behind the craft, the pilots and gunners of the two Vendettas scrambled to their own aircraft, jamming on their flight helms before bounding up the ladders that led to their cockpits.

'Hold on,' said Numitor. 'Lord Duggan, the tau are fond of traps. If this is bait, we could be wasting our only...'

The roar of anti-aircraft guns from a nearby bastion snatched his words away, a thunderous *brakk-brakk-brakk* of quad autocannons sending shells high after the tau craft. Tracer fire stitched the skies, but the xenos spotter was already out of range.

With a lurch the black Valkyrie lifted straight up, the howl of its engines rising as it took off after the spotter craft. Within seconds the Vendettas had followed suit, blasting upwards from their rudimentary airstrip to fall into line behind the Valkyrie. Ruby lasers spat from their prow-mounted guns, two striking the tau aircraft just as it disappeared over the roofs of the domed buildings. Numitor could just make out the tiny disc of a black drone detaching from the wingtip of the spotter craft and flying to safety as the rest went down in flames.

And then the sky strobed white.

As soon as the Valkyrie pilot and his wingmen had left the protective aegis of the anti-aircraft gun batteries, four tau squadrons appeared from over the tallest buildings to fire everything they had at the ad hoc Imperial squadron. A lattice of white energy and whooshing missiles streaked out from the tau craft to blast into the Valkyrie and its Vendetta wingmen, tearing them to pieces in a chain explosion that cast stark shadows across the fortress zone. Fiery debris rained from the sky.

Astra Militarum troopers were scrambling from the bastions to take firing positions behind the aegis lines, heavy weapon teams setting up atop every roof. Numitor was slide-checking the new clip in his bolt pistol when he noticed a swarm of tau drones detach from a damaged section of the burnt-out transmotive rail, drifting away into the streets. They were not the gun drones he was used to, but smaller grey-white models with complex manipulator arms around their circumferences. Spies, no doubt.

His heart lurched. Manipulator arms, like those of a servitor.

They were not spies, but builders.

'Gunsights trained on the transmotive rail!' he shouted. 'We'll have company any second!'

A blaze of blue light came from the east. Numitor's photolenses hazed for a moment, then sprang back into focus to reveal five massively-armoured Terminators shadowed in a dome of sickly orange energy. Four of the huge Ultramarines bore massive storm shields in one hand and long-hafted thunder hammers in the other, but their sergeant wielded a crackling broadsword of raw, angry plasma energy. Shielded by their bulk was a Space Marine with the mechanism of a psychic hood gripping his temples like a vice. His staff was raised aloft, a horrible amber light burning in his eyes as corpuscant played along its length.

Epistolary Elixus, and he had brought brothers of the very highest calibre.

'Do not yield!' he called out, his stentorian tones electrifying. 'Look to the rooftops!'

Numitor heard the same voice in his head, this time cultured and smooth. +The tau are launching simultaneous ambushes upon every Imperial zone in every city,+ it said, the feeling of psychic communication eerie and unsettling. +This is the last site still standing. It must hold.+

The severed wing of a Vendetta smashed and bounced between the buildings to the west, pinwheeling end over end before ploughing into the side of a bastion and

crashing over the aegis defence line in a flurry of sparks. It crippled three Astra Militarum troopers before one of the Terminators strode to meet it and, with an overhand blow of his thunder hammer, smashed it into skidding scrap.

Everywhere, on rooftops in every direction, the signature ochre and white of the tau warrior caste could be seen. Bulky warsuits stepped from the elevator columns of buildings to take their place alongside massing infantry. In the street, wedge-shaped formations of hover tanks glided into view.

As Numitor had predicted, a transmotive zoomed over the sweeprail section the Imperial defenders had previously thought impassable, moving over the tumbled section on a freshly-rebuilt mag-rail before hissing to an abrupt halt. Warsuits shot from the ejection cradles on the transport's roof to take position atop cylindrical hab towers. Teams of tau riflemen disembarked from the transmotive's carriages to form gun lines upon nearby roofs, whilst others took position on the sweeprail itself.

Without exception, the tau ambushers were taking elevated positions. They were forcing the vast majority of the Imperial troops to engage in a one-sided firefight, with no hope of rushing them. With the Munitorum base's air cover gone, the tactic would likely see the defenders all cut down in a matter of minutes.

Pulse fire lanced down into the streets, the Imperial Guard returning fire. Sicarius' jump pack cycled active, but before he blasted skyward, he turned to Numitor.

'Get in close, you think?' he shouted.

'If you can,' said Numitor. 'Epistolary Elixus, will you aid us? Can you reach the roofs?'

'I can,' said Elixus.

'Hit them with everything they won't expect. We only have one chance. Fail here, and we will be wiped from the face of the planet.'



# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## REALISATION/HOUR OF THE WITCH

Commander Sha'vastos looked with distaste upon the myriad readouts and command screens of his personalised XV85 Enforcer-model Crisis suit. Its arrangement was no longer to his liking.

He eye-flicked a requisition for a standard model XV8 to be made available to him upon return to Shas'ar'tol high command. Everything was ready; the dual strike was set, a blend of kauyon trap and mont'ka blow that had the Imperials all but defeated purely by their relative positioning. So why did the latest generation of commanders feel the need to overcomplicate matters, clinging to so many auxiliary information feeds as if they would increase the harmony of the moment? Perhaps that was why the fire caste had been straying from the path to victory of late.

'To embrace simplicity is to walk the road to perfection,' he said in a voice not quite his own.

'Commander?' came the reply over the cadre-net from his saz'nami, Ula'tan. His icon shone the blue-grey steel of uncertainty. 'Signal ambiguous. Should we let the killing blow fall?'

'Strike,' said Sha'vastos. 'That is the distillation of purpose

into a single perfect moment. Be the first to strike.'

'Acknowledged,' said Ula'tan. 'Commencing.'

Commander Sha'vastos watched the elements of his strategy fall into place like the interlocking pieces of a meditation mosaic. Each team was playing its part until the whole was complete. The bait, provided by the noble Warghost Ob'lotai 3-0 in the form of a passing drone-plane, had drawn off the gue'la aircraft as surely as the hornet draws the gnawspider from its web. The sting had been soon to follow.

Sha'vastos' teams had made their way through the city's underground network and then ascended through the spinal elevators of the district's buildings to emerge upon their roofs. It was as he had always told them: to reach the heavens, a warrior must first learn to crawl. They had opened fire with pleasing synchrony, just as they had in a dozen different locations across the planet. He knew with all the conviction of the Tau'va that his fellow Swords of Puretide were also bringing their strategic brilliance to bear. This war would soon be over, and then the real conquest of the Imperium could start.

Commander Sha'vastos idly considered joining the fight in person, for something within him was stirred by the sight of blood and the pungent smell of smoke. There was no real need, he reflected, pushing down the impulse with a deep, measured breath. Let the lower ranks of shas make their mark this day. A true master of the Code of Fire achieves victory without once drawing his blade. The air caste also had their part to play, of course, as was only proper in the name of the Tau'va. But he would remain on high, overseeing the slaughter.

'To bind the beast, first blunt its claws,' said the commander. With the code phrase given, twelve teams of missile-armed Crisis and Broadside suits sent him the gold symbol of affirmation. A heartbeat later, missiles streaked from the rooftops on every side of the Imperial drop zone to detonate upon the quad-barrelled gun emplacements the

gue'la fondly imagined would protect them from aerial attack. The string of detonations was a thing of beauty, with every gunner killed or blinded, and all bar one of the weapons themselves reduced to mangled scrap. Sha'vastos retroactively blink-recorded it as training footage for later generations.

'Admiral Teng,' he said softly, eye-flicking the air caste frequency. 'It is time. The way is clear.'

'Acknowledged,' came the reedy voice of the air caste admiral. A few decs later, four Sun Shark bomber squadrons flew in a tight lattice formation over the war zone. The glowing spheres of their pulse bombs were released from the generator arrays on their undersides, dropping towards pre-programmed coordinates. They crackled down to detonate between the dual towers that bracketed each of the compound's exits. Plasma fire boiled in the craters of each bombardment, fierce enough to melt the metal of a fuel tank. The thuggish Imperial vehicles that were seeking to leave the zone slewed to a halt, blocking each exit with their lumpen mass.

Commander Sha'vastos smiled at the air caste's impeccable work. 'The wise warrior turns the enemy's fortress into his cage,' he said. 'My compliments, Admiral.'

'I am not worthy of them, master,' said Teng, his thin voice high and formal. 'It is reward enough to watch Master Puretide's genius at work.'

The north-east quadrant of the battle, purposefully left empty of tau presence, had seen a surge of gue'la troopers clamber over their crude battlement to sprint down the street. Predictably, they were making for the ramp of rubble that led to the roof above. The commander almost felt disappointed, so eagerly did these fools dive into his kauyons. Without the gue'ron'sha to provide a challenge, there would be little honour in this victory.

Sha'vastos blink-clicked an icon gold, and a squadron of Devilfish veered from concealment in the streets ahead. Their burst cannon and drone-mounted pulse carbines cut

down the human soldiers as they braved the open terrain, spraying boiling gore and dismembered bodies across the streets.

In weakness, hide strength.

Seeing their comrades so dramatically cut down, the rest of the gue'la infantry hunkered down to escape the hail of energy bolts hissing into their ranks. Desultory fire crackled out, and one of their heavy weapons blasted a drone from the sky. An acceptable loss, thought Commander Sha'vastos. As he had predicted, the gue'la had huddled close to one another like frightened herdbeasts. He eye-flicked the icon of his railgun teams, and the Broadsides he had positioned on the eastern and southern towers opened fire.

The armoured refuelling silos the Imperium had planted within their beachheads were capable of turning aside even large-calibre rounds from conventional armaments; this the fire caste knew from experience. The Broadsides' hypervelocity rounds punched through them with the ease of a bonding knife stabbed through a paper lantern. Three fuel dumps detonated with a thunderous boom. Mushrooming clouds of smoke billowed sky high as burning fluids turned the huddling soldiers into pillars of flame.

Sha'vastos allowed himself a sad smile at the irony. The crude fuel the humans prized so highly was so indicative of the gue'la mindset - powerful, volatile and easy to ignite into a self-destructive explosion.

The elemental castes of the tau, measured, proficient and balanced by the blessed ethereals, did not make such simple mistakes. Here, Commander Sha'vastos had used the vertical axis as their shield against the barbaric gue'la, for they had proved too slow of wit to fight with true three-dimensional awareness. A swordsman without reach cannot strike. Even a child realised that. His gaze swept another mont'ka into place on his distribution suite.

There was a horrible screaming, a sound unlike any Commander Sha'vastos had heard before. The giant pillars

of flame that had erupted from the fuel silos twisted, turned upon themselves, and struck like angry serpents at the Crisis missile teams on the rooftops. The commander gaped in horror as heroic fire caste battlesuits melted away, molten metal mingling with bubbling flesh to spill over the edge of the rooftops in foul rivulets.

One of the Hammerhead gun tanks closing the trap from the south blipped the deep red of alarm. The commander spared a glance with his left eye, gaping in disbelief at what he saw. A Hammerhead on Sha'vastos' left peripheral screen lurched vertically, tumbling up through the air as if flung skyward by the hand of an invisible giant. It reached the apogee of its flight at the lip of the tower and crashed hard into the Broadside missile team stationed there, bowling two of the battlesuits over and skidding into the firing lane of the third with a tremendous crash.

Sha'vastos searched his miraculous mind for a way to counter the threat, to identify and neutralise whatever invisible power had hurled the hovering gunship like a discarded toy.

He found nothing.

On the roof across from his vantage point, a flare of amber light burst into being next to his railgun Broadside team. It was not an explosion, as he had first thought. Its electronic signatures were not recognised by his suit's analysis programs at all.

The orange fires burned on as Commander Sha'vastos diverted an eye's full attention to it. He zoomed in on impulse. There were shapes resolving there, bulky and broad-shouldered in the manner of the gue'ron'sha elite. They charged from the amber light, raising their shields. Sha'vastos blink-stabbed the icon of his Broadside team. As one they swung their railguns to face the new threat and smoothly opened fire. The commander breathed a mental sigh of relief. No human infantry could withstand a hypervelocity round impact, no matter what shield they bore.

An explosion of cerulean electricity put the lie to his thoughts as the gue'ron'sha warriors charged straight through the volley into the midst of the Broadsides. Hammers rose and fell, disruptive energies flaring as they pulverised the hulking battlesuits one after another. One of the warriors swung a crackling sword of what read on Commander Sha'vastos' analysis screen as plasma energy. Batting aside a wild swing from a railgun, the shock trooper brought his sword up in diagonal sweep, cutting right through the Broadside from hip to shoulder. As the battlesuit's separate halves toppled away, the cauterised remains of its pilot slid free in a tangle of limbs.

The commander cast about in mounting confusion. Suddenly he saw upon his targeting screen a silvered gue'la hellion, rising onto the roof on which he stood. He could not tell if the metallic figure was a male or female of the species, and it appeared to have no means of propulsion. Its stylised coat billowed in the thermals of the fires below. Let the earth caste solve that mystery, he thought, sliding his plasma rifle's crosshairs over the being's torso.

The killshot hit its centre mass, as he knew it would. It yielded a few puffs of silver smoke, but nothing more.

Sha'vastos' bodyguard opened fire too, their burst cannons whirring as they poured firepower into the creature to no discernible effect. He blink-stabbed permission for his drones to intervene, and they added their pulse carbines to the volley. Consumed in the firestorm, the strange creature's finery was shredded away to nothing, but its silver body remained whole. The drones dived in, and it swatted them away as if they were no more than insects.

Then, against all logic, the metallic figure was upon them. Stretching out its hateful five-fingered hands, it grabbed the arm of Ula'tan's battlesuit and pulled it free in a shower of sparks. Sha'vastos winced as it hurled the limb aside to crash through the missile volley of Saz'nami Du'erlka and

thud into his plexus hatch. Ula'tan's jet pack flared as he boosted away, and the commander quickly followed suit. The silvered thing reached out and caught Ula'tan's leg at the last moment, swinging the entire battlesuit like some outrageous club towards Du'erlka. It struck the other saz'nami full on, bowling them both over the edge of the tower in a spray of sparks.

Commander Sha'vastos was already airborne, putting as much distance between himself and the metal-skinned anomaly as possible. His mind burned hot as he cycled through endless tactics, strategies and aphorisms, but nothing seemed to apply. He cast around the screens of his command suite, seeing glimpses of gue'ron'sha brutes cutting down his warriors over and over. Black spots appeared in his vision as the stress built to unbearable levels.

'Commander Sha'vastos,' came a voice on the edge of panic. 'Unknown enemy capabilities encountered. What are your orders?'

Sha'vastos felt white-hot needles of pain shoot through his mind. An aggressive migraine thrust a fist of agony under his skull. His focus was gone, his thoughts scattered in a hundred directions at once. He clawed at the emergency protocol pad, and his battlesuit veered away into the night.

'Commander?' came the voice over the cadre-net. 'Commander! What are your orders?'

Neither Sha'vastos nor Puretide could reply.

Numitor triggered his jump pack, focusing on the wider battle despite the pyrotechnics of the psykers at work. With Epistolary Elixus and his Terminators using arcane means to counter-attack the artillery warsuits, and Mannis' columns of flame burning the jump-capable machines from the rooftops, the greatest remaining threat was posed by the transmotive. Tau infantry were disembarking by the score, and there was little in the way of firepower to hinder them. Most were firing salvos into the complex from the

edge of the sweeprail bridge. Others had spilled from the far side of the translocator, jumping down to the roof of the cylindrical building beyond, finding yet another vantage point from which to pour firepower into the Munitorum base.

The Codex Astartes had a lot to say on the matter of emergent threats. Even after the passage of almost ten millennia, those tenets still held true. The wording was ancient, laid down by the great primarch of the Ultramarines, but in Numitor's eyes, they all boiled down to one, ageless concept.

Hit them before they hit you.

The sergeant soared high on twin plumes of flame towards the sweeprail with Magros, Duolor, Aordus and Golotan close behind him. Aiming to use the roof between the two points as a staging post, Numitor flew over the lip of the building where a team of three enemy warsuits had stood moments before. Since Vykola's pyromancers had seized control of the promethium fires, all that remained of them was vile, bubbling sludge.

A volley of plasma shots spat down, one burning into Numitor's jump pack as he turned his head briefly to ensure his men were still close behind.

'Damn it,' he swore, cycling his pack's jets. They were intact, thank the Emperor. Imperial technology was built to last.

A moment later he was airborne once more. A smattering of pulse rifle shots blazed down. This time one struck Aordus, burning away the squad marking of his pauldron, whilst another hit Duolor's chainsword and sent it spinning down into the street. The third hit Numitor on the top of the head, whipping it backward, but the ceramite of his helm held true.

A flash of insight struck him, ill-timed but profound. Less than a few weeks ago, he would have made that jump unhelmed, the better to drink in the sights and smells of an active war zone. No more, swore Numitor. No more

unnecessary risks.

He had brothers to avenge, life debts to pay, and they would be made good in xenos blood.

Numitor made the leap to the sweeprail, his squad close behind him. They crunched down on the alabaster lip in quick succession, the transmotive twelve feet away to the right. The tau warriors ranged along the sweeprail's edge scrambled to make the best of the enfilade. The closest opened fire, one of the shots punching into Numitor's hip to spin him halfway over the sweeprail bridge's edge. He sent a burst of fire from his pack that flung him upright - and then turned the momentum into a charge.

'For Macragge! For Ultramar and Macragge!'

The Assault Marines shot along the sweeping bridge, their flight all but horizontal. There was a burst of light and sound from some manner of suppressive grenade, but their momentum was unchanged; with their heads turned away and their photolens dampeners kicking in, the blast did little more than dazzle. Numitor and his squad hit the tau lines like a cluster of cobalt meteors, shoulders turned to slam into the milling xenos ranks with maximum impact. Three tau were hurled over the low wall of the sweeprail, tumbling to their deaths in the rubble-strewn streets below. Six more were bowled from their feet into their comrades behind, the domino effect of the serial impact knocking rifles wide and square-bodied pistols from shaking fingers.

Then the Space Marines were in the thick of the foe, and the full power of their training was brought to bear. Aordus' chainsword juddered through outstretched hands, wrists and breastplates to chew voraciously through the alien flesh beneath. Magros kicked a tau warrior over the sweeprail edge to bounce from a warsuit passing below, his pistol taking the machine's head from its shoulders as it turned to face him. Duolor discharged his own plasma pistol at point-blank range. The shot from its fat muzzle burned through one tau warrior's chest even as Duolor's open palm crunched into another's face. Golotan looked

half-dead, the ceramite of his battleplate cracked in a hundred places by a pulse bomb, but he fought as if born anew, spinning and shooting and slashing with his chainsword until torn cadavers were strewn in his wake.

Numitor's contribution was sheer, crushing violence. He pounded one tau warrior into a crumpled heap with a downward swing of his power fist, then shot an explosive bolt into the gut of another to send a fountain of crimson viscera over the aliens taking aim behind. His fist came in once more in a backhand blow, a trail of lightning in its wake as it crunched horizontally through two xenos warriors frantically trying to get out of the way.

In such cramped confines the tau's long-barrelled rifles were proving worse than useless. With a narrow column of space separating them from the transmotive and the sheer drop on the other side of the sweeprail, they were at the Assault Marines' mercy. Those at the back had begun to retreat to the far carriage, their brethren covering them with ill-disciplined volleys as their squadmates sought better shots. A lucky hit took Duolor's plasma pistol in an explosion of burning light, the hissing liquid inside its cartridge burning across the Iaxian's flank. He did not cry out, but instead dived further into the tau ranks, fists swinging to bowl over the tau warriors in arm's reach.

Numitor revelled in the shrill cries and wails of the alien as he killed. The xenos were scrambling away from him as if he were a daemon, some literally shaking with fear. Aware he was enjoying himself too much, he forced himself to think like a sergeant rather than a new recruit. Screams echoed from the Munitorum zone below, those of men in great shock and pain. With the tau breaking before him, he took a swift glance into the wider battle, and saw a storm of pulse rifle fire from a low roof on the other side of the transmotive sleeting into the Astra Militarum behind the aegis lines. A Chimera transport moved in to cover them, but the tau firepower was intense, and the vehicle detonated with a dull crump that took half a squad with it.

