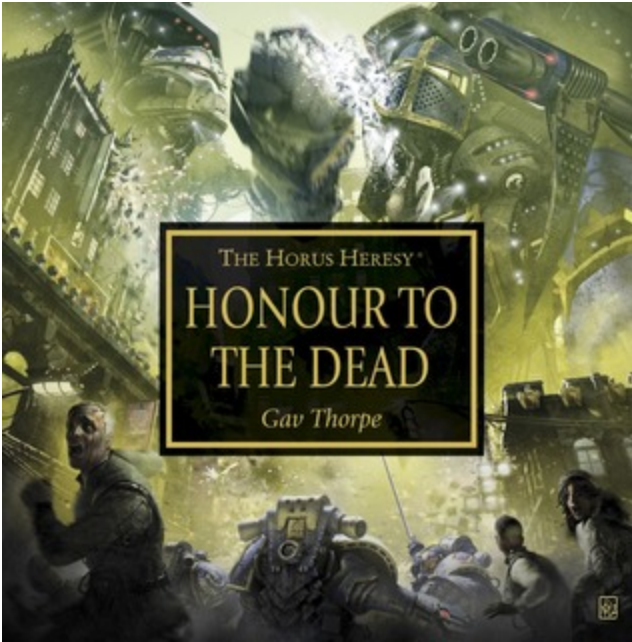


THE HORUS HERESY™

HONOUR TO THE DEAD

Gav Thorpe



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Across the plain they march, the Titans of the Legio Praesagius, the mechanical giants of the True Messengers. The shadows of the behemoths pass over low buildings, eclipsing the marshalling yards on the outskirts of Ithraca as Titan after Titan follows in single file. The ground shakes to the thud of their ponderous steps.

Battle group Argentus brings up the rear of the long line, the third such formation in the column. At the fore strides *Evocatus*, great Warlord, largest of the machines, whose adamantium skeleton was first raised a thousand years earlier.

After the Warlord come *Victorix*, *Deathrunner* and *Firewolf*. Classed as scout Titans, the Warhounds are still many metres tall, capable of obliterating entire battle companies, pack-hunters that are a match for even the largest war engines.

Next is *Inculcator*, a Reaver-class engine, stalwart of the line, whose weapon systems can level city blocks and lay waste to lesser foes in a heartbeat.

Ancient war engines, old even when the Great Crusade began, striding purposefully towards the mustering field. Old save for one machine – *Invigilator* brings up the rear of the battle group. Newly commissioned, the Reaver Titan's blue and gold livery is freshly painted, the threads of the banners hanging from weapon mounts coloured bright, metal gleaming with recently applied unguents and blessed oils.

Invigilator's commander leads the battle group. Princeps Senioris Mikal, veteran of many battles, hears the general

order to halt. He eases his consciousness deeper into the mind impulse unit of his war engine to survey the scene, his senses moving from sight and sound and touch to thermal optics, frequency audit and tactile resonance.

For a moment he feels weak, a man of flesh and bone with a slowly beating heart trying to tame a colossus of metal driven on by the unimaginable energies of a plasma reactor. *Invigilator's* crude awareness defies him briefly, almost petulant as Mikal imposes his will upon the machine-spirit.

Several kilometres ahead, the ships of the Mechanicum wait for the Titans to board. With magnified vision, Mikal sees the war engines of the Legio Infernus – the Fire Masters. Through the haze he sees dozens of Titans, black enamelled hulls decorated with yellow flames. Their column is breaking, spreading out between the super-lifters that will transport the Titans to orbit.

‘Order to Argentus,’ Mikal transmits. ‘General halt. There seems to be some delay ahead. Our friends in the Fire Masters are being laggards. Princeps Maximus, what are our comrades doing? They are blocking our path into the mustering zone.’

There is no response, only static and a few seconds of garbled voices.

‘Calth command, this is Princeps Mikal of the Legio Praesagius. Reporting communications fluctuation. What is the status of Ithracas embarkation?’

Still there is no reply. Only the hiss of a dead channel.

‘Moderati Lockhandt, run full track diagnos–’ The order becomes a gasp of shock. ‘By the Omnissiah!’

The cloudy sky reddens with a false sun. Scarlet shadows dapple the landing field as miniature stars seem almost to descend from the heavens, their ruddy light glinting from the transports waiting for the Titans.

There is a moment of perfect silence.

Then the stars strike the landing field, smashing into armoured hulls, searing through drop craft in blossoms of devastating fire. The thunder of detonations is picked up by

Invigilator's audio relays. Aghast, Mikal is speechless as great beams of energy lance down from orbit, obliterating temporary worker blocks and overseers' villas as they rip across Ithraca. In moments the city is aflame, bright and harsh in Mikal's artificial sight.

Half a kilometre above the landing field a lance beam slices through an ascending transport, carving its engines in a plume of escaping plasma. The ship's climb stalls, its momentum carrying it over the city in a declining arc.

A rough voice breaks through the crackle of transmission static.

'...no control at all. Coming down in Ithraca, close to the admin... Repeat, this is Eighty-Three-TA-Aratan. We have been struck by orbital fire. No contr...'

Mikal would look away but every sensor of the *Invigilator* is fixated upon the crashing ship, making him a reluctant witness as it ploughs through towering hab-blocks, trailing debris and wreckage.

As he tries to process this flurry of information, new sensor readings crowd Mikal's thoughts from the systems of *Invigilator*. Energy spikes erupt into life amidst the ruin of the landing site. The Fire Masters are powering their void shields. Miraculously, it appears that their Titans were unharmed by the extraordinary bombardment.

Yet the miracle is soon proven to be complicity.

War horns blare. Plasma destructors, volcano guns and gatling blasters unleash their fury against the Praesagius Titans at the head of the column. The distant sound of cannon fire and the snap of las-weapons seems muted and unreal. With their own void shields inactive, the True Messengers are easy targets, and dozens are executed in the space of a few heartbeats.

Invigilator responds more swiftly than its crew as alarm chimes and threat warnings ring across the bridge of the Titan.

'Raise shields!' Mikal snaps the order without thought, sending the command through the systems of his machine.

‘All power to shields and locomotion.’

He feels the strength of *Invigilator* surge through him, the energy of the plasma reactor like fire in his blood as it crackles through void shield generators and flows into the Titan’s legs.

The impetuous young machine, stirred from near-dormancy, wants to fight. The instinct to return fire is almost overwhelming, but Mikal cuts through the urge with cold reason. The True Messengers are outnumbered. Badly outnumbered. The *Aratan* was carrying much of their strength and the Fire Masters have a superior position.

‘Battle Group Argentus, fall back to the city. All engines that can heed my command, fall back and regroup!’

Even as he says the words, *Invigilator* responds, swinging ponderously away from the devastation unleashed at the Titan fields, heading for the sanctuary of Ithraca.

