

The background of the cover is a dynamic illustration of a red Orkney Terminator, a heavily armored power armor suit from the Warhammer 40,000 universe. The Terminator is shown in a three-quarter view, facing slightly to the left. It has a large, golden spherical visor on its head, a blue glowing light on its chest, and a large, curved blade held in its right hand. The Terminator is set against a dark, industrial background with large circular structures and a fiery, orange and red explosion or smoke effect on the right side. The overall color palette is dominated by reds, oranges, and greys, with some blue highlights from the Terminator's lights and the explosion.

WARHAMMER
40,000

FARSIGHT

EMPIRE OF LIES

A decorative horizontal bar with a central circular emblem featuring a red and white design, flanked by two small orange lights.

PHIL KELLY

The background of the cover features a large, red, heavily armored robotic figure, likely a Terminator, in a dynamic pose. The figure has a large, curved blade in its right hand and a glowing blue energy weapon in its left. The background is a dark, industrial setting with smoke and fire, suggesting a battle scene. The overall color palette is dominated by reds, oranges, and greys, with some blue highlights from the figure's weapon and eyes.

WARHAMMER
40,000

FARSIGHT

EMPIRE OF LIES

A decorative horizontal bar with a central circular emblem featuring a red and white design, flanked by two small red and white rectangular elements.

PHIL KELLY

More tales of the T'au Empire from Black Library

FARSIGHT: CRISIS OF FAITH

Phil Kelly

THE TAU EMPIRE

Various authors

A collection of T'au Empire short fiction

FARSIGHT

Phil Kelly

BLADES OF DAMOCLES

Phil Kelly

STORM OF DAMOCLES

Justin D Hill

DAMOCLES

Ben Counter, Guy Haley, Phil Kelly and Josh Reynolds

A Space Marine Battles book containing the novellas

'Blood Oath',

'Broken Sword', 'Black Leviathan' and 'Hunter's Snare'

Also available as an MP3 audio book from

blacklibrary.com

THE SHAPE OF THE HUNT

Joe Parrino

A Space Marine Battles audio drama

THE KAUYON

Andy Smillie

A T'au Empire audio drama

SHADOWSUN: THE LAST OF KIRU'S LINE

Braden Campbell

A T'au Empire novella

FIRE CASTE

Peter Fehervari

An Astra Militarum and T'au Empire novel

COURAGE AND HONOUR

Graham McNeill

An Ultramarines and T'au Empire novel

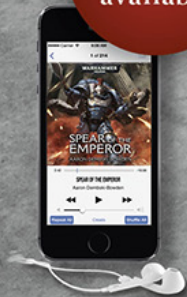
***Visit blacklibrary.com for the full range of T'au
Empire novels,
novellas, audio dramas and short stories, along
with many other exclusive products.***

BLACK LIBRARY

To see the full Black Library range visit
blacklibrary.com



Multiple
formats
available



MP3 AUDIOBOOKS | BOOKS | EBOOKS

CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
Warhammer 40,000
Dramatis Personae
Map
Prologue
Part One
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Part Two
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Part Three

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Epilogue

T'au Xenolexicon

About the Author

An Extract from 'Watchers of the Throne: The
Regent's Shadow'

A Black Library Publication

eBook license



FARSIGHT

EMPIRE OF LIES



PHIL KELLY



BLACK LIBRARY



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.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

T'AU

FIRE CASTE

FARSIGHT, High Commander of the Farsight Expedition, student of Puretide, also known as O'Shovah, Mont'ka-Shoh

BRIGHTSWORD, Farsight's protégé and wielder of the fusion blades prototype system

BRAVESTORM, Commander of Dal'yth, veteran of the Blackthunder Mesa disaster

SHA'VASTOS, Commander of the historic Arkunashan War

SHADOWSUN, Supreme expert in the Kauyon, student of Puretide, also known as O'Shaserra, Kauyon-Shas

MOATA, The Burning Chameleon, garrison stealth commander of Vior'los, protégé of Commander Shadowsun

ETHEREAL CASTE

AUN'VA, Master of the Undying Spirit

AUN'TIPIYA, The Watchful One

AUN'TEFAN, The Bringer of Harmonies

AUN'DIEMN, The Blue Gaze, seconded to the Farsight Expedition

AUN'XA, The Hope of Youth, seconded to the Farsight Expedition

AUN'LOS, The Quiet Dignity, seconded to the Farsight Expedition

EARTH CASTE

O'VESA, Inventor and genius-level high scientist

WORLDSHAPER, Dal'ythan terraforming expert

AIR CASTE

LI MAU TENG, High Admiral of the Farsight Expedition
Kor'vattr

Y'ELDI, Personal pilot of High Commander Farsight

MAI'TYS, Gunnery captain of the *Wing of Blades*

KOR'EL SYLPHWING, Co-pilot of the *Wing of Blades*

WATER CASTE

POR'O ZOA'HA, Sub-Magister of the Vo'hal District,
Tau'rota'sha

IMPERIUM

VYKOLA HERAT, Kindred Soul and Inquisitor of the Ordo
Xenos

ORKS

GROG IRONTEEF, The Warchief of Alsanta, kaptin of the
Dagga

BIG GOBBA, First mate of the Dagga

DRILLFIST, Top big mek of the Dagga

KROBB, Snakebite elder

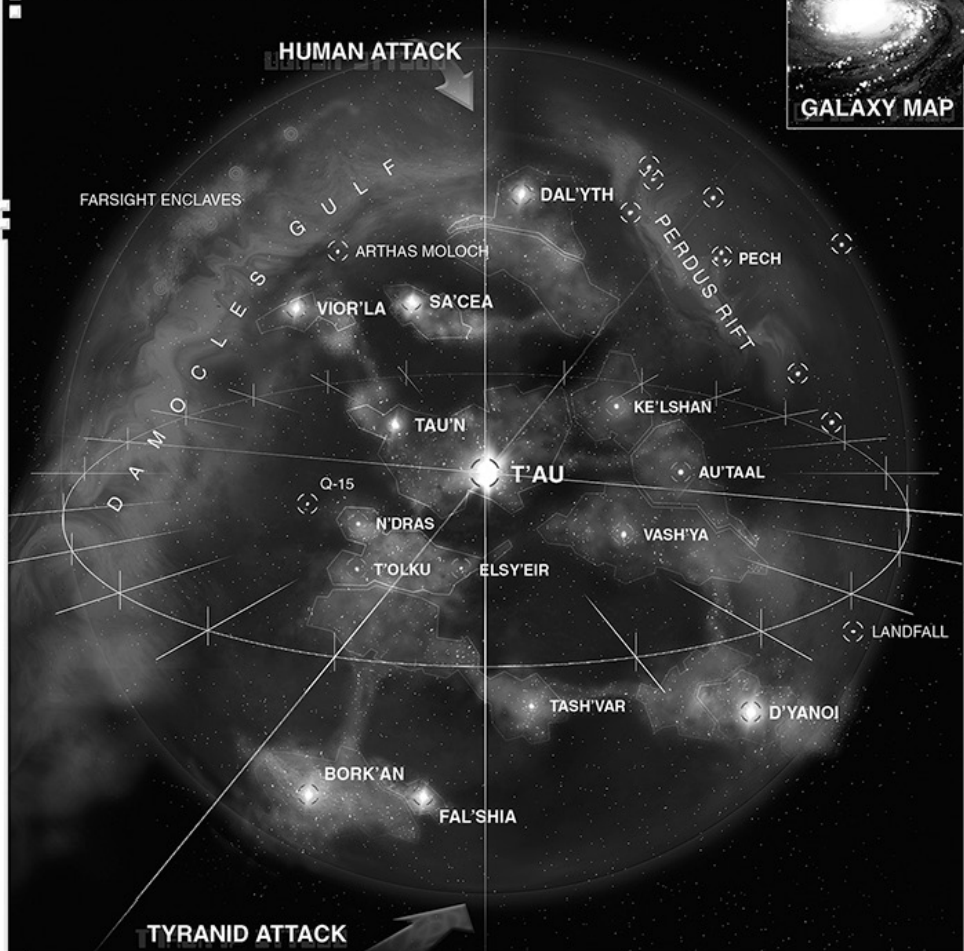
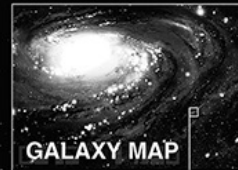
RED DA BULLIT, Speed Freek warboss

DOK TOOFJAW, Da Painboss, ex-warlord of Orka-Gnasha

KAPTIN BADRUKK, Legendary Freeboota, kaptin of the

Blacktoof

THE TAU EMPIRE



PROLOGUE

In the freezing depths of the void, a bubble of unreality became solid. It shimmered in the light of nearby stars, its form in constant flux. First it was a sphere of flame, then a vast globule of quicksilver, then a stark eye fringed with a rainbow of feathers. The apparition was formed of nothing more than thought and emotion, but it was real enough, and it was one of countless others. There were as many of its fellow incarnations as there were stars in the galaxy swirling around it. Together, they formed a god.

The entity the apparition belonged to was not omniscient, despite its best efforts. What one fractal presence saw, another forgot, or worked to undo. It was a divine contradiction, a dynamo of cause and consequence, and it thrived on constant change. Here, on the Eastern Fringe of the galaxy, the harvest of flux was rich indeed.

The eye's iris burned as a halo of pink and blue fire, its

pupil a black hole yet to be. Its optic nerve was a shimmering confusion of multicoloured strands that led to another dimension entirely, channelling its oracular visions through a tiny rip in the fabric of space.

This one, this particular vantage point, watched an exiled portion of itself take one new name, then another, then yet another. To the mortal races of the galaxy, such splintered sentiences were known as *daemons*. It was an amusing term, highlighting how little the mortals understood of the nature of things. All these little portions were aspects of the Changer, and the Changer was all of its constituent parts. They were one and the same. Those who lacked true understanding of the universe, whose superstitions saw them cling to pattern recognition as a shipwrecked soul clings to flotsam, saw them as malign entities. Yet they simply *were*, and most were no more individual than the cells in a biological body were distinct from their greater whole.

The daemon that the vantage point observed had more free will than most. Exiled and cursed, it had chosen a long and difficult road to redemption, one that led through obscurity, frustration and failure. Yet it had chosen its path wisely. It had buried itself deep in a thriving and dynamic empire, unremarkable in the greater scheme of things, yet ripe for corruption. The contrarian's path often leads to hidden treasure, after all, and there was no greater treasure than change.

The exiled daemon's journey had led it to a new source of soul-fodder in the galaxy - one that was individually weak of spirit, but collectively a powerhouse. This young and vibrant race was rich with the potential not only to rise high, but also to fall into spectacular darkness.

It was a story that echoed throughout history, for it was a tale beloved of the Dark Gods, especially when the culture in question was so blind to it. Here, at the new race's heart, were leaders that claimed to rule for the good of all, as most mortal rulers do. They harboured secrets that could

see the gleaming edifice of their utopia dashed into a thousand jagged splinters if they were ever to come to light.

Another house of cards, lavishly illustrated, yet ultimately just as delicate as any other. Waiting to be toppled by the removal of a single foundational element.

This particular race would be unusually gratifying to bring to disaster. Their entire society was built around obeisance, and it offended the Changer greatly that its people would not hear a word spoken against their masters. When the roots of insurrection found no cracks in which to flourish, the entire plant would wither and die. But the entity thrived on adversity, and turning sanctity upon its head. There was always a way to effect blessed change. It was just a matter of finding it.

The contrarian was living proof, for it could not exist otherwise. Through a combination of rough opportunism, canny possession and the artful usage of truth, the contrarian had burrowed like a parasite into the heart of this bright new empire. It had taken one too many risks, been forced to shuck off one incarnation and take another. In doing so, it had buried deeper, a mosquito that had become a tick.

Already there was one whose destiny it had caused to fork, and fork again. The fractal paths of causality that spilled out from each decision were as pleasing as a kaleidoscope of light refracted through a gallery of prisms. Through the contrarian's machinations, there was a traitor in the ranks – one who did the work of change without realising it, and who harboured the sparks of corruption deep within.

Better yet, there was one thread amongst the tapestry of fate that intersected with countless trillions of others. A warrior king, already a focal point of the young race's future. He was of interest to a rival deity, the Red God, the King of Skulls. Reason enough to pull the strand in itself.

The dizzying display of cause and effect overlapped, blended and was refracted again. With a few minor

manipulations, each splitting beam would merge with the others into blinding light, then utter blackness. In its wake would come a new order, a tyranny that would see the entire Eastern Fringe bathed in blood and fire.

With enough whispers, with enough cultivated tragedy, with a measure of power lent here and a bargain struck there, everything would lead to the same point.

The damnation of an entire race.

PART ONE

THE WAY OF THE SHORT BLADE

*'Learn to shorten your reach!
If your foe can come close enough
to negate your striking power,
All stratagem is lost.*

*And when all stratagem is lost,
The battle is lost.'*

– O'Shovah

CHAPTER ONE

THE PATIENT HUNTER

VARNAD WASTES
VIOR'LOS

Commander Farsight weighed his honour blade as he surveyed the horde of orks charging up the ridge towards him. With his pulse pistol held lightly in his other hand, the t'au commander adjusted his stance an inch, relishing the sensations of the equatorial desert's sand trickling between his broad, hoof-like toes. The Vior'los sun beat down on his leathery grey skin, keeping his war spirit hot.