An idea struck Numitor. He took a quick glance under the transmotive's hull.

'Get to the end carriage, equal spacing along its length,' he voxed to his squad. 'Frag grenades for suppression.'

His squad acted as ordered, plucking frag grenades from their belts and short-fusing them to detonate a second after they were thrown. The tau massing in the carriage took cover, but most of their number were still hurled backwards or flattened by the violence of the serial explosions.

Numitor blasted forwards over a carpet of alien corpses, skidding to a halt to reach under the transmotive with his power fist. The gauntlet's disruption fields crackled and snapped in protest as he grasped the mag-bar underneath and wrenched it loose, buckling the entire length and sending energy fizzling haywire as it was broken free from the magnetic field of the single rail beneath. Unbalanced, the entire carriage tilted over towards him.

'Backs to it, and heave!' shouted Numitor. His men, already in position, obeyed without question. The carriage was massively heavy - alone, even a Space Marine could not have prevented himself from being crushed like an insect beneath it. Five straining together, however, was a different matter. The tilting carriage slowed, and stopped.

The weight was immense. Numitor ground his teeth, but he could feel his foothold slipping. He braced one leg against the sweeprail wall, then the other, to stabilise himself. Duolor followed his example, the others finding purchase of their own.

Still the transmotive carriage bore down on them, inch by inch, metal shrieking in protest as its sheer tonnage was brought to bear.

'On... my... mark,' said Numitor, jaw clenched. 'Boost!'

All five Space Marines pushed backwards with everything they had, the servo-motors of their battleplate whining as they triggered maximum thrust from their jump packs. The carriage lifted swiftly, reached its apex and toppled in the

other direction amongst a howling of jump engines, its sole remaining mag-tether rail acting as a hinge. It slammed down on the other side of the bridge with such force that its coupling to the carriage behind it was torn clean away. The entire section, tau passengers and all, went over the far side of the sweeprail in a spray of debris.

There was a split second of silence as it fell.

Then, with a titanic boom, the transmotive carriage crashed lengthwise into the fire warrior gunline on the roof beneath. The sound resounded across the battlescape as its immense bulk smashed through the cylindrical building, taking perhaps fifty xenos riflemen and sniper teams with it in an avalanche of rubble.

A vast cloud of dust billowed up, twin curtains of alabaster bracketing the sweeprail as the Assault Marines renewed their attack, bolt pistols spitting death into those few tau left atop it. Numitor slammed in a fresh clip as he strode forward, putting down the last two aliens with pinpoint shots that blossomed into messy explosions of gore. He was smiling fiercely beneath his helm.

Make a weapon from your environment, Roboute Guilliman had written in the holy tome of the Codex Astartes. Make it your sword, and make it your shield.

Numitor had made it a hammer, but that suited him just fine.

Atop a domed roof scattered with tau corpses, Cato Sicarius laughed grimly. He was liberally covered in xenos blood from the waist down. It made him feel unclean, but somehow righteous. Nearby, his squad dismembered the last of the aliens to resist.

An impact smacked into the small of the sergeant's back, burning pain flaring as his compromised armour yielded. Then another impact. This time he stumbled, putting the hilt of his tempest blade against the gentle slope of the roof to stop himself from going over altogether. He turned as he got back up, eyes wide and plasma pistol aimed toward the

source for the return shot. He could see no xenos in the street below.

A flare of white as another impact hit him, this time in the temple. A killshot, stopped only by an inch of power armour. Shaking his head to clear it, Sicarius found his right eye sticky with blood, with one ear ringing and torn ragged by slivers of dislodged ceramite.

'I'll kill you all!' he roared, firing half-blind into the street. His men followed suit, but their bolts found nothing.

'Cease!' shouted Sicarius, not willing to waste any more ammo. He was livid. It was happening again. The stealth-ghosts were hunting him.

'Down into the street,' he said, firing up his jump pack and leaping in a controlled descent to land with a gravelly crunch. His pistol muzzle swept the area as his squad landed nearby, autosenses scanning.

Another flash of white plasma bolts, this time from the left. Two of them took Ionsian in the shoulder, the big warrior's grunt of pain and surprise audible over the vox. Three more took Kaetoros in the chest, knocking him over in a cloud of flaking black paint. Still gripping his flamer, he sat up fast, a boost of his jet pack hurling him forward and up into the air. He sent a glorious cloud of flame roaring into the streets, hoping to consume whatever was hiding there, but even the gouting promethium fires found nothing.

Sicarius cast about, desperately looking for a psyker in the hope that their extra-sensory perception could reveal their persecutors. He found his opportunity, but it came from something else entirely.

To the west, the lead carriage of the transmotive on the high sweeprail was toppling onto the roof below, collapsing an entire building floor by floor. Cobalt-armoured figures punched the air on the bridge above. A billowing cloud of dust exploded outward, racing towards the Conquerors.

'Edifice damage!' Sicarius cried over the vox. 'Must be Numitor's sloppy work!'

The reply was distorted, but by the tone the sergeant

picked up its meaning well enough.

Then the wall of debris and dust was upon them. With it came revelation. No matter the camouflage, no matter their technology, the tau stealth operatives would be hit by the dust as much as any other.

‘Look for them in the clouds!’ shouted Sicarius. ‘Hunt and slay!’

Harsh shouts of assent came over the vox as his warriors plunged into the choking mist. Sicarius ran pell-mell down the street, aware that he had seconds at best. The words of the Codex Astartes rose in his mind – opportunity is fleet, and so must be the victor.

But never hunt alone.

‘Glavius, Veletan, Ionsian, stay close to me,’ ordered Sicarius. ‘A spear’s length apart, we bar this end of the street. Kaetoros, Colnid, Denturis, get to the other end as fast as you can. Lay down flame and close it off.’

‘Aye, sergeant,’ came the responses. Sicarius heard something in their voices, a note of warmth, even relief. Kaetoros and his comrades roared away, the dust swirling into eddying vortices behind them as they made it to the end of the street in a single bound. An orange glow appeared in the distance as Kaetoros threw a linear inferno across the street.

There – a bulbous shape, as much an absence of solid matter as a recognisable anatomy. Three more disturbances in the dust shimmered behind it. Sicarius bellowed like a bull, hurtling forward with blade outstretched in an exaggerated Talassarian lunge. The stealthier swung its arm-cannon, dust swirling around it, but it was too slow. Sicarius felt his arm jolt in his shoulder as the tempest blade ran through the thing’s torso and punched out the other side. A crackle of disruption energies, and the stealthier was visible, a weirdly-shaped biped with an oval core and backjointed legs.

‘Not so clever now,’ said Sicarius through gritted teeth, bracing his foot on its chest and pulling his sword free in a

spurt of blood. Veletan was nearby, driving his chainsword up with both hands to rip the arms from another of the stealthers tau. Glavius dived left as a stream of shots pulsed from another's quad-barrelled cannon, one of them scoring the ceramite of his jump pack. Ionsian was on the xenos in a flash of blue, slamming into the warsuit from the side to knock it sprawling. As the tau warrior scrabbled to get upright, Ionsian stamped on the sensor unit that formed its head, dislodging it from the body before driving the tip of his chainsword straight down into the gap. He was rewarded with a spray of blood and bone. Sicarius had seen the warrior's chainsword chew through a hundred different types of armour - no matter the sophistication, it always made a horrible mess of whatever was inside.

The dust was clearing, but the sounds of detonating bolt rounds and the whoosh of promethium let Sicarius know the men he had stationed at the end of the street were still engaged. He looked back to see two trails of mist making for the corner of the street, and his nostrils flared at the thought of some of his foes slipping the net. Without the dust to reveal them, the stealthers would be able to hunt the Ultramarines on their terms once more.

A bald, stooped girl in torn Baleghast fatigues staggered around the curved corner of the building, clutching her stomach. She gave a gurgling yell and spasmed, projectile vomiting a copious stream of what looked to Sicarius like egg yolk. The stream turned into a geyser, gushing into an escaping a tau stealthers. It pushed the warsuit back, its feet slipping and skidding, into the opposite wall. Congealing, the stringy vomit pinned the stealthers in place, a yellowish spider's web that had trapped a meaty morsel of prey.

Sicarius and Ionsian were running over to kill the stealthers when a ten-foot warsuit hovered into view above them, flames licking from the weapons systems on its arm and shoulder. It poured a torrent of fire and plasma into Ionsian. An unearthly scream came from the big warrior as his ceramite and flesh melted away. Sicarius blasted

upwards to meet the battlesuit head on, passing a low rooftop where a wizened, black-skinned psyker looked right at him. Then the battlesuit's flamers roared, and Sicarius was consumed by fire and ash.

Numitor leapt onto what was left of the transmotive, looked back to the Imperial compound, and swore an oath of frustration. Everywhere anarchy reigned. The Astra Militarum were fighting a dozen skirmishes at once instead of working as a single united front. Lakes of flame burned amongst them, sending columns of choking smoke skyward that billowed this way and that in the tempest of war. For all their fortifications, plans, orders and military precision, the Imperial Guard had been taken apart in a matter of minutes – and from what Elixus had said, the same story was being repeated across the planet.

Yet the bedlam was by no means confined to the Imperial lines. Every tau ambush site had been smashed, burned, stormed or collapsed by the intensity of the counter-attack. Tau bodies littered the streets in greater numbers than dead Guardsmen, a victory of sorts. Flames ran wild in the streets, appearing like capering elementals or writhing serpents in those places where Vykola's pyromancers unleashed the powers of their haunted minds. To the north, a dome of flame shed flickering light across the whole grisly vista, making shadows dance. They looked to Numitor like devils rejoicing at some hellish feast. The Imperium had brought utter chaos to this world.

The sergeant shook his head, appalled at where those thoughts were leading.

Retribution. They had brought retribution.

A few roofs away, Elixus and his Terminator-armoured brethren were smashing apart the last of a warsuit team optimised for supporting heavy weapons fire. It was a rare honour to glimpse the First Company at work. The plasma blade borne by the unit's sergeant left bright blue trails in the air as it sliced through battlesuit, pilot and drone

without slowing, the grace and swordsmanship of its bearer impressive despite him being clad in the heaviest armour the Adeptus Astartes could field.

Numitor was not the only one to notice the Terminator assault. A team of wide-bodied drones, jutting rifles underslung beneath them, appeared from the core of a split-cylinder building to the south east. Pivoting smoothly, they spat fire into the melee. Numitor gasped as they struck Elixus three times, tearing away chunks of his chest and stomach before sending him sprawling from the roof into the streets below.

A low hum, and the squadrons of the tau pilot caste came through the clouds once more, spheres of crackling plasma held suspended beneath them. One after another they dropped their strange munitions, the energy payloads detonating amongst the Terminators on the rooftops. The Ultramarines raised their storm shields high, only for the drones that had felled Elixus to hammer a volley of ion energy into their exposed arm joints.

More bombs rained down. Two of the Terminators went over, the heavy crunch of their impact audible even across the battle-torn plaza. They were stranded, their foes out of reach. Even their priceless and irreplaceable suits of Tactical Dreadnought armour had limits. A few more bombing runs, and the veterans would be no more.

‘Squad Numitor,’ called the sergeant, ‘close in. We have work to do.’

Sicarius opened his eyes to see the intense fires that eclipsed his vision flow over his head, encapsulating him with the web-trapped stealthier and the stooped young woman. The flames roiled and poured like liquid covering an invisible dome. Intense amber light cast dancing shadows across the strange tableau.

‘We are safe,’ said the girl softly, wiping ectoplasm from her mouth with the back of her sleeve as she looked around the fire dome.

'He's not,' said Sicarius, driving his tempest blade sidelong into the wriggling tau stealther's headpiece. The xenos fell still.

Sicarius scraped his blade on his forearm and made to leave, but the heat of the dome around him was so blisteringly intense he fell back again. He could not go through without risking severe burns, or worse, the ignition of his jump pack's fuel.

'This will not stand,' he said. 'It's still up there, the flamer suit. And Ionsian is down.'

'It isn't,' the girl said seriously, shaking her head. Ruddy light played across the contours of her skull, wispy strands of psyker-stuff coiling around it. So small, thought Sicarius. So easily crushed.

'That warsuit used flame near Cobliaze,' she continued. 'It's dead already. Melted.'

'You are Darrapor?' said Sicarius. She nodded. 'And this is your contribution to the war effort, this... whatever this is?' He waved to the yolky mess that still pinned the tau to the wall.

She nodded again, her half-smile showing broken teeth. 'I just think of them tau all lined up in their tubes, and it makes me so sick I have to let it out.'

Sicarius gave an approving frown. 'Commendable hatred.'

There was a distant series of booms, the light of the explosions visible even under the strange dome of fire.

'That's the air caste,' she said sadly. 'Their castes all work together. Like disgusting insects.'

'It won't save them,' said Sicarius, his features grim as death.

'It will,' said Darrapor. 'I see them in my dreams. The main ones tell the rest what to do, and the others all have to do what they say.'

'The main ones?' Sicarius was only half listening, prowling around the circumference of the fire dome like a caged lion.

'The fifth caste. No one knows about them.'

Sicarius stopped, and turned to the young psyker.

‘What did you say?’

‘There’s another caste. No one listens to me, but I seen them, in their hover-chairs. The Golden Giant showed them to me in a dream.’

‘And this fifth caste, they are the leaders of this race?’

She nodded earnestly, picking a string of ectoplasm from between her teeth. Around them the dome of fire was dimming, flame coiling away to leave thinning smoke behind.

‘My thanks,’ said Sicarius, turning to go. ‘For the shelter, and for the knowledge.’

‘It was Cobliaze,’ said Darrapor. Her tone was awkward, but she stood a little taller, a little straighter. ‘You have to say it Cob-lee-ay-zee.’

‘Fight well, little one,’ said Sicarius, blasting into the sky to rejoin the fray.

Numitor sprinted down the corpse-scattered track of the sweeprail before launching diagonally from its wall. The running jump saw him sail through the air, a half-second burst from his pack pushing him onto the oval roof of the wide tower below. Magros was close behind as he changed direction and bounded again, this time setting his jump pack to full blast. They left Duolor, Golotan and Aordus behind to set krak grenades at the weakest points of the drone-repaired bridge, their orders to bring it down. For another translocator to bring in more reinforcements at this point would be disastrous.

Numitor leaped over the burning hull of a Leman Russ Demolisher, the tank still hammering a tau vehicle echelon with wide-bore shells even as it trailed fire. The Baleghast Castellans were outnumbered, both in terms of infantry and machines – and with the anti-aircraft gunners cut down in the opening salvo of the battle, the tau’s air superiority would likely see the xenos turn the tide once more.

Another jump, thought Numitor, and he would redress the balance in person.

There was a shrill whistle, descending in the manner of incoming ordnance. A heavy shell plummeted down to blast into the tau vehicle echelon, hurling two of the ochre-hulled skimmers into the buildings on either side. Numitor heard an exultant shout, and spotted the Castellans' master of ordnance, Nordgha, slamming his fist into his palm.

'Keep them coming!' shouted Numitor as he backed away from the roof's edge and took another running jump. Across from him was what looked to be a largely intact anti-aircraft emplacement, abandoned atop a bastion half caked in soot.

Numitor was perhaps ten feet from the bastion's roof when a missile veered around a building to smack into his chest-plate. It detonated with such force that it flung him backwards and sent Magros off-course to slam into the building's flank. They both went down hard into the street, Numitor struggling to stay conscious as the double impact turned his sight into an indistinct blur.

A deep boom nearby brought Numitor to his senses. Magros was out, lying motionless in the street. There was no time to attend him. There was another detonation from the roofs to the south. The Terminators, without Elixus to move them, were stranded up there, and the circling tau bombers knew it. The sergeant triggered his jump pack, intending to vault upwards to the bastion roof above. The left engine caught, but the right stuttered and coughed, failing to engage. It was all he could do to keep from being flipped over. Mortis signals flared upon his helm's readout, a sure sign the pack would not respond without the proper ritual maintenance.

Numitor ran across the street, planted a foot atop an aegis line and sprang as high as he could, catching the jutting muzzle of a heavy bolter protruding from the sponsons halfway up the bastion's flank with one hand. He reached a foot out and braced himself on the rivet-studded bottom lip of the gun emplacement. He pushed up far enough to get both hands on the top edge of the sponson just as a volley

of xenos weapon fire stitched vertically up the sagging banner to his left.

Ignoring it, Numitor hauled himself upward, getting a knee then a foot atop the emplaced weapon. He spring-jumped upward to catch the lip running around the bastion's crenulated roof, one foot on the highest outer ridge. From there it was a simple matter to push upwards over the lowest point of the battlements, rolling over onto the floor beyond it with a thumping clatter of ceramite.

Another missile detonated, flattening him against the blood-slicked steel. Had Numitor been a heartbeat slower it would have pitched him right off the roof and back into the street.

Numitor stole a glance though the battlement's vision slit. The missiles had come from a wheeling tau fighter. Time to strike, before it came back around for another run.

The sergeant made for the battered Icarus quad-gun that jutted from the circular plate in the middle of the roof. Though one of the barrels was a fused mess, three were still intact. The cybernetic skull attached to the gun's automation reliquary buzzed angrily at him, but its status lantern was green. It was still ready to fight.

'Time for your revenge, machine,' whispered Numitor. He swung the anti-aircraft gun all the way around until the tau fighter was square in his sights, and squeezed the trigger. The recoil shook his arms as the quad-gun roared its fury. Its autoloaders clanked and spat sparks as shell after shell thumped into the breech, and twelve spurts of fire blazed from the ends of the three barrels still intact. Numitor's photolenses kicked in, dampening the flashes of the weapon muzzles to show the xenos craft weaving through the flak.

Numitor's aim was sound, and the volume of shells he fired impressive. One took the xenos craft in the wing, all but tearing it off. Trailing smoke, it veered over the circular roofs and disappeared from sight. A distant explosion put a broad smile on Numitor's face as he swung the quad-gun

around to find another target.

On the other side of the Munitorum base, a squadron of tau aircraft were dropping one pulse bomb after another. The Terminators of the First Company were taking heavy fire, not only contending with the white fires of plasma bombs, but also the marksman drones on the roof behind them. Outfitted for close assault and too heavy to make the leap, there was nothing they could do short of hunker down and weather the storm.

'Time's up, xenos,' muttered Numitor, aligning the quad-gun's sights upon the circling squadron of tau bombers. 'Your doom is at hand.'

The sergeant squeezed the trigger and held it, playing the long-barrelled autocannons back and forth across the skies. The tau pilots, thinking the Imperial air cover neutralised, had been flying in close formation. The punishment the gun meted out was ruinous. Shells the thickness of a man's wrist blasted through wings, fuselages and cockpits. In a matter of seconds, all three of the aircraft were sent blazing out of the skies.

A second xenocraft squadron peeled around, guns returning fire. This time its target behind the Icarus emplacement was no mere Imperial Guardsman, but a Space Marine clad in indomitable power armour. Impacts punched into both the quad-gun and Numitor, one smacking right into the sergeant's throat and stealing his breath, but the thick layers of his battleplate stopped it from tearing his windpipe out. Numitor held the flak-gun steady, thumping out rounds with a deep staccato rhythm. His fusillade saw the lead aircraft torn down in flames, followed moments later by the one behind it.

There was a hissing series of clicks as the autocannons ran dry, barrels plinking as they cooled. The third xenos aircraft came on, the quad-linked ion weapon that formed the sting under its tail blasting hissing beams that struck the Icarus gun true. The energies were blinding in their intensity, and Numitor was forced to turn away. With a groan of defeated

metal the entire anti-aircraft array slumped to the right, hopelessly ruined.

The aircraft was closer now as it came in low, guns retrained on Numitor himself. He cycled up his jump pack on instinct, but nothing happened.

Then the bastion itself opened fire. With its war spirit roused, the same heavy bolter that had provided him a handhold less than a minute ago added its deep bass to the chorus of destruction echoing through the city. Large-calibre bolts stitched an arc in the sky as they tracked the oncoming xenocraft. One smacked into the tau fighter's nose, detonating in a sudden blossom of fire and smoke. The xenocraft roared on, swathed in flame and out of control, hurtling towards Numitor on a collision course.