Unable to believe their eyes, the people packing the third floor balcony stare in amazement and horror at the destruction being set free across their city. The wrath of giants is being unleashed in a blinding display of fire and shell, laying ruin to great swathes of Ithraca’s skyline. Most of the observers are wives and children of the Imperial Army regiments called to the Calth muster, their gasps and cries of fright lost in the tumult.

There is one whose eyes are not directed at the Titan battle, but instead her gaze is in the opposite direction, towards the centre of the city where the transport ship fell. Varinia’s thoughts are of her husband, Quintus, stationed with his regiment. They said their goodbyes only hours before, and she knows he was at the government plaza to receive his company’s muster order. She cannot see the buildings but the tower of fire and smoke rising from the crash site fills her heart with anguish.

A detonation close by, less than a kilometre away, rips her attention from thoughts of her husband. A Titan, a Reaver in black and red, stumbles at the far end of the avenue, its

void shields flaring as it tramples across ground cars and topples into a five storey housing block.

The battle is getting closer.

‘Pexilius,’ she whispers. She dashes back into the stairwell landing from the balcony, thoughts turned to her infant child in the nursery two floors up.

She reaches the first landing at a full run, almost slipping in her haste as she turns at the next flight of steps.

Then the front of the hab-block explodes, showering glass and chunks of plascrete down the stairwell, the fire of the detonation billowing over Varinia as she dives into a corner. Roof beams and ceiling panels fall.

Dust clogs her mouth and nose, coating her pale skin and clinging to blond curls of hair. Her clothing is tattered in places, her face and arms scratched. There is a pain in her side and warm blood soaks her dress.

‘Pexilius!’ Her voice a scream, ignoring the agony of her wound, she clammers over a fallen beam and scrambles up the rubble-choked stairway. ‘Pexilius!’

There are bodies, and parts of bodies, crushed in the tangle of fallen masonry. Someone croaks a cry for help, a broken-fingered hand reaching from the depths of the debris. She pushes past, heaving aside a fallen beam to get through. Varinia cannot stop to help. She has but one thought in her mind.

Three whole floors have been smashed by the stray missile. Reaching the floor of the nursery, Varinia sees the flimsy door hanging by one hinge. She pushes through.

‘Pexilius!’ She stops, coughing hard in the dusty haze, the pause giving sense a chance to return. Her son cannot reply; he is only a few weeks old. Instead she calls for the nurse. ‘Lucretia? Lucretia? Anybody?’

The nursery is in ruins, the brightly painted walls covered with black blast marks. Half the ceiling has fallen in, completely burying the area where the cots had been lined.

Varinia screams again at the sight, every worst fear brought to stark life by the grim scene. She throws herself

at the fallen tiles and plaster, cutting her hands and breaking her fingernails as she tears away lumps of masonry.

‘Lucretia! Is anybody alive? Is there anyone here? Make a noise. Oh, please, someone be alive. Please let my little Pexilius be alive.’

Her tears wash into the caked dust on her face as she continues to dig.

A cough attracts Varinia’s attention and she redoubles her efforts, aching limbs finding new strength. She hears rasping breath and pulls away a cracked ceiling tile to reveal the blood-covered face of old Lucretia. The nurse is twisted unnaturally, hunched over something.

There is a wide gash down the side of her head, her face slick with blood.

‘Pexilius?’ Varinia whispers the word, in dread more than hope.

‘...just got him up... to feed...’

Varinia does not know whether this is good or bad, but then poor Lucretia shifts her weight, pain contorting her face, to reveal a blue-swathed bundle underneath her.

‘My son! Lucretia, you saved him.’

Varinia nearly snatches the dazed child from Lucretia’s weak grip, lifting his cheek to hers, holding him tight.

Another explosion mere blocks away reminds her that they are not safe. Cradling tiny Pexilius in one arm, she tries to move the pillar pinning down the nurse but it will not move. The old woman’s eyelids flutter and she slumps, her chest unmoving.

‘Thank you, Lucretia. Thank you, thank you, thank you...’

Varinia’s tears of gratitude spill onto the dead woman as she leans forward to kiss her wrinkled brow. Then she composes herself, for the sake of her son.

‘Right, Pexilius, let’s get you out of here.’

Her forced jollity cannot hold back the dismay she feels. Varinia heads back to the stairwell, picking through the

rumble with her child clasped to her chest. She reaches the floor below and stops, suddenly wary.

The building shudders, more debris clattering from the ruined floors above. Again and again, something pounds the earth close by, slow and methodical. Varinia screams as an immense shadow looms beyond the broken windows and stops. With a rising whine, massive multi-barrelled cannons spin into motion, directed at some distant target. Knowing what is to come, Varinia dashes into one of the rooms adjoining the landing, shielding her son with her body.

The Titan opens fire.

The noise is deafening; the rapid boom of ignited shells, the shockwaves shattering what glass is left in the windows, causing a fresh storm of shards to hurtle around Varinia as she hugs Pexilius tight and throws herself against a wall.

She cries wordlessly, trying to cover her son's ears as best she can, her own eardrums throbbing with pain, the primal scream drowned out by the Titan's cannonade.

And then, numb silence.

Its mighty footsteps shaking the building, the Titan sets off once more, pitching the interior of the hab-block into darkness for a moment. Varinia sees a table, upended but intact. She seeks shelter behind this flimsy barricade.

'We'll stay here, little one, my precious son. We'll stay here and they'll come for us. Father is fighting now. But he'll be thinking of us. Yes he will. He'll be coming. He knows where we are and he'll come for us.'

As the din of the Titan's passing fades, Varinia curls into a protective ball around her child.

'We'll be safe here until father comes home.'

The screams of the fleeing crowds can barely be heard over the incessant blare of the Fire Masters' war horns. Their scout Titans lead the attack, fast and mobile, driving the populace of Ithracia before them like cattle.

There is a harsh logic to their clamour: targets on the street are easier to destroy. The purpose of this cacophony

is to rout the people of Ithracia from their homes and workshops, sparing the renegade regiments following in the Titans' wake the miserable task of clearing the buildings. There are tens of thousands of soldiers flooding into Ithracia now, on foot and in transports, the way paved by the terror unleashed by the Fire Masters.

Speed is essential. With surprise, the Word Bearers and their allies have gained the upper hand. With speed, they will seize victory.

At the head of the chase is Princeps Tyhe in his Warhound, *Denola*. Thousands pour through the streets in front of him, surging like waves down boulevards and alleys. He is one with his Titan, weapons spewing explosive rounds into the midst of the panicked crowds, gouging the ferrocrete roadway and shredding grounded civilian skimmers trapped by the press of the throng.