It was glorious, this moment. The meditation before the lightning strike.

'First target, shas'o?' he asked Brightsword.

The young warrior straightened a little at his side, uncomfortable without his signature XV8. He had accented the rectangle of his sinistral shoulder armour with stylised blue flames, a youthful affectation to mirror that of his famous battlesuit.

'Crux point of body mass and proximity, then descending

order as usual, wise one,' said Brightsword. His smooth, bald head twitched like that of a hunting bird as he read the horde's disposition and leadership structure. 'Though perhaps "patronising one" would be more fitting.'

Still work to do with this latest clone, thought Farsight. Brightsword's pride ran deep in the genes. 'We shall discuss appropriate responses later. Ob'lotai?'

A large disc-drone in gleaming black dipped its rim in salute, its profusion of antennae swivelling as the artificial intelligence tracked the oncoming enemy. 'Maximum disruption, commander. Retain high ground. Isolate and confound.'

'Just so,' said Farsight. He gave a curt nod. Though the pupil had long ago become the master, his original battlesuit tutor – or rather the AI that replicated him – was reliable as a master-forged blade, even outside his Broadside battlesuit.

The charging beasts were perhaps twenty metres away, bellowing loud and frothing at the mouth as their heavy-set walkers stamped up the ridge behind them. Farsight could not smell them, despite the fact he was downwind. He made a mental note to consult O'Vesa after the battle; every sensory datapoint was important. He tensed his muscle groups, relaxed, and tensed again, feeling the reassuring weight of the pistol in his hand.

His heart pounded. This was it.

'Are you sure about this, high commander?' asked Brightsword.

'The sight must be seen.' He swallowed. 'As much for the water caste's dronerecorders as for Master Puretide's memory.'

An electric moment passed, one last breath before the killing began.

'Kauyon,' said Farsight.

The first shot was Brightsword's. A tiny sphere of plasma-sizzled into the open jaw of a monstrous ork, blowing its brain out the back of its bald green head. Farsight broke

left as the giant tumbled into the dirt, two more of the bestial things tripping over its corpse. The greenskins close behind leapt, axes raised against the harsh blue sky. Farsight shot one in the forehead even as Brightsword bullseyed the other.

Ob'lotai 4-0's droneform rose smoothly upwards, hidden compartments on the hovering disc's underside sliding open. Miniature smart missiles shot from within. Each the size of Farsight's index finger, they detonated amongst the ork ranks, causing a string of perfectly placed explosions that sent liquid flame and gobbets of dark fluid spraying in all directions. The foremost aliens were hurled back from the ork front line, but the greenskins behind flowed around them, Ob'lotai's firestorm forming a bulwark that slowed their assault but did not stop it.

Farsight glanced over at Brightsword, just for a fraction of a second. The young commander was moving smoothly along the ridge, taking placed shots one after another as the orks scrambled up towards him. So far, the ratios looked good. They were leading them, misdirecting them, robbing them of momentum.

'Coldstar, attend me, please,' said Farsight. His XV8's own artificial intelligence gave a brief blip of acknowledgement via his ear bead cadrelink. Farsight nodded curtly. 'Commander Bravestorm, move in. The bait is taken.'

'Inbound,' came Bravestorm's curt reply. The cadrenet carried his throaty tones so clearly it was as if the hero of Blackthunder Mesa were standing right next to him.

Despite their slowed advance, the orks were getting too close, braying and roaring so loudly it offended Farsight's ears. One of them lunged for him, but he had read its stance, and was already ducking beneath it, taking its legs with a tangle-trip he had mastered on Arkunasha. He came up in a smooth half-circle that saw his pistol lined up perfectly with another of the beasts. The shot took the top of its head clean away even as he pivoted on his heel to bat aside the weapon of another.

A massive warrior-leader shoved its way through the throng, bawling for its kin to follow it. Farsight shot it in the chest, then chided himself. That tactic would stop a human, but not a charging ork. He adjusted his aim a fraction and shot it in the throat instead.

Still it came forward, half its neck missing and its engine-axe revving so the dirty metal teeth whirred along its edge. The boxy pistol in its other hand bucked violently as it disgorged a clatter of solid shot. One bullet clipped Farsight's pulse pistol, jerking it out of his hands and shocking his fingers with a ripple of pain. The pistol skidded down the slope behind him. Instead of retrieving it – a fatal mistake at such close quarters – he readied his Vior'lan honour blade in the Stance of Seven Deadly Cuts.

The sword felt unfamiliar, almost like an enemy in itself. He had not used such a primitive weapon since those days on the slopes of Mount Kan'ji, decades ago. He remembered asking Master Puretide, as a youth – with the earth caste's technology, why would they ever need a blade?

The giant ork stormed in, swinging its engine-axe. Sand shifted underfoot at its sheer weight. Farsight's parry was off-kilter. His blade was batted aside as if it were no more than a thin reed. The commander leant over with the momentum, placing one hand down on the sandy dune before pushing himself back up after the juddering, saw-toothed axe roared overhead.

Well inside the ork's guard, Farsight reversed his grip on the sword and rammed it upwards with the point under the beast's chin. It pierced the thing's lantern jaw, came out of its eye, and withdrew in a spatter of red.

Critically, it missed the creature's brain.

The commander felt the beast's knee hit his gut, then took a backhand blow to the chest that sent him sprawling backwards with the longblade spinning from his hand. Reeling, the high commander saw something coming in fast from his left: another ork, which shoulder-barged him on its

way towards Brightsword. He fell, spinning, to the ground. The giant closed in. The Vior'los sun disappeared behind the creature's bulk as it raised its axe.

Disarmed and on his back, Farsight reached for the sword, scrabbling in the sand and finding nothing for a terrifying second.

A vision seared through his mind, bursting from some hidden mental scar he thought long healed since an Imperial warp drive had addled his mind in the Damocles Gulf. He saw a world of broken statues, and a flat disc of fire. He was reaching for a far larger blade as a red-skinned monstrosity bore down on him, screaming its war cry as skulls rattled on the chains bound to its wings.

Blood for the Blood God.

Then his gauntlet closed around the honour blade's hilt.

Farsight shook his head and knelt as he took up the sword, bringing it round to lock his muscles in the Guard of Stone. This time the angle was true, and the power of the ork's blow was turned against its wielder. The honour blade, its edge the sharpest the earth caste could devise, cut straight through the metal of the ork's axe, sending the engine-blade thudding into the sand.

The ork growled. It swung the axe's heavy steel haft anyway, and hit Farsight hard.

The force of the impact hurled him away, bright Vior'los daylight lancing into his eyes as he flew through the air. Through the pain he had a flash of memory – Mount Kan'ji, and harsh lessons under a punishing sun.

'Reinforce,' he gasped.

There was a sudden sense of displaced air, the sound of jetpack engines ripping the hot sky. Farsight heard hissing hydraulics from behind him as he fell backwards off the ridge's crest. His ribs burned and his lungs emptied of air as he slammed into the control cocoon of his customised XV8, but he squared his shoulders on instinct as it compensated for his weight. As restraint bars slid around Farsight's torso, a spike of old pain came from his hip,

where the flesh met his cybernetic leg: a reminder of a battle lost to Arachen skitterlings long ago.

Stunts like this were the province of younger warriors, but he had a reputation to keep.

Coldstar swung the facia of the control cocoon up into place, hex-screens leaping into life as the battlesuit overlaid a dozen targeting solutions across the ork horde below.

'Your emergency boarding lacked finesse, commander,' said the suit's artificial intelligence, her voice smooth and calm. 'Unlike that of Commander Brightsword. I will play your protégé's version of the manoeuvre during the next down cycle.'

'Truly an incentive to stay alive,' said Farsight, already designating kills with practised eye-flicks and microgestures as he shifted his legs backwards. He triggered his fusion blaster, and twin beams of white light seared out to mingle as a blade. It neatly bisected the hulking ork leader that had broken his ribs.

He smiled despite himself. It was invigorating to go from the most simplistic and vulnerable interpretation of the Way of the Short Blade to its ultimate expression – the true might of the Hero's Mantle. The artificial intelligence he used to bolster his own XV8, ported across from the experimental Coldstar-class voidsuit he had used during the first crossing of the Damocles Gulf, knew full well how valuable she was to the T'au'va. Farsight had come to appreciate her company. Though he had never admitted it to himself, her clipped tones reminded him just a little of Shadowsun.

He leaned forward, and the custom XV8 tilted in response as it rose up and over the ork front ranks, spitting bright plasma. Ob'lotai 4-0's droneform rose alongside him. The orks below were hit one after another by plasma bolts and micro-missiles, each coming apart in sizzling bursts of dark blood.

Already the tide had been robbed of its focus. It was more

a milling crowd now than the front line of an army. Desultory pistol fire shot up towards them, smacking into the legs of Farsight's XV8 but causing no real harm. A red-coned rocket, self-propelled and whirling in a corkscrew of white smoke, missed him by an arm's length; another detonated ten metres short of its target. He saw Bravestorm take one on his shield generator, a dome of bright blue light and orange flame crackling around the arm-mounted disc as the rocket detonated prematurely.

Three more of the ork missiles were spiralling towards Brightsword. The young commander was still fighting at close quarters, slashing his fusion beams through the scissoring limbs of a piston-driven walker much like those they had faced on Arkunasha.

'Should we intervene, high commander?' said Coldstar.

'No,' said Farsight. 'Brightsword has proximity alerts, just like us.'

At the last minute, just before the ork rockets hit home, the bulky warscaper drone that O'Vesa had gifted Brightsword emitted a halo of light. It gave a pulse of gravitic energy, and all three of the ork rockets were pulled downwards at the last moment as if yanked by invisible hands. They detonated amongst the greenskin horde beneath with a series of satisfying bass thumps.

Red dots on Farsight's damage control suite flared briefly as a smattering of bullets pinged from his suit. One by one they turned silver as his AI categorised them as purely cosmetic damage.

'Do they really only use such primitive technologies?' asked Coldstar. 'How are they space-capable?'

'They are a contradiction, these be'gel,' said Farsight, target-looping the largest orks from the horde below before sending sizzling bolts in to slay them. 'I know them well enough from ten long tau'cyr of war upon Arkunasha, and yet sometimes I feel I do not know them at all. They have far more sophisticated weaponry in their arsenals, though given their scarcity, I am not sure they know how to mass-

produce them.'

'Please clarify.'

'The be'gel are a race of idiot-savants, especially regarding their relationship with technology. Their speech patterns show a rudimentary intelligence at best. O'Vesa's theory is that they rely on intuition more than learning, but that their warrior caste has kept enough understanding to function as an empire of sorts. They are a random force in the cosmos.'

'A plausible conclusion,' said Coldstar. 'It troubles me that we have not yet extinguished them from the galaxy.'

Ten metres beneath him, he saw Commander Bravestorm swinging his onager gauntlet in great crackling arcs into a knot of hulking ork leaders, deflecting the fiercest counterstrikes with his shield generator whilst simply letting the other blows rebound from his iridium suit's impervious alloy. Every impact of the commander's great fist smashed another ork so hard it came apart in an explosion of blood. Nearby, the young warrior Brightsword had re-engaged the front line. In the full throes of combat he appeared to be a spinning fire-wheel of fusion beams that carved through orks by the dozen. He dodged, weaved and leapt, his mastery of the XV8 truly impressive.

'I would like nothing more than to see the entire race eradicated,' said Farsight. His plasma rifle dealt its carefully measured fury in a triple burst, each of the three bolts sizzling into the scalp of one of the orks below. 'We tried it, once. We tried everything, starting with diplomacy, as ever. Eventually the water caste was forced to admit defeat. The orks seek not peace, only to revel in conflict of all kinds. Ultimately the ethereals decided to leave them well enough alone.'

He eye-looped an ork leader, swiping the blade of his hand right, and his fusion blaster echoed the movement, cutting the beast in two at the waist.

'Yet I believe we cannot ignore them, especially in the enclaves. They must be exterminated before they can derail

our entire expedition. If they encroach on the outer worlds, they must be hurled back immediately, or we risk the worst.'

'And that is?'

'A gathering of lethal momentum that the orks call a *Waaagh!* in their own tongue. It is a descriptor and war cry alike, shouted at maximum volume. Commander Bravestorm is experiencing just that, in microcosm. Observe.'

The sheer numbers of the greenskin horde beneath them began to overwhelm Bravestorm, for though he was killing with each punch of his famous onager gauntlet, and though his flamer was blasting back dozens at a time, he could not face every direction at once. The orks bellowed as one, surging forward. One, two, three of the beasts leapt on his back. The Dal'ythan commander boosted upwards with an ungainly leap, batting aside an ork climbing over his shoulder and kicking away another that grasped at his iridium XV8-02's legs. One still straddled his shoulders, hacking at his sensor head with a crackling power axe. Farsight dropped a crosshair over it and decapitated it with a shot from his plasma rifle, the intense heat of the shot cauterising its neck.

'My thanks,' said Bravestorm as he rose high on his jetpack's pillar of thrust. 'He was in my blind spot.'

'Even when using the Way of the Short Blade, keep them at arm's length.'

'Noted, high commander.'

Nearby, Brightsword's fusion blades were flickering and spitting, an indication they were running out of power. They burned bright, hot, and briefly - not unlike their wielder, thought Farsight.