The sergeant ducked as the tau aircraft careened headlong over him and buried itself in the building behind, its impact so tremendous that only its tail could be seen.

With its architectural stability shattered, the top of the xenos structure collapsed in an avalanche of rubble that crushed the aircraft flat. The entire roof section slid away and the landslide crashed into the street, throwing up another bow wave of rock dust.

With their air cover gone and their ambush in tatters, the tau on the rooftops around the munitorum zone were making a full retreat. Even the drones floated out of sight, the cursed discs disappearing into the dust-choked streets. The Terminators stranded on the rooftops across from Numitor broke formation, moving to areas of building that were still broadly intact. Their sergeant caught his gaze, his eye-pieces glinting as he raised his plasma blade in a Macraggian salute.

Numitor smiled broadly at the sight, tapping his foot on his bastion's access hatch in a gesture of thanks to its machine-spirits. There was no finer feeling than victory hard-won. His thoughts strayed to the Codex Astartes once more. Do not hasten to attack the enemy in his stronghold, it taught. There he is strongest, and you may dash your

strength to nothing against his walls.

The sergeant's elation faded as he applied the maxim to the wider situation - not to the tau that had attacked their ersatz fortress zone, but to the Imperial invasion - a headlong attack upon the heart of an alien empire, a civilisation with limitless technical resource.

The battle for the munitorum zone was over, but the war was a long way from won.



# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## REFLECTION/BEFORE THE TEMPEST

In the wake of the aborted tau attack, munitorum zone Theta Tert was cleared, rebuilt and reinforced. Dozer-bladed demolitions tanks ground through the rubble-strewn streets. Columns of engineer-led tankers and Munitorum vehicles, swathed in the purifying incense of censer-armed servitors, followed them to resurrect the vehicle bays destroyed in the battle. Valkyrie sorties flew in low supply runs, taking advantage of the lack of enemy air presence. Before long Theta Tert teemed with twice the manpower it had before the attack, every soldier on high alert. Aside from a few distant sightings of drones, the tau did not come back to trouble them.

It was not only the Astra Militarum that used the fortress zone as a staging post. Scout squads from the Ultramarines Tenth Company operated out of the munitorum zone to ensure it was not ambushed again, combing the streets and taking those high vantage points recommended by Aordus as stable ground. The rest of the Assault squads took the chance to rearm and refuel. Duolor retrieved his lost chainsword and pistol. Denturis' bolt pistol was mangled beyond repair, so he opted to retain both chainswords, claiming he would return to Codex-approved wargear

patterns at the first opportunity.

The Hammers of Dorn briefly used the area as a staging post, grumbling about the Eighth Company's recent abuses of the Codex Astartes until Veletan out-quoted them for a full hour and sent them away in frustrated silence. Even the proud riders of the White Scars had refuelled there, Stormseer Sudabeh conferring with Numitor and the injured Elixus on how best to exploit the enemy's blind spot for arcane warfare.

In the last few hours, the command squad of Captain Atheus had arrived by Stormraven. With them came Techmarine Omnid and a trio of plump and unblinking cyber cherubs, each with bionic additions more off-putting than the last. They hovered around Omnid as he went about setting up a temporary forge station in the midsection of one of the bastion towers. There he repaired and resanctified the battered wargear of Squads Numitor and Sicarius.

Whilst Veteran Sergeant Enitor debriefed every officer involved in the battle, Apothecary Drekos tended to the wounds of those too badly injured to recover on their own. Colnid had his missing leg properly cauterised. Drekos and Omnid worked together to provide their brother with a workable bionic taken from a White Scars casualty, donated with the blessings of the khan by one Veteran Sergeant Sarik.

Ionsian, who had suffered so badly in the tau ambush that his armour had been melted away to expose his blackened multi-lungs and burned hearts, died of his wounds.

When the Apothecary had asked to see the rest of their dead, Sicarius and Numitor had given him exact coordinates for where their brothers had fallen along the way. The progenoids of the fallen were of paramount importance to the Adeptus Astartes, for they contained the gene-seed of the primarchs themselves – the key ingredient in the transformation of a mortal to Space Marine. They were vital to securing the future of the Chapter. Drekos had

ministered to the wounded as quickly as possible, then gone on his way, the Stormraven gunship *Guilliman's Grace* bearing him skyward in search of the Eighth Company's dead. His was a harrowing duty, but one that carried limitless respect.

Though Numitor had led two more sorties to reclaim the fortification zones of Theta Prime and Theta Sec from the tau garrisons left there, he had been back at base for almost a full day. He had done his best to meditate and train without showing any signs of irritation, but it had been a challenge. The waiting was worse for Cato Sicarius, for of all of the Eighth, he was perhaps the most battle-hungry. Yet they were both sergeants, experienced enough to realise that even Space Marines had to make their peace with the ebb and flow of military life. With Captain Atheus gone, and with the face of the war for Dal'yth changing so quickly, they would not plunge into battle again without direct instruction from the Chapter's command echelon.

So they waited for new orders, and in time, they were rewarded.

Cato Sicarius made his way over to the bastion that had been sequestered by Apothecary Drekos, reasoning that with the medicae gone, his prohibition upon entry was gone too. During the battle Ionsian, Kaetoros and Glavius had trapped the stealth team as ordered, killing half a dozen of the things, but had taken heavy fire in the process. Sicarius understood from Drekos that the wounds taken by the other two were almost as severe as those that had killed Ionsian.

Still, he needed to talk to his squad, and the matter had waited long enough. There was the possibility of a fifth caste in tau society, and what bearing that might have on their situation Sicarius did not know. He had no especial desire to talk to Numitor about it; his fellow sergeant would ask where the information had come from, and the answer would not be easy to explain. He very much doubted the

Ultramarines would change their war strategy on the word of a warp-touched young psyker. He could almost see Numitor's stolid expression as Sicarius made himself look like a fool in front of his men. No. He would seek Glavius' advice first, at least.

As he made his way over, Sicarius saw an Astra Militarum medic carrying a bundle of gore-soaked bandages exit the hospitaller building. The medic stopped and stared at him, but as soon as he stared back the human averted his gaze and scurried off. Sicarius nodded to himself and proceeded inside.

The dingy room smelt of sweat, blood and damp rockcrete. Its dripping walls were lined with makeshift bunks, wounded and dying Guardsmen lying in such profusion that the place looked like a breeding ground for disease. Vortico Ionsian's recumbent corpse lay in the corner, a tattered red standard displaying a threadbare Imperial aquila draped neatly across his chest.

Two giants amongst men stood at the vigil slits on either side of the room. The upper portions of their power armour were arranged against the far wall, leaving their torsos mostly bare. In places the black carapaces fused to their chests were crusted with dried blood, and dressings and bandages bound their wounds.

'Golotan, Glavius,' said Sicarius. 'Glad to see you on your feet. What in the primarch's name...'

Locon Kaetoros rose from a makeshift bunk, his bolt pistol's adjoiner components spread across it. His heavily burned face, disfigured badly the last time Sicarius saw it, was now little but a mask of exposed teeth and mangled flesh. It was all the sergeant could do not to step back in shock as the flamer operative rose up like a shark lunging from the depths. A heartbeat later his hideous features were scant inches from Sicarius' own.

'Glad to see us, are you,' he hissed. 'You don't care about us at all, you glory-seeking bastard!'

Sicarius saw the curled fist of a punch mid-throw, and

stepped back, letting it catch him on the gorget. Kaetoros lunged forward, headbutting Sicarius in the mouth so hard that he filled the sergeant's mouth with blood. Dazed and angry, Sicarius very nearly let the muscle memory of a thousand sparring sessions take over, but did not raise his fists. Instead he let Kaetoros throw a right hook that hit him so hard he felt his brain bruise inside his skull. A follow-up punch nearly dislocated his jaw, knocking two of his molars free.

'Enough,' said Golotan. 'That's enough.'

'It feels like enough,' said Sicarius through a mouthful of blood, spitting teeth onto the floor.

'Brother Kaetoros has a point,' said Glavius. 'You're not fit to lead this company.'

The accusation hit Sicarius far harder than Kaetoros' assault. It was doubly shocking coming from Ignacio Glavius. His battle-brother had always been there at his side, ready to snap to, or to fight at his shoulder.

Sicarius backed away from Kaetoros as he slumped onto his bunk, grimacing and clutching his wounded chest. The sergeant glanced at his second in command with an expression of aggrieved shock, and saw Glavius as if for the first time, eyes narrow in the gloom.

'You've been acting like a Fenrisian tribesman fresh off the ice,' said Glavius. 'You know it, and we know it. Austos knew it too, talked to me about it more than once. By splitting the squad at Gel'bryn City, you effectively got him killed. Dalaton and Endrion died on your watch too, when you went after the pilot caste instead of seeing the drop through to the end.'

'For that, I am truly sorry,' said Sicarius.

'And then you shot off into the wastes, after your stunt with Kaetoros' flamer,' continued Glavius calmly. 'We went after you, as we always do. I suffered for that decision.' He gestured to the four finger-thick holes in his torso. 'Four more on the back, shallow enough but still painful as all hell. That's just how it is, I thought. That's how it is in the

Eighth.'

Kaetoros snorted, then winced in pain.

'Until here, at Theta Tert,' said Glavius. 'This time you actually gave orders, and even talked to Numitor first before bounding off into the fight. I thought you'd turned a corner, but you split us up again, Cato. And just like always, it was the squad, not its glorious leader, that paid the price. Ionsian paid with his life.'

'Splitting into combat squads is Codex-adherent,' said Sicarius.

'Only when necessary,' said Glavius. 'Ask Veletan if you want. You always split us up at a moment's provocation, Cato. You do not see us as brothers at all, but distractions.'

'We are Space Marines!' shouted Sicarius. Around the room, wounded Guardsmen stirred in their half-comatose slumbers. 'Warriors of Ultramar! You are supposed to be able to look after yourselves. You don't need a shepherd!'

'We look after each other. That's why we're still alive. Some of us, at least.' He gestured at Ionsian's cadaver, and Sicarius saw for the first time the gouged holes in his neck where Drekos had recovered the warrior's progenoids. The wounds were black with dried blood.

'A true leader unites those around him,' continued Glavius. 'You're a destroyer, Cato. You thrive on it. Your talent for war and your tactical nous have got you far. But you have to temper that part of yourself if you are to be a decent sergeant, let alone a captain.'

Golotan turned from the vigil slit on the other side of the room and nodded sombrely. 'It's true. We have discussed the matter at length.'

'I know I have acted rashly, and I have resolved to learn from it,' said Sicarius, his face already beginning to bruise. 'Yet why do you not speak against Numitor, Golotan? He has lost more of his squad than I!'

Kaetoros gave a disgusted cry from his bunk, throwing up his hands. 'We are not just numbers, sergeant, to be compared as metrics of victory! We are Ultramarines! And

more than that, we are your kinsmen!’ He gave a long sigh, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth. ‘To you, everything is a competition to be won. That is the diametric opposite of good leadership. It blinds you, makes you vulnerable by proxy.’

‘A true warrior’s shield is the brother he trusts,’ said Golotan sombrely.

‘The primarch’s words,’ said Glavius. ‘But of late, Cato, you have put them aside. Disregarded them in your haste to prove yourself better than Numitor. You think yourself on the brink of the captaincy, but I tell you now, you are not ready for it.’

Sicarius had no answer. Silence stretched out in the bastion, broken only by the occasional cough or moan from a wounded Guardsman.

‘Perhaps it is just the Talassarian way,’ said Sicarius after a while. ‘We are encouraged to compete, to excel, to strain for new heights.’

‘You forget,’ said Golotan. ‘I, too, hail from Talassar. It is our way, yes. The way we teach the young ones. But we have grown to adulthood. We must reassess the simple blacks and whites of our youth. Colour them with the greys of experience. And sometimes we must lose, that others might win.’

There was another long moment of silence. It was the most they had ever heard Golotan say at one time.

‘You are right, of course, brother,’ said Sicarius. ‘I must learn to fight for the Imperium, for the war effort as a whole, not just for my own causes.’

Glavius stood upright, making for the door. ‘That is good to hear. We shall not speak of this outside the bunker, and these men,’ he said, motioning to the wounded and the dying, ‘they are too far gone to care.’ Glavius walked past his sergeant without a backward glance, bracing his wounded chest. Sicarius let him go without rebuttal, watching his brother open the door and emerge into the wan sunlight.

Sicarius looked at Kaetoros, but the warrior turned away, shaking his head. Golotan was already back at his post, staring out through the vigil slit with shoulders hunched.

‘I am sorry, Brother Kaetoros,’ said Sicarius. ‘I realised too late what I was doing in the wastes, but... but I suppose I have not yet learned from it. Not truly.’

Kaetoros looked up at him from beneath flame-ravaged eyelids. ‘So learn. It is never too late.’

‘I shall think long on the matter,’ said Sicarius. ‘You have my word on that. First, though, I have information that needs to be shared, I think. And thank you, brother, for bringing me to my senses.’

‘Hmm,’ said Kaetoros. ‘You can thank me by letting me sleep.’

‘Of course.’

Sicarius turned and left the bastion, shoulders slumped as he made for the watch post.

Numitor and Magros were discussing the campaign’s latest developments in their makeshift strategium when they were called to attend company command. The sergeant nodded to the servo-skull that had brought the message parchment, linking his thumbs in the sign of the aquila and telling it he was on his way.

Leaving the bastion and walking into the centre of the munitorum zone, Numitor was puzzled to see the rest of Eighth Company – some sixty warriors in total – standing to attention in parade ground formation. With them were three squads from the Tenth Company, chameleoline cloaks cast back over their shoulders, and four from the Fifth, each Space Marine holding his bolter upright in front of him. At their fore the skull-helmed Chaplain Uticos was standing atop one of the promethium silos, his deep bass voice filling the air as he regaled those gathered with the glory of the immortal Emperor.

‘Any idea what this is about?’ asked Numitor, looking sidelong at Magros.

‘Some,’ admitted his battle-brother.

At the head of the gathered Ultramarines were Veteran Enitor, Apothecary Drekos, returned from his mission of recovery, and the newly elevated company champion Vellu, sword and shield gleaming in the evening light. Next to them was Zaetus, holding aloft the Eighth Company standard with his shining new bionic arm. The priceless banner’s shaft had been meld-torched together, the joint polished to a high sheen. Its heavy embroidered cloth stirred in the wind, bullet holes dotting its face and purity seals flapping on its crosspiece. The heraldry it displayed was a rousing sight: the champion skull over the icon of the Ultramarines, the gladii of the swordmaster, and the laurels of victory on a field of steel grey.

‘The Eighth is out in force,’ said Numitor. ‘Looks like we have new orders. Maybe a big push, at last.’

‘Looks likely,’ replied Magros, nodding slowly.

As Numitor strode to join the rest of his squad, the cyber-cherubs that had been flitting about the camp came together above the Eighth Company standard. They opened their mouths and sang, a major chord that sounded angelic at first, then mechanical. Projector arrays pushed out from between their lips, triple tubes that revolved and clicked as flickering light poured forth.

The apparition they were projecting flickered blue, gold, crimson and tan, but only when the lightfields overlapped fully did Numitor realise what he was seeing.

‘Brothers,’ came a booming voice, rich and seasoned. ‘In the name of Ultramar, I bid you welcome.’

The speaker was Marneus Augustus Calgar, the Lord Macragge, Chapter Master of the Ultramarines.

Every warrior standing in formation, from the oldest veteran to the youngest Baleghast conscript, stood tall and saluted the giant lumen-spectre of Lord Calgar. Those upon the rooftops continued their watch for tau attacks unabated, aware that to turn away from duty before the master of Ultramar was to dishonour themselves beyond

measure.

Numitor felt a sense of pride and purpose well up inside him at the sight of his Chapter's liege. Lord Calgar appeared as a glowing giant resplendent in deep blue Terminator armour – the Armour of Antilochus, no less, trimmed with gleaming Imperial symbols and a tilting plate in the style of a golden eagle. His regal features were framed by cropped hair as white as the cloak fanning out behind him, the garment unstirred by the evening wind.

Lord Calgar opened his arms wide to encompass his audience, his massive gauntlets articulating so finely it seemed he could conduct a Macraggian symphony. Numitor had seen those twin power fists pull apart a heretic stalk-tank as if it were made of damp parchment.

'I come before you today with tragic news,' intoned Lord Calgar, his rich tones rolling from the laud-hailers chained beneath the attendant cherubs, 'and to mark a new beginning. A new start for the Eighth Company of the Ultramarines, and a new phase of war upon this xenos-tainted planet. A world that will soon be scoured clean.'

There were a few scattered murmurs of agreement from the Baleghast Castellans, but most of the assembled warriors watched in rapt silence.

'Captain Ledo Atheus has been killed,' said Lord Calgar. 'He fell in service to the Imperium, shot down by a xenos warsuit. His like will not be seen again.'

Murmurs of assent from the crowd, many of the throng making the sign of the aquila in remembrance.

'He died well, as a hero of the Imperium. During a command strike upon the primary invasion site, Captain Atheus fought a high champion of the tau warrior caste. He emerged triumphant, proving the supremacy of the human spirit over this most ambitious of foes. Only after he had struck a grievous blow to tau morale did he allow himself to fall. His legacy shall live on for eternity. Hail, Atheus.'

'Hail, Atheus,' came the response from the crowd.

'The war he left behind is far from over,' said Lord Calgar.

'We have struck hard at the xenos in their nest, and been struck in return. Now we must assert our right to rule beyond doubt.'

Silence, but for the thump of explosions in the far distance.

'There is one amongst you who took battle to the high commander of the tau empire's military caste within an hour of making planetfall. He did so through instinct, and initiative. His squad has since uncovered, categorised and reported more information on the tau threat than any other gathered here.'

Numitor felt a hot coal of nervousness at the base of his throat, mingled with something like shame. He had lost near half of his squad in that same fateful hour.

'Word will likely have reached you of the punitive assaults experienced by our invasion forces over the last few days. My advisors would have me name them setbacks. But I shall not lie to you, my brothers, my kindred. The tau are formidable strategists, and their weaponry is strong. They made great gains with a concerted counter-attack that tested our own tenets, the Codex Astartes and the Tactica Imperium, to the limit. Only a few days ago, the area in which you now stand was the only zone still in Imperial hands.'

The audience held their breath, eyes locked upon the magnificent apparition.

'One amongst you saw a way to break the noose that closed around our throats,' continued Calgar. 'The Codex Astartes teaches us to use every weapon at our disposal, no matter its nature. One weapon we have that the tau cannot match is that of our minds. It was the weapons of the mind that saw this stronghold stand firm. It was that same inspirational solution that has seen the tide turned in a dozen critical locations since.'

The sanctioned psykers gathered near the command Chimera of the Baleghast Castellans were scruffy and mismatched, a freak show in comparison to the ordered

Ultramarines, but they stood upright with eyes raised high. Since the defence of the munitorum zone there had been a quiet pride in their bearing.

‘We must weigh our blades,’ said Calgar. ‘We must drive them not into the body of the foe, but into his mind. We must take away his ability to plan, to think, to react. This is the duty I give to you. You are the force I now call upon to achieve this strike. But first, you must have one to lead you to victory.’

The Ultramarines stood stock still, awaiting their master’s pronouncement.

‘Leading this assault will be Jorus Numitor,’ said Lord Calgar. ‘Amongst the sergeants of the Eighth Company, he alone has fought this war not just as a Space Marine, but as an adept of the Imperium. In doing so, he united disparate forces to wrest victory from defeat.’

Numitor felt his mouth go suddenly dry.

‘Sergeant Numitor, step forward.’

The sergeant felt suddenly very alive. Over a hundred Space Marines turned and fell back to make space for him to walk up to the command podium, weapons held tight to their chests. The sergeant walked forward, approaching the giant apparition of his Chapter Master and the officers that looked down from beside it.

‘Jorus Numitor, I hereby elevate you to Captain of the Eighth Company,’ said Marneus Calgar, ‘and name you Lord Executioner.’