'Is it not beautiful, my sweet?' He caresses the interface of the mind impulse unit. 'See the ants spilling from their nests to be crushed. So weak and pathetic. But kill them we must! Our comrades in the Word Bearers require deaths, and deaths we shall give them. Deaths by the dozen! Deaths by the hundred, by the thousand!'

With *Denola* are two more Warhounds, splitting through the streets to herd the civilians of Ithracia to their doom, but Tyhe pays them no heed. He will not share the glory of battle. His is a world that consists only of hydraulically powered limbs and heavy servos, plasma cores and weapon systems, targeting arrays and autoloaders.

'Yes, yes! The death of this rabble will make us stronger. The Princeps Maximus swore to that. Fortunate was the day he heeded the call of Kor Phaeron and swore us to this cause. Have you ever known such freedom, such power? We have become one with the Machine God through destruction! Gone are the shackles of the Emperor! The Machine God is set free from the bonds of servitude to Terra. Horus has shown us the way and we follow gladly!

‘They thought to make us a slave, glorious *Denola*. They muzzled us and told us when we could hunt. Yes, I feel the same savage glee that roars in your plasma heart. It beats as my own. When we are done clearing out the vermin, the true hunt will begin.

‘Remember how the True Messengers fled from our guns? That will not save them. They will be shown the lie of their name, for there is no message more true than the one we bring. We are the harbingers of a new dawn, the heralds of death! We are the Fire Masters, the bringers of woe! And as we set the sorrow of our foe upon the fires of battle, it will raise us up beyond all-’

‘Tyhe, you are moving out of formation.’

The warning from his fellow princeps is meaningless, just syllables barely understood through the pounding of blood and the thump of pneumatics. Tyhe laughs. He can feel piles of corpses underfoot as *Denola* strides along the street, the bodies pulped beneath the weight of her tread.

‘The enemy are massing around the crash site of the Aratan. Legion command is issuing orders to regroup. We cannot attack piecemeal.’

The words irritate Tyhe, like the buzzing of a gnat. He simply ignores them, stalking further into the city, guns blazing.

The undersides of the smoke clouds shrouding Ithraca are lit by the flare and flash of explosions and searing las-blasts. Two battles rage, both desperate in their own way. In the buildings and streets the traitor regiments of the Imperial Army sweep through Ithraca in long columns of tanks and transports. Artillery and self-propelled guns pound the city blocks from the outskirts, paving the way for the infantry with a creeping barrage. Street-to-street, the scattered forces still loyal to the defence of Calth sell their lives for every metre the enemy advance; each life expended to buy time for the shock of treachery to pass and the defenders to organise.

Aboard *Invigilator*, the ground battle pales into insignificance compared to the mighty rage of the Titans. The men and women hurling themselves at the traitor advance with desperate abandon, the horde of rebels pushing into the Ithracia – they are as nothing compared to the war engines that stride through the city. They crash through buildings and stomp across plazas, cracking ferrocrete underfoot as they manoeuvre to catch one another in deadly crossfires. Flights of rockets and hails of shells rip through the choked air. The crackle of overloading void shields shatters windows and sets fire to tree-lined avenues.

The battle group have extricated themselves from the immediate threat of the Infernus assault, but several mighty Warlords of the Legio Praesagius have been brought down in the withdrawal. Their sacrifice has allowed Mikal and others time to get their war engines to full battle readiness.

Though outnumbered, the True Messengers will not surrender Ithracia meekly.

Away from the landing fields communications are better, though patchy, and Mikal can speak with the rest of Argentus. The traitors must have employed some kind of damping screen, and there is still no contact from legion command or the other battle groups. For the moment Mikal must lead Argentus without any grander strategy to follow.

The *Aratan* becomes the focus of his efforts. Trapped on board are the principal engines of the Titan legion, and if they can be salvaged then they could well turn the tide. The Fire Masters have apparently come to the same conclusion, and enemy Titans are also moving through the city towards the crash site. Battle Group Argentus were the least mauled by the traitor ambush, and lead the way for the six surviving Warlords of the True Messengers. If the Battle Titans can secure the *Aratan* and guard the area from infantry assault, there may still be a chance of blunting the enemy attack.

‘*Evocatus*, take the lead and push on to the crash site,’ commands Mikal. ‘Pull down that broadcast station and the

clear line of fire. Enemy Warlord, four kilometres to north-east. Warhounds, flank westward. *Inculcator*, support position theta.'

Affirmatives buzz back across the battle group vox-net, and the Titans break their close formation to disperse through the streets of Ithrac. With *Inculcator* moving along a parallel route, *Invigilator* advances. Loyal Imperial Army troops part ahead of the Reaver, the infantry cheering and raising their fists to the defiant war engines as they pass.

There has been no word from Calth command or the Ultramarines Legion. The Imperial forces are still reeling from the surprise attacks and the defence of the city rests upon the shields and weapons of a score of Titans, against three times that number. Mikal barely registers the shouts of encouragement from the infantry swarming around his machine, his mind enmeshed in the sensor net of his Reaver as he monitors the enemy's movements.

'*Victorix*, we need eyes ahead of advance. Five hundred metres. There was a Warhound hunting group to the west but they have disappeared from the auspex. Keep watch for them.'

'*Aye, Princeps Senioris*,' comes the terse reply.

'Keep communications to minimum, total encryption. If the enemy were able to scramble transmission, they may have possession of our cipher keys and protocols.'

The battle group advances swiftly, leaving behind the rag-tag formations of Imperial Army preparing to repel those who had but hours before been their allies. With the Warhounds scouting ahead, the larger Titans remain within a few hundred metres of one another in close support. An enemy engine, a heavily gunned Nemesis-class, has taken up a position directly ahead of their advance. Scanner returns suggest that the Nemesis is not alone, but all energy signatures are blurred by the background noise of the turbine mills and manufactories.

A kilometre further on, they come within range of unseen enemy artillery. *Evocatus* takes the brunt of the first salvo,

the Warlord's void shields crackling and blazing as they absorb the shells. A building to the right and a few dozen metres ahead of *Invigilator* collapses in moments, spilling debris into the street. Through the smoke and dust, the Reaver's sensors pick up massed infantry and vehicles heading directly for the battle group.

'Enemy troops, half a kilometre. Several hundred infantry. Battle tanks, number unknown. *Inculcator*, *Deathrunner*, engage and suppress. *Evocatus*, we will continue to advance. Enemy artillery located on the outskirts of Demesnus parklands. *Victorix*, *Firewolf*, deal with the guns.'

Whether from bravado, madness or fear of failure, the enemy regiment attacks the Titans directly, pouring into the buildings across their line of advance. More shells and rockets fall, laying waste to city blocks around the war engines.

A lucky salvo engulfs *Invigilator*, and Mikal feels the pulse of the Titan's void shields straining to hold back the explosions. A generator fails, the mind impulse feedback feeling like a muscle spasm in Mikal's gut. In the heart of the Titan, engineers and servitors race into action to repair the overloaded shield.