The first Brightsword had been killed back in the Imperial assault upon Dal'yth Prime, all but cut in half by the axe of a gue'ron'sha executioner-captain. It was fortunate for the fire caste that Farsight's pupil had been chosen for the earth caste's cloning programmes a short while before his

original incarnation's death.

The young commander leapt high, disengaging with a well-placed kick that crushed an ork skull as a parting gesture. He had taken his life in his hands, as ever, and yet extricated himself in style. Perhaps overconfidence was a side effect of the cloning process.

With all three battlesuits safe from earthbound attack and Ob'lotai's droneform lending fire support close by, the engagement had reached a natural end. From a mid-range aerial vantage point, with the sun behind them, the battlesuit pilots were safe from all but the heaviest weapons fire - orks were famously inaccurate, and their high-calibre weapons few and far between.

They had enacted a passable Kauyon from a standing start, even outside the Hero's Mantle, and taken only superficial damage in return. Yet Farsight could not shake the feeling that the finer details of the war form still eluded him.

Shadowsun would have done it so much better.

'Cease engagement,' said Farsight. The orks froze, then dispersed slowly into a wide grid. 'Tally?'

'Sixty-three before disengagement,' said Ob'lotai. It was a new record, and one that the water caste would crow about as an exemplar of the Kauyon unless Farsight expressly requested their silence. He knew full well it was still a drop in the ocean against a full horde.

'O'Vesa, your conclusions, please.'

'At once, high commander.' The icon of the Stone Dragon unfurled on one of Farsight's hex-screens, replaced by the broad, flat face of his foremost ally in the earth caste. He was grinning obsequiously, making the open-handed gesture of the friend-eager-to-help. 'Were the proxies to your taste?'

Farsight scowled at the overly direct question. He leaned forward to send Coldstar speeding over the ork horde, feeling his ribs grind in his chest. 'They are convincingly violent,' he said. 'Though the olfactory elements were

conspicuous by their absence.'

O'Vesa's smile grew stale, then dropped away altogether. 'Olfactory elements? Is a full sensorium emission really necessary?'

'The higher the authenticity of the engagement, the greater its use. You should know that.'

'It is not that we cannot make a reasonable representation of their porcine stink, of course. It is just that since the autopsy incident on Arkunasha, I find it distasteful in the extreme to simulate their-'

'Distasteful?' interrupted Farsight. O'Vesa's experimental autopsy procedure had seen an ork leader-creature inadvertently brought back from the dead, and his friend Ob'lotai had been killed in the ensuing brawl before Farsight put the ork down for good. 'You, who not only brought about the death of Ob'lotai, but engineered that of Master Puretide himself? You find your duties *distasteful*?'

'The Puretide operation was at the express command of the Ethereal Aun'Va, high commander,' said O'Vesa, taken aback. 'Did you not place the prototype mind-scan device upon his crown for the very same reason?'

Farsight felt bile rise in his chest. He drew crosshairs over three more orks, and for a moment contemplated triggering them, even though the exercise was long over. Something in him wanted to spill their blood in person.

'There is truth there, I admit,' he said, forcing his anger to dissipate. 'Just ensure the facsimiles are as true to the source specimens as possible, in every way, please. How else can we justify such an experimental cross-caste endeavour?'

O'Vesa nodded, chastened, as Farsight continued.

'Even a small detail might save the lives of those destined to fight the be'gel in actuality. If we are to make the enclaves safe, we must know the foe as we know ourselves.'

'Of course, high commander,' said O'Vesa. Then his face lit up. 'Do you need more bipedal ork war machines against which to hone your doctrines?'

‘They pose little challenge, in truth.’

‘A shame. Manufacturing such crudity is proving an entertaining challenge. Do you have any other observations as to verisimilitude?’

Farsight looked to one side, trying to put into words a feeling that lurked on the edge of his consciousness. ‘The orks on Arkunasha engaged us in many different theatres of war, at times inflicting heavy casualties. They are adaptable, this we know. More adaptable than we give them credit for. I cannot help but feel we are missing something.’

‘If you can be more specific...’ O’Vesa made an apologetic grimace. ‘I have read your famous *Book of the Beast* many times, and thrilled at its insights. Yet I feel I have reflected everything within it to the best of my ability.’

Farsight shook his head. ‘It is no single factor, or behaviour, that I could outline to you. Perhaps it is something elemental. Some indefinable quality lacking from our simulations.’

‘Perhaps.’ O’Vesa nodded. ‘They are so foreign to me.’

‘And me, in truth. In itself, lack of knowledge about alien races is not a crime. Yet the be’gel must not be underestimated. Their defining feature is their lust for war, and they are built for it, even on a microscopic level. They cannot be allowed to survive, to multiply, on the borders of our empire. It is akin to letting a starving snow lynx prowl the slopes of a mountain settlement without concern.’

‘Or rather a pride of them,’ interjected Brightsword.

‘Indeed. The orks will savage us the first chance they get. They are our first priority. We know from experience the retribution of the Imperial humans is slow in coming-’

‘And can be repelled,’ said O’Vesa, making a clumsy attempt at the blade-that-parries with the flat of his hand.

‘Just so. Yet the orks are mercurial, surging into outright war on the slightest pretext or opportunity. It is imperative they are dealt with first.’

‘Despite the ethereal caste having declared that we will

complete the purge of the Imperials from enclave space?’

O’Shovah inclined his head. ‘Is it not possible, in theory, to do both?’

‘In theory, of course,’ said O’Vesa. He did not sound convinced.

‘Not yet,’ said Farsight, twisting the last ring of his scalp lock in his fingers. ‘How goes the war in the Vorac Belt?’ He knew the answer well enough, but needed to hear it nonetheless, and the change of subject would be welcome indeed.

‘The railgun is a wondrous thing,’ said O’Vesa. ‘We outrange them by several orders of magnitude. I understand our kill-to-loss ratio in the asteroid field is in the multiple hundreds.’

‘An imprecise summation, for the Stone Dragon.’

‘I have been concentrating my efforts on the ground war, high commander,’ said O’Vesa. ‘There is little to be gained from applying my ingenuity to a theatre of battle that is not within my sphere of influence. You had best address the air caste for information regarding void engagements.’ All levity had gone from his expression; he made a perfunctory sign of contrition, but the laxity of the gesture put the lie to it.

‘Of course. My thanks for today.’ Farsight made the closed-hands sign of farewell in good order, wincing as his ribs sent a pulse of pain through his chest.

‘You are hurt,’ said O’Vesa. ‘You should report to the med-suites immediately.’

‘I have other duties to attend to.’

O’Vesa shook his head. ‘I thought fire was supposed to be unpredictable.’ The scientist’s hex-screen holo folded in on itself to vanish altogether.

Mentally composing himself, Farsight tapped the inverted triangle of the air caste. A moment later, a golden bird of prey symbol that demarked the enclaves’ high admiral enlarged from his residual display, then unfurled like a paper sculpture being unmade to become the blue-grey

visage of his old friend turning to face him.

'Kor'O Li Mau Teng,' said Farsight. 'May the light of the T'au'va shine upon you. How fares the defence initiative?'

'All parameters have been met thus far,' said Li Mau Teng, features creasing into a smile. Farsight had always found the admiral's bonhomie half-reassuring, half-infuriating. 'Though I have news that would be better imparted face-to-face.'

'Is that so?' said Farsight. He angled his flight path for the exit zone of O'Vesa's vast testing ground. 'The command link is secure. Do not keep me in suspense. The threshold of our airspace is still contested, I take it?'

'Trust me,' said the elderly admiral. 'We need to speak face-to-face.'

'With all due respect, high admiral, can you not send a compile? I am in the middle of a cross-caste debrief, and even with the finest ZFR horizon drive it will take days to reach you out there in the Vorac Belt.'

'Of course!' came the cheerful reply. 'I shall jump right to it, oh most wondrous leader of all. I feel sure the water caste can put a spin on why your mock wars meant you were too busy to attend to the front line in person.' The admiral grinned widely, his eyes twinkling.

Farsight sighed. 'Teng, I do not feel the best place for a hunter cadre commander is on the bridge of a spaceship. Perhaps, as leader of the entire expedition, my opinion will carry at least a little weight.'

'You certainly carry more weight than you did back on Arkunasha,' said the admiral, chuckling. 'So dashing, back in those days. Though I myself will be disconsolate at your refusal of my invitation. I might never forgive you for spurning me. The ethereal caste will understand, I am sure. I hear Aun'Va is known for his relaxed attitude to duty and his frequent indulgences of disobedience.'

Farsight laughed, despite himself. When it came to dealing with Li Mau Teng, he always had a feeling he was losing at a game before it had even started. 'Aren't you too advanced

in years for the duel of words, Teng? Surely it is time for your diurnal sleep break, and perhaps some pre-masticated food?’

‘My thanks, commander, but I am still fighting fit,’ said the admiral. His gnarled hands formed the clenching fist and turning palm of tortoise-outliving-dunerunner. ‘Especially as I wage my wars from an even comfier seat than you do. It is a wonder you do so well, with only the best technology in the T’au Empire and its finest warriors to protect you.’ The admiral smiled ruefully, the kind wrinkles around his eyes reminding Farsight of Aun’Shi. ‘You realise high rank carries obligations to the wider caste structure?’

‘I do.’

‘Of course you do,’ continued Teng. ‘Better than any, perhaps. Many of my junior teams have holos of you looking square-jawed and heroic in their living quarters, I am told. It would so crush them for you not to attend our rendezvous.’

‘Fine,’ said Farsight, setting a new course for the Kor’lacanth airbase. ‘But only for the benefit of your junior teams’ morale. I may even jut out my jaw for them.’

‘Excellent,’ said Li Mau Teng. ‘There is already a shuttle waiting for you. See you in the belt, old warrior.’ He smiled again. ‘Incidentally, I have made provisions for a Coldstar battlesuit to be accommodated in the *Wing*’s cargo hold. I know how void war discomforts you so. I’ll even let you bring your little bonding knife onto the bridge if you like.’

‘Get some rest, Teng,’ said Farsight, twitching a finger towards the communion icon for Kor’lacanth. ‘I have a feeling you will need it.’

CHAPTER TWO

THE CHIMERAЕ ENTWINED

ADMISSION OF VYKOLA NIAMH HERAT 3-31
565.760.M41
+++UNEXPURGATED ITERATION+++

And so, dear Xyndrea, it comes to this. Another confession. If you are truly a member of the Inquisition first and foremost, this time you will have me executed after reading this. I am not sure I could fault you for it.

In my last missive, which I sent only partially complete, I professed to becoming that which I had once only pretended to be. A gue'vesa sympathiser with the t'au race, and a proponent of their philosophy of the Greater Good. Since then, I fear I have become something worse.

There is indeed virtue amongst these strange xenos, a virtue I always intended to delve further into. Perhaps within it, there are clues to the wider struggle of humanity against its own flaws. I had hoped to work towards an Imperium that did not force its daughters to watch their parents die for futile causes.

I sought the truths lurking behind the t'au's utopian

façade. By the Golden Throne, I found them. As I intimated in our previous correspondence, they were not ripples I detected, not echoes of some hidden causality that I would never see, but a core of evil itself. It is a cruel irony that my talent for seeking out darkness, that same skill set that saw me thrive in the Emperor's Inquisition, should so blacken my spirit in turn. I found more than I could ever wish for, Xyndrea. More than any human soul should have to bear.

My last message was incomplete for a reason. Even as I sought signs of corruption, unnatural forces sought me in turn. Something vile was lurking within the T'au Empire, something so skilled in the chameleonic arts that I sat in the same room as it, debated with it, even scorned it as a simpleton. I did not realise the nature of the company I kept. By the time I had my suspicions the maggot within the apple had sought me out and broke into my quarters.

The events of that night crossing scarred me, and I am no longer sure what is objective truth, for I fear I am no longer alone inside my own head. Let me tell you what I believe to be real, and perhaps, in parsing it, you can help me find the falsehoods within. Perhaps the simple act of writing it down will help shed light on what is truth

The crossing of the Damocles Gulf went to plan, up to a point. By learning as much as I could from Tidebringer, my verbose water caste guide, I absorbed as much of t'au society as I could. I even learned their language, though my lack of nuance in the gestural vernacular still occasionally sends t'au linguists into protocolic shock.

I left Tidebringer behind soon enough; I outgrew him and we both knew it. By exuding just the right amount of heresy as one of the Imperial traitors they know as gue'vesa, I climbed my way right to the Elemental Council itself.

In my guise as Thransia Delaque, I became one of the council's two Kindred Souls - non-t'au delegates that they include to further their own delusions of a utopian multi-species empire. It was whilst speaking on that council that I won the approbation of High Commander Farsight himself.

As we danced around one another in our exchanges, it became clear we have a similar approach to the rectification of iniquities in our respective civilisations. Since then he has seen me at my worst, and after intervening when I was attacked in my quarters, he knows both my actual profession and my true name – that which I hope is still my true name, at any rate – yet thus far he has kept both of these facts secret.

I owe him my life.

A more troubled member of the t'au race than Farsight I have yet to meet. Though his role is that of a fire caste commander, his mind seems multifaceted and adaptable, far more so than usually permitted by the t'au caste system. When I consult the Tarot in my own reflection and dwell on this leader of the t'au, it is the Philosopher King I see. It fits.