The Chapter Master gestured towards Numitor, and a quartet of manipulator servo-skulls came forward, bearing the massive two-handed greataxe that had once belonged to Captain Atheus.

Numitor stared, disbelieving. The honour accorded to him was beyond measure. Hundreds of warriors turned to him as one, saluting with a stamp of the heel.

The servo-skulls hovered closer, their hinged manipulators holding the axe within Numitor’s reach. The weapon was magnificent, a true work of the Macraggian mastersmith’s

art. Twin power blades curved on either side of a polished gold generator, thick cables linking it to seven feet of ornate haft inscribed with the Twelve Triumphs.

The weapon had a cobalt blue gauntlet still clasping its haft.

‘Captain Atheus’ will to fight was so strong he would not relinquish this weapon even in death,’ said the Lord Macragge. ‘It is his command squad’s wish that you respect the tenacity of his spirit by wearing his gauntlet instead of your own.’

Though taken aback by the request, Numitor disengaged his power fist with a series of harsh, decompressive hisses. He eased it off and placed it carefully on a nearby ammo crate, his exposed hand feeling strangely naked and small in front of the vast apparition of the Chapter Master.

Numitor took a deep breath. Taking the axe with his right hand, he slid his left into Atheus’ gauntlet. It was cold and slightly clammy but it fit. He worked his fingers all the way to the tips, his grasp forced tight around the greataxe. The weapon was heavy and solid; it would take some getting used to. Part of Numitor’s soul rejoiced in the idea of seeing what it could do to a tau warsuit.

Pride, unease, grief and joy all mingled into an overwhelming surge of emotion. Sensing hundreds of eyes upon him, Numitor pushed the feelings down, forcing himself to focus and keep his expression neutral.

Then he turned, raising the relic greataxe in both hands above his head.

The roar of applause from Space Marines and Imperial Guardsmen alike was like a physical force. It continued long after Techmarine Omnid had torch-fused Atheus’ iron halo to the back of Numitor’s power armour, long after the command squad of Enitor, Drekos and Vellu had walked forward to stand at his side. Zaetus raised the company standard high and the applause was joined by war cries and shouts of approbation. Numitor’s eyes met those of Sicarius. The sergeant nodded sagely, making the sign of

the aquila.

Numitor turned back to face his Chapter Master and give a Macraggian salute – not as a sergeant, but as the master of an entire company.

‘The Librarius has spoken to me of the valour they saw upon this field of war,’ said Marneus Calgar. ‘Epistolary Elixus has personally vouched for the conduct of the One Hundred and Twenty-Second Baleghast Castellans. He tells me that without their sallying forth into the open, he would have been slain in the street. They are to be commended.’

There was a ragged chorus of cheers from the Castellans, and many a thump on the back. Numitor could see Lord Commissar Duggan from the corner of his eye, standing to rigid attention at the front of the Astra Militarum assembly. Even in profile it was obvious the officer’s expression was that of a constipated grox. The commissar motioned an aide forward with a flick of his white-gloved fingers, and whispered something from the corner of his mouth. No doubt rescinding the 122nd’s imminent court martials, thought Numitor.

‘Epistolary Elixus also spoke of one who approached him, one of your number who wishes to remain nameless. This warrior brought knowledge concerning the caste structure by which the tau arrange themselves.’

Numitor frowned. He had heard nothing of this.

‘We had previously believed tau society to be loosely structured around the four classical elements, but it seems there is in fact a fifth caste that oversees the others. The Librarius have since scribed the mind-states of captured enemies, and have concluded the information is sound.’

A low hubbub erupted in the Astra Militarum lines. The Space Marines remained silent, listening intently.

‘The next phase of this war will be the most important,’ said Lord Calgar. ‘Your orders are to locate this fifth caste, and destroy it wherever it is to be found.’ He paused, eyes scanning across the audience as if he could see them directly.

‘In the last few days, the tau have been attacking in concert, their military manoeuvres uncannily similar no matter where they are on the planet. It is as if their commanders are somehow mind-linked, like insects from the same colony. An apt comparison, I’m sure you will agree.’

There was a quiet ripple of mirth from the Astra Militarum. Numitor smiled dutifully, but inside, he was not so sure the comparison held true. The xenos had some concept of a warrior code. He had heard the tau female in the hab-block speak of it, and even Calgar himself had referred to the events leading up to Atheus’ death as an honour duel.

‘This behaviour bears out this theory of a command caste. Should these be the overseers of the enemy’s civilisation, their destruction may hand us not just a military victory upon Dal’yth, but the key to defeating the entire Tau Empire.’

The low susurrus amongst the Guardsmen grew to cries of outright celebration. Chaplain Uticos brought his crozius arcanum down onto the flank of his improvised podium, the gunshot crack that rang out silencing the audience completely.

Numitor saw instantly that something was wrong. Lord Calgar was looking not at the gathered warriors, but off to one side, his expression deeply troubled. The apparition blurred and faded, going badly out of focus.

‘How close is this bio-fleet?’ came Calgar’s muffled voice, so quiet that Numitor had to strain to make it out. He would not have heard it at all but for the cybernetic cherubs being so close. ‘How long do we have?’

There was a reply from an unseen advisor, but it was unintelligible.

‘Captain Numitor,’ said Marneus Calgar, springing into focus once more above those gathered in the Munitorum zone. ‘Your original command is over. Brother Magros shall serve as sergeant of the Calgarians in your stead. You shall

lead those gathered here in the hunt and slaughter of the fifth tau caste, effective immediately. Use this opportunity swiftly, and well.'

Numitor looked up at the Chapter Master, meeting his gaze for the first time. 'I shall, my lord.'

'Of that I have no doubt,' said Calgar distantly. He paused for a moment, seeming diminished somehow, then straightened. 'Warriors of Macragge, go this very moment to rejoin the fight. Smite the leaders of this alien world. Shatter their armies and destroy their will, and do not rest until every sign of xenos infestation lies desolate and cast into the dust. For Macragge, and the Emperor.'

'For Macragge and the Emperor!'

Despite the elation in Numitor's soul, something had changed in the Chapter Master's demeanour, try as he might to disguise it.

That fact alone troubled him greatly.

Lord Calgar brought his fist across his breastplate, blurred out of focus, and disappeared.

'Cato,' said Numitor as he caught up to Sicarius. 'A moment.'

The sergeant was trudging into the shadow of one of the bastions, evidently seeking a moment's peace. Respite was a luxury the Ultramarines no longer had. Numitor had already briefed his command squad with an exit plan, ordering Omnid to make ready the transports and Enitor to brief the Astra Militarum officer corps. They would be out of Theta Tert within the hour.

'Captain Numitor,' said Sicarius with a tired smile. 'Congratulations. I truly mean that.'

'You do? I thought you'd be full of reasons why it should be you lugging this unfeasibly heavy axe around the place.'

'I'm more of a blades man, truth be told.'

'Of course.'

The two walked in silence for a moment before Numitor spoke again.

'You seem different, old friend.'

'I just saw the corpse of Vortico Ionsian,' said Sicarius. 'I lost another one, Jorus. Kaetoros is in bad shape too. He and Glavius had some prize words to say to me, I can tell you.'

'Glavius? He challenged you?'

'That he did.'

'Emperor's teeth. These are strange times indeed.'

'They have a point, though, Jorus. I do not deserve to be called a leader.'

'Perhaps it's not your strongest suit,' said Numitor awkwardly. 'I'll tell you what you are, though.'

Sicarius looked sidelong at Numitor. 'Let me guess. Arrogant? Blind? Callous?'

'No, idiot,' said Numitor. 'You are a champion. A born warrior that even the Ultramarines look up to. Trust me on this. People watch you slaughtering these xenos bastards by the dozen, and it gives them hope. Makes them believe the Imperium can not only survive, but excel. That's how you lead, Cato. By inspiring others, and making them want to be the best they can.'

'Thank you, brother. Those are kind words. To be honest, if that is the case, it is by accident. Glavius said I was like a young Fenrisian, hungry only for glory. The comparison was fair. I am supposed to be a sergeant of the Ultramarines Chapter, for Guilliman's sake. I should be better than that.'

'So think first, act second,' said Numitor. 'Use the Codex Astartes as your guide. I know that seems hypocritical coming from me, but against these tau and their traps, it's imperative we cleave to its teachings. For all of our strength, we aren't invulnerable after all.'

'Aye,' said Sicarius. 'I'm beginning to realise that.'

'Do not lose your confidence, though,' warned Numitor. 'It's what makes you who you are.'

The warriors kept their peace as they walked on around the perimeter, approaching a Baleghast sentry smoking a lho-stick in the lee of an Icarus quad-gun. He hurriedly

ditched it, face draining of all colour as he ground the butt under his heel.

‘Captain,’ he said in a dry, strained voice.

‘Very discreet, private,’ said Numitor.

The Astra Militarum trooper saluted weakly as the Ultramarines walked on.

‘The Lord Calgar spoke of a fifth caste,’ said Numitor. ‘Know anything about that?’

‘Some. One of the psykers told me about it, during the battle. Darrapor, the bald one. I didn’t put much stock in it, at first. She is... disturbed, I would say.’

‘That was you? You told the Librarius of these hidden tau leaders?’

‘I did. Though I took far too long about it.’

‘So what changed?’

‘That fact that if she is right, we may lose a lot less lives in the prosecution of this war. I would rather look a fool than see that happen.’

‘That is the logic of a leader,’ said Numitor. ‘Not a glory seeker.’

Sicarius did not answer.

‘If that supposition is true...’ Numitor stopped, and turned to face his brother. ‘You realise if Calgar knew it was you that passed on that information, you likely would have had a far better shot at the captaincy?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Sicarius. ‘Perhaps not.’

‘Used well, that veritas could topple the Tau Empire.’

‘You deserve the halo, brother. We both know I am not ready for it.’

‘Not yet,’ said Numitor.

‘Besides,’ Sicarius smiled ruefully, ‘I have my eyes set on a far greater captaincy than that of a mere reserve company such as the Eighth.’

‘Ha! I would have thought you’d be eyeing up Lord Calgar’s throne instead.’

The two walked along the perimeter in silence once more, the gravel of shattered buildings crunching underfoot as

they passed another sentry.

When they were out of earshot, Numitor spoke again, so quiet it was barely above a whisper.

‘Put your helm on, Cato, just for a moment.’

Sicarius looked quizzically at the captain.

‘Why? Do you suspect the sniper-machines that got Elixus, or...’

‘Just do it, Cato,’ said Numitor, ‘before I make it an order.’

The sergeant made a distasteful face, unclamping his helm from his waist and sliding it on.

Numitor opened a discreet vox-link, ensuring only Sicarius’ rune was active in his helm display.

‘I heard something when the Lord Calgar defocused, just on the edge of earshot.’

‘Something bad, I take it?’

‘I heard him say something about a bio-fleet.’

‘A what?’ Sicarius turned to face Numitor. ‘What in Guilliman’s name are you talking about, Numitor? An ork fleet?’

‘That’s not what I heard,’ said Numitor, his tone grave. ‘He said, “How close is this bio-fleet, how long do we have.”’

‘Throne,’ said Sicarius. ‘What do you suppose it means? Another species of alien?’

Numitor shrugged. ‘It doesn’t sound good, whatever it is.’

‘Surely we’d know about it already if there was another xenos fleet inbound? And why did Malagrea not speak of it?’

‘I do not know. Lord Calgar clearly thinks we have work to do here first.’

The two walked on in silence. Unbidden, their pace increased.

‘Time is of the essence then,’ said Sicarius. ‘We should make ready the war council.’

‘Good idea,’ said Numitor, ‘though I can tell you now, my intention is to go back to the original plan, but with a lot more manpower. Our theory concerning the red-armoured tau commander is still sound. And those were Atheus’ last

orders. We should respect them.'

'Very well. And Jorus?'

'Yes, sergeant?'

'We should consider ordering some drop ships to stay on standby.'

'I already have,' said Numitor. 'We are likely to need them.'



# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## REDEMPTION/THE LINE IS DRAWN

The *Silent Aftermath* slid through the skies, its repainted hull as red as the Dal'ythan sunset. Violet clouds scudded beneath the Orca as it carried Commander Farsight towards the rendezvous point where he was to meet his old comrade Sha'vastos.

Given the rumours about the venerable commander's mindset, it was not an encounter Farsight was looking forward to.

The *Aftermath* had no honour guard of air caste craft attending it. After returning from Mount Kan'ji with O'Vesa's mind-scanning device, the neural crown replete with the totality engram of Master Puretide's brain, Farsight had been left to his original command once more. Clearly Aun'Va considered his dedication to the Greater Good proven.

It was a great relief, to be redeemed as one with the Tau'va, the accusations of vash'ya put to one side in view of his success. Still, a strange sense of disquiet gnawed at Farsight's conscience in the long hours of the night. Puretide's warning still lingered, colouring his perceptions. The very idea that not all of the ethereal caste could be trusted was nonsense, tantamount to deliberate idiocy. Yet

it had come from his mentor, the wisest of all the fire caste. It was a *fu'llasso* mind knot, and it would not leave his thoughts.

On the night of his return to active duty, Farsight had ordered his Orca painted red in the manner of his armour, ostensibly for the same reason – to honour the blood spilt by the fallen of Arkunasha. He knew in his heart it had more to do with him asserting his own identity, reinstating his command on some symbolic level.

If he was honest with himself, it was likely because he was not one of the Swords of Puretide.

The majority of Farsight's fellow shas'o had gladly volunteered for that elite clique, for the fire caste held the war-sage as a role model, a figure of legend. A simple act of surgery, they were saying, and the commanders' brains would be embellished with an engram neurochip bearing Puretide's own thoughts and philosophies. In a way, it was genius, a quick and easy way to access the finest of fire caste strategies in time to bring them to bear on the Dal'yth war, outwitting the Imperials before their intrusion took any more ground.

Farsight had politely declined the surgery, knowing the matter would not be that simple. In many ways there was something that bothered him about the very concept. He realised the Tau'va came first, over and above any loyalty to caste or comrade. Yet O'Shaserra – along with O'Kais – had studied for many long and hard tau'cyr atop Mount Kan'ji to fully understand Puretide's wisdom. To merely copy it from his neural matrix as if he were a machine and download the information into the brains of living beings, and using an untested prototype at that, felt disrespectful in the extreme. There was a difference between the intelligent application of principles and the direct imitation of past success. It had all the hallmarks of a swift route to disaster, though Farsight could not place why.

In the last few rotaa, the commander's instincts had been borne out. From what he had heard, those whose minds

had assimilated the neurochip had found their personalities not so much complemented as subsumed by the iron-hard mind of Puretide. The inventor of the technology, O'Vesa, was gifted; some said he was the finest mind in all of the earth caste. But Farsight had known him long enough to realise his prototypes tended to be geared around power rather than caution. The scientist was obsessed with the act of innovation, and rarely paused to consider the moral implications of his rampant invention. In the past, there had been times when Farsight had thought O'Vesa did not even understand the concept of morality.

On impulse, Farsight patched through to the scientist on his battlesuit's caste-net suite, eye-flicking the square-and-circle symbol of the earth caste with the stylised Stone Dragon entwined around it.

'Commander!' said O'Vesa, his flat, broad face twisting into a bright smile. Farsight felt himself returning it. The scientist was always pleased to see him, genuinely so. Despite their differences the feeling was slowly becoming mutual.

'I take it you have been informed, then?'

'Informed?' said Farsight. 'About Sha'vastos' recent incident, you mean?'

'No!' cried O'Vesa, almost beside himself with glee. 'That is a mere setback. No, we are to go into battle together! Well, in a manner of speaking. My prototypes will be accompanying you. I have made some modifications since the gue'ron'sha breach of the testing facility. I fitted the latest iteration of the pulse driver cannon! And I hear your new sunforge attack pattern is paying great dividends against those ugly gue'la vehicle columns.'

'A simple application of vertical envelopment theory, twinned with paired fusion blaster XV8s,' said Farsight. 'Hardly a tactic worthy of the Swords. Is the Warghost with you?'

'Ob'lotai 3-0 is present, yes. And he is not the only old friend of yours I have on board.'

‘Where are you at the moment, O’Vesa?’

‘Very close! Almost on top of your little craft, in fact. I have stealth fields running that a mere Orca could never penetrate. The timing of your call has ruined the surprise.’

Farsight frowned, eye-flicking to the distribution array, then the exterior screens.

Looming through the cloudbanks was an earth caste builder ship so large its cargo bays could have accommodated a hundred Crisis suits with room to spare. The craft’s vast belly blocked out the darkening skies high above, the pressure of its descent buffeting the *Aftermath* so hard Farsight could feel the turbulence in his control cocoon.

‘Kor’ui Y’eldi,’ said Farsight to the Orca’s pilot, ‘give that great sky-whale some room.’

*‘Of course,’* came the response, *‘though that seems a harsh way of referring to an honoured comrade.’*

Farsight gave a tired smile and shook his head. The willow-thin air caste usually said exactly what was on their mind, and Kor’ui Y’eldi was always quick to take a shot if he could. Such unvarnished honesty was a valuable asset in combat airspace, when every microdec could be the difference between life and death. In a diplomatic situation, it could be a liability.

‘Just concentrate on our flight path, please,’ said Farsight. ‘O’Vesa is an old ally of mine. Besides, I prefer to think of him as robust in construction.’

*‘I would say he is practically cuboid.’*

‘Enough, Y’eldi.’

The *Aftermath* duly flew lower to compensate, coming out of the clouds. The Ath’adra command facility was visible in the distance, a series of five tall hexagonal structures set at staggered heights like a zoomed-in view of a crystal formation.

The caste-net chimed, and the split pentagon of the ethereal caste appeared on his display, the circle atop it flashing gold.

'One moment, O'Vesa,' said Farsight, blink-pushing the golden symbol.

'Greetings in the name of the Tau'va,' came the cultured tones of the ethereal Aun'Tefan. Her features were serene, appealing in their tranquility, though Farsight noted her dress was not ceremonial, but practical. By the look of it, she was planning on going somewhere as soon as the conversation was over; either that, or she was already on the move.

'Greetings, honoured Aun,' said Farsight, blipping the symbol of the Greater Good. 'I hear I may be going into battle, rather than attending a strategic rendezvous.'

'That is true,' said Aun'Tefan. 'There have been some developments in the shape of the war outside Gel'bryn. The Imperials are making a massed push south. Towards Ath'adra.'

'I see,' said Farsight. 'Well, I am on my way. My battlesuit retaliation cadre is not far behind.'

'Excellent. Commander, the gue'ron'sha are leading a strike at great speed. We have begun evacuation of all ethereal personnel, as well as high-ranking tau from the other castes, fire caste excepted. Every active commander in the area has been given an imperative to intercept. Admiral Teng is leading an air caste attack run as we speak.'

'The Swords of Puretide will be in attendance, I presume?'

'Only Sha'vastos, and then because he is already here, overseeing the evacuation,' said Aun'Tefan. She straightened her garments, a strange expression crossing her features. 'In truth, the prototypes have been found wanting.'

'They have?' said Farsight. 'How so?'

'The Swords are using the same tactics across the planet, in the same situations,' said Aun'Tefan. 'They met with great success, initially, conquering near every beachhead the Imperials had established. But their strikes are so consistent, so they are becoming...'

‘Predictable?’

‘It seems so. The humans are not idiots, despite their appearance. The gue’ron’sha share information swiftly between their tribes, and are capable of learning at an impressive rate. Even a theoretically impeccable tactic is found wanting if the enemy is able to anticipate it.’

‘The Space Marines have strict doctrine behind their actions,’ said Farsight. ‘I have been monitoring it closely, for in the long term I believe it may be the key to defeating the Imperium’s finest armies. In a way, that doctrine has been matched against the Code of Fire. The elder strategists that laid down their tenets of war have been tested against ours.’

Aun’Tefan nodded sagely. ‘And ours have been found superior.’

‘Of course. Their modus is primitive and lacking in insight, but it has some basic sense to it. Some of the human organisations, such as those the water caste call the Hammers of Dorn, obey its tenets to such an extent their actions have allowed me to codify several of its key points. The ones Por’o Kais calls the Ultramarines have exhibited very similar invasion dispersals and battle protocols. A weakness to be exploited, in the future.’