The enemy infantry are within range. *Evocatus* opens fire with its twin carapace-mounted gatling blasters, sending a torrent of shells into an occupied building in reply to the sporadic heavy weapons shots spitting from the windows and balconies. The front of the stuccoed building sags and implodes under the weight of fire, opening up its shattered interior like a gaping wound.

The Warhound *Deathrunner* breaks into a run, paired mega-bolters shredding squads of infantry as they try to move in the open. *Inculcator's* las-weapons chew through a column of battle tanks rounding the junction ahead, turning three into blazing wrecks and blocking the advance of the others.

Mikal highlights the formation in his tactical display. 'Skallan, target that choke point. Full salvo.'

The apocalypse missile launcher atop the Reaver's carapace adjusts its trajectory under the coaxing of the moderati and then opens fire, sending a flurry of ten missiles screaming down the boulevard into the heart of the tank formation. Machines and men are ripped apart by the thunderous detonation, spraying the lower floors of the surrounding buildings with shrapnel and wreckage.

Assessing the damage inflicted by the battle group, Mikal reaches a conclusion. The tanks and infantry are nothing more than a distraction, intended to prevent the Titans from reaching the *Aratan* before the enemy.

'Threat minimal, this is a delaying action. Continue the advance, we cannot afford to waste time mopping up dregs. Nemesis is two kilometres, holding position.'

Mikal considers his options, absently strafing the shattered traitor company as they pass. The opposing Nemesis is only a single Titan, but its weapons are capable of ripping through void shields and slicing through armour. It is the perfect Titan killer. Its position gives it wide arcs of fire and would require a lengthy detour to outflank – a detour the battle group cannot afford to make. Sporadic sensor returns also indicate the presence of supporting troops, probably traitor Skitarii from the Fire Masters legion.

Weighing up the possible courses of action, Mikal must decide if the risk of losing one or more of the battle group outweighs the time lost by an encircling manoeuvre. It is not an easy choice, but as Princeps Senioris he knows what must be done.

'Full attack on the Nemesis. If we can break through to the parklands then we have an open route to the *Aratan*.

Evocatus, you must draw its fire from the west.

Deathrunner, dare the gauntlet and deal with ground support. *Inculcator*, you and I will make the main attack.'

To the credit of his fellow princeps, there is no hesitation in their affirmative replies. Leaving the dead in their wake, the battle group presses on through Ithraca.

Amidst the creak of settling debris, Varinia hears voices. She cannot make out the words, but they are coming from down the stairwell. For a moment she wonders if they are other survivors, but their harsh, cruel laughter suggests otherwise.

Pexilius stirs in her arms as she stands up to survey the remains of the apartment. Broken furniture litters the dust-covered floor and the collapsed ceiling blocks off the only other exit. She spies a crawlspace, just large enough for her, where an inner wall has toppled. Pexilius murmurs and opens his eyes as she places him inside the dark space.

‘Hush now, mother will be right back.’

Pushing him a little further into the gap, Varinia returns to the upturned table and tries to lift it. She hears the crunch of boots on the stairs through the broken doorway. The table is too heavy for her to lift completely but she needs something to cover the opening. If not, she might as well stand in the middle of the room. Gritting her teeth, she pulls up the edge of the table and takes a few steps, wincing at the noise as the corner drags through broken tiles. Arms already trembling from the effort, she lowers it gently and takes in a deep breath.

The voices are coming closer, echoing up the shattered stairway. Glass breaks under their approaching tread.

‘Move, damn you,’ she whispers.

There is the sound of rubble thudding down the stairs and a curse as one of the men stumbles. There are words she does not understand, but the tone of them needs no translation. Varinia seizes her chance, hauling the table up onto its side across the entrance to her hiding place. Ducking behind, she pulls a few stray ceiling tiles across the gap, leaving only a sliver of light.

Pexilius is fully awake now. He wriggles in his swaddling, yawning and blinking. Taking him up in her arms, Varinia backs as far into the hole as possible, shaking with fear. Her son seems to sense her fright, brow creasing. She strokes her fingers across his head to comfort him.

‘Not now, little one, not now. Stay quiet for mother.’

Her agitation unsettles the infant and she recognises all too well an imminent cry.

‘Please, Pexilius...’

Through the crack she has left, Varinia sees dark shapes at the doorway. Three men appear. They are dressed in drab Imperial Army fatigues. She does not recognise the regiment; there have been so many in Ithraca for the mustering that she always lost track during the conversations with her husband.

She wishes he were here now. She wishes her brave lieutenant would kill these damnable looters and take her and Pexilius to safety. Her tears start again, salty on her lips.

There is a sigh from Pexilius and he opens his mouth, eyes screwing shut. Hating herself, Varinia puts her hand over his face, terrified for the both of them. His distress is muffled, unheard amongst the sound of settling wreckage and the thud of the looters’ boots. Holding her breath, sure that the pounding of her heart itself can be heard, Varinia is immobile, not daring to move a muscle lest she disturb the pile of debris above her.

Someone steps next to the upturned table, blocking out the light. Varinia stifles a gasp of fright, clenching her jaw tight. Pexilius struggles beneath her hand.

The men sound disappointed, snapping at each other. She sees fingers grabbing hold of the table. She shrinks back, trying to make herself as small as possible.

Five staccato bangs echo deafeningly in the room, cutting short a cry of pain. Something crashes against the table, dislodging the tiles.

A heavier tread thuds across the apartment. She realises she still has her hand clamped across Pexilius’s mouth. For a moment she is filled with the terror that she has suffocated her child. She pulls her hand away, the lesser of the two evils, and Pexilius takes a gasping breath. She waits for his cries to start and cannot stop herself, her words little more than a breath.

‘Hush, my beautiful boy. Hush. Mother is here. It won’t hurt for long.’

She shrieks as light floods the hiding place, the loose debris above her wrenched away. Varinia finds herself staring into the wide barrel of a gun, pointed directly at her. She screams again before taking in everything else.

Behind the gun is an armoured figure, dwarfing any man Varinia has ever seen. She lets out a choked cry of relief, recognising the livery of the Ultramarines. The legionary has lost his helm and stares at her with cold blue eyes, his broad jaw set. His hair is dark, cropped short, and there is a golden stud in his brow above his right eye.

‘Survivor. Nothing more. Move out.’ The words are uttered without emotion.

As the warrior turns away, Varinia surges out of her hiding place, holding little Pexilius tightly. The sound of more gunfire drifts down the stairwell, startling her momentarily. She steps in a spreading pool of blood and almost slips, putting out one hand upon the overturned table to steady herself. The three looters lie scattered in the broken tiles and dust, lifeless eyes staring at the ceiling. Shuddering, Varinia covers her child’s eyes and steps after the Space Marine.