To its credit, Farsight's expedition has carved a bloody chunk out of this region of Imperial space. Those systems that these xenos had once taken into their empire over the course of the infamous Silken Conquests, a dense cluster easily navigated by the t'au's ZFR horizon drives, had been reclaimed by the Imperium, resettled, and restored to something approaching productivity by the Adeptus Mechanicus. It did not last. The t'au have a power all of their own, and their fire caste, when roused, burns brightly indeed.

After the dramatic resolution of the Dal'yth invasion, where the Imperial forces were forced to withdraw by the oncoming menace of the tyranid bio-fleets, the t'au had won a reprieve. Their leaders, in particular the ethereal caste, were badly shaken by the raw might that the Imperials had brought against them. The t'au had fought both the Astra Militarum and the Adeptus Astartes before, but never faced them en masse as a focused invasion force.

The Imperium smashed one of the core sept worlds so hard it halved the population in a matter of days. They left a broken world behind them. I took some pleasure in that,

back then. I was part of the invasion force, at the time, and killed my fair share of t'au before taking this new identity. I even fought alongside Captain Numitor of the Ultramarines Eighth Company; did I tell you? That which remains of my inner Imperialist has reminisced many times about that, though now I do so with mixed feelings at best and a sense of creeping shame at worst.

In the wake of the Dal'yth disaster, the t'au leaders needed a propaganda victory. The hero of the hour was there, for Commander Farsight had led the critical strike that had seen the Ultramarines vanguard driven off. His image was projected every night over the biodomes that form the t'au hab networks.

Farsight was the ethereal caste's choice to lead the Great Reclamation. Though he has since confided in me that he was not keen on the role, he rose to the occasion. Since the fleet's arrival in the area of space the t'au now call the Farsight Enclaves, he has shown every bit of the military genius the water caste attribute to him. I have come to respect him, even to like him, I suppose (despite the fact he is of course an evil xenos blight on the face of the God-Emperor's rightful domain, et cetera, et cetera). Condemn me if you must. My sympathy for this particular devil seems such a minor heresy matched against the truth of what has happened to me since that time.

The journey of the Great Reclamation across the Damocles Gulf was fraught with disaster. That region of space is hostile at the best of times, but with the Imperium an extant foe, it was humanity that proved the worst of all dangers. A war fleet of the Imperium, led by the infamous Scar Lords of the Adeptus Astartes, burst from the warp even as the t'au fleet was making the most dangerous part of the crossing. The t'au ships, having only a skeleton crew outside of biostasis at the time, were caught completely wrong-footed.

I asked myself at the time how they had managed to close in so accurately on the t'au fleet's whereabouts; it

transpires that the creature that attacked me had contacted one of the fleet's astropaths en route and laid down a powerful enough psychic signature that the Imperial fleet made translation into real space a matter of a few hundred kilometres away. The t'au only escaped when Farsight himself mounted a one-man counter-attack on the Imperial battleship Scabbard of Flesh and crippled its warp drive, inadvertently triggering what sounded like a minor daemonic invasion within the enginarium decks. In consultation with Farsight I found out that counterstrike was levelled due to information proffered by the creature that attacked me, too. The hateful thing was playing both sides, and turning a stalemate into a burning crusade in the process.

The t'au escaped the Imperial fleet, but only after the ethereals sanctioned the abandonment of a full third of the expedition to buy the rest of them time. It was as callous and calculated a decision as any I have seen since my inception into the Emperor's Inquisition, and raised my respect for the t'au markedly.

For all its claims of benign intent, this is a race with dirty steel behind the clean white façade, unafraid to act without hesitation or mercy when drastic measures are required. That said, I feel they will not truly understand the term 'drastic' until the Imperium truly commits to their extinction. They have drawn our vast empire's notice by reconquering the worlds on our side of the Damocles Gulf. Holy Terra's retribution will be slow in coming, but it will come, and when it does, this little empire will be snuffed out like a votive candle at midnight. Without a true means of faster-than-light travel, they can hardly escape.

What of my own trauma? Well, my last missive to you was incomplete for good reason. I wrote it sequestered in my quarters, after the t'au reclamations had gathered an unstoppable pace. Whilst I was doing so, I was sought out by another delegate on the Elemental Council - the infamously forthright and plain-speaking t'au caste

diplomat known as the Water Spider.

The Water Spider had become possessed by a daemon, a low scion of the Changer of the Ways, by its own admission. It had come to kill me, for I was the only one of the expedition that was close to learning of its true nature. It willingly confided its nature and purpose, for the creature had been cursed by its patron god to only ever tell the truth.

The bestial thing came for me even as High Commander Farsight accessed my quarters. He had sought me on instinct. The creature summoned a fire of its own, then, and thrust the ball of energy into my chest.

I have never felt such pain as in that moment. I burned inside; if there is such a thing as a soul, I think that was aflame too. I fell smoking to the ground.

Perhaps, were it not for the creature's desire to revel in my pain, I would have died then. But something tells me it kept me alive for quite another reason. That it put something in me, as a caterpillar-wasp injects its eggs that its young might feast on the still-living host.

I still suffer to this day. When I gaze into the mirror at night, it is not just my own reflection I see.

'Throne, it's no use.'

Vykola Herat put down the autoquill, and rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hands. She had not cried for well over a decade, and she was not about to start now, but reliving the experience in her old quarters made her feel something very strange inside. She had become afraid of her own reflection, and that was not behaviour befitting an Imperial inquisitor.

Herat stood up, smoothed down her smock and forced herself to move over to the translucent mirrorfield in the corner of her quarters. It shimmered quicksilver and turned reflective as it detected the heat signature of her approach.

In the mirror she could see a tall figure, androgynous and well dressed, features ethereal in their perfect symmetry. It

was an affectation she maintained for the edge it gave her over those unsettled by such an unnatural sight. Thin braids were slicked down across her forehead, curled like the tentacles of an octopus around a rectangular tattoo in the centre of her brow. That psy-tattoo was an old friend; in the image of a card from the Emperor's Tarot, it could depict not one static image, but seventy-eight, shifting and sharpening to become a card appropriate to her current dilemma or thought pattern. Many was the time it had changed to portray a fitting representation of whatever was foremost in her thoughts, or lend an insight into the character of one who was on her mind.

Lately, the card had brought only confusion. As she watched it changed, melded, flowed and changed again, forming figures that soon dissolved into other shapes and other people. For a moment, she thought of the terrible, malformed creature that had writhed on the floor of her quarters as Commander Farsight's sonic barrage overloaded its mind with a thousand voices at once. A hundred eyes, gelatinous and staring; a dozen mouths gibbering in the Dark Tongue; a score of tiny, frond-like limbs rippling and grasping along each hideous flank. It made her gorge rise just thinking about it.

As she watched her reflection, the Pauper King melted and stretched into the Raging Beast. It swiftly morphed into the Faceless One, then the blind Somnambulus, then the Gifted Child. It hurt her mind just to look at it, but she forced herself to stare, to glean something from the raw flux boiling in front of her. The next morning she would awake with livid, blistering burn marks around her eye sockets, under her nose, radiating out from her mouth. She would heal them afresh, holding one well-manicured hand over the shifting card so she could concentrate on the smooth, poreless mask she presented to the world.

Each morning, it was becoming a little more difficult to eradicate the psychic stigmata. But through sheer force of will, she kept the marks of her battle with the daemon from

showing to the outside world.
Even while it tore her apart from the inside.

CHAPTER THREE

THE VOIDFARER

EIGHTEEN IMPERIAL DAYS LATER

THE *WING OF BLADES*
ENCLAVE SPACE, VORAC BELT

An elegant golden Manta sped through the blackness, the space-capable destroyer's streamlined hull flashing with the hues of Salash'hei's crimson dawn. The mining drones dotting the asteroid belt took footage as it passed, their scanners remotely operated by water caste operatives keen to record the exemplars of the T'au'va in action.

Many amongst Farsight's closest advisors had commented on the advanced aesthetics of Admiral Li Mau Teng's personal ship, claiming them to be a sop to his high status. O'Shovah knew better. High rank came with a duty to the t'au's propaganda engine as well as to the empire's war machine, and the customised Manta missile destroyer had inspired tens of thousands of air caste pilots. Like as not, thought Farsight, this day it would inspire a hundred more.

The high commander had rendezvoused with the *Wing* in order to take part in a kill-strike against the flagship of an

ork mercenary presence, a threat lurking on the fringes of enclave space that needed destroying before it could summon any more vile greenskins. Though it was unlikely he would actually take part in any fighting – the orks were not swift enough to mount a boarding action in the manner of the gue'ron'sha Space Marines – Farsight was there to lend weight and credence to the water caste's portrayal of the five castes united against a common foe.

On the *Wing's* bridge-screen, a scattering of asteroids spun slowly through the nothingness of enclave nearspace. They were part of the Vorac Belt, an asteroid field so massive it formed the rimward border of the entire Farsight Enclaves. The earth caste had been thorough in their assimilation of the vast mineral resource represented by the asteroids, leaving those nearest to Salash'hei as honeycombed chunks of rock ranging in size from a Devilfish transport all the way up to planetoids the size of Tinek'la's moon. The air caste had been just as thorough, engaging the greenskins that had made their homes in the belt wherever they could. Amongst the asteroids spun the debris of shattered orkoid spacecraft, including ugly hulks of scrap, skeletal frameworks, glyph-painted armour plates and molten lumps of fused iron.

'We should have known that the orks would infest these asteroids, sooner or later,' said Y'eldi.

The pilot sat at the control throne alongside Farsight's. Y'eldi had settled into his reclined seat in moments, while the commander himself still shifted uncomfortably in his own berth. By nature the t'au pilot caste was tall and willowy, attenuated by lifetimes spent in low gravity, whereas the muscular bodies of the fire caste warriors were too broad and comparatively short to be comfortable in the thrones of a spacegoing vessel. The discomfort had not put Farsight in anything approaching a good mood, especially given that High Admiral Teng had yet to disclose just why he had been asked to join them so far out on the edges of enclave space.

‘They are like sandroaches,’ said Gunnery Captain Mai’Tys, her strident tones clear from the engagement desk at the front of the customised Manta’s elongated bridge. ‘Leave a hole in the ground for long enough, and they will breed inside it.’

‘Worse,’ said Farsight. ‘Even sandroaches fear discovery. We must use caution. Being here at all, even on an observation mission, is a grave risk.’

‘Fear not, high commander,’ said Li Mau Teng from his seat at the front of the Manta, the air caste admiral’s gentle features creasing. ‘Every missile is primed, every railgun checked and ready. As soon as we see one of the ork craft turn its guns towards us, we will open fire, just as we have done for almost three kai’rotaa. Any vessel seeking to engage us will be destroyed before it has even registered our presence.’

‘Despite us travelling in a craft designed to catch as much attention as possible,’ added Y’eldi. ‘A personalised craft is a fine thing, high admiral, but with all due respect, does the *Wing of Blades* have to display the hue of gold when on the hunt?’

Farsight grinned behind his hand. Once the darling of the air caste promotionals, Y’eldi had grown more mature over the years spent in the high commander’s service, but he still spoke his mind to authority figures, and often out of turn. It was one of the reasons Farsight liked him. The high commander could feel Li Mau Teng’s mood souring from across the room.

‘Sometimes, young master of the skies,’ said the high admiral, ‘the Greater Good demands that we put ourselves forward as far as possible, in order to take the eye of the enemy from others. From such paradoxes comes the true understanding of the T’au’va.’

‘He is right,’ said Farsight, chuckling despite himself. ‘Now hold your peace, Y’eldi, and concentrate on the scans.’

‘Yes, high commander.’ The young pilot made a

perfunctory sign of contrition, setting his long fingers dancing through the holograms of his control console.

‘The anomaly was found in this segment,’ said Sylphwing. One of Y’eldi’s fellow top graduates from the air caste academies, she had experienced no shortage of attention from the water caste herself. ‘We should be drawing close to it any moment.’

‘As Sylphwing says,’ nodded Li Mau Teng. ‘In fact...’ the admiral eye-flicked a section of the hex-display, where several giant asteroids turned counter to one another in a strange dance of inertia. ‘That is not normal. Some manner of thrust has been applied to one or both of these macroliths, likely in the last few hours. Ready all weapons batteries, please.’

‘At once, admiral,’ said Gunnery Captain Mai’Tys. Her flight suit was the deep red of an Arkunashan veteran; though Farsight had never before met her in person, that was enough for him to trust her skill. Rows of icons amongst her holographic displays pulsed gold in readiness as she brought the guns into compliance with targeting solutions carefully overlaid upon the two spinning asteroids.

‘High admiral,’ said Farsight, looping a section in the corner of the giant hex-display that showed hundreds of tumbling asteroids slowly eclipsing one another. ‘Would you freeze that portion?’

‘Of course,’ said Teng. His haptic gauntlets left glowing traces on his holo-screen as he tapped in new instructions. The *Wing*’s scopes focused in tight beam rather than broad, and a moment later the illuminated section became clearer, but not by much.

‘There appears to be some interference,’ said Farsight. ‘Even a standard XV8 could magnify to a better degree than this, surely?’

‘Some property of these asteroids is interfering with our sensor suite,’ admitted Teng. ‘A native electromagnetism, intermittent but powerful. The earth caste believe it is due

to some mineral deposit, ferrous ore or other geological component. I am not entirely sure of the details.'