‘If only all these humans were as formulaic as you claim,’ said Aun’Tefan.

‘Do you refer to the anomalous data, honoured Aun?’

‘Yes. The humans have been launching attacks with... unconventional means. They are deploying warriors that defy easy categorisation and are almost impossible to anticipate, for there is no visible sign of their weaponry. The appearance of the operatives and the effects they manifest do not seem linked in any meaningful way. Sometimes the weakest specimens prove the greatest threat.’

‘Surely these incidents are localised, and easily avoided?’ said Farsight. ‘Metaphysical phenomena are not unknown to us. What do the Nicassar have to say on the subject?’

‘Very little, save vague and superstitious warnings. This is not ambient meta-tech, commander, nor is it the remote hypnology of the Nagi. This activity is... weaponised, for want of a better term. *Ghu’lach* mind-science, the earth caste call it. The gue’ron’sha have been actively using it against us at every opportunity. We have ordered the Shas’ar’tol to comb their archives, and it seems Commander Puretide never encountered this human technique of war.’

‘To my knowledge, that is true.’

‘The resultant cognitive dissonance is causing the Puretide engrams to malfunction. In places this has cost the fire caste dearly. The order to rescind the devices has already been given by Aun’Va himself. Many of the Swords of Puretide are already in custody of the earth caste, and cannot contribute to the war effort at this time.’

‘I see,’ said Farsight, scowling. ‘And may I ask a question? Are the devices extracted from the hosts’ brains without incident?’

The ethereal paused, her expression darkening.

‘Sadly not,’ she said eventually. ‘The water caste will brief you on the details.’

‘I am sure they will.’

‘Because of this setback we are calling upon those commanders who have not undergone the process, first amongst them yourself and Commander Shadowsun, to defend Ath’adra with all available assets.’

‘Understood.’

‘We have reinforcements inbound from five other septs, and the kor’vattra is convinced its fighter shoals will be mustered in numbers enough to gut the Imperial fleet should it hold its position. We will win this war, commander, and soon. But should the gue’la so much as witness the craft bearing the ethereal caste from the site, we shall consider the mission a failure. It is of critical importance to the Tau’va they escape without incident, and are not pursued.’

‘Of course.’

‘We have sanctioned O’Vesa’s inclusion in this matter, and the use of whatever prototypes he believes battle-ready,’ said Aun’Tefan. ‘No weapon will be left aside in the defence of the ethereal caste’s safety. Given the unreliable nature of the Swords of Puretide, we are reinstating you as overall commander for the rest of the Dal’yth war effort, effective immediately. Commander Shadowsun will work alongside you. Do not fail us.’

‘I will not,’ said Farsight. ‘This I promise, for the Greater Good.’

The ethereal nodded and patched out. As the distribution array’s screen resolved once more, Farsight noted not only O’Vesa’s symbol winking in the corner, but the four-fingered claw symbol of the kroot shaper Kraakor Prokk, the stylised electromagnetic pulse of the Cadre Fireblade Shas’gra of Rala’tas, and the split blue triangle of the air caste. Underneath it, Admiral Teng’s plateau raptor symbol glowed gold. Scanning the exterior display screens once more, the commander saw the modified ochre Barracuda the admiral used as his personal craft arcing through the skies ahead of them.

‘Admiral Teng,’ transmitted Farsight, ‘an honour to have you as the tip of our blade.’

The air caste officer’s symbol flashed in affirmation.

Then Farsight’s heart lurched. The circle of the fire caste had appeared, a stylised white spider holding it in its tiny claws.

The Kan’ji Mal’caor.

He gathered his focus, breathing in, out, in again. Hardened his soul. He blink-pushed the symbol.

Shadowsun’s face filled his screen, stern and noble. Her smooth features had begun to wrinkle a little at the eyes, but if anything the signs of maturity added to the sense of power and presence she exuded.

To Farsight, the cold severity of her gaze was like a punch in the gut.

‘Commander O’Shovah,’ she said.

‘Commander O’Shaserra.’

Farsight eye-masked the transmission, blocking out everything but the most high-grade urgency protocols.

‘Your plan?’ said Farsight.

‘I will take the fight to the ground assets in the locations appended to this transmission,’ said Shadowsun. ‘My cadres are already in position, hidden and ready to strike. Do not hinder them with your own efforts.’

Her lips were a thin, cold slash. It was an expression Farsight knew all too well.

‘Kauyon-Shas,’ sighed Farsight, ‘this needn’t be...’

‘Do not call me that. That name died on Mount Kan’ji.’

Farsight frowned and shook his head. ‘Contrition. An old artefact of speech. But we have a common duty here. We are the true Swords of Puretide, not these *vral j’kaaras* Aun’Va has fashioned. You, Kais, and I. And Kais is not here.’

‘He is never here,’ said Shadowsun, looking off to one side.

‘You cannot believe this surgical procedure of Aun’Va’s does honour to our mentor’s legend,’ said Farsight.

‘It is O’Vesa’s doing, not that of the Ethereal Master,’ she said, her tone cold as she turned to face him once more.

‘His was the hand by which the deed was done, yes,’ said Farsight. ‘But the fact remains. With the vast majority of our commanders out of commission, it falls to us to uphold the fire caste’s honour.’

Shadowsun said nothing, which Farsight knew to be as close to an agreement as he was likely to get. Something was strange in her gaze. Not a single other soul would have picked up on it, not even O’Kais, but there was pain there, behind the mask.

‘Aun’Tefan spoke of the devices’ extraction,’ said Farsight. ‘She said it was no simple matter.’

‘It certainly is not,’ said Shadowsun. He saw something flicker in her eyes, some emotion between anger and despair, before her shield of professionalism fell into place

once more. 'An old comrade of mine, O'Myen, has already had hers extracted.'

'I remember O'Myen. Is she still as she was? Before the surgery?'

Shadowsun's eyes grew thin.

'No. She has become as an infant. Perhaps worse. "Such is the cost of victory," as the water caste said.'

Farsight felt the truth seep into his blood like poison. It burned for a moment, and then grew hot.

Hot enough to burn worlds.

'You mean to tell me...' He felt the flame of outrage burst in his veins, his lips tightening. His eyes flicked to O'Vesa's icon, winking in the corner of the display, his mask of suppressed anger turning into a furious snarl.

'Commander Farsight,' said Shadowsun. 'I do not think...'

'This cannot go unpunished, O'Shaserra!' shouted Farsight. 'They take our brightest, our best, and they use them up like ammunition cells! It took them a matter of what, two rotas? And what do they leave behind?'

'Mont'ka-Shoh,' said Shadowsun softly. 'Don't.'

'Sha'vastos has had this procedure!' cried Farsight. 'He was the first to volunteer for it! That heedless fool O'Vesa, he just smiled at me a few microdecs ago, like nothing was wrong! How many other gifted leaders must we lose to this colossal mistake?'

Shadowsun's expression told Farsight the answer. It was as stark and clear as thin ice - ice with deep, black waters beneath, so cold they could kill.

'By the stars,' whispered Farsight, his emotions overcoming him. 'It's my fault. I took the original engram.' His almond eyes closed involuntarily. When they opened again, they were rimmed red. 'What have I done?'

'You were ordered to go to Kan'ji by the ethereal council,' said Shadowsun, her tone firm but gentle. 'There was not a soul in the Tau Empire that would have done otherwise.'

'I know,' said Farsight. 'I know that. I just... I can't believe...'

‘We must believe in our leaders, Shoh. That is our way.’

A long pause stretched between them.

‘I know what you are going to say next,’ whispered Farsight. ‘Trust in our destiny.’

‘Yes,’ said Shadowsun, her expression softening just a little. ‘That might be a good idea.’

‘You are right, of course.’ He hung his head. ‘I offer contrition, O’Shaserra. I shall keep my focus on this matter.’

She shook her head quickly, dismissively. ‘Stop apologising.’

‘It is not a sign of weakness, commander. You should try it one day.’

Shadowsun’s look of contempt was painful to witness. ‘You have changed so much,’ she said, ‘and yet so little.’

Farsight shuddered out a breath. ‘This is a dark time in our lives.’

‘Then do not make it darker,’ said Shadowsun. ‘We follow the path to the Greater Good, as the ethereals show it to us. Even if that path should lead through shadow, we must walk it with our heads held high, and we cannot do that without them. Not without risking a lapse into the Mont’au.’

The Time of Terror. Farsight felt his skin pucker at the very thought.

‘You near our position, commander,’ Shadowsun said archly. ‘It is time to do what you were born to do.’

‘I shall not be found wanting,’ said Farsight. ‘I promise you that.’

‘You had better not be, or I shall locate Monat-Kais and tell him to pay you a visit in the night. I shall see you once the trap is sprung.’

‘Until then. And thank you, commander.’

Shadowsun raised a perfectly-arched eyebrow, and cut the link.



# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## CULMINATION/THE KILLING BLOW

The *Silent Aftermath* came down outside the staggered hexagonal towers of Ath'adra, the four pillar-engines at each corner of the craft rotating until they were vertical. The craft powered down with such grace that Farsight hardly felt it land.

'Compliments, Y'eldi,' he said absently. After his conversation with O'Shaserra, there was much on his mind.

The transport bay was flooded with silver light, then gold. The inner doors at the craft's rear slid back, the ramp hinging down soundlessly.

Farsight stepped out in his XV8, the battlesuit's analysis arrays panning wide and its sensor vane rising to maximum elevation as it harnessed every possible screed of information from the environment. The five hex-towers of Ath'adra loomed high and proud in the middle distance. In the dusk, their faceted sides were rendered ivory, orange and black. O'Vesa's vast drop ship circled around to the macro dropsite beyond, Admiral Teng's Barracuda squadron acting as its escort.

The hex-towers were of different dimensions, but much the same design aesthetic. Lowest in height was the squat but massive tower emblazoned with a gigantic symbol of the

earth caste, the regular oval windows in its flanks glowing bright. Drone nests dotted its upper walls, the sophisticated helper-machines within them ready to come to life at a moment's notice. Farsight's punch-cylinder readout displayed a slight vibration coming from the earth caste tower's confines, as if it were generating an incredible amount of energy. The commander nodded in satisfaction – his requested protocols were already in place.

Next largest was the water caste hex-tower, its topmost plane ringed with elegant communications vanes. Casting a shadow upon it was the tower of the fire caste, where Farsight had spent many rotas discussing sept defence with his peers. Tidewall gunrigs bristled from the building's hexagonal roof, and artfully concealed battlesuit hangars dotted its upper stories.

Rising above the fire caste tower was the column of the air caste, tall and thin like the anatomies of the tau that dwelt there. Farsight had always been impressed by the building's environmental engineering. Inside the hollow tower was a marvel of earth caste science, an artificial column of low gravity intended to make the long-limbed aeronauts more comfortable. Atop the air caste tower were the winking lights of landing zones. Every so often a craft would lift off from it on a mission of deliverance.

Tallest of all was the tower of the ethereals. It was featureless other than the sign of their caste upon its flank and a viewing gallery at the top that enabled those inside to look down on the ordered landscape of Dal'yth as it stretched away to the horizon. Yet it did not need embellishments to convey its purpose. Its height and prominence spoke volumes.

The sweeprail that led from Gel'bryn reservoir rose up to embrace the earth caste tower, curling around it to the interior of the complex before coming back around the far side of the water caste building. It looped around the tower of the air caste, then that of the fire caste, and finally wound upward twice around the ethereal tower to the very

peak of the Ath'adra complex. Along the transmotive rail's length were node-stations that allowed passengers to disembark into the towers themselves. From a distance, the sweeprail looked like a cord binding five disparate elements as one. Its symbolism had never been lost on Farsight. The castes were linked together by communication, technology and common purpose.

Should the gue'ron'sha manage to penetrate the kauyons that O'Shaserra's fire caste had prepared for them, that common purpose would form their last line of defence.

A shadow fell across the landing site, its edge a gentle curve. The Manta *Elocution of Flame* had slid into place some hundred feet above.

'Commander Farsight? We ask your permission to approach.'

Farsight consulted his distribution array and blipped his assent. Against the inky sky he could make out Commander Sha'vastos as he descended from the Manta, his XV8 battlesuit's vectored retro-thrusters flaring and his saz'nami bodyguards close by. The aged veteran's Crisis suit was a welcome sight.

Less so was the battlesuit of Tutor Sha'kan'thas, drifting down alongside him. Farsight groaned inwardly. He was not sure he had the energy to deal with a mentally traumatised facsimile of Puretide and his old detractor Tutor Sha'kan'thas at the same time as planning the defence of a vital site.

'Greetings in the name of the Tau'va,' said Farsight to Commander Sha'vastos, pointedly ignoring the warrior at his side. 'Assuming that is still your name?'

Sha'vastos blipped the sign of the unworthy one, his battlesuit lowering in a gesture of deference.

'Commander, I—'

'Please, esteemed comrades,' said Tutor Sha'kan'thas. 'Allow me to speak first.'

Farsight's expression soured in his control cocoon. 'If you have something to say, say it now. The gue'ron'sha strike

approaches.'

'I have made many mistakes in my life,' said the old tutor, his tone that of one who has practised a speech many times. 'The worst of them was to hinder you in your career, Commander Farsight. At the battle domes I taught you practically nothing that you could not work out for yourself. When you proved yourself the greater mind, I sought to hold you back in the hope you would lead with maturity and experience instead of youthful pride. By doing so I became the proud one. I have not acted in the way demanded by the Tau'va. I undermined the trust our race has in you, and indirectly led to the loss of many of our caste's finest minds. I cannot live with this burden.'

'Parts of that are true,' said Farsight, 'but not all of it. Without adversity, we cannot evolve.'

'That is gracious of you to say,' said the tutor, 'but I must atone. It was I that levelled the accusation that you were vash'ya.'

Farsight shifted in his control cocoon, his blood pounding hot.

'I must start my life anew,' continued Tutor Sha'kan'thas. 'I shall take the role of monat, fighting alone until either I redeem myself, or give my life for the Greater Good.'

'You, a monat?' said Farsight. 'I must admit I did not see you taking that role.'

'I have been blinded by the clouds of a selfish perspective for too long. In my haste to prove myself a capable teacher, I forgot how to learn. That stops now. I begin my new life this day. To that end, I implore you - bestow upon me a new name.'

Farsight was taken aback by the change in his old adversary, but he did not speak. The sensor antennae of the water caste tower were at his back, no doubt recording his every word. The occasion demanded that he graciously forgive his old teacher, and order the tutor to redeem himself by fighting alongside the fire caste's finest in the battle to come. But there was a part of Farsight's soul, part

of his youth even, that still remembered every defamatory comment Tutor Sha'kan'thas had ever made. More importantly, the memory of the hurt behind Shadowsun's eyes when she had talked about her friend O'Myen was still fresh. With his accusations of Farsight being between spheres, Sha'kan'thas had led to Farsight's exile, to him dishonouring his mentor, and to the use of the engrams that had crippled some of the fire caste's finest minds.

Diplomacy be damned. The tutor would suffer.

'As you wish,' said Farsight, 'I take from you your former name and title, and give you the name *Sha'ko'vash* - fire's worthy cause. And you will live up to it, starting now. You shall return to Gel'bryn and descend into the deepest magnorail tunnels as a monat, there to hunt the gue'ron'sha known as the Scar Lords without so much as a drone to support you. The Scar Lords are disfigured monstrosities that are seeking to use the most covert means they can find as a way to gain entrance to our core buildings. Terminate as many of these vile creatures as you can. Kill them all and earn atonement, or die in the attempt.'

'Thank you, commander,' said the newly-named Sha'ko'vash, making the raised palms of the gift received. 'I shall go immediately.'

The monat turned and walked towards the nearest transmotive node, breaking into a bounding run as soon as he was clear of the landing zone.

'Good fortune,' said Farsight. 'And goodbye.'

'I must offer contrition, too,' said Commander Sha'vastos. 'When the foe's neck is exposed, only the unworthy stay the blade.'

'We will talk of that later, old friend,' said Farsight. 'Your fate is distressing enough as it is.'

'A fate avoided is a fate postponed,' said the commander awkwardly.

'Yes, thank you, commander,' said Farsight. 'I listened well to Master Puretide's wisdom in my four years atop Mount

Kan'ji. There is no need to reappraise me of it.'

'That is not what I heard,' came a familiar voice.

Farsight's mind reeled. 'Bravestorm? What are you doing on the cadre-net?'

'Using it to communicate with my field commander.'

There was a distinct thud from behind Farsight. He span around, only to be confronted by a massive iridium Crisis suit with a shield generator on one arm and an outsized gauntlet on the other.

'Reporting for duty,' said Commander Bravestorm. 'Do you want to see something shocking?'

'Not really,' said Farsight.

'Well, I offer no contrition whatsoever,' said Bravestorm, force-patching through a live feed to what lay behind the thick iridium armour of his plexus hatch.

'By the light of the Tau'va,' breathed Farsight.

'Indeed,' said Bravestorm dolefully. 'An unforgettable sight, even from the outside.' He paused, the battlesuit's posture changing from formal-ready to at ease.

'I won't be leaving this XV8, commander. This is the totality of my form.'

'I see,' said Farsight. 'A life support mechanism, then.'

'O'Vesa's best students constructed it. The speech relays are exceptional. I can almost fool myself I have a face again. But to think I shall never truly see, never sense anything again...' His battlesuit's giant gauntlet flexed, four massive articulated fingers clutching into a fist that glowed from the inside with barely suppressed power. 'It makes me want to kill.'

'Channel it, old friend,' said Farsight. 'Use that fire. Make the Imperials pay for what they did to you and your warriors at Blackthunder Mesa.'

'That is my intent, yes. The earth caste could not deaden my nervous system without ruining the interface with this suit. I am in serious pain, commander, at all times. I intend to repay it tenfold.'

'Then we must make a start,' said Farsight. 'The decoys

are in place. We must block the gue'ron'sha advance well before they get here.'

Farsight checked his topographical display. The Imperial tank column was moving at impressive speed from the outskirts of Gel'bryn, given the crudeness and bulk of its vehicles. They had already passed the reservoirs, heading straight for Ath'adra - and in the process, approached Shadowsun's kauyon traps inside the transmotive sweeprails.

'We'd better move out,' said Farsight. 'It would be a shame to miss Commander Shadowsun saving the fire caste's reputation.'

According to Farsight's distribution array, the Imperial vehicle column was one hundred and forty-six vehicles strong. At its fore were the boxy, cobalt blue vehicles of the Ultramarines cadre, pugnacious and graceless but with enough engine strength to crunch over rubble without slowing. The massive tracked giants at their fore were firing thick ruby laser beams at the overland transmotive tunnels as they approached, blasting away the structural integrity so that demolition shells from the rolling siege guns behind could shatter them to crumbled rock. Before the dust had settled the vehicles powered through the breach, each grinding set of tracks pulverising detritus into gravel and making the way clearer for the next. It was an impressive yet vulgar display of power. Farsight had never seen an adversary rush headlong into a trap so fast.

'This should be a simple challenge,' came Bravestorm's voice over the cadre-net. 'Once Shadowsun brings them to a halt, we will have them surrounded.'

'I hope you are correct,' said Farsight. 'All cadres, prepare for the mont'ka strike as soon as the kauyon has begun. The Way of the Short Blade will be our contingency in case the enemy closes in.'

Golden affirmation symbols winked across his distribution array. All was in readiness, yet something was nagging at

the back of Farsight's mind.

'Where are the gue'ron'sha warriors?' he said softly.

'Commander?' said Bravestorm. 'They are the brightly coloured ones blasting a path towards Ath'adra.'

'No,' said Farsight. 'I mean the Space Marines themselves.'

'Inside the vehicles,' said Bravestorm slowly. 'These humans are cunning. They are using transports to move from one location to another.'

'I am serious about this,' said Farsight, unease slowly churning in his gut. 'They tend to man their guns in person. Their turrets and pintles. Check the archives.'

'Perhaps they took the logical route this time,' said Bravestorm. 'Perhaps they are preserving their strength for the main conflict.'