Past him, on the landing, another Ultramarine stands at the window. In his hands he has a large, multi-barrelled cannon, carrying it as easily as a normal man hefts a lasgun. He fires at something in the street, and a torrent of shell casings spill to the floor. Varinia winces at the sudden noise, trying to shelter Pexilius from the din.

‘Take your child to safety, woman.’ The helmetless Space Marine gestures at Varinia as she attempts to protect her son. ‘The Word Bearers and their treacherous allies have brought war to us all.’

Then he strides away, with Varinia at his heels.

‘Wait! Please wait!’

He stops, seeming to stiffen, and turns his head. His gaze is harsh. ‘We are heading for further battle. It will not be

safe.'

'Safer than here,' replies Varinia. 'Please, take us with you.'

The Space Marine at the window speaks without turning. 'There is an evacuation point being set up in the Demesnus park. Go there.'

'On my own?' Varinia's limbs feel even weaker at the thought. 'That's nearly *five kilometres* away.'

Another Ultramarine descends from the floors above, fallen masonry shifting under his tread. He stops when he sees Varinia. The three warriors seem to pause, exchanging words via their communicators.

'We won't be any trouble, I promise. I'll stay out of your way. *Please*. Please don't leave us here. There could be more... of them.'

There is another exchange between the Ultramarines, the one without his helmet remaining silent and grim-faced. He turns to look at Varinia and nods once.

'No guarantees,' he says. 'We are heading to the muster point. We will take you that far.'

The other two warriors head down the stairs, leaving him to wave Varinia onwards.

'Thank you, thank you so much. What are your names, so that I might praise them to my husband when we find him? Have you any news from the administration centre? He was there to receive orders.'

'A ship came down in the area of which you speak. Communications are fractured. Enemy forces converge on that position, but there are survivors still fighting...'

The words bring renewed hope to Varinia. As they reach the last flight of steps she realises the Space Marine did not answer her question.

'Your names, please. I am Varinia, and this little one is Pexilius.'

The lead Ultramarine laughs, the sound strange through his armour's external speakers. He stops by the shattered remnants of the double doors leading onto the street.

‘Our captain was called Pexilius. He would have been proud.’

‘That is Gaius,’ says the warrior behind her. ‘My companion with the rotor cannon is Septival. I am Sergeant Aquila. Tullian Aquila.’

‘Thank you, Tullian Aquila.’

‘Do not thank me yet. Five kilometres through Ithraca is no easy journey today.’

The flicker of firelight in the windows of the villa makes it look like the building is laughing at the destruction, eyes glinting with glee. Tyhe laughs with it, delighting in the death and misery that stalks Ithraca alongside him. His weapons are like fists of fire, obliterating everything he comes across. In his wake the streets are littered with corpses and wrecks.

The villa holds a few dozen desperate men. They think they have found safety but all they have located is their tomb. Tyhe has chased them for an hour, goading them with his war horns, forcing them back with his mega-bolter when they think to turn and fight.

Some tried to make a stand, turning their autocannons and plasma guns against his armoured form. They did not even overload his void shields. In repayment, he wiped them from the mortal world, turning flesh to bloody ruin and vehicles to tattered metal. He has forced the survivors up the hill to a patrician’s home overlooking the parklands. It gives him reason to destroy this place, sating a desire that has filled him since he first spied the column-fronted compound, lording it up over the common city below.

‘An eyrie for the arrogant eagle, now to fall to ruin!’ he cries, pleased by his own poetic tone. He throws out a full spectrum scan of the villa and the men hiding within. ‘Fifty, no more. A fitting sepulchre we shall make of this fine palace, my sweet *Denola*. I wonder where the master of this house is now. Perhaps he still cowers within? Or maybe he

flees the city, abandoning even his own slaves to save himself.

‘Such shall be the fate of all tyrants. The liberation begins here and will end upon shackled Mars! The gears of war will grind the eagle to a bloody smear, and then we shall reclaim the galaxy! Horus shows us the way, and by the word of Lorgar has it been promised!’

He fires the turbo-laser, smashing through one wing of the villa, blowing out the power generators within. A gasline explodes and sheets of flame erupt from the windows, setting fire to the lawns and trees of the trampled gardens.

Tyhe steps easily over the wall of the compound as futile lasgun fire sparks from *Denola*’s void shields. It feels like rain on his skin; persistent but not unpleasant.

‘Cease your pointless resistance!’

His bellow roars from the Titan’s external speakers. There are defiant shouts, small and weak, from the men trapped inside the building. Tyhe spots a handful trying to escape – he steers his engine through the gardens, trampling an orchard to block the rear roadway. He guns down the men emerging from the building and tears through the parade of windows into a ballroom beyond. Drapes are shredded and the lacquered wooden walls shattered into splinters.

‘Let me lavish upon you the feast you deserve, my friends! You no longer feed from plates borne upon the backs of the conquered, but must now taste the ashes of defeat and humiliation. I shall heap upon you the just rewards for the lies you have spread, the misdeeds you have performed in the name of “compliance”. It is *you* that shall comply, for you are mere men and we are *Denola*, immortal agent of the Machine God!’

The sport provided by the ragged band of men does not last long, and they retreat into a basement, not daring to fight. Tyhe considers kicking his way in through the walls, but is not so desperate for their blood that he will risk becoming snared in the ruin.

He breaks away from the compound, descending the hill into the greenery of the park in search of a fresh challenge. Not far away, no more than ten kilometres, the Nemesis-class *Revoka* is carefully striding backwards along a tree-lined road, gatling blasters and volcano cannons blazing at an enemy Warlord. The other Titan's void shields are a riot of colours under the constant hail of fire, writhing and spitting with every shell impact.

The Praesagius engine cannot take any more punishment. With a flash that momentarily whites out all of *Denola's* scanning systems, the Warlord's reactor detonates. Almost twelve city blocks become a glassy crater in that instant, mottled with grey as droplets of molten slag fall to the ground. It is all that remains of the war engine.

Tyhe can see that enemy's sacrifice is for a purpose – *Revoka* is being outflanked. Two Reaver Titans are approaching from the south. He is too far away to intervene and watches as *Revoka* is caught in a withering crossfire. The Nemesis's shields try to hold back the fusillade but fail in spectacular fashion, flattening trees and ripping up the turf all around.

Exposed, *Revoka* turns its guns upon the approaching Reavers, but too late. The next volley dents armoured plates and slices through the Titan's carapace. A knee joint suddenly gives way, and *Revoka* collapses sideways. Surrounded by dust and flames, the great war machine crumples, armour buckling and tearing as it crashes to the ground.