'I see,' said Farsight. 'Do you think the orks are using it deliberately?'

'Perhaps,' said Teng. 'We both know they are not as foolish as the por like to maintain.'

Though the image resolution was low, Farsight could still make out telltale square-and-icon combinations on the flanks of some of the asteroids. The marks of the beast. They sent a surge of disquiet through the core of his being.

The symbols bore simple, crude messages, each a single pictogram that taken together formed some manner of ident code.

'Odd,' said Farsight.

'This is what I wanted to show you,' said Teng. 'These carry specific meaning in the be'gel language, do they not? Is it true you can read them?'

'I can try,' said Farsight, squinting as he deciphered the smaller icons in his mind's eye. He pulled his notation disc from his belt and mag-tethered it to his command console so it hovered within reach, then called up a hologram of the glyphic alphabet he had appended from the water caste's contributions to his *Book of the Beast*. The glyphs mapped well enough to translate, especially for one who had pioneered the learning of the orkoid mindset.

'*Guns*, it says. *Intoxicants*, I think, or something like it. *Wealth. Strength. Cunning.*'

Sylphwing looked askance at him, her wide-eyed expression that of a loyal recruit who has watched her superior officer flagrantly break the rules.

'Is it not the water caste's role to translate alien tongues, commander?' said Y'eldi wryly, bursting the bubble of Sylphwing's silent accusation. 'Surely it is considered *vash'ya* for a member of the fire caste to take such a duty on himself?'

A hot coal of anger burst into flame within Farsight's soul, but he said nothing, studiously ignoring Y'eldi's bait. The

pilot knew full well that his darkest moment had come as a result of being accused of being vash'ya - 'between spheres' - a state considered taboo amongst many traditional sept worlds. On Dal'yth he had been publically reprimanded for it, and the course of his atonement had set the path that had doomed his mentor Commander Puretide to mental dissolution.

Because of him, his master had been relegated to an existence as little more than a set of algorithms and a mnemonic imprint. That same imprint had later been forcibly overlaid across the minds of several of the fire caste's finest commanders, an act that had seen his old friend Sha'vastos descend into madness.

Part of him still hoped that one day, those wrongs committed against his kin would be set right. But the T'au'va came first.

'The glyphic language is simple, hardly worthy of the name,' said Farsight. 'I gained insight into it a long time ago. These are the exact same patterns I saw upon Arkunasha, perhaps twenty tau'cyr in the past.'

'Trust your instincts, high commander,' said Teng, 'and do not let the barbed thorns of these striplings wound you. Your *Book of the Beast* is a fundamental keystone of the empire's war protocols. We found it invaluable when dismantling the ork war machine in the name of the Greater Good.'

Farsight inclined his head in humble acknowledgement. 'Thank you, admiral.'

Teng nodded, as if concluding something. 'If you believe these orks to be from the same organisation as the be'gel from the Arkunashan campaign, then like as not, that is who they are.' He made a claw with one hand and gripped it fiercely with the other in the gesture of the Savage Tamed. 'Better to face the measured foe than the enemy unknown.'

'Perhaps you will get to finish the extermination mission that you left behind during the Arkunasha evacuation, high

commander,' said Sylphwing. There was an earnest breathlessness to her tone that Farsight had often heard from young t'au. 'To avenge those you honour with the crimson hue of your battlesuits.'

'The Argap Plateau was a disaster,' muttered Farsight. 'We had no choice but to leave.'

'Ten tau'cyr was judged time enough,' said Y'eldi. 'You were needed elsewhere.'

Farsight shot him a glare, fighting the urge to snap at the young pilot. Instead he took a deep breath through his olfactory chasm, centring himself before speaking. 'It was the decision of the ethereals as to when to stay, and when to withdraw,' he said. 'We must abide by their wisdom, one and all. They see further than us in all things.'

Admiral Teng's voice sounded in his ear bead, his low subvocals filtered to become clear words. 'All the right words, high commander. But something in your tone tells me you don't quite mean them.'

Farsight bowed his head, just a little.

'Perhaps we should speak later,' said Teng softly over the command channel. 'I have some observations of my own regarding our glorious leaders that I would share with you.'

Sylphwing looked up sharply at Teng for a moment, then returned to her console.

'This planetoid you spoke of,' said Farsight by way of reply, his voice cutting across the bridge. 'Do we near it?'

'We do indeed,' replied Teng. 'These asteroids move erratically, but our multitrapper arrays do not easily *lose the scent*.' He said the phrase with a sense of drama, as if partaking in a water caste stylistic theatre. 'I believe that is the correct hunter's vernacular, is it not, High Commander Farsight? Your fire caste terms often have to do with crawling around and physically sniffing things, yes?'

Y'eldi stifled a laugh. Sylphwing looked appalled.

'Thorns from a gnarled rose can cut just as deep, high admiral,' said Farsight. He cast a meaningful glance. 'It is lucky I have such a thick skin. We can discuss matters of

the castes when we return to Kor'lacanth airbase.'

A bar of red light flared above the bridge display. Trigger icons lit in a cascade across the vista as a distant asteroid hove into view, fully three times the size of those around it. Patches of deeper darkness and glinting light played across the honeycombed exterior of the void-borne megalith as it turned slowly in the nothingness of space. Just before it was eclipsed by a closer asteroid, the second blotting out the first with stately grace, Farsight saw the glint of gun barrels.

'It is a weaponised base,' said Farsight. 'Recommend evasive manoeuvres.'

'We must learn more before we leave,' said Teng. 'The ethereals would not be pleased by our withdrawal without something to show for it. Kor'el Sylphwing, kindly map our-'

A strident warning chime cut him off.

'High admiral, we have come under an enemy target lock,' said Sylphwing.

'Energy signatures?'

'Hard to say with the electromagnetic interference. I would hazard several both above and below, with more to come.'

'Shake them, if you please. Stay in the lee of the eclipsing asteroid for the time being. Y'eldi, deploy sensory countermeasures.'

'At once, high admiral.'

The *Wing of Blades* shuddered hard before veering off, turning to follow the asteroid that had interposed itself between them and the massive ork base.

'Is that juddering normal?' asked Farsight.

'No,' replied Teng. 'And it does not bode well.'

'Our velocity is impaired,' said Y'eldi. 'Something is slowing our control.'

The sensation of movement from the *Wing* slowed, then stopped altogether.

'Tractor beams,' said Sylphwing. 'I remember learning of

such things in the lecture halls back on Dal'yth.'

'I doubt these barbarians have anything so advanced,' scoffed Y'eldi. 'The mastery of field technology required is—'

'Just shake them off!' shouted Farsight. 'Disrupt them! Call in a strike!'

On the viewscreen ahead, the interposing asteroid slid past, revealing the cratered face of the larger ork base in the distance.

'We're held fast,' said Sylphwing, her tone quavering. 'There are asteroids both rimward and coreward that are projecting fields. They have us caught in an overlapping net.'

'A Kauyon,' muttered Farsight. He felt suddenly old, every one of his advanced years weighing upon him.

A quarter of the giant ork base ahead was visible, now. Farsight saw white blurs ringing some of the gun barrels dotting its surface. An insistent beeping rang out from the control consoles around them, rising in pitch.

'We have incoming,' said Teng. 'Mai'Tys, please level intercepting fire at the approaching missiles.'

'Certainly, high admiral,' replied the gunnery captain, overlapping targeting solutions on the ork missiles with deft looping motions of her nimble fingers. She jabbed a golden icon hovering in mid-air. A split second later the *Wing's* railgun array sent lines of shimmering silver out into the void, each impeccably aimed shot detonating an orkoid missile whilst it was still scores of kilometres away.

The *Wing* shook again, this time so violently the straps of Farsight's command throne dug into his flesh.

'Taking fire, high admiral,' said Y'eldi, his voice tight. 'From above and below.'

'So do something about it,' said Farsight.

'Void war is not ground war!' shouted back Sylphwing before covering her mouth in shock at her own outburst.

'The distances we are dealing with are an order of magnitude greater than those of a hunter cadre's engagements,' explained Teng. 'We are held fast by not one

but two tractor beams, and it will take some time before the rest of the reconnoitre fleet attends us. It has denied us the foremost asset in—'

Farsight's world came apart in a howling, roiling maelstrom of violence. The upper left portion of the bridge suddenly disappeared amongst a storm of shrapnel and light, a sucking roar of decompression snatching everything close by into the darkness beyond. Gunnery Captain Mai'tys was caught up in the explosion, ripped from the main body of the bridge to spin away into the void amongst a cloud of wreckage and detritus.

The hideous, clawing forces of decompression tore at Farsight's skin, inflaming his olfactory chasm and ripping the saliva from his mouth as he shouted in denial and agony. He was near-blind with pain, panic threatening to unravel his brain entirely.

Then, as suddenly as the hole had been ripped in the vessel in the first place, it disappeared. A set of shutters irised down from the whorl-like shape at the apex of the bridge. In shape they were like petals: transparent, yet harder than steel. They had slammed into place to seal the deck from the yawning void outside, the *Wing's* emergency artificial intelligence nullifying the decompression in a single second.

But for the panicked wails of Y'eldi and Sylphwing, the bridge was still once more.

'Coldstar!' shouted Farsight, hoping against hope his communion bead still had a link to the battlesuit in the cargo section. 'Power up and detach shield generator immediately!'

'Of course, high commander,' came the reply. 'To what purpose do—'

'Just do it! Y'eldi, open the cargo airlock!'

'Acknowledged,' said Y'eldi, a hard focus in his voice. His personal pilot knew better than to second-guess Farsight in times of crisis.

'The gunnery systems are shot!' shouted Sylphwing.

'We're static targets.'

'Get to the escape pods,' replied Farsight, manually releasing his restraint strips. He rolled from the command throne to land in a loose crouch, his insides still feeling twisted and strange after the wrenching pull of the bridge's explosive decompression. 'Put the *Wing* on drone-recovery protocol, and get out. Teng, take the platinum pod. We haven't much time.'

Teng and Sylphwing were already past him, Teng making for the admiral-level escape pod at the back of the bridge even as the younger pilot ran for the rear pods, a compact pulse pistol in her hand. Farsight made to follow her, then noticed that Y'eldi had stayed behind. The pilot was hitting the egress stud of his restraint straps, but they were not releasing; they had likely been fouled by the blast that had snatched away Captain Mai'Tys. Y'eldi fumbled with the manual control, but his fingers were shaking badly, too clumsy and numb with fear to undo them.

Farsight ran over, drawing his bonding knife from the ceremonial sheath in the small of his back. He cast a glance at the looming asteroids on the bridge's display, the curving screen still crazed by embedded shards of shrapnel. On the section that was still working Farsight saw that more ordnance was inbound, the insistent beep of the bridge's alert systems growing higher pitched and more unsettling by the moment. The only saving grace was that there were other asteroids spinning in to block the path between the glyph-marked monstrosity and its prey.

A proximity counter flicked down next to each missile. Those closest to the *Wing* would complete their lethal journey in a matter of decs, maybe less. Still the golden ship was held fast.

'I will make you pay for this, beast,' said Farsight through gritted teeth as he carved his knife's edge through the first of Y'eldi's restraint straps. It was hard work, and he felt his muscles burning as the knife's edge parted each strap's pseudometal core. 'For Mai'Tys, for Arkunasha, for making

me sully this sacred knife, I will make you pay.'

There was a ripping noise as the restraint harness came away, and Y'eldi's torso was suddenly free. He half-turned to Farsight to expose a deep gash in his thigh. The shrapnel still stuck out, a knife of off-white alloy. Dark red blood slicked the command throne, a pool of sticky gore swilling under the pilot's legs. The pilot's eyes swam unfocused, his head lolling with lack of blood.

Still another strap to carve through. Farsight went to work again, sawing frantically.

Sylphwing called out from the tunnel on the far side of the bridge. 'We have to leave! What in the T'au'va are you doing with that thing?'

'It is a bonding knife,' said Farsight through gritted teeth. 'It has more uses than simply to remind you to stand by your peers.'

'You must abandon him, for the Greater Good,' said Sylphwing, her expression intense. 'You are of far more use to the T'au'va than Y'eldi, high commander.' She made a hands-clasped gesture, pivoting to make the request-to-leave. 'High Admiral Teng is already away. His platinum pod's chaff cloud was enough to baffle the tractor beam. There are only two escape pods left intact. We haven't long left. Come!'

'No,' said Farsight. 'I will free Y'eldi.'

Sylphwing drew her pulse pistol from the holster at her back, and raised it so it was pointing right at him. 'I insist. It is my duty to ensure you make it back to the enclave worlds.'

'Shoot me, then,' said Farsight, his eyes narrowing. In the back of his mind, he knew she was right, but could not leave his pilot to die when the ork missiles hit home. 'Though you had better be sure you shoot to disable rather than kill, or it will be you who dies in disgrace, not I. I am freeing Y'eldi.'

'But...'

'The battlesuit in the hold is a Coldstar, void capable.'

Leave. We have lost enough lives this day.'

After a few more seconds of agonised indecision, Sylphwing lowered the pistol, then turned and ran. Farsight gingerly lifted Y'eldi over his shoulder, using his waist as a fulcrum and standing as tall as he could. He took an uncertain step under the pilot's weight, then found his stride, making off after Sylphwing. At the far end of the ship, he could see she already had the two undamaged life pods primed and open. She was folding herself into the first as Farsight approached.