'No,' said Farsight. 'I recognise the icons on their tanks. The V shape with the three vertical lines next to it. It denotes the Imperial numeral eight. I have seen that same cadre's warriors fight an orbital drop bareheaded, with their helms clamped at their waists, just to show they are not afraid. They would not waste a chance to take the first shot, not for safety's sake. That is not their mindset.'

'Wait,' said Bravestorm. 'You're not suggesting...'

'This is a decoy,' said Farsight, his voice rising as the shock hit home. 'There are no Space Marines inside those vehicles, just the crew, I'm sure of it! We are falling for their kauyon, Bravestorm, not the other way around!'

The symbol of the Kan'ji Mal'caor blipped upon Farsight's command suite. 'My infiltration cadre has been intercepted by elite gue'ron'sha,' came Shadowsun's voice, high and tense. 'They appeared from nowhere... a burst of light... I must look to my own.'

The air caste symbol of Admiral Teng flashed urgently on Farsight's coresystem control suite. With a great sense of foreboding, the commander eye-flicked it with one pupil whilst the other remained on the armoured column.

'Commander,' said the Admiral. 'We have inbound. At least

thirty airborne Imperial craft, converging upon Ath'adra from three separate cloudbanks.'

Farsight's eyes widened.

The fire caste had failed before the battle had even begun.

Captain Jorus Numitor sat in the steel-grey belly of the Thunderhawk gunship *Sword of Calth* as Techmarine Omnid drove it through the cloudbanks towards the hexagonal command complex. The gunship's interior scryer-slabs showed the site in the distance, lit up from within. It grew closer with each minute until Numitor could see dots of light in a thousand places, its curling transmotive rail lit up by whatever infernal lumen-technology the tau favoured. Behind him his command squad, each having secured a jump pack at Numitor's behest, were pre-blessing their ignition systems.

'Side portal disembark, captain?' said Enitor.

'No,' said Numitor. 'We use the tailgate, as per the Codex. And helms on.' He slid his into place.

Enitor and Drekos shared a look, the subtlest of nods passing between them.

'Techmarine Omnid,' said Numitor, 'are we nearly in position?'

'Aye,' said Omnid over the pilot's vox. 'Four minutes till green lumin, if these clouds stay thick. Captain, I have a confession to make.'

'Speak on, Omnid.'

'When I was running sanctifications at Theta Tert, the residual fuel in your jump pack proved anomalous. It was more refined than standard Adept-class promethium. Considerably more so.'

'We had to refuel en route. You purged it, I presume?'

'At first, yes. Then I took the liberty of analysing it, synthesising it with Theta Tert's silo arrays, and ensuring the Eighth had enough to go round.'

'Did you indeed,' said Numitor. 'You realise that is a serious breach of Cult Mechanicus commandments?'

'Hence the confession.'

'Will it work?'

'Better than you would believe. It is greater than the sum of its parts.'

'Then keep quiet about it,' said Numitor. 'I am sure Sergeant Sicarius will not object to the extra power, nor the rest of the Eighth, come to that. But it had better be stable.'

'It is. You have my word as a Techmarine, and as a disciple of Mars.'

'Very well. This stays between us.'

Numitor's command squad nodded in understanding. Checking their jump packs were twice-blessed and harness secured, they sent icons of readiness to Numitor's helm display one by one.

'A remote missive for you, captain,' said Omnid. 'It is the Lord Macragge. I am relaying it now.'

The Chapter Master appeared on the scryer-slab mounted atop the Thunderhawk's reliquary. His expression was imperious and grave.

'Captain Numitor,' he said. 'I have new orders for you. I have instigated a worldwide evacuation from the planet. The battlegroup invasion is to withdraw entirely and attend the fleet muster at Brimlock.'

'My lord,' protested Numitor, 'we are poised to strike at the tau command echelon.'

'A major alien incursion is encroaching upon Ultramar, captain, its designation unknown. Its current heading leads it straight to Prandium, jewel of our empire, then onto Macragge itself. You will make haste to the exact coordinates my astropathic choir is sending to Epistolary Elixus, and from there, make the warp jump to Ultramar's coreward Mandeville point. This matter is of the utmost importance.'

'Aye, Lord Calgar,' said Numitor. 'The Eighth will be there.'

'Dal'yth can wait, as can these upstart tau. Macragge cannot.'

'As you say, my lord.'

'Then farewell, captain, and may good fortune go with you.' Lord Calgar saluted, and the communique ended in a stuttered blurt of static.

'Drop site in three minutes, captain,' said Omnid.

Numitor turned back to his command squad. The veterans were all looking at him.

'Captain?' said Enitor. 'Do we break off the attack?'

Numitor did not reply for a moment. He could almost feel the paths of fate unfolding around him, the weight of the souls that would live or die based on his next decision.

'I realise time is of the essence,' said Numitor, 'but we are so close.'

'Surely we cannot receive orders to withdraw, and then immediately attack, without risking censure?' said Zaetus.

'To call it off now would strand many of our brothers without support,' said Drekos. 'The resultant gene-seed extraction would take longer than securing a swift victory, and likely cost more lives.'

'So we are to make the drop, then?' asked Enitor.

'Two minutes, captain,' said Techmarine Omnid. Vital seconds ticked past.

'I know it seems contrary to Lord Calgar's orders, but yes,' said Numitor. 'Many of our elements are already committed, the Astra Militarum amongst them. Without us, they will be slaughtered. We attack.'

Drekos nodded, and Vellu smiled. Enitor simply inclined his head, and turned to make his final preparations.

'All Eighth Company squads, ready drop,' said Numitor over the company vox. His helm array lit up with runes of readiness from each of his sergeants, Sicarius amongst them. Numitor closed channels on his vox until only his old comrade's rune was left.

'Sicarius,' said Numitor. 'I just got orders to withdraw from Lord Calgar. No doubt the other captains have received the same. Ultramar is in danger from a different breed of xenos altogether.'

‘Then why are we still inbound?’ asked Sicarius. ‘Surely this is no time to go against the Chapter Master’s orders.’

‘Drop site in ten seconds,’ came Omnid’s voice over the Thunderhawk’s interior hailer.

‘We need to make this strike, Sicarius,’ said Numitor.

‘Are you sure about this?’ said the sergeant.

‘Eight... Seven...’ said Omnid over the hailer.

‘Yes,’ said Numitor. ‘We do it. See you down there, old friend.’ He cut off the channel.

‘Six. Five.’

‘Portals open, Omnid.’

The Thunderhawk’s rear doors pistoned apart, and howling winds blasted Numitor as the gunship’s interior filled with the deep purple light of the planet’s sunset. The Dal’ythan gas cloud was visible in the distance, a faint blur of cold blue. Numitor felt the old familiar urge to leap headlong into the nothingness and never look back.

‘Four. Three.’

‘Clean dispersal, brothers,’ said Numitor, hefting the greataxe as his command squad took position. He looked down at Atheus’ gauntlet, still feeling strange upon his hand in lieu of his power fist.

‘Two. One. Site.’

‘For the Emperor!’ shouted Numitor. Leaning forward, he ran headlong into the Thunderhawk’s tailgate portal and leaped, triggering his jump pack and boosting away with his squad close behind.

It was strange, not having the air blasting straight into his face, but the sensation of freefall was still exhilarating. He smiled involuntarily inside his helmet, his grin wide and honest. Around him the Eighth were deploying with near-perfect dispersal.

Below them was the tau command site that Numitor and Sicarius theorised was the headquarters of the xenos Gel’bryn operation. Already tau craft were zooming through the thin clouds to counter-attack the airdrop. Numitor had seen that coming, and organised his assault

into three separate groups. If the tau pilot caste grouped to stop one, it would let the others through, but if it spread itself thin to intercept all three, it would be brushed aside.

To Numitor it looked as if the tau were opting for the latter. Two squadrons of the fighter craft were lifting off from the hex-tower with the airfield zone atop it, whilst a golden air superiority fighter cut through the skies ahead. The cannon mounted off-centre on its prow flashed, and fat spheres of blue energy shot towards them.

‘Evade,’ shouted Numitor. His squad engaged their jump packs, their formation exploding outward to let the hurtling spheres of energy pass. Numitor shut off the vox, laughing wildly for a moment before reopening the channel.

‘Everything in order, captain?’ asked Enitor.

‘Yes,’ said Numitor. ‘Never better!’

The five hexes of the command centre were growing ever larger, a thick column of Imperial tanks crawling towards them from the south. The front elements were swathed in smoke, the Land Raiders at the point of the spear on fire and slewed at a bad angle. The tau had taken the bait and hit the vehicle column hard, but in doing so they had left the Eighth free to make a vertical assault. Furthermore, a hundred and fifty tanks was not a force to be stopped easily. Baleghast transports were already peeling off from the main column and driving onward at full speed, escorted by Razorbacks and the occasional Predator battle tank.

‘Backup inbound,’ said Numitor, ‘we won’t be doing this alone.’

‘Alone would have been fine,’ came Sergeant Sicarius’ voice over the vox-net. ‘The Eighth was made for this kind of action.’

‘You say that now,’ said Numitor. ‘Look at the largest of the hex-towers. Recognise the anatomy of the machine on top of it?’

‘Is that great beast the thing we crippled back in the jungle?’

‘That, or something very similar,’ replied Numitor. ‘We

take that out first, or the Baleghasts are dead on arrival. The thing has no shortage of companions, either.'

Around the giant warsuit were six teams of artillery suits. Three had long-barrelled rail cannons held before them much like a Devastator would hold a heavy bolter. As Numitor watched, they fired solid shots that left striated cylinders of air disturbance in their wake before the whip-crack sound of their fusillade reached him. Where the artillery suits struck, Astra Militarum tanks rocked on their suspension before springing high on columns of flame, their turrets spiralling away to smash into the vehicles behind. The other three artillery suits had boxy missile arrays in place of gauntlets, their design reminiscent of the titanic walker the Eighth had fought in the jungle environment. Salvo after salvo streaked out, white contrails intertwining as the missiles smashed into the Ultramarines Rhinos bullying through the wreckage of their comrades' tanks. One by one the vehicles were ripped apart, yet more wrecks in the burning scrapyard that the armoured spearhead had become.

'We need a sacrifice,' said Sicarius, his voice clear over Numitor's earpiece. 'They're taking us apart down there.'

'Sergeant Kinosten,' voxed Numitor. 'Do you receive this?'

'Go ahead, captain,' came the reply. An explosion sounded nearby.

'We need to distract the warsuits atop the lowest tower. Find cover, disembark your men, and get a few Chimeras in there on autodrive to force their hand. We will do the rest.'

'No time to disembark, sir,' said Kinosten. 'We're going in now. And captain?'

'Disembark, sergeant!' shouted Numitor, 'that's a direct order!'

'Tell Duggan to shove his fancy sword up his backside.'

Pennants streaming, the Baleghasts' armoured column drove straight towards the lowest of the hex-towers, the heavy bolters and multilasers of their machines stitching fire across the giant warsuit's indomitable hide. There was

a blue glow at the end of the behemoth's shoulder-cannon, a flash, and two Baleghast Chimeras were simply erased from existence. The vehicles behind veered crazily to avoid the glowing, perfectly oval crater that was left in their wake. In doing so they allowed the squadron of Leman Russes behind to approach the lip of the crater and open fire, pounding the giant warsuit on the roof with one battle cannon shell after another.

When the smoke dissipated, the monstrosity was scorched, dented, but still standing. The Leman Russes began to reverse, slowly but steadily, further confusing the ranks of the armoured column.

Missiles streaked from the artillery warsuits atop the roof, a score of warheads, then another – enough to kill a platoon of infantry three times over. Numitor grimaced as they careened towards the Baleghast column. Suddenly the top hatch of a languishing Chimera was thrown open, a tiny figure in a greatcoat crawling out from it. A wall of flame burst into being in front of the hurtling missiles, and they cooked off as they passed through, the pyrotechnics of their detonation doing nothing more than light the battlefield.

The rush of freefall was fading for Numitor, replaced by a powerful feeling of anticipation. The hex complex and the ground were growing nearer with every second. The third tallest of the hexagonal towers, each of its corners host to a massive cannon structure, would have them in its arc of fire any moment. Worse still, with its primary target rendered non-viable, the xenos war goliath below was revolving its massive missile arrays skyward.

'Throne,' said Numitor. 'It's seen us! Omnid, the Diving Eagle!'

The Thunderhawk, locked in a deadly aerial duel with the golden superiority fighter that had fired upon them, disengaged and took two punishing hits from its tau opponent in the process.

*'There had better be a good reason, captain,'* said Omnid.

*'Can the Sword withstand a direct missile hit?'* said

Numitor.

*'Depends on the missile,'* said Omnid, the stress in his voice obvious as he put the machine into a near-vertical dive towards Numitor. *'But almost certainly.'*

*'How about a dozen?'*

*'No. It's those railgun towers I am worried about.'*

Numitor changed his vox-channel and turned in midair to see the second spearhead bully its way past a thin cordon of tau fighters.

*'Stormraven squadrons, take out the roof-mounted cannons on the tower's southern side, optimum dispersal!'*

His command was answered almost immediately by a profusion of strike missiles, their yellow-tipped warheads briefly visible as they streaked from the Stormravens to detonate upon the high-necked railcannon emplacements punching hypervelocity shot into the sky. Two of the tau gun towers were struck in the centre line, and toppled like felled trees. Smoke trailed as they tumbled down to smash into the xenos infantry fanning out of the building's gate-ports.

Numitor turned back into the Codex freefall position, explosions of tau flak bursting nearby to buffet him with tremendous forces. As the Assault Marines plummeted, the boxy missile arrays of the war goliath came into focus, the machine stomping around ponderously to get a better bearing on the Thunderhawk before letting fly. A profusion of missiles soared straight upwards towards the gunship, some no bigger than a tank shell, some as long as Numitor's arm.

*'Stay directly above it, Omnid,'* voxed Numitor. *'The cannon on its shoulder is its most powerful weapon, but it has a limited range of movement. It also takes a moment to recharge after firing. We know this from experience.'*

*'Understood.'*

The goliath's missile salvo, as orderly in their flight as a flock of migrating birds, hurtled upwards towards the Thunderhawk. They detonated upon the thick ceramite in a

serial burst of explosions. The heavily-armoured gunship continued its headlong dive – scorched, swathed in flame, but unhurt.

Thin beams of blue light flickered vertical from drones in the sphere-nodes ridging the rooftops, glancing across the Thunderhawk's prow. A moment later the artillery warsuit released two more missiles; they shot out at a sharp angle before veering upwards on an intercept course. These projectiles were of truly daunting size. Four fins ringed their thick bodies, extending and adjusting mid-flight as they roared towards the Thunderhawk coming at them in a vertical dive.

'*Numitor,*' said Omnid warily, '*I am not so sure about these ones.*'

The *Sword's* heavy bolter sponsons thundered out their self-propelled bolts, but at such velocity and with such relatively small targets, they flew wide.

'Sicarius, Vosarian, can you intercept those two missiles?' asked Numitor.

'*We can try,*' said Sergeant Vosarian. Numitor saw Vosarian's squad alter their flight path at full dive, jump packs flaring bright.

'We can succeed,' said Sicarius, blasting from Numitor's blind spot towards the nearest missile. He put a plasma shot right atop the first missile's squared-off warhead, and the sky was lit by a violent white burst. A split second later there was a thunderous boom that caused Numitor's photolenses to dim before his vision blurred back into place.

Squad Vosarian took their shots, bolt pistols barking as they flew in. Incredibly, the square-bodied missile veered away as if sensing the threat, compensating immediately afterwards to hurtle on towards the *Sword of Calth*.

Inbuilt drone intelligence. A warhead most likely designed to fell Titans.

And the gunship was in full dive towards it.

'*I have the unhallowed thing cold, Numitor,*' said Omnid.

*'I'm taking the shot.'*

The Thunderhawk fired its dorsal turbo-laser destructor, and a thick column of ruby energy burned vertically through the skies to bullseye the goliath warsuit straight and true. The killing force of the strike punched through the machine's head, down through its chest, and out from between its splayed legs, gutting it completely in a blinding burst of scarlet light.

Then the warsuit's macro-missile struck the Thunderhawk's nosecone. The detonation was so violent it ripped the ancient gunship's cockpit wide open and annihilated both Omnid and his co-pilot in a single terrible moment. A titanic explosion threw stark shadows across the battlefield below.

The Thunderhawk's ravaged remains hurtled downward with a rising roar. Tau scattered below, warsuits disengaging from firing positions to stomp away, but they were too slow. The gunship ploughed so hard into the lowest hexagonal tower that the craft's reactor core gave out in a cataclysmic explosion that consumed every tau, drone and battlesuit atop the roof.

Numitor braced himself a moment before the freefalling Eighth were scattered, all coherence lost as their drop vector was hit by the pressure wave. Flung high with his helm readouts haywire, Numitor fought to claw back some kind of cohesion. His greataxe was throwing his balance off, but he held it tight. It took him a moment to find his equilibrium and rejoin his squad as they pulled back into formation.

The crimson warsuit, attended by a cluster of its fellows, was bounding towards them from the darkness of the south. The elite team blasted from one roof, then another, touching down on the third in a cloud of dust.

'Sicarius!' shouted Numitor. 'Behind the gun towers! The xenos warlord!'

*'I see him,'* said Sicarius grimly. *'Intercepting now.'*

'With me,' voxed Numitor to his squad. Flinging out his

legs, he engaged his jump pack and hurtled towards the hex structure with the circular crest of the tau military. The sheer power of the pack's turbines was incredible – the fuel Omnid had provided was a revelation.

Numitor's attention was drawn for a moment to the chain of transmotes sliding soundlessly around the perimeter of the tower. Indistinct figures massed inside. Something about their rangy silhouettes was strangely familiar.

Then Numitor's mortis signals blipped, and a pair of missiles shot past him, exploding upon Enitor's pauldron and hip.

The veteran cried out as he spiralled out of control. 'I'm down!'

'We will make them pay,' said Numitor grimly. Three of the tau warsuits were boosting towards them, the quad-cannons on their shoulders spitting thin lozenges of plasma. Numitor twisted away, but their aim was sound, and the volleys were unavoidable.

'Brace!' he shouted.

A flaring sphere of energy, and he rocketed through, unscathed.

'*Iron halo, captain,*' said Apothecary Drekos. '*Get used to it.*'

Numitor released a deep breath inside his helm, silently thanking Atheus for the gift from beyond the grave.

Another pair of missiles streaked up towards them from the warsuit group below. This time Numitor was ready, batting them both away with a wide sweep of his greataxe and bursting through the resultant cloud of flame. The axe's swing was absurdly heavy, and the momentum threatened to unbalance him. This time he went with it, twisting around as he shot like a bolt of blue lightning towards the three xenos warsuits.

He brought the artefact weapon around in a wide loop, trusting to his instincts.

The axe's edge struck the first warsuit so hard it ripped the chest unit in two, the fleshy ruin of the hewn pilot

inside flying out of the control seat in an explosion of blood and sparks. A split second later Numitor collided shoulder-first with the machine's remains. It flew backwards into the warsuit behind it, knocking it off-balance as it tried to dodge past. Numitor saw an opening and thrust the axe out one-handed right into its path. The edge of the blade clipped the second battlesuit's head unit from its neck, sending it spinning end over end to smash into the tower below in an explosion of rock dust.

'Blessed aquila,' said Numitor in surprise.

*'A fitting start for our new Lord Executioner!'* laughed Vellu as he knocked a veering missile aside with his combat shield, thrusting his power sword down through the neck of the warsuit that had fired it.

*'Time for back-slapping later, Vellu,'* said Drekos. *'At them!'*

Numitor, overshooting the tower after his deadly strike, planted his feet on a jutting antennae array instead. He sprung upwards to bound over the remains of a shattered gun tower, his command squad following suit.

As soon as they crested the lip, Numitor's world exploded into light. A horizontal storm of plasma greeted his squad, blasting Drekos, Vellu and Zaetus back over the rounded wall of the tower in a shower of vaporised blood. Numitor was struck too, but the energies of his iron halo dissipated the first volley, then the second. The third hit with a series of stabbing, agonising impacts. Numitor crashed awkwardly to the rubble-strewn ground, his momentum sending him tumbling head over heels to land in a smoking pile of limbs as Atheus' greataxe skittered away.