Contemptuous of the great warrior they have felled, the enemy battle group marches on. Tyhe growls, the noise echoed and amplified by his Warhound as he cuts across the park. One of the Reavers stands as rearguard, protecting the others as they head towards the crash site.

The Reaver is bigger than *Denola*, with more firepower and better shielding, but Tyhe does not care. He is a wily hunter. Sooner or later, the Reaver will make a mistake and that is when he will pounce. He will avenge *Revoka*, but more than

that Tyhe will savour the execution as its own reward. A Reaver would be a fine kill indeed, far better than the tanks and infantry he has encountered so far.

Powering down shields and weapons, *Denola* sprints into the cover of the hab-blocks surrounding the parkland, the Warhound's falling energy signature masked almost completely by the burning buildings.

'Repeat, Thunderhawk extraction in progress. Enemy Titans are closing on our position. General order to all companies - withdraw from Ithraca or fall back to rally point at sector sigma-secundus-delta.'

Aquila lifts his hand to the vox-bead in his ear and then lets it fall back, knowing from recent experience that although he can hear the words of his superiors, they cannot hear him.

There is an ornamental gate in the high wall of the park at the end of the street. The buildings to either side of the road are burning shells, but the battle has passed from this sector, the Titans moving on to continue their deadly conflict in the parkland.

Aquila can hear the constant rumble of distant thunder, knowing that it is no tempest but the barrage of heavy guns deciding the fate of the city. It is not lightning that brightens the sky but the flash of super-weapons fire and the flare of void shields.

'Fifteen hundred metres, straight across the park.'

'Open ground, no cover,' replies Gaius. 'It will be a deathzone.'

'All right, *seventeen* hundred metres, following the treeline,' counters Aquila. 'Slower going. We need to keep watch for traitor patrols.'

He turns his attention to the woman, Varinia. She leans against the gate, face bright red. Her child is slung across her chest in a papoose made from a torn curtain. True to her word, she has not slowed them down, but only because they are not moving at full speed, the terrain requiring that they

advance more cautiously in case they should encounter a well-armed foe.

‘No time to rest,’ he tells her.

‘Just... a moment... please...’

Her ragged breathing causes Aquila some concern, as does the blood that smears her leg.

‘You cannot continue.’ He looks around. The streets in this part of the city are deserted. ‘Rest here and when you have recovered, make your way to the rendezvous point.’

She looks at him, confused.

‘In the park.’ He points north-west. The wreck of the crashed ship is plain to see, rising above the low buildings that are scattered across the grassy hills. ‘Head towards the crash. You cannot go astray.’

‘Sergeant, is that wise?’ Septival’s protest is restricted to the comm-link. ‘The order is for general withdrawal. Ithraca is lost, my friend. It is just a matter of how soon and how many survivors we can extract.’

‘Sep has a point,’ adds Gaius. ‘Ithraca is not an isolated event. All of Calth is under attack. The city will be abandoned in favour of higher value objectives. This will become hostile territory. If she stays here, she will die or be taken by the enemy.’

Conscious that the woman is close at hand and his words can be overheard, Aquila points across the parkland. The ground is pocked with fuming craters, the hillsides gouged and torn by the tread of Titans. Explosions have ripped up trees and the air is thick with ash from the burning meadows.

‘She will not make it across that,’ Aquila whispers. He raises his bolt gun a little. ‘She is dying of blood loss. Perhaps we should spare her the torment.’

‘Sergeant!’ protests Gaius.

‘Be honest, we are most likely already dead as well. It would be a mercy.’

‘Have you given up hope, sergeant?’ Septival’s disapproval is also clear.

'Any optimism I harboured was destroyed by the traitors' first salvo. The Word Bearers have caught us at our most vulnerable. It is likely that the Ultramarines Legion will perish on Calth.'

'We can't just give up.'

The woman's words take Aquila by surprise; he realises he has spoken louder than he intended. He looks at her and sees defiance rather than dejection. He cannot share her blind hope, but he does not want to delay the advance any longer.

'Gaius, carry her if you wish. The traitors will be upon the muster point before long. The Infernus Titans are entering the fray. We cannot be tardy if we wish to fight again.'

'As you say, sergeant.' Gaius stows his boltgun and scoops up Varinia, cradling her as easily as she holds her child. The legionary's head tilts to one side as he looks down at the baby. 'You are... *very small*. To think that once even our noble Sergeant Aquila was as tiny as you.'

'Enough,' says the sergeant. 'We head to the trees, and then north. Be vigilant.'

The three Space Marines break into a loping run, plunging into the smoke and fire.

A column of Ultramarines vehicles powers along the road beneath *Invigilator* - three Rhinos, and the same number of battle tanks. There are others, scattered formations of blue-armoured figures making their way through the blasted woodlands not far from the Titan's position. The Reaver stands vigilant amongst the pavilions and villas bordering the park, a kilometre from the crash site of the *Aratan*. Princeps Mikal can see the bulk of the vessel, its ravaged hull steaming, on the northern edge of the parklands. The immense ship towers over burning trees and the ruins of buildings, nearly two kilometres long and three hundred metres high. On the broad-spectrum scanners, the wreck is a blazing mass of heat and radiation, blotting out every sensor signature within hundreds of metres.

‘So few Ultramarines,’ Mikal mutters. ‘Not even a company. It is not only the Legio Praesagius that has been caught unawares by this treachery. They may help against these traitor Army scum, but bolters and volkites are no match for a Battle Titan.’

The rest of Battle Group Argentus is further to the east, providing a cordon against the traitors so that the legion’s Warlords can create a perimeter to protect the downed transport ship. The Battle Titans of Infernus are massing, four kilometres away, readying their strength for an all-out assault on the downed ship. Intense fire from the True Messengers lights up the skyline, holding back the traitor tanks and infantry trying to occupy the buildings overlooking the eastern stretches of the park.

Mikal performs a last sensor sweep but against the background flare of the *Aratan* there is nothing significant, only a scattering of signatures that could be loyal forces, trapped civilians or inconsequential enemy ground troops.

‘Negative threat. This area is secure. Routing power from sensor screen to locomotion. We will conduct a patrol to the west and north before heading east to join the line.’

Invigilator turns from the park and steps over the tumbled ruin of the wall, into the gardens of a low manse. Leaving deep footprints in the lawns and crushing hedges, the Titan crosses to the north, a shortcut to the main highway leading around the park from the outskirts to the administration quarter. The power of *Invigilator*’s plasma reactor drives the Titan on, every stride felt by Mikal as if he were a giant.

The traitor shelling has intensified. Most of it is directed at the hulk of the downed ship but errant rocket salvos and shell-fire scatters onto the park like explosive rain. Moving through the woods in the western border of the parklands, Aquila is not confident of the route ahead.

Not much can be seen through the trees, but the bellowing of war horns echoes all around, growing louder as the enemy Titans converge on the wrecked transport ship.