The *Wing* shook as if in the grip of a giant fist. Farsight collided with a side bulwark as he lurched down the corridor, then strode onwards, pounding on a symbol demarking an emergency point as he went. An array of oval drawers slid out. He grabbed a lozenge-shaped aerosol and pocketed it in his fatigues before breaking into a loping run.

Reaching the end of the corridor, Farsight carefully laid Y'eldi in the second pod. The young pilot had passed out, his limbs heavy but unresponsive. He gingerly removed the knife-like shard of shrapnel from the pilot's leg, then sprayed a copious amount of the aerosol's contents on the wound. An ivory-hued medical solution expanded upon contact with the air to fill the deep red gash, sealing it amidst a swirl of cream and white. It was a messy job, and Farsight winced at the sight of it, but it would hold. He sealed the pod, nodded at Sylphwing, and set it on immediate launch.

Then he ran as fast as he could to the cargo bay.

The Coldstar was big, so big it all but filled a cargo bay of the *Wing*, even reclined with its limbs folded into transit configuration. Its artificial intelligence, reinstalled in its datacores at Kor'lacanth airbase, reacted to Farsight's presence, the battlesuit coming alive and unfolding as the microsamplers on its antennae picked up his heat signature.

'The blade ascends,' said Farsight. He climbed atop its shoulders with a practised movement even as the machine's plexus hatch hissed open, and used the fusion blaster on its shoulder as a step to vault into a supine boarding stance. He slid inside smoothly, already eye-flicking data as the hatch closed and the restraints slid into place.

'Better embarkation?' he said.

'Better,' replied Coldstar. 'But still room for improvement.'

'Just get us out of here. We have work to do.'

'Acknowledged.' An autolink appeared on a secondary hex, communing with the *Wing's* own limited AI and setting in motion airlock protocols. The great craft's rear hatch hinged wide. A scattering of stars against midnight black was revealed, the odd asteroid spinning across a velvet tableau of infinite nothingness.

Another hex sprang into being, this time showing the trajectories of the three escape pods bound for Salash'hei, nearest of the enclave planets to the asteroid belt. Teng's was in the far distance, already having boosted hard through the asteroid field to leave a cloud of scatter-chaff behind it. The other two had shot from the emergency bay like bullets, but to Farsight's horror, they slowed as he watched, and stopped, held fast in the void.

'The tractor beams holding the *Wing* fast have ensnared the escape pods. Can you baffle them long enough for us to escape?'

'I can try,' said Coldstar. 'We have a shield generator of our own.'

'Good,' said Farsight. 'Boost for the space between the two escape pods. Reroute the rest of the available power to the shield, and have it on wide spectrum emanation to compromise the tractor beams. Save enough power for a strike if we get free.'

'Acknowledged, high commander.'

'Launch.'

The Coldstar shot from the cargo bay, the initial burst of

its ejection carrying it a hundred metres into the darkness of space before the tractor beams of the ork asteroids slowed its progress. Farsight's power readouts slid from gold, through silver, to brass as the XV8's thrusters fought against the titanic forces of the beams. His haptic links were sluggish and rebellious; he felt like a minnow caught in the wake of leviathans, but he made progress nonetheless. In a matter of microdecs he would be out of power altogether, and caught as surely as the *Wing*, a sitting duck for the ork ordnance that would be undoubtedly launched his way.

The escape pods, rendered little more than floating coffins by their stasis, appeared to grow larger as the Coldstar crept up on them and slid into the space between the two.

'Extrude manipulator gauntlets,' said Farsight.

'Already extruded,' said Coldstar, a slight air of injured pride in her tone. 'As I have denoted on your display, high commander.'

'Then grab the escape pods and draw them in close. Is that feasible?'

'In theory, commander.'

A moment later, Coldstar grasped the boarding rungs of one of the escape pods, then the other. The power readings were the colour of dark steel, now. Farsight could see the faces of his pilots inside the pods, Sylphwing's contorted by near-panic, Y'eldi's drawn and pale.

Farsight carefully calibrated the XV8's boosters to swing the Coldstar battlesuit around, and the two escape pods with it. The ratio of mass to thrust on a battlesuit was as optimal as the earth caste could make it. Unlike the *Wing*, which was caught fast due to the large amount of surface area for the tractor beams to latch onto, and unlike the pods, which had only rudimentary propulsion units, the Coldstar's jetpack would allow him to haul the pods forward even under the pull of the orkoid energy fields. There were fluctuations in the power of the tractor beams, too; by adjusting his thrust/vector suite to maximum

propulsion when they were weakest, and minimising it when they were strongest, he and the pods crept forward towards freedom.

In doing so, he caught a glimpse of the asteroid beam generators that had the *Wing* caught in their entrapment fields. They were mounted on the tip of each asteroid, maintaining their directional field even as the spacegoing rocks revolved around their axis. Though they looked like any other space-borne debris to casual inspection, they had long, ribbed antennae extending from the deepest craters, a slight green glow emanating from the loose cabling that looped along their underside. Considering their efficacy, each beam seemed a device of bafflingly poor construction. But they worked. The telltale cylinders of point-defence guns bristled alongside each of the tractor antennae. A single hit would be enough to rip his battlesuit wide open to the void.

Farsight rerouted all available power to the Coldstar's jetpack, and the battlesuit slowly moved forward. For a moment, it felt as if it were passing through something viscous, like treacle. Then it left the tractor field with a sudden burst of acceleration. It shot forward, hauling the escape pods with it.

Farsight swung his arms forward, and his battlesuit mimicked him, physically sending the pods tumbling away. They righted their course on autopilot, the compensator jet arrays along their flanks flaring to send them heading smoothly towards the water caste planet of Salash'hei.

Satisfied the two pilots were as safe as they could get, Farsight eye-sketched a new flight path, the Coldstar carving around towards the nearest beam-emitting asteroid.

'Are you intending solo engagement with a de facto enemy battleship?' said Coldstar.

'Not for the first time,' he said. 'At least this time it is not an Imperial cruiser.'

'That's what I am concerned about,' said Coldstar. 'The

smaller the ship, the more likely it can effectively engage a battlesuit-sized war asset.'

'These are orks,' said Farsight. 'They are not noted for their accuracy.'

A stream of glowing tracer fire shot through the void, curving in a wide arc as the asteroid turned on its axis. New cannon batteries opened fire as they came into view.

'They have mounted only static defence emplacements on this belt detritus,' said Coldstar, altering their flight path so they veered away from the tracer bullets with easy grace. 'And they are relying on the asteroid turning in just the right way to bring the target under their crosshairs? It beggars belief.'

'If they mount enough guns, some of them will be pointing in the right direction at any one time. Quantity over quality,' said Farsight. 'It is a signature philosophy of the be'gel race.'

'It will be the death of them,' said Coldstar, smoothly altering their flight path so a red-nosed missile shot past them.

'As you say.'

Another stream of fire poured out towards the battlesuit, but Coldstar anticipated it and veered away. Free of the tractor beams, she was in her element. Soon the asteroid filled a dozen hex-screens on the XV8's control cocoon.

'There are the emanator arrays,' said Farsight, eye-looping the tall antennae that crackled with green lightning. 'Advance to maximum blaster range.'

'Acknowledged,' said Coldstar. There was another long moment of tense silence as the battlesuit's flight path led it into the shadow of the giant asteroid. More bursts of solid-shot fire hammered out from the cannons dotted on its flanks. This close, Farsight steered the battlesuit's progress manually, turning the XV8 to avoid the streams of bullets heading towards him.

The emanator mast seemed to come towards him like a spear thrust in slow motion. Farsight leaned forward,

sending the XV8 looping beneath, then triggered the fusion gun on his right arm at full blast.

A twin beam of blinding light shot from the dual muzzle, appearing to blend into a blade-like plane of killing energy. He swept it across the emanator mast, and the outer scaffold came apart. Boosting around, he made another cut, and another, until almost a full third of the mast was sliced from the rest. The detached section spun away, soundless and unhurried, into the void. The green lightning that had been crackling across the rest of the mast intensified for a moment, and then disappeared altogether.

Farsight twisted the Coldstar battlesuit around, sticking so close to the asteroid that the artillery mounted upon it could not draw a bead. He locked a course to follow its steady spin, the Timbra System's star slowly obscured as if by a premature sunset as the asteroid revolved. Its light limned every peak and trough of the space-borne rock's outer crust with white fire, then faded and disappeared altogether.

'Coldstar, do we have enough power to reach the main body of the fleet unaided?'

'We have approximately thirteen per cent of the power needed for that journey, commander.'

'I see. Can you instead extrapolate the trajectories of the nearest asteroids, both in terms of spin and gross movement?'

'Even with the electromagnetic interference, high commander, a simple gun drone could achieve that feat.'

'Good. When the moment is right, I want you to reroute all power to the jets. We will use the asteroid itself to disrupt its opposite number's pull on the *Wing*. Is that feasible?'

'It is, in theory,' said Coldstar, a note of curiosity in the machine's formal tone. 'Shall we find out?'

Farsight grasped a jutting spar of metal and forced his jetpack to maximum yield, pushing at the asteroid with every iota of force the battlesuit could muster. At first, his efforts seemed futile, but as his jets burned their fuel

reserve, the space-borne rock started to move. Coldstar sent up a hex showing its trajectory curving, then intersecting with the field of the other asteroid's tractor beam.

Farsight disengaged, boosting forward towards Teng's beleaguered craft. Still in between the two asteroids, the *Wing of Blades* was swiftly being drawn towards the functional tractor beam, no longer held in balance between the two. With one of the beams that held it in place destroyed, and the other disrupted by the asteroid that was now accelerating towards it, the *Wing* spun slowly on its axis.

'Any moment,' said Farsight. 'Come on, golden vessel. Earn your reputation.'

The *Wing*, its railgun array coming to bear on the emanator mast of the other asteroid, opened fire. A silver streak shot from its bows to smash into the ork asteroid's tractor array in a blooming cloud of shrapnel and debris. Another joined it, then two more. The entire mast, its moorings shattered from the bedrock up, came away to spin gracefully through the nothingness of the void.

Finally free of the ork trap, the artificial intelligence of the *Wing's* backup systems guided it in a steep dive that saw it duck beneath the weaponised asteroid and disappear out of sight on a preset recovery trajectory towards Salash'hei.

'The water caste will be pleased,' said Coldstar.

'Almost certainly,' said Farsight. 'Tight-beam transmission, please. *Wing*, please adjust your course. Loop back and rendezvous at asteroid designation *Mes'me Tsin 2324.92*. We have need of you.'

A gold blip of affirmation came from the iconic vessel. Coldstar set off for the coordinates; they still had power enough to make it to the rendezvous point. Farsight felt a brief frisson of victory. Then the memory of Captain Mai'Tys being ripped from her beloved bridge rose unbidden, the gunnery expert still strapped into her command throne as she was wrenched into the void, and

his joy turned to ash.

'These orks will suffer for what they did today,' said Farsight as a glint of gold grew more distinct in the middle distance. On the hex-screen showing their previous whereabouts, the two asteroids that had entrapped them drifted ever closer to one another, their inertia making the collision inescapable. Eventually, they slammed into one another hard, the impact breaking their flanks apart into jagged rocks and mangled scrap.

'For the Greater Good,' said Coldstar.

'For the T'au'va,' replied Farsight.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

DAGGA, ORK FLAGSHIP
VORAC ASTEROID BELT

'Look at 'em run, the smug gits,' said Warchief Grog of Alsanta, swilling back a last slug of foul-tasting squig liquor. He threw the empty bottle to shatter in the corner of his makeshift bridge amongst the debris of a dozen others, and let fly a growling belch.

The cavernous chamber was made of dark and porous rock. One of the larger pitted holes in the great asteroid that formed his current flagship, it was protected from the hard vacuum of space by a bubble-like field that crackled and spat just outside the cave, yet was transparent enough to show the battle unfolding at the fringe of the Vorac Belt.

'Stupid gun-runts,' said Grog, picking a clump of iron filings from the triple barrel of his favourite shoota. 'They know they messed up by comin' out here.'

In the far distance, the t'au were staging a fighting withdrawal against the ork outriders. Dozens of asteroid-

ships had revealed themselves now, each with its own suite of weapons that was hammering away at the retreating t'au. Though the ork roks were taking heavy losses, they outnumbered their enemies ten times over. Grog nodded in approval every time one of the sleek t'au ships took a direct hit, coming apart in a slew of spinning debris. Those that returned fire at the larger asteroids found their salvos confounded by force fields, those few missiles that made it through smacking home into lifeless rock to little effect.

'Yeah,' said Grog to himself. 'Not so clever now, ya little show-offs. You'll get all the dakka you deserve.'

'Get the dakka! Get the dakka!' A disembodied head to Grog's right echoed his words with manic intensity. Its jaw flapped and its eyes rolled; installed in a cylinder that the warchief kept next to his throne, the wizened green lump's speaker link fizzed with sparks whenever it spoke. 'Kill 'em dead!'

'Nah, don't fink I will, dok,' said Grog thoughtfully. 'Thought you'd know better than most about how ta get the most out of gitz wot are wounded, Toofjaw. You know, wot wiv you being a painboss and all.' He grinned nastily at the disembodied ork head as it stewed in its tank of translucent pink fluid, all that remained of the surgery-crazed tyrant that had led the clan coalition's last war against the t'au.