The crimson warsuit loomed over him, its bodyguards close behind and the barrel of its cylindrical plasma gun levelled at his head.

'Disappointing,' it said in accented Low Gothic.

There was a clattering thud as Squad Sicarius slammed into the enemy from above, closely followed by a string of explosions from their bolt pistol fire. The crimson warsuit

was only distracted for the briefest moment, but Numitor was already rolling away. Then Sicarius was in the thick of them, spinning and whirling, his Talassarian blade a blur as it cut through legs, wrists and weapons. A burst of plasma from his pistol knocked back the first warsuit long enough for him to ram his blade up under its waist gimbal and into the cockpit. A sharp kick took the leg from the second even as its rotary cannon spat fire. Sicarius was already under it, a shoulder-lunge boosted by his jump pack's engines slamming the thing into the wall. Before it could right itself Sicarius fired his plasma pistol through the thing's vision slit, a sidelong blast of blue light marking the pilot's demise.

A team of three warsuits hovered in close, weapons levelled at Sicarius' back. Denturis hit them like a charging bull, twin chainswords shrieking as they gnawed through metal to take the barrels from their guns one after another. Veletan and Colnid fired bolt pistols at joints and sensors as they strode in, the explosions tearing the hesitating tau suits into pieces. Another team hove into view, only for Kaetoros to slam down in front of them, his flamer blasting a geyser of promethium flame so intense it knocked the warsuits backwards. Their blazing hulks staggered away, two falling back over the edge of the tower as crackling fireballs. The third hovered upward, a burning devil in the sky, before a plasma shot from Sicarius blasted it limb from limb. Omnid's alchemy with the fuel had paid off a dozen times over, the pyre of dead tau below a fitting tribute to his martyrdom.

Suddenly the crimson warsuit shot upwards, the flight vanes on its jet pack angling as it soared up to the ring of blue lights circling the highest of the hex-towers.

'After it!' shouted Sicarius. 'Surround it!'

A backblast of flame, a cloud of promethium stink, and Squad Sicarius hurtled after the xenos commander into the darkening skies.

Numitor recovered his axe, cracking his neck as his

battleplate ran diagnostics. He was hurt, but not out of the fight, more than could be said for Zaetus and Vellu. Their status sigils all showed the red of critical damage. Drekos sent the helix rune; he was down there attending to their wounds, but they would not be back in the fray before it was over.

‘Thank you, Cato,’ said Numitor to the blue flames disappearing into the night above. ‘I will repay the favour someday.’

*‘We are brothers, are we not?’* came the reply over the vox. *‘Now get back up and put that oversized meat cleaver to use!’*

Smiling to himself, Numitor leaped up into the night on a pillar of flame.

The lights of the tallest tower flashed by, gold in the darkness, as Jorus Numitor shot upward.

‘Permission to join you, captain?’

Magros roared up alongside him, the red helm of the sergeant clamped at his waist and Trondoris’ six-foot eviscerator held across his shoulder.

‘Very much so,’ said Numitor. ‘Decided against the helm this time?’

‘Twenty-eight years of doing things sensibly,’ came the reply. ‘It is time to feel the wind in my face.’

The rest of the Macraggians roared upwards, coming alongside Numitor as one. Golotan, his cracked ceramite welded whole in a spider-web tracery across his chest, sketched an aerial salute.

‘To have you at the tip of the spear is a relief,’ said Duolor, holding his plasma pistol in both hands at his side as it recharged. ‘And to welcome you back is a pleasure.’

‘The red warsuit leads us into a vertical trap,’ said Aordus, jump pack flaring as he swooped within a hand’s breath of the hex-tower. ‘Let us not make an easy target.’

‘Good advice, Aordus,’ said Numitor. ‘Everyone close to the wall, and ready frags.’

The captain's fuel gauge was dropping low, but there was still enough to get to the top of the tower. The tau commander had been banking on the Assault Marines having limited reach, but once again he had underestimated the Eighth – and Numitor intended to make him pay dearly for the error.

Either that, or Aordus was right, and Numitor was about to repeat the mistake that had cost him his command squad.

The giant gold orbs that studded the exterior of the tallest hex-tower flashed by, then a luminous strip of glasteel-analogue, the viewing gallery beyond empty of all but light.

'Calgarians!' he shouted. 'Let me take the first volley! The rest of you burn slow! Grenades on my mark!'

The Assault Marines fell back a little, enough to claim they had followed the order, but not enough to prevent them from taking some of the shots meant for Numitor if it came to it. The captain clenched his teeth in frustration. No time to reprimand them.

'Now!'

Four frag grenades were flung upwards, cresting the tower's roof to detonate in a devastating hail of shrapnel. Numitor braced himself for a storm of plasma as he crested the lip of the tower.

Nothing.

Sicarius stood in the centre of the roof, his tempest blade held out wide with his squad close by. The crimson battlesuit stood alone before him, maybe twenty feet distant, the boxy blaster on its forearm held behind a long-barrelled plasma weapon and a shimmering disc of force.

Numitor was about to hurtle in for the kill when he recognised when he had seen Sergeant Sicarius' stance before.

It was the *en garde* of a Talassarian honour duel.

Commander Farsight took in every detail of the Space Marine warrior that faced him. The creature was stocky,

but powerful - half the size of a battlesuit and nowhere near as well armed. But he had seen these creatures fight. They were strong, fast, and determined; those that wore the coloured helms of their elite most of all.

This one, by its stance, wanted to fight him and him alone.

Farsight felt the weight of the Code of Fire upon him. He had contingencies left: two of them, in fact. But there was no way he would refuse this duel, even if there were no other living soul within a hundred leagues - and no way his warriors would breach the code by interrupting it. This was tau against human, the Greater Good versus the Imperium of Man. The clash of two spacefaring empires epitomised by two rival avatars of battle.

It could not be denied.

'Your name, bladesman?'

'Sergeant Cato Sicarius of Talassar, Ultramarines Eighth Company.'

'I am called Shas'o Vior'la Shovah Kais Mont'yr, Commander of the Second Sphere.'

'Meaningless noise to me, alien. I will take your head, for the Imperium and for those of my brothers you have killed.'

'Then you may call me death!'

Farsight sprinted forward, honour pennants fluttering behind him as he raised his rifle and fired a double blast of plasma at the gue'ron'sha. His adversary was already leaping aside, just as the commander knew he would. Farsight swept his fusion blaster's beam around two feet from the ground to take the warrior's legs, but the bladesman was already leaping over it with a blast of his jump pack. Level with the XV8's head, the Space Marine kicked out hard, almost tearing the sensor node from the battlesuit's neck and sending Farsight's control cocoon screens haywire for a critical second.

Farsight heard a barking laugh, and sensed rather than saw the sword descending. He raised his shield, eye-flicking its field to maximum. There was a blaze of warring energies as disruption weapon fought shield technology,

but Farsight's generator was far more powerful, and the blade slid away.

The Space Marine landed with a thump, and Farsight triggered his repulsor jets, his battlesuit gliding backwards a few feet from the ground. Raising a fat-barrelled plasma sidearm, the warrior took a shot as he ran forward with his blade carving in a figure of eight. A canny ploy; Farsight's generator flared to prevent the plasma bolt, and in the miniscule lag of recharge his opponent's blade slashed away a big chunk of the XV8's torso and much of its right thigh. His damage control hub flashed, the tiny holographic doppelganger of his suit glowing red where the wounds had been inflicted. Farsight staggered backwards, kicking out in desperation. To his relief the blow connected as the Space Marine came in hard, sending him skidding along the white marble of the Ethereal Tower's roof.

With a blast of jump jets the warrior was straight back in, the plasma rifle shots with which Farsight had intended to end the duel flying wide. His adversary's glowing blade came down again, and the commander raised his shield – only to realise it was a feint. The Space Marine reversed the sword's course, span it, and sheared the barrel from his plasma rifle with no more effort than if it had been a paper tube. A straight kick in the plexus followed, and Farsight reeled backwards, eye-flicking his repulsor jets to keep from going over.

This foe's strength was in aggression, skill and limitless confidence.

On the warrior came again, the same tactic. Off balance, Farsight saw his doom on the point of that sword. This time the plasma sidearm flared white, steaming, but did not fire. A stay of execution. Then a flash of insight – a duel with O'Kais upon Mount Kan'ji, a flick of the staff, well-timed. O'Kais staggering past to splash into the icy river, face a mask of fury.

The gue'ron'sha warrior shouted an oath and came in, his sword crackling blue in an overhead sweep with the

strength of humanity's hatred behind it. Farsight brought his fusion blaster up in a warding sweep, intending to take his foe's head, but he mistimed the strike. His fusion beam went high, taking his enemy's blade instead.

The top half of the sword span away to clatter, scorched black, on the roof. The thuggish Space Marine roared like a wounded krootox, leaping forward, his knee coming up to force the shield generator's pulse - and then rammed his half-blade through the vision slit at the top of the XV8's chest.

Two feet of jagged metal burst through the slit's meniscus layer, entering Farsight's control cocoon with a scream of protesting metal. Its blackened tip rushed towards him, a hair's breadth from his eyeball when it came to a sudden halt.

There was a burst of noise and activity from the other side of the roof. Farsight's screens, half-crazed by the fading energies of the powered blade's disruption core, showed nothing conclusive.

But he was still alive. For now, that was enough.

Captain Numitor was the only one not watching the duel, and even then, only with the greatest effort of willpower. Subvocalising orders to the battle raging below, he heard the plaintive voice of Malagrea over the din of war.

+Jorus Numitor,+ came her wheezing tones, tickling the back of his mind like an itch. +Beware the long-hawks. And look to the stars.+

Frowning, Numitor looked up in time to see a giant shape blot out the Dal'ythan gas cloud. Thin strips of light glittered on its underside like the bioluminescence of some ocean predator. It was as large as an Astra Militarum drop ship, yet almost entirely silent. Suddenly a pair of xenos warsuits dropped out of the sky. Long blades of light blazed down from one of them towards him.

Numitor threw himself aside a fraction of a second before the beams burned black holes deep into the hex-tower's

roof, carving in a giant X pattern to bisect Aordus where he stood. The two halves of the Assault Marine's corpse fell apart with a disgusting hissing noise before clattering onto the marble roof.

'Attack!' shouted Numitor, both a warning and an imperative. Sicarius span around, leaping away from the fallen xenos commander to fire plasma bolts into those enemies dropping towards them.

Chaos erupted atop the hex-tower as the two warsuits touched down. One deflected Magros' scything eviscerator with a shimmering wall of force before punching him in the chest with a glowing gauntlet. The blow sent the Ultramarine flying thirty feet across the roof. The other warsuit swiped twelve-foot long blades of fusion energy across Squad Sicarius. Most of the Space Marines read the blow as it came and evaded in time.

Colnid, a fraction slower, was shorn in two from hip to shoulder.

Numitor cried out, hurtling in with his greataxe swinging. The shield-toting warsuit stepped forward to meet him, taking the power weapon on his energy wall in a thunderous boom of clashing forces. Off balance, Numitor saw the return blow too late. The xenos suit threw a massive articulated fist that crashed against the field of Numitor's iron halo so hard the energy discharge turned his vision grey and sent him stumbling back across the roof.

The second battlesuit followed up close behind. Rendered monochrome by Numitor's scrambled photolenses, it swung a blade of pure light at Numitor's head. The iron halo burned bright. This time, the force field's icon on the captain's helm array faded out altogether.

Numitor's sight returned to normal just as the first warsuit swung its great fist. He rolled under the blow, kicking out to fold the thing's knee before coming up with the greataxe curving in a low arc underneath its shield. The blow connected, ripping the tau's shield arm away with such force it sailed out over the hex-tower's lip.

Numitor grinned fiercely, swinging his axe around in a killing arc.

‘Now you die,’ he said.

Farsight finger-pushed failsafes and overrides on every screen of his control cocoon, desperately bringing them back online as his autocompensators got the XV8 back to its feet. The scene on the roof was utter carnage. By the look of it, as soon as the Space Marine bladesman’s sword had plunged through Farsight’s plexus hatch, Commander Bravestorm had dropped into the fight, heedless of the odds against him and regardless of their prearranged plan. With him was a battlesuit that was unmistakably that of Commander Brightsword. His fusion blasters had long, tapering energy blades extending from their barrels that seemed permanently active.

Farsight had a flash of memory – a dormant clone in the depths of O’Vesa’s laboratory complex, its resemblance to his dead friend Brightsword uncanny. No time to untangle that mind-knot now. The Space Marines, outnumbering the tau three to one, were on the cusp of victory.

Time to redress the balance.

‘Bravestorm,’ he transmitted. ‘You and your companion must clear the zone immediately to the appended distance. Drone-net, come in close on my position, suppressive fire. All personnel, prepare for Rala’tas manoeuvre. We have no other choice.’

‘No, commander,’ said Bravestorm, his XV8 veering backwards as a Space Marine swept an impractically large axe a hand’s breadth from his plexus hatch. ‘I cannot leave. I will fight at your side until death!’

‘Bravestorm,’ said Farsight. ‘You are jeopardising my strategy. Leave immediately.’

Something in his voice must have got through to the fearless commander, for Bravestorm blipped the gold sign of acknowledgement and launched from the lip of the tower.

‘All shaper kindreds, disembark and climb,’ said Farsight. ‘Whoever that is wearing Brightsword’s mantle, go high.’

The warrior shot vertical, carving an X into the roof that sent the Imperials diving to avoid the same fate as their slain comrades.

‘Farewell for now, unworthy ones.’

A storm of pulse carbine fire erupted as a drone-net cloud crested the lip of the tower, keeping the Space Marines low. The gue’ron’sha returned fire, blasting several of the drones out of the sky, but the distraction had bought the time intended. As his battlesuit righted itself, Farsight watched Bravestorm’s icon connect with that of the *Aftermath*, the Orca bearing the commander away at speed.

A water caste accord message, priority gold, spooled across Farsight’s command suite. He read it, and smiled.

Ahead, several of the Space Marines turned to face him, their strange tooth-edged blades roaring in their fists. He could feel the force of their anger, so pure it could burn an empire to ash.

‘O’Vesa,’ said Farsight, kicking the manual release of his suit’s access hatch. ‘Initiate.’

The distant thrum of the earth caste hex-tower, represented by a tight sine wave on Farsight’s control display, spiked hard as an electromagnetic pulse of staggering force burst out from its depths. The purple hemisphere of its perimeter expanded out across one mile, then two, leaving nothing but darkness in its wake.

Numitor raised his greataxe for the blow that would finally slay the crimson-armoured war leader, flaring his jump pack just as a purple wave of crackling electromagnetic force passed across him.

Nothing happened. His helm displays dimmed and disappeared, his warsight reduced to whatever he could make out through its reddish-black lenses.

A rising sense of unease swept over Numitor as he realised his armour’s systems had shorted out entirely. The

serial generators of his backpack were silent as the grave. The captain took a heavy step forward, then another, but it was real effort. Many of his squad did the same, stamping the roof involuntarily as if its gravity had increased threefold. Veletan stumbled, and fell with a heavy crash.

The machine-spirits of the Ultramarines' battleplate were utterly dormant. What had once been some of the finest personal wargear the Adeptus Mechanicus could devise was now little more than dead weight. Numitor's axe fell from stiff fingers to clang hard onto the roof.

The captain's sense of rising disquiet increased as he saw strange, hooked hands curl over the lip of the tower. Avian heads, beaked and quilled, were just visible in the gloom. Gangly silhouettes hauled themselves up and over the edge of the roof – a dozen, then two. With a grinding effort, the captain unholstered his bolt pistol, aimed and pulled the trigger. It too did not respond, its belligerent little machine-spirit exorcised by the tau's nullifying witchery.

Clawed fingers eclipsed Numitor's eye lenses for a moment, nimble talons disengaging the exterior clamps with a hiss of depressuring air. His helmet was lifted free. The captain elbowed back hard, but did not connect. In instant later he felt a blade at his throat – razor sharp, with enough pressure behind it to draw blood.

The oily stink of the xenos mercenaries known as the kroot filled his nostrils, so pungent it made his eyes water.

'Captain?' asked Magros. Numitor saw the warrior in his peripheral vision. He too had a blade at his neck. All of them did.

'Just kill us then,' growled Sicarius.

Numitor thought back to Malagrea's warning. Beware the long-hawk. The red warsuit facing them was stock still, rendered inert by the electromagnetic pulse. But these kroot, avian and stealthy, were not robotic facsimiles like those in the earth caste facility. These were the real thing – slender eaters of flesh, skin-takers and cannibals. They needed no war-tech to work their hunter's arts.

Ahead, the warsuit's hatch was kicked open, and a slender tau warrior dropped out to land in a hunter's crouch. He stood slowly, and bowed without taking his eyes from Numitor's. The captain expected to see an alien expression of triumph on the flat slab of the warlord's face, but instead saw something that looked more like sadness.

'Parley, I think you call it,' said the xenos, his Low Gothic strangely lilting but accurate.

'Very well,' replied Numitor. 'As soon as you have your pets take their blades from our throats.'

'I think not,' said the tau warlord. 'Not yet. Honoured citizens of Pech, please stay your hands. But if even one of these gue'ron'sha moves, kill them all.'

Sicarius spat a gobbet of acidic saliva towards the xenos leader. It landed a hand's breath from his three-toed foot, hissing as it burnt into the scorched roof. The alien calmly took a step backwards, and made a complex gesture with his hands.

Something whispered at the back of Numitor's mind. The astropath, Malagrea. This time, it was an impression, more than words - a trillion malevolent eyes, all united by a single, galaxy-devouring hunger.

For the first time in his life, Numitor felt true horror.

'You have inflicted much damage upon Dal'yth,' said the alien warlord. 'Scarred it deeply as you fought to conquer it for your Emperor. Though I should not say this, I respect you for the skill and strength you have shown here.'

Numitor frowned, but did not speak. The threat of imminent violence hung in the air, almost thick enough to taste. But with every piece of Imperial war-tech temporarily rendered dormant, and with the tau able to bring in reinforcements from outside the electromagnetic blast zone, a single hostile action could result in a massacre.

'You are faithless bastards all,' said Sicarius, 'and one day you will be put to death, in the name of the Emperor.'

'Faith is a powerful force indeed, it is true,' said Farsight. 'We have our own faith - not in one of our number raised to

godhood, but in a mutual destiny that cannot be denied.'

'Think well before you talk of such things,' said Numitor. 'Though it may cost me my life, I feel sure I could snap you in two before I bled out.'

'You would attack an unarmed opponent?' said the alien. 'You would put the lives of your brothers in unnecessary danger? I thought you had honour, you Ultramarines. Or is that the Hammers of Dorn?'

'What would you know of honour,' snarled Sicarius.

'I know that if it is broken, it cannot easily be repaired. We too have a warrior code.'

'Lies,' said Sicarius.

'For instance,' said the alien, 'I would consider it dishonourable to give my cadres the order to hunt down and kill every one of your white-armoured medics, ensuring their ritual death flasks are ground beneath our boots. That would be a stain upon my soul I could not erase.'

Numitor felt his gorge rise at the thought of the primarchs' legacy scattered in the dust, but struggled to keep his expression neutral.

'It would be a great shame if matters came to that,' continued the xenos warlord. 'Enough lives have been lost, on both sides, for us to learn from this. But my advisors have recently told me your masters have ordered an evacuation, so perhaps such extreme measures are not needed after all.'

The Ultramarines glanced at one another in disbelief. Numitor met Sicarius' gaze. His fingers, stiff with the effort of moving the dormant power armour, picked out a message in Talassarian sea-cant.

Home. In. Danger.

'I see,' said Sicarius, speaking as much to Numitor as the alien. 'So be it. And if we do withdraw this day, alien, you will simply let us leave? Every last army, craft and trooper?'

'Yes,' said the xenos warlord. 'You have my word on that, as a commander of the fire caste.'

This time, Sicarius did not grunt in disbelief. 'Stand down,

squad,' said the sergeant. 'There is more truth to this foul alien's claim than you realise.'

A stunned silence pervaded across the roof. Nine pairs of eyes looked to Numitor, and he nodded, slowly and sombrely.