‘If we press on directly, it is only a matter of time before we get caught in the bombardment.’

‘We have more immediate concerns, sergeant,’ says Septival.

He points to the east where a bridge crosses the narrow river, the road curving northwards along their line of advance. Hundreds of men in the colours of the traitor regiments are crossing, their column supported by super-heavy Fellblade tanks and armoured cars ploughing through the water.

‘Not much a rotor cannon can do against them,’ says Septival, ‘and no way to avoid them if they spread into the trees.’

Aquila glances at Gaius. The woman cradled in his arm appears to be asleep, but that is not a good sign. She hangs limply in his grasp, but stirs for a moment, eyes vacant. The child is clutched to her chest, his little face stained from the smoke, but does not make a sound.

‘That Reaver we saw would make a fine escort,’ said Gaius.

‘I concur,’ replies Aquila. ‘It will take a little longer but we have to move back into the city. If we make haste we should reach the muster before the Titan cordon is breached.’

There are nods of agreement from the other two and they turn west towards the park’s edge, heading for the burning buildings beyond.

‘Fool,’ Tyhe declares with triumph. ‘Blinded by false devotion, as much as the flames obscure his scanners!’

At the princeps’ urging, *Denola* steps through the fires raging within a destroyed power coupling station, the heat posing little threat to his beloved war engine. Masked by the thermal backwash, the Warhound stalks after the enemy Reaver. Moving swiftly, Tyhe closes the range to three hundred metres, using burning ruins to cover his approach.

His sensors detect people in the buildings close by, on the edge of the park, but he pays them no heed. He is entirely

focused on the kill.

The Reaver presents an easy target, moving away with its back to him. Tyhe waits for a moment longer, analysing the street layout ahead. There is a smaller road running parallel to the highway, separated by tenements even taller than the Warhound. A perfect flanking route.

At two-hundred and fifty metres, the Reaver stops. Tyhe feels active sensors wash over him.

'Too late,' Tyhe whispers. 'Far too late.'

Denola opens fire with its mega-bolter. Hundreds of high-calibre rounds stream up the wide road, ripping into the Reaver's void shields with an actinic flare of energy.

Auditory sensors detect the failure of the void shields, their generators overloading with a crack of sonic pressure.

'Come on, you clumsy oaf! Fight us! Bring your weapons to bear!'

The Reaver staggers as the last shots slam into its carapace, causing only superficial damage. Tyhe powers up the turbo-laser and fires, the beams of energy slicing into the hip joint of the Battle Titan.

'Turn you bastard! Retaliate!'

Tyhe is already moving towards the parallel road, increasing power to *Denola's* legs. Once the Reaver brings its weapons to bear, he will already be at full speed, heading past the Battle Titan to come at it from the rear again.

The enemy princeps does not comply. Instead of turning to fight, he drives the Reaver forwards, crashing through the corner of a tenement in a shower of rockcrete fragments.

'No! No matter, you cannot run from us.'

Adjusting stride, *Denola* sprints along the second road, weapons recharging and reloading. They will be ready to fire into the retreating Titan's back as soon as they round the next corner. The enemy princeps is clever, but his machine is simply too slow to respond to the ambush.

The blare of warning sirens seems muted. Mikal's body is awash with manifold feedback, his shoulders and flanks

feeling bruised and sore. Emergency systems are like a soothing balm to his flesh as the repair crew initiate damage control procedures.

‘Shield status?’

There is a pause before his prime moderati, Lockhandt, replies.

‘Not responding, princeps. All generators overloaded. That sneak attack caught us good and proper.’

Mikal can sense the Warhound dashing after him. It will be less than a minute until its weapons are brought to bear.

‘Cease damage control. All power to locomotion and weapons.’

‘Princeps? We have no shields.’

‘No time. We need to kill this engine first.’

Under Mikal’s urging, *Invigilator* slams into another tower block as the Warhound reaches the junction behind him. The armour holds out better than the struts and ferrocrete of the hab-tower. A cascade of debris tumbles behind the Titan, filling the road.

‘That will slow him down a little. Forget the launcher, overload power to arm weapons. We are not finished yet.’

The outer wall of the building disintegrates as the traitor Warhound blasts through with its turbo-lasers, shattering masonry and support beams to target the loyal Reaver beyond. Lumps of debris tumble onto Aquila as he retreats from the window.

‘Our sanctuary is short-lived,’ he says. ‘Septival, try to get an angle on that Warhound. It is little enough, but the rotor cannon may strip off a void shield. Gaius?’

He turns to see Gaius lowering the woman to the carpeted floor by the doorway. The Space Marine looks up, and shakes his head. Aquila can see that Varinia is still alive but her movements are weak – she has lost too much blood. She strokes the head of her son with a trembling hand, her eyelids fluttering.

‘Gaius, get a visual on target. Guide Septival to the prime firing point.’

The building shakes again. The Warhound passes by the gaping windows, its mega-bolter churning out dozens of rounds a second.

Through the ruin of the far wall, Aquila sees the Reaver turning. Its weapon arms are raised, a short melta cannon and a multi-barrelled las-blaster. The Ultramarine glimpses a crackle of energy from exposed power cables and knows what is about to happen.

Septival knows it too. ‘Does he not see that we-’

The Reaver opens fire, targeting the Warhound through the building. Pulses of laser energy obliterate the walls. The Warhound’s void shields explode, the blast wave smashing into the already weakened structure.

There is a rumble from above as the ceiling gives way.

Gaius moves like lightning, hurling himself at Varinia. He crashes over her and the child as great chunks of masonry rain down. Armour splits with a loud crack. Aquila knows instantly that his companion has not survived.

Septival is also caught by the falling ceiling, the rotor cannon knocked from his grasp as a twisted support beam glances from his shoulder. The floor buckles under Aquila and pitches him through the widening gap into the storey below.

He tumbles down, fragments of rockcrete raining around him in the suddenly dazzling light as the roof is opened to the sky. He crashes into the rubble-filled basement level, stunned. The debris settles, clouds of dust billowing up from the ruin.

The whine of immense motors steals Aquila’s attention. Looking up, he sees the traitor Warhound looming over the breach.

Somewhere above him, Varinia screams.

The Reaver is directly ahead of *Denola*, revealed by the partial collapse of the corner block. Its aim was off,

smashing the hab-complex but missing the Warhound. Tyhe roars with laughter. One blast to the Reaver's unprotected bridge will end the duel.

A noise filters through the audio pick-ups. A scream of utter terror. The sound is pleasing to Tyhe and he glances down into the ruin of the building. He feels *Denola* responding too, elated by what it detects.

A young woman kneels in the rubble, bloodied and covered in dust. Her fear and anguish is palpable.

Something stirs in her arms. A child.

Two bright blue eyes look up at Tyhe, as startling as laser beams.