Reaching over, Grog tapped the glass with a long, black-nailed finger. The head stared back, madder and more unsettling than ever as it thrashed about on a neck made as much of cable as it was sinew. 'Painboss!' screeched the decapitated head. 'Pain! Pain!'

'How do you mean, not killin' 'em, chief?' asked Big Gobba. The giant lunk was one of his crew from back on the desert planet. Grog remembered when his first mate was a skinny runt in stripy pantaloons. Grown huge on a diet of constant conflict, he was now so massive he could have killed anyone on the bridge in a fair fight.

Not that freebootas ever fought fair.

'Simple trick, mister mate,' said Grog. 'Bash yer prey

good, but don't kill 'em, and they'll slink back home so they can die in peace. Lead you to their mates, most o' the time. Sometimes they get strong again and have another go, which is good too, cos then you get two fights fer the price of one. These gun-runts ain't so different, under all the dakka. They're off to their hidey-holes to lick their wounds.'

'Lick da wound!' shouted Toofjaw. 'Lick da wound!'

'So you're lettin' em escape on purpose?' said Redd da Bullit. The resident speed freek boss, he seemed to get more fidgety and manic with every passing day he wasn't able to race his beloved wagons. He stared at Grog over a shell-casing smile. 'Just so you can chase 'em, right, chief?'

'Somefing like dat,' sighed Grog.

'Don't sound like right ta me,' said Krobb, scratching his generous gut. The squiggoth tattoos there writhed and gurned as his yellowed nails carved pale green paths across the emerald expanse of his belly. 'Kill 'em when ya can, that's the old way.'

'Out here, Krobb, your old ways ain't worth a grot's fart.'

'I reckon you're scared.'

'Kunnin' is the word. There's hundreds of them long-range zoggers out there in orbit of that watery-planet. They'll smash up anything that comes even close. The gun-runts got these worlds sewn up.'

Krobb counted on his fingers, the tip of his tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth. 'A hundred zoggers. That's a lot.'

Grog bared his teeth in impatience. The herdmaster didn't bother counting anything that wasn't either piles of teef or the squiggoths he sold for them.

'Ya gotta fink wiv yer brain as well as yer fists, if ya want ta get the good dakka,' said Grog. 'The gun-runts on them worlds down there, they got the good stuff. Gork knows they need it, wot wiv their weedy little arms and tiny teef. But we can't get to it, just like they can't get us out here.'

'Some of 'em look like they'd snap in a stiff breeze,' said Krobb. 'I reckon I could eat three of 'em and have room for

three more.'

'Exackly,' said Grog. 'These ones need ta make the best guns so they can still be such a buncha runts. But imagine if we had them guns for ourselves. Then we'd have the best muscle *and* the best dakka.'

There was a moment of contented silence as the orks stared into space at the thought, their crude imaginations working overtime. Even Dok Toofjaw had a wistful look in his bulging eyes.

'That gold jet, that woz dead shiny that woz,' said Redd da Bullit, strings of drool dribbling down his chin. 'Paint it red, I reckon it'd go super fast. Faster than anyfing.'

'Precisely why I didn't go after it and blow it up,' lied Grog. 'You get that one for yerself if you help me take down the rest, Redd. Reckon it had room enough in the back for one of yer low riders as well.'

Redd chuckled to himself, lost in reveries of big shooty vehicles driving out the back of even shootier ones. Grog chewed a gobbet of phlegm, and smiled.

'So we're not gonna smash 'em all, then,' said Big Gobba, the mass of scars that passed for his face sagging.

'Let 'em go,' said Grog. 'If you let yer enemy hit ya, sometimes he breaks 'is fist. At the very least he'll get the idea he can hit ya when he likes. Then when he comes in again, all cocky like, ya got him right where ya want him. In clobberin' range.'

'Yeah but I thought you were all about the dakka, boss,' said Redd, his sloping brow furrowed. 'How can we punch them in space?'

'For Gork's sake, ya wheel-lickin' lump! I don't mean literal clobberin'!'

Redd just looked taken aback. Krobb picked his nose and examined the contents, which looked to Grog much like a hairy caterpillar, before popping it into his sharp-fanged maw.

'Whatever you say, boss,' said the herdmaster, chewing noisily. 'Looks ta me like ya lost most of your space roks to

them gun-runts already. They got flashy ships, and we got what? Flyin' caves? No way can we win without a lot more dakka, wherever we fight 'em.'

'More dakka!' agreed Toofjaw enthusiastically. 'Dakka! Dakka dakka dakka!'

'I got an idea about that,' said Grog, doing his best to ignore the dok's madly frothing face. 'We get down onto some other gun-runt planet on the other side of the gulf and we mess it up good. Then, when this lot follow to dig us out, we start duffin' 'em up proper.'

Big Gobba nodded, flexing his fingers. 'Be good to get some blood on our fists again.'

'We don't even have ta leave these roks behind, neither. Too useful, even if the mekaniaks say they make yer gubbinz go on the blink. We'll just drive 'em straight at their shiny cities, just like Ghazghkull did on Armageddon, and let the meks sort out all the whos, hows and wotzits. That should get their attention.'

'We already got it,' whined Redd da Bullit, motioning at the vista beyond where the t'au fleet was still fighting a retreat against the outlying ships of the ork asteroid belt. 'Can't we just attack 'em head on?'

'Not likely. They got us beat here. We need a fresh planet to mess up. If we head for the rest of the gun-runt worlds, the same lot they came from, they'll come in ta save their mates.'

'Chief's right,' said Big Gobba. 'We need ta bring 'em in close.'

'Bring 'em in close!' Toofjaw's disembodied head headbutted the side of his cylinder tank, a slow but insistent *thunk*. 'Blood on our fists!'

'Wait a minnit,' said Krobb. 'Wot about them uvva planets we passed on the way out here, near that star with them burnin' tentacles?'

'One was a gun-runt base, I reckon,' said Grog. 'Lotsa shiny glints around it. Them's spaceships, and that means there's lots of gits to krump on the planet below. With good

guns to loot.'

Big Gobba smacked a meaty fist into his palm.

'The other one just looked like a big lumpa white rock,' continued Grog. 'Weird Zogg said it had all kindsa good stuff on it though. Old stuff, from ages back, but well shiny. Reliks, he called 'em.'

'*Treasure*, that means,' said Big Gobba. The hulking ork's eyes glinted in the gloom. 'Zogg saw it in one of his dreams.'

'Not the dreams again,' said Redd.

'Yeah, you know them weirdboyz, always bellyachin' about "visions" or somefing. "Then the red-horns came," he said, "and the pink gribblies too." No idea what he was gabblin' on about. Then he smashed his own head against the airlock door til he passed out.'

There was a dutiful ripple of laughter from the freebootas at the back of the bridge. Redd da Bullit's snigger turned into a manic, spiralling laugh, but he had a faraway look in his eye. Grog's lip curled. No doubt the speed freek was thinking of riding his giant-wheeled battlewagon across a fresh planet.

Krobb stretched his flabby limbs, then cracked his knuckles meaningfully. 'So we goin' to the gun-runt home world, or this uvver place wiv da treasure?'

'Both,' said Grog. 'They're close enough to the same swirly fing, that whirly-pool we used to get across the gulf. Two worlds bashed up is better than one. We just need to find someone who knows the best way. Big Gobba and I will take the runt-planet. Redd and Krobb, you get the treasure. By the time da gun-runts get there, you lads will be good and ready for 'em.'

He shot a sidelong glance at Redd and Krobb, but neither seemed to twig to his intent. The real treasure was the guns of the first world, not the dusty old scrap of the second.

'Wot about kustomisin' our stuff then, boss?' said Big Gobba, hoisting a multi-barrelled snazzgun that would have

taken two normal orks to lift. 'That still da plan?'

'You'll all get yer extra dakka soon enough,' said Grog. 'Don't worry about that. This new runt-world will have more guns than you could dream of. And rippin' 'em off their fancy flying armour suits will be a lot of fun. Won't it, Drillfist?'

His big mek, a walking tools workshop with a crackling generator on his back, grunted in assent from the back of the bridge. He was fine-tuning the scope wheels of his viewscreens, the grainy image above him blurring in and out of focus amidst a snowstorm of static. 'Look at this for a minnit, chief. That red git's wreckin' my tractor-grabbers.'

The mek stood aside, revealing a streaking red form that flew in close to one of the asteroid tractor beam arrays, then carved it apart with a searing blade of light.

'Gork's gutz,' said Grog, smacking a meaty fist into his palm. 'That's him, from Orka-Gnasha. I bet ya a gobful of gold teef. Bitin' off more than he can chew like usual.'

'Who is it?' asked Big Gobba.

'Da Red Runt,' he said. 'Dat's their warlord, right there. They call him Boss Farsite.'

The other orks leaned in close.

'Oh yeah,' said Krobb. 'I got a score ta settle wiv that git. He cost me some of my best squiggoths.'

'I had a feelin' we'd be seeing him again someday,' said Grog. 'Had a feelin' it was him behind all these attacks. Might have ta bait him in close, then gouge out his eyes meself.' He fingered the tip of his sickle-like power klaw, pressing a thumb hard against it until his blood dripped onto the cave floor. 'See how far he sites then, hur hur hur.'

'Kill 'im!' shrieked the disembodied head of Dok Toofjaw. 'Kill 'im dead!'

'Blimey,' said Big Gobba. 'The dok made sense. Toofjaw don't like 'im either.'

'Yeah well,' said Grog. 'It was da Red Runt wot took his head off.'

'That's a bad wound, that is,' said Krobb, nodding sagely.

‘Don’t worry, dok,’ said the hulking freeboota, ‘you’ll get another crack at ‘im. And I happen to know an ork wot can get us a bunch more dakka. Gobba, give Weird Zogg a punch and get him ta scare up da good kaptin. He won’t be too far outta the fringe.’

‘Aye, boss,’ said Big Gobba. ‘Punch Weird Zogg, and scare da kaptin. Got it.’

‘Right then,’ said Grog, sighting down the crosshairs of his favourite new shoota, a rotary kannon that looked more engine than gun. ‘Who else wants a nice bit of payback?’

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SHROUDED MONARCH

THREE IMPERIAL DAYS LATER

SALASH'HEI MESME ORBITAL SPACE RELAY
SALASH'HEI, ENCLAVE SPACE

Farsight made his way down the ramp to the inner orbital with the events of the Vorac asteroid belt still fresh in his mind. He was flanked by two of the ethereal guard, specially bred members of the fire caste who made even the high commander look small in stature. They had said not a word to him since coming to collect him from the relay station's visitor berth after his interstitial journey aboard the injured *Wing*. Since his return from the Belt, he had been given the bare minimum amount of time to reorient himself - a full rotaa being standard practice after a journey that used a ZFR horizon accelerator drive - before they came for him.

Farsight knew full well he had a reputation amongst the singular order of the ethereal guard after the events of Damocles, and it was not a good one. The looming warriors were escorting him to his audience with the three ethereals

that had monitored his actions on Dal'yth. Though technically he outranked his guards in caste matters, to defy them would be to defy the ethereal caste itself. Such a thing was taboo in t'au society, so much so it was unthinkable.

In theory, at least.

Having lied to the Supreme Ethereal Aun'Va's face about the fate of Commander Sha'vastos - it had been the only way to save him from the lobotomisation procedure assigned to him - Farsight was already running a terrible risk of excommunication from the T'au Empire, perhaps worse.

He had never heard anything directly about those who defied the ethereals, though he had read between the lines on a number of occasions. Those who openly defied them, or even embarrassed them for whatever reason, usually got reassigned to a different wargroup. Sometimes, they were never heard of again, even by those of their *ta'lissera* bonding group. That had certainly been the case for his assigned ambassador and water caste contact, Wellclaim.

Back on Dal'yth Prime, the ambassador had been the mentor of the Water Spider, that infiltrator from another race of beings that had fooled them all for so long. Whether she knew of the creature's nature or not would never come to light. The fact of Wellclaim's disappearance, as well as the hideous reality of the Water Spider's true allegiance, was not to be discussed. This had been made abundantly clear to Farsight after the incident in Mamzel Delaque's quarters; the matter had been silenced so thoroughly that sometimes he thought he had imagined the whole thing.

It never got any easier, consorting with the celestial mentors of the entire t'au race. They were the Greater Good made manifest, living legends that were not to be questioned. No matter what caste an individual hailed from, it was always daunting to meet them in person.

'This way, high commander,' said the leftmost ethereal guard, motioning for him to pass through into the lushly

appointed hub zone of the orbital's vast wheel. At the space station's heart, they would be waiting.

At least the ethereal was known to him. He had first dealt with Aun'Tefan on Dal'yth, where she and her counterpart Aun'Tipiya had censured him for overstepping his bounds as a commander. A shard of bitterness twisted in his soul at the thought, reopening old wounds. Memories rose unbidden of Tutor Sha'kanthas, his childhood teacher in the ways of the fire caste, accusing him of being vash'ya before an entire Elemental Council. On that day, as an act of atonement, he had been given the duty of reaping the secrets of war from Puretide's mind. It was an act that had led to his master's untimely death.

An audience with the ethereal caste was considered an honour, a gift, a salve upon the soul and a religious experience all rolled into one. So why did Farsight feel only dread?

As they approached an iris door that bore a depiction of a stylised lotus flower, the ethereal guards both made the sign of the patient attendant with their off-hands. Farsight came to an abrupt halt, as protocol demanded. The guardians moved ahead, each one placing a palm in front of the bio-reader by the side of the door. The device blipped, analysed the tiny flakes of skin it had taken in, and gave a melodic chime as the display turned gold. With a hiss, the door opened, its inner shield generator powering down.

'You may enter, high commander,' said the first of the two ethereal guards.

Head bowed, hands clasped in a gesture of meek subservience, Farsight moved inside. A wonderful sound filled his ears, flowing glissandos played in the T'aun style that rose and rose atop one another in a complex rhythm. The swell of emotive music was threaded through with a melody that he somehow felt he had heard a hundred times before.

Aun'Tefan was sat at her harp in the corner of the room, face serene as her nimble fingers ran across the delicate

strings. She inclined her head, just for an instant, before continuing with her musical phrase.

Not spontaneous, thought Farsight, but deliberate. The ethereal guard had allowed him to enter. They would not have done so had Aun'Tefan not been ready for him. She was making him wait, a subtle way to show him his place before the exchange had even really begun. Yet her mastery of the harp was something to behold. The music somehow made Farsight feel like he was flying upwards, gliding down, then flying again. It lifted his heart just to hear it.

With a flourish, the ethereal concluded her piece.

'Light of the T'au'va shine upon you,' said Farsight, making the eye-shielding gesture of the Unworthy Suppliant. 'Your music was sublime, honoured aun. I thank you for that gift.'

'I did not play it for your benefit, shas'o,' said Aun'Tefan, sketching a swift gesture of furtherance. A high chime rang out, and two hexagonal tiles in the audience chamber slid silently open to reveal broad projector-drones that rose smoothly upwards. 'It was a melody to settle my own soul. I have received some unfortunate news.'

'I see,' said Farsight, his mouth suddenly dry.

The air above the first disc-like drone shimmered for a moment, and the holographic presence of Aun'Tipiya coalesced, hovering a few metres off the ground on the gravitic repulsor belt she favoured as a method of locomotion. The image was of such high resolution that Farsight could see the slight hint of contempt on the ethereal's lips as if she were actually there.

The second disc shimmered a moment later, projecting the image of another ethereal after the split microdec of subservience that protocol demanded in respect of the other ethereals' senior rank. Aun'Dienn's famously ice-blue eyes pierced Farsight's soul as she made the gesture of welcome. The swiftness with which she returned her hands to her sides implied it was only a formality, and her

expression showed not an iota of warmth.

Farsight felt the sudden need to kneel, but kept his stance, leaning on well-worn formality to mask his anxiety at being confronted by three ethereals at once. 'I am humbled thricefold by such auspicious company. This is a day of blessings.'

'We have news from the Ethereal Aun'Va, Master of the Undying Spirit,' said Aun'Diemn. 'Dal'yth Prime has been fully reclaimed, and all remaining Imperial presence on the planet either slain or rendered gue'vesa.'

'That is well,' said Farsight, looking up. He truly meant it. He and Shadowsun had fought with everything they had to free the sept world from the Imperium's headlong assault, and millions of t'au had given their lives in the process. To see the sept world falter and fall in his absence would have undermined the entire purpose of their mission.

'Aun'Va asked after the Great Reclamation, or the Farsight Expedition, as the water caste have taken to calling it. He has placed a great deal of trust in you.'

'He has,' said Farsight, making the cupped-hands-supping of the gift acknowledged. 'And I am eternally grateful for it.'

'We were forced to report that although the primary worlds of the Farsight Enclaves have been reclaimed with acceptable loss of life and resource, there remains one yet to be reconquered. Illuminas, high commander. It remains under Imperial control.'

'For now,' said Farsight. 'I have ordered it quarantined by the Kor'vattru. Their void drones will alert them if any stray from low orbit. We will get to their destruction in good time.'

'It appears that your failure to complete the conquest of Imperial presence is because you have begun another campaign of conquest,' said Aun'Tipiya. 'One that focuses on the barbarian species of the be'gel.'

'The two campaigns are being waged concomitantly,' said Farsight. 'The orks are a species that thrives in darkness

and ignorance. To allow them a foothold so near to—'

'The term for this species is *be'gel*,' said Aun'Diemn. 'Not "ork". Why do you insist on using the vernacular?'

'I believe it is important to understand the mentality of a foe in order to defeat it,' said Farsight. 'As Master Puretide said to me, "to put one's thoughts into those of the enemy is to read it, then to undermine it, and ultimately, to defeat it".'

'Your master is Aun'Va, high commander, not Puretide,' said Aun'Tipiya. 'Your master is the Greater Good. You would do well to remember that.'

'Of course, honoured aun,' said Farsight.

'Do you feel,' said Aun'Diemn, 'that after we lost a third of the expedition in the crossing of the gulf, and then expended almost half of the remaining resources in retaking these four systems from the Imperial humans, we have the ability to fight two foes at once?'

Farsight fought back the urge to wince. 'I feel our warriors should be lauded rather than judged harshly.'

'Do you, indeed?' said Aun'Tipiya, her eyebrows arched.

'To reconquer such a massive swathe of Imperial space, including the numberless gue'la troopers of the Astra Militarum and the gue'ron'sha shock elements of the Space Marines, is a significant achievement. In working in close harmony with the air caste, in particular High Admiral Li Mau Teng, we have already engaged and destroyed over two hundred ork war elements in the Vorac Belt.' Even speaking the words gave him some certainty that it had been the right thing to do. 'Their threat has been degraded to the point that we could send a full half of the spacegoing assets back to Illuminas and still keep the ork threat from reaching critical status.'

'Ah yes, Li Mau Teng,' said Aun'Tipiya, making the tipping gesture of remote grief. 'A sad loss to the T'au'va.'

'I beg for clarity,' said Farsight, taken aback. 'He is alive. I saw him escape the Vorac incident myself, and his survival pod registered gold throughout.'

'He died in service last cycle. Whilst the *Wing* was under repair, his replacement vessel was lost with all hands when engaging an be'gel missile base deep in the Vorac Belt, rimward east.'

'No,' said Farsight. 'That cannot be right. He himself quarantined that zone last time I saw him.'

'Nonetheless,' said Aun'Tefan. 'The venerable admiral died a hero, giving his life for the Greater Good.'

'How did I not know about this?'

'Teng's death is a fresh wound,' sighed Aun'Diemn. 'The water caste are working out how best to dress it, that it may heal swiftly.'

Farsight said nothing, too stunned to reply.

Aun'Tefan smoothly capitalised on his silence. 'Do you truly believe fighting a war on two fronts is the best way to further the T'au'va, high commander?'

'I fought the orks for ten long tau'cyr on Arkunasha,' said Farsight, fighting to gather some decorum. 'We cannot afford to let them regroup. They thrive on war, and if word spreads of an escalating conflict, it will attract more of their warfleets towards us. Ultimately we must eliminate them. Once we have received our reinforcements, honoured aun, we can close down these Imperial elements for good, pushing back the—'

'Reinforcements?' said Aun'Tipiya. 'There will be no reinforcements.'

Farsight felt an ice-cold fist clench in his gut.

'How can that be so?'

'It has been judged prudent to forgo them,' said Aun'Tipiya, as if that explained everything.

'I was given to understand that this expedition was to establish a beachhead, and that subsequent crossings of the Damocles Gulf would see the population bolstered.'

The ethereals said nothing.

'How else can we hold onto so many worlds against counter-attack? To say they are thinly defended would be a grotesque understatement.'

‘There will be no reinforcements,’ repeated Aun’Tipiya with an air of finality. ‘The act of crossing the Damocles Gulf is too hazardous, and we have already weakened the defences of the core sept worlds by launching this expedition in the first place.’

‘It is the will of Aun’Va,’ said Aun’Diemn. ‘You must make do with what you have. The empire has been more than generous to allow you that much.’

‘Aun’Tefan and I must return to the sept worlds,’ said Aun’Tipiya. ‘In our place, Aun’Diemn is inbound to ensure order is maintained across the enclaves. Her companions Aun’Xa and Aun’Los go with her. Think of it as a net gain of a single ethereal. In that, you may find your reinforcement.’

Farsight’s mind reeled, turning his confusion and despair into anger. He did not betray his feelings, bar perhaps a slight narrowing of the eyes, but his heart was beating as fast as if he were fighting a horde of orks in close melee. The news of Teng’s death, so soon followed by the revelation that the expedition would not be reinforced, was a double blow that laid a fresh wound alongside an old scar, opening it once more within his soul.

‘May I leave to meditate upon that which I have learned this day?’ he said softly.

‘We would expect nothing less,’ said Aun’Tipiya, making a perfunctory pushing gesture of dismissal.

Farsight bowed his head, glad that the motion hid the reddening of his eyes, and left.

Meditation was the last thing Farsight felt like doing. Sat with his legs crossed in the centre of his quarters, he had attempted to find a modicum of peace, dulling even the barely perceptible thrum of the space station’s engines with a dampener field. So far, he had remained trapped by the same thoughts that had plagued him when he had left the audience chamber.

For a long while he had sought to find equilibrium by sitting still with his eyes closed, doing nothing whilst others

fought and died in his name. The inaction gnawed at him. He had concentrated on his breathing, on that which he could sense around him – the flow of the air as it outlined the shape of the room, the faint earthy scent of the ban'cha trees in their alcoves, the trickle of the stream and crackle of hearth-flame in the impeccably arranged elemental garden that made up the rear portion of his otherwise minimalist quarters.

Still it felt like the acid of rage burned inside him, fighting alongside a rising tide of black despair to consume him entirely.

'No reinforcements,' he found himself saying under his breath.

His mind strayed back to the red planet of Arkunasha, the flat mesa atop the Argap Plateau. To the boxy Orca that had bellied down, its ramp hissing open to reveal not an elite team of commanders, not a vanguard for an ensuing military strike, but a single figure. Aun'Shi, the only ethereal with whom Farsight had ever felt a true connection, he who had fought alongside the fire caste, his blade matched against those of the orks, and proved himself as capable a combatant as any of them. He who always presented himself as an equal, not a superior, and who had a smile behind his eyes even when he was being deadly serious. He who the ethereal caste had despatched with exactly the same message as he had endured this day.

But who was nonetheless a single t'au.

'No reinforcements.' He shook his head, sickened to his core. Did they fail to understand war so completely?

Farsight stood up with a hiss of frustration, pacing around his quarters like a hyperfelid caught in a cage. He could not believe it. How had he been so foolhardy? Of course the ethereals had no plans to reinforce his expedition. But the death of Li Mau Teng...

Unworthy thoughts pulsed through Farsight's mind. Could the admiral's death have been somehow related to the whispered doubts he had shared with his old ally upon the

Wing's bridge? Was it a coincidence that his friend had met with disaster not once, but twice, in the last few cycles, especially after over twenty tau'cyr of distinguished service where he had suffered not a scratch?

Farsight banished the thought as unworthy. Paranoia was an aspect of the mind that haunted all fire caste commanders at some point. Like many poisonous things, it could be useful if recognised for what it was, and turned into a weapon – when used wisely, it could be another asset in a greater war. But it was a double-edged blade, and if employed too often, it was toxic to the soul.

He heard Shadowsun's voice inside his head. *There is nothing to be gained by feeding hungry ghosts.* It was a maxim she had heard Master Puretide use, though only once; she liked to repeat it nonetheless. Their bond-mate Kais had often derided her for it – he and Farsight shared a view that Shas talked of ghosts a little too often. But the older Farsight got, the more he thought he understood her preoccupation.

Understanding was one thing. Acting upon that understanding was another.

Farsight paced over to the flattened-mushroom shape of his console and clicked his tongue. The auditory receptor, identifying a match to his vocal pattern, conjured a base holo display tailored to his own personal info-harvest. He delved through the layers of military information available to him as high commander, crossing into the overlap with air caste assets and identifying the last mission that High Admiral Teng had attended.

It proved to be a foray back into the same area of the Vorac Belt that Teng had personally designated as out of bounds until the tractor beam anomaly was thoroughly investigated and understood by delegates of the earth caste. There was footage of the *Furthest Extent*, a Mako-class vessel that Teng had taken as his own whilst the *Wing* was under reconstruction, engaging a cluster of asteroids that showed evidence of orkoid presence.

Just as the Mako was disengaging, a trio of orkoid missiles shot from one of the larger asteroids. Instead of being prematurely destroyed on the *Furthest Extent's* shields, they crackled briefly with energy, and kept going to detonate on the underside of the Mako, right next to its engines. A few moments passed on the recording in which Farsight took not a single breath. Then the entire vessel detonated with spectacular force.

There would have been no survivors. But why had the missiles been able to penetrate the shields in the first place? And why was there a delay between the ork missiles hitting home and the vessel exploding with such titanic force?

Farsight shook his head; it was a matter for the earth caste, not for him. He needed to talk to one who would understand, who could glimpse at least a portion of his dilemma, and remain impartial. Telling a t'au he had suspicions about the ethereal caste was extremely dangerous. He needed an advisor, a sounding board. But how could he trust someone from outside the T'au'va?

Pacing the room, he caught his reflection in the mirrorfield that activated in the corner of his quarters, and the symmetry sent an idea into his mind. No one soul could bear the weight of