'It is true,' he said. 'Ultramar is in danger.'

'Citizens of Pech,' said the warlord, 'release these ones. They are under the shield of truce, and must return to defend their own planet.'

Numitor felt the knife blade move from his throat, his augmented blood clotting within seconds as the stink of the kroot's proximity faded away.

'Allies can be most useful, captain,' said the tau commander as he turned to Numitor, 'and sometimes found in the strangest places.'

A massive drop ship bellied down out of the clouds, its ramp extending as it neared the hex-tower's roof. A pairs of battlesuits descended gracefully from the portals on the side of the craft. Extending their manipulator gauntlets, they reached under the inert warsuit and bore it upwards with a loud thrum of repulsor jets.

The alien warlord waited for the ship's ramp to touch the edge of the tower and stepped onto it, making another complex gesture with his hands as he backed away.

'Our civilisations will cross paths again,' said Sicarius. 'That I promise you, alien. And on that day, there will be blood.'

'I am sure of it,' said the xenos warlord sadly, turning and walking slowly into the craft as it drifted towards the stars.



## EPILOGUE

Commander Farsight heard the low chime of the bedchamber's portal. Steeling his mind, he stood up from the spartan recliner of the dorm-cell. At the head of the recliner was Sha'vastos' neatly arranged dress uniform, old fashioned but impeccably presented. Farsight's knees ached from sitting in the same position for so long, and he had not felt a meditative calm for almost two rotas, but by the look of the symbol showing on the door panel, his long vigil was at an end.

The commander cast a last glance behind him, through the window slit. Farsight could just see the *Aftermath* in the distance, its cargo hold sealed and the stasis casket safely inside.

'This time, it is I that offers you contrition, old friend,' he said softly, touching the dress uniform on the chest.

Walking to the portal, he steeled himself, straightening his apparel and standing as upright as he could.

'Open,' he said.

The panels of the portal slid into their recesses.

The force of Aun'Va's presence struck Farsight like the first rays of the dawn. The Ethereal Master was standing an arm's length away as if for a ceremonial portrait, tall and

magnificent in his robes of office with his ethereal guard flanking him on either side. The sheer aura of authority was overwhelming. It was all Farsight could do not to fall to his knees.

‘Commander Farsight,’ said Aun’Va, his brow furrowing the tiniest amount. ‘An unexpected pleasure.’

‘Greetings, master, in the name of the Tau’va,’ said Farsight, bowing his head and making the gesture of the unworthy supplicant.

‘I have come for Commander Sha’vastos,’ said Aun’Va. ‘It is time for his neural commune with Master Puretide to come to an end. As a mark of respect for his commitment, I will accompany him to the laboratories myself. Hand him over immediately, that we might begin the extraction process on schedule.’

‘I understand your intent, master,’ said Farsight. ‘Unfortunately, I cannot comply.’

‘And why is that?’ asked Aun’Va, eyes narrowing. Farsight felt the feeling of the sun’s rays fade, replaced by a chill as cold as the void. He bunched his soul into a tight fist, and said the words he had been practising for an entire rotaa. Still they did not come easy.

‘Commander Sha’vastos gave his life in the battle for Ath’adra, dying in pursuit of the Greater Good. His body was burned so severely it was completely unrecoverable.’

A long pause stretched out, cold and deathly.

‘That is terrible news,’ said Aun’Va, his expression growing sterner still.

‘It is,’ said Farsight.

The two tau stared unblinking, eyes locked. Farsight kept his expression calm, but he felt his mind being swallowed by the infinite depths of those black orbs, drowning, spinning, coming apart.

Just as it felt as if his soul would unravel completely, confessions spilling from his lips, the Ethereal Master spoke.

‘A great shame,’ said Aun’Va.

Farsight fought his way back to some semblance of focus. 'Such is the cost of victory,' he said quietly, dipping his head in sorrow.

Without another word, the Ethereal Master turned on his heel and swept away, his ceremonial robes fanning out before him. His honour guard followed without so much as glancing backward, their backs as straight as their duelling halberds.

Farsight waited until they had passed into the vector lift at the end of the communal housing unit's corridor.

Then he closed the portal to Sha'vastos' room, keyed off all systems, and allowed himself to collapse.

The Imperial dropship *Harsh Finality* roared and shuddered into high orbit, making its way to the muster point at Brimlock. Captain Numitor stared long and hard through a mildewed viewport at the hexagonal structures covering the surface of Dal'yth Prime. The planet bore the scars of war, long swathes of its surface discoloured by smoke and raging wildfire. Gel'bryn City was just one of the war zones the Imperium had torn down in flame before the Tau Empire had mustered its armada in earnest.

The converging fleets of the other sept worlds were visible in the far distance, a silvered swarm glinting in the firmament. A good enough reason for withdrawal, and one that would mollify many an Imperial official.

But not the whole truth. Not even close.

Lord Calgar was right. There was something strangely insectile about these tau, ordered and neat in their honeycomb worlds. They all worked together in the name of some ephemeral utopia, unaware that imminent disaster hung, cold and merciless, above their heads. With all their technology, with all their talk of honour and progress, the tau still had no comprehension of the horrors that awaited them as they stepped away from the flickering candle of their civilisation and out into the hungry void.

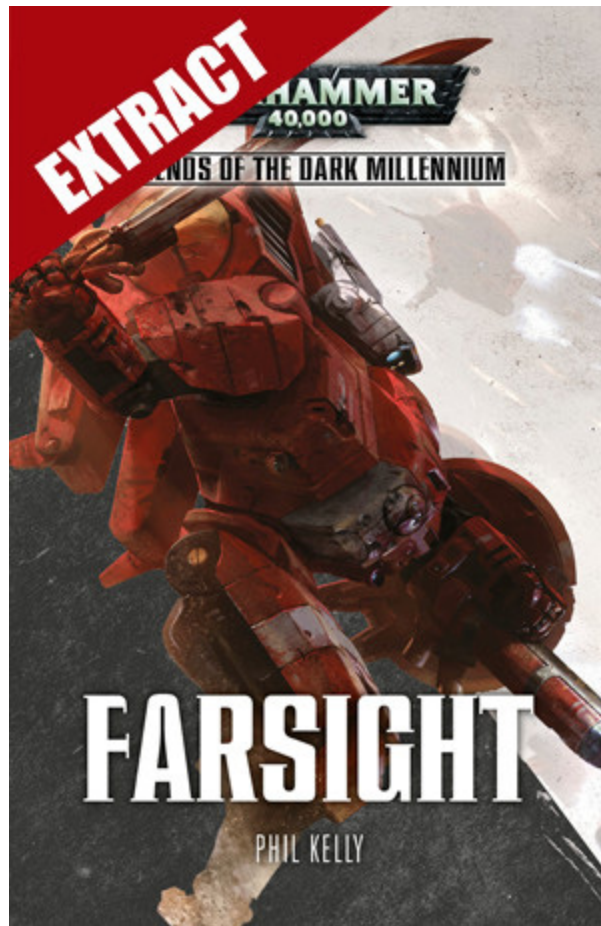
The galaxy was a cold, dark place. Only one thing could

thrive there, eternally violent and unrelenting.  
The Imperium had made sure of it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Phil Kelly** is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 Damocles novella *Blood Oaths* and the Warhammer titles *Sigmar's Blood* and *Dreadfleet*, as well as a number of short stories. He works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham.

An extract from [\*Farsight\*](#).



Commander Farsight was struck by a dozen bullets at once. The solid slugs punched into the armoured plates of his Crisis battlesuit, each hitting hard enough for him to feel within its control cocoon. More impacts dented the ochre plates of the XV8's exterior. He swung his shield generator to block the gunfire, the shallow dome it projected rippling at each impact. Above his command suite's damage display, a holographic doppelganger of his suit pulsed red.

The orks in the storm outside were shooting at anything that moved, roaring in their bestial tongue as they emptied their guns into the tempest. Their fusillade had raw kinetic power, but little chance of penetrating a battlesuit's nanocrystalline alloy. Farsight's elite Crisis teams could theoretically ride out an ork volley with no more than superficial damage. Even a basic XV8 pilot could hold out long enough to kill his attackers.

The cadre's fire warrior infantry could not.

Tau bodies littered the rust dunes, chewed to dismal ruin by the killer storm and the relentless hail of ork firepower.

'Beasts,' spat Farsight, recalibrating his plasma rifle for close-range engagement. With the howling gale turning the air red with oxide particles, long-distance marksmanship was out of the question.

There was a momentary lull in the din of battle. Sensing an opportunity, the commander broke left into the storm. He kept his shield raised and his cowled head-unit turned away as his sensors extrapolated the paths of the largest

calibre bullets to strike him. Ghostly lines flickered across his targeting bay, each a ballistic trajectory.

The analysis was complete in a microdec, confirming the firing solution Farsight had already put in place. His index finger twitched three times, and the long cylinder of his plasma rifle seared with staccato bursts. Each bolt of plasma silenced a heavy gun hidden in the storm.

Farsight's humourless smile soon fell away. Such kills would have been routine in an open battlescape. In the training simulations he had undertaken as a cadet, he had taken entire waves of orks apart with systematic efficiency. But the reality of Arkunasha was worse than Tutor Sha'kan'thas had ever imagined.

The immense tornados haunting the rust planet's wilderness whipped great swathes of its ferrous deserts into the air, flinging tiny metal fragments at a terrifying pace. An unarmoured tau warrior would be chewed to ruin before he could escape the storm. Even inside his battlesuit, Farsight could practically feel the airborne rust gnawing at him, its violent energies rendering his suit's blacksun filter next to useless. As well as disrupting any kind of electronic surveillance, the tempest made it impossible to maintain battlefield cohesion. For the orks, a race that thrived on anarchy, the storm was an inconvenience. For the tau, it was a nightmare.

The commander scanned left on instinct. Sure enough, a knot of hulking orks was barrelling out of the murk. They were almost as broad as they were tall, clad in soiled cloth and beaten metal plate. In their calloused fists they clutched crude bludgeons, whirring mechanical axes and boxy pistols. Their bucket jaws hung low, exposing blunt yellow tusks. The orks charged, roaring like hungry predators hunting fresh prey.

They found something else entirely.

The commander took a long step backwards before firing, coring the nearest beast with a plasma bolt. The second ork was close behind; a blinding arc of light seared from the

fusion blaster on Farsight's right arm, and the creature collapsed in a puff of scattering ash.

The third greenskin charged with a roar, bringing its chain-toothed axe down in an overhead sweep. Farsight's rifleman stance became a low crouch, and he blinked his shield generator to maximum just as the ork's blow was about to connect. The generator's flaring energy field hurled the ork backwards, the commander swiftly taking its head with a plasma shot to the jaw. The storm snatched the thing's decapitated body into the vortex like so many others.

Farsight recalibrated his sensors, adjusting his blacksun filter to mask out the storm's latest assault. Bloodstained corpses lay everywhere, tau and ork alike. Some were slumped on the dunes, whilst others hurtled through the air upon violent winds.

To his right, Farsight saw a lone gun drone struggle against the storm before being whipped into the hurricane. Behind it, a team of Crisis suits stalked over the crest of a dune, jetpack vents glowing blue.

'Keep your altitude low!' shouted Farsight. A gold symbol of acknowledgement flickered on his command suite. The wind changed abruptly, and another battlesuit team emerged from the red haze, Commander Sha'vastos at their head. The old warrior picked off a cluster of nearby orks with precise bursts of plasma, his team matching him as best they could. The orks broke, scattering from sight.

'We cannot win this war, Commander Farsight,' transmitted Sha'vastos over a closed frequency. 'We cannot battle two foes at once. We fight the storm and the ork infestation, yet we have mastered neither.'

'Keep scanning, Sha'vastos. Recalibrate every dec if necessary. Tooth Jaw is in here somewhere.'

In his heart, Farsight knew Sha'vastos was right. The ferrous sands gummed engine vents, clogged ball-and-socket joints and baffled electromagnetic sensors. Exactly the kind of scenario his tutors had said to avoid.

'All teams compensate for the storm as best you can,' transmitted Farsight into the cadre-level net. With any luck, it would reach at least some of his teams. Some sent the gold of acknowledgement, a loose constellation of icons blipping across his distribution array. Others remained the silver that denoted an unconfirmed status. A worrying number had turned the charcoal grey of death.

The commander felt his throat tighten. They were losing.

He pushed on through the storm, his sensors reaching out for signs of his quarry. A white-yellow heat signal flickered, and he bore down upon it at top speed. A many-armed smudge began to resolve in the rust clouds ahead. Its silhouette slowly coalesced into one of the barrel-bodied contraptions the orks used as walkers.

The commander's face twisted, disgusted by the mockery of the Hero's Mantle confronting him. The waddling scrapheap was a single-pilot war machine, but there the similarity with a tau battlesuit ended.

Such ugliness. Such inefficiency. Yet the thing was clearly dangerous; its hydraulic shears were crusted with tau blood.

The commander's plasma rifle burned a fist-sized hole through the thing's metal plates. The ork walker stomped on regardless and returned fire, the solid slugs ricocheting from the invisible disc of Farsight's shield generator. The monstrosity's joints wheezed steam and drizzled oil as it came about in clumsy, limping increments. Around the machine came a mob of hollering orks, their porcine eyes glinting in the storm's strange twilight.

Farsight didn't need his sensor programs to find the lumpen thing's weak spot. He broke left, drawing the walker's ork followers towards him, and then suddenly burst right. Pounding a wide circle to the clanking walker's rear, he slashed his fusion blaster's beam into its midsection. The shot cut through the boiler door strapped over its power plant, and the walker exploded. A ring of knife-sharp shrapnel burst outwards. Farsight rolled with

the impact, but the orks who had been advancing alongside the walker were shredded.

A secure frequency stuttered open.

'The storm's eye is moving counter-intuitively, commander,' transmitted Sha'vastos. 'Our cadres cannot sustain much more of this.'

'I realise that, Sha'vastos,' replied Farsight, firing into a knot of orks as he came alongside one of his XV8 shas'ui veterans, 'yet unless we make it to the eye, escape is impossible. We must press on.'

His sensor suite flared a red warning. Anomalous readings spiked as an energy build-up bloomed from his right, crackling like a thunderhead about to strike. In a flash of green light, the XV8 shas'ui simply disappeared from the waist down.

Farsight staggered back in shock as the pilot, his legs shorn completely, slithered from the control cocoon. The remains of his battlesuit fell sparking onto the rust dunes.

Righting himself, the commander leaned into the storm and pushed towards the source of the hideous attack. His sensors detected more of the powerful energy emissions typical of the orks' mechanic caste. He could just make out a loose group of the creatures up ahead. All were clad in thick piston-driven armour, but one had a strange contraption strapped to its back. Its readings shone with aggressive brilliance on Farsight's sensor unit.

'Ork elders located,' he transmitted. 'All teams close on my position.'

Finding a firing solution, he loosed a burning bolt of plasma. It dissipated at the last moment, dispersing across a crackling dome of force.

'Sha'vastos,' said Farsight, his tone grave, 'they have portable shield technology. Appending footage.'

'Send it to El'Vesa. It's his field.'

'No time,' Farsight lied.

Taking a gunman's crouch behind the lip of a dune, the commander joined his fusion blaster's beam to the

trajectory of his plasma rifle and poured everything he had at the ork mechanic caste. The primitive power field overloaded in a shower of sparks, sending greenskin elders stumbling backwards.

The flame-painted battlesuit of the young Commander Brightsword burst from the tempest to leap over Farsight's position. Twin fusion beams cut a great 'X' into the rust dunes, reducing all bar one of the ork mechanics to steaming ruin.

'Die, worthless ones,' Brightsword said through his XV8's vocalisers. 'This planet is ours!'

The symbol of Stealth Team Tar'osa appeared on Farsight's distribution array, the telltale ripple of their passage gliding through the storm nearby. They were heading to intercept a scrawny ork in brightly coloured attire with a highly unusual heat signature. Farsight punched the creature's image up close. For some reason, the writhing ork was being held in the grip of two much larger specimens. Some trick of the storm's light made it look as if the beast's eyes were aflame.

Farsight watched the ork spasm, the bio-sign readings on his sensor suite going haywire. The commander felt his blood thunder within his veins as a sickly light poured from the alien's eyes and mouth. Blinding whips of green-white energy lashed from the greenskin's cranium. Several grounded on Stealth Team Tar'osa, rendering the shimmering battlesuits visible for a flickering moment just as they levelled their burst cannons.

Then the crackling energies simply erased the tau from existence.

Crying out, Farsight triggered his battlesuit jets and boosted low through the storm to their position. A threat alarm blipped insistently; he had left his fellow Crisis pilots out of formation in his wake. He ignored it. Such unnatural horrors could not be allowed to survive.

A shot from his plasma rifle cut one of the creature's ork bodyguards down, its muscular flank burned away. The

other ork stepped in, axe raised. A contemptuous shot from Farsight's fusion blaster vaporised it.

Before the commander could make another kill, the gangling ork wretch convulsed, its snaggletooth maw yawning wide. Heaving forwards, it vomited a kaleidoscopic geyser of energy that struck Farsight's customised Crisis battlesuit full in the chest.

Fierce spears of light jabbed at Farsight's eyes as his entire control console went haywire. He could see nothing but crazed static, his targeting systems glitching and unresponsive. Even his motive units had stopped working.

Unable to fight the storm, Farsight's Crisis suit toppled onto its side. His audio picked up the ork's febrile yammering outside. The commander twitched his fingers inside his control gauntlets, each gesture calling for a kill.

Nothing happened.

The commander blink-jabbed fail-safe icons, but even they were offline. He could see a yellowish fluid bubbling through his hatch seals, its suffocating stench filling the cocoon. His throat was scorched with every gasping breath. He yanked hard at the mechanical release lever, but it was stuck fast.

His battlesuit had become a tomb.

Farsight took a desperate glance through the plexus vision slit. The control cocoon was filling with smoke, the stench of burning electrics and ork bile chokingly intense. Eyes watering, the commander disengaged his buckle clasps and kicked hard at the manual release panel. The seals depressurised with a hiss. Still the torso unit did not open.

The smell of boiling vomit clawed at Farsight's throat, eyes and skin. Lungs burning, he braced against the cocoon's backrest and placed both feet on the hatch. He kicked out hard and sharp, but it shifted less than a finger's breadth.

Farsight channelled his pent-up anger and frustration; the fires of desperation roared within his soul.

With a great cry, he pushed as hard as he could.

The hatch groaned for a single microdec, then sprang

open. Farsight fell into the howling storm. He landed on his hands and knees on a dune of sharp-edged rust, as vulnerable as a newborn.

Razored flinders chewed at his face and hands as he stumbled away from the sparking wreck of his battlesuit. A sudden gale hurled him from his feet, and the commander scrambled backwards over the lip of a dune. The rust sliced his nimble pilot's fingers to the bone, terrifying pain wracking his hands as the tops of his digits were carved away. He felt terror creep over his mind as he realised his hands were all but useless. He could not pilot a battlesuit now, even were he safe inside one.

Farsight shielded his face to draw in a foul-tasting lungful of hot air, getting a mouthful of rusty sand for his efforts. He fell, coughing hard as splintered metal stabbed him in a thousand places at once. Mind blazing, he tried to focus, to somehow grasp a strand of hope that could lead to his escape.

An insistent buzzing grew louder over the howling gale, accompanied by the thin screech of metal. The silhouettes of three ork walkers emerged from the tempest. Rotary saws at the end of each of their limbs buzzed loudly.

A giant of an ork stomped amongst them, its sutured body as much metal as flesh. It was easily the ugliest thing Farsight had ever seen. Beneath a crown of crackling antennae, a scarred head peered through the storm, its leer obscured by a jutting metal jaw and the buzzsaws that revved in place of its hands.

The pig-like eyes of Dok Toofjaw glinted red, lit by the fires of malice.

Then the buzzsaws came down to end the Arkunashan war once and for all.

**Click here to buy [\*Farsight\*](#).**

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First published in Great Britain in 2016.  
This eBook edition published in 2016 by Black Library,  
Games Workshop Ltd,  
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Pedro Nunez.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-465-7

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