Slay.

The impulse surges through *Denola* but Tyhe hesitates. The infant shows no fear, blissfully ignorant of what it is looking at. Pure innocence.

Kill. Destroy. Maim.

The whispers of the engine are vehement, driving into Tyhe's thoughts like hot nails. The pain – the insistence – unnerves him, and he flinches from the contact.

For a fleeting moment he surfaces from the manifold and looks about the Warhound's bridge with his own eyes. Shrivelled corpses lie slumped at the moderati control consoles while flickering energy, sickly and yellow, dances across the panels.

Blood. Let the blood flow.

These are not the voices of his comrades. Cold realisation freezes his heart as he becomes aware of himself. His body is a frail shell, barely alive, kept that way by the unnatural power of *Denola*. He is not its master any more.

'Do not command me! I am the princeps-'

Slaughter. Rend.

The Warhound sends shards of pain stabbing into his mind. Recoiling, Tyhe grits his teeth, battling against the murderous urges filling his thoughts.

'No! No, I am the master of the machine!'

The manifold picks up his defiance, sending it as impulse signals through the Titan's systems.

The Warhound inexplicably staggers back from the building, stumbling into the middle of the road. Mikal does not hesitate.

'Fire!'

The melta-cannon unleashes a focused beam, vaporising the armoured canopy of the Warhound. The surging microwaves incinerate everything inside the Titan's bridge, and the over-pressure bursts its armoured head.

The Warhound topples backwards, guns and legs in spasm, crashing into the hab-block on the other side of the street.

'Again! Full attack!'

Invigilator blasts the crippled war engine with missiles, las and melta-beams, tearing holes through the carapace, severing a leg and shredding its armour plate. Flames engulf the wreck from sheared power lines as the blackened, twisted mess slumps to the ground, leaking burning oil.

Mikal scans the wreck for a few seconds, convincing himself that it is truly destroyed.

'Repair crews – the enemy are closing in on the *Aratan*. I want void shields back online by the time we reach the cordon. Let us hope the Machine God blesses us with a timely arrival.'

Aquila drags himself up the broken rubble and is met by Septival on the floor above. He stands over Varinia and the child. The woman does not move.

'She is dead,' says Septival, looking down at the slender, tattered form at his feet.

Aquila stoops to pick the baby from his mother's dead grasp. Pexilius looks up at the Space Marine with a frown, tiny fingers clawing at Aquila's gauntlets.

'Gaius thought it our duty to protect them,' says Aquila. 'He gave his life for this infant.'

‘A one-sided exchange, I fear,’ replies Septival.

‘He was right. This child will grow up in war and turmoil, but what do we fight for, if not to protect the next generation? One that might know peace. There will be many orphans in the coming years, but we cannot abandon them.’

‘And one child will make a difference?’

‘If our lives are to be forfeit, it must be for good cause. Gaius believed that this child’s life was worth more than his. We owe it to his memory not to make such sacrifice a mere vanity. In time we all will die, but there must be others to bear witness to our deeds. Ithraca is a mass grave, but perhaps one day young Pexilius will know the truth of what happened here, and he will repay that sacrifice a thousand times over.’

‘So you have hope for the future of the Imperium after all?’

‘Hope is but the first step on the road to disappointment, brother. You can fight for hope if you wish. I will fight to bring honour to the dead. Now, no more delays – we head for the rendezvous.’

Mikal has seen the might of Titans unleashed many times when a world has refused compliance, but the spectacle of two clashing legions makes all other conflicts pale in comparison. Voids shields flicker as the battle rages, blue and purple glares in the smog of war. Shells rip into metal bodies, lasers rupture armour and missiles pound from above. Three Praesagius Warlords have fallen already, their burning wrecks like beacons in the gloom.

Invigilator is just one amongst many, hurling everything it has into the fray. Behind the weakening line of Titans, the crew of the *Aratan* fight to free the main vault doors and see what can be salvaged.

‘It does not matter if we are defeated today,’ Mikal tells the battle group. ‘It is enough that we fight. The artifices of the Machine God have been perverted to a traitorous cause and we cannot allow that to pass without response.’

A volcano cannon sears into *Invigilator* from the left, blowing out a shield. The brief stab of pain in the back of Mikal's skull subsides in a few seconds. He knows death is near. He is calm.

'It brings to mind a tract from the *Archaia Titanicus*, from the dark days before the Omnissiah brought unity - "It was once held that there was nothing so pure as Man. From man came Artifice, and so Artifice was deemed pure also. When Man was found to be corrupt, that corruption spread to all that he had created, and all that had been learned was lost." Princeps Maximus Arutis taught me that on the first day I was brought to the legion. I never understood it fully until now.'

A shower of rockets falls about the Reaver, blanketing the Titan with detonations, another void shield burning out as its energy is expended against the blasts. Mikal replies with the apocalypse launcher, sending his own hail of missiles at the Warlord that has targeted him.

The line is being pushed back, retreating into the buildings around the wreck of the *Aratan*. Mikal looks at the charred hulk and sees swarms of red-robed Techpriests labouring at one of the massive boarding gates. Heavy-duty servitors with arc-cutters saw away at the tangle blocking the vault door.

Two more Infernus Warlords and a Night Gaunt have joined the fight, moving in from the north. The battle group responds, *Victorix* and *Firewolf* striding out to meet the threat, hopelessly outmatched but still defiant. They are prepared to sell their lives dearly.

Just a few dozen metres from Mikal's position, warning beacons blaze into action on the hull of the *Aratan*, flashing red and orange. Klaxons sound as the great gate of the transport finally grinds open. Light streams from the transit bay within.

Its war horn signalling the counter-attack, *Immortalis Domitor* strides from the hold.

The Warmonger-class Titan dwarfs even the Warlords, its main weapons longer than a Warhound is tall. Shells the size of battle tanks are let loose, obliterating an Infernus engine in a single volley. Missiles that can level entire city blocks burst from the launchers of the *Domitor*, streaming out across the ravaged park. They detonate like a dozen miniature dawns.

In the wake of the Warmonger stride four more Praesagius Warlords, fresh and ready for the fight. Cheers flood across the loyalists' comm-net.

Joy singing in his heart, Mikal embraces the manifold once more.

'Get those void shields back online. Battle group, support the Princeps Maximus. Ithraca is not yet lost!'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GAV THORPE is the *New York Times* bestselling author of 'The Lion', a novella in the collection *The Primarchs*. He has written many other Black Library books, including the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost* and audio drama *Raven's Flight* as well as fan-favourite Warhammer 40,000 novel *Angels of Darkness* and the epic Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*. He is currently working on a new Dark Angels series, *The Legacy of Caliban*. Gav hails from Nottingham, where he shares his hideout with the evil genius that is Dennis, the mechanical hamster.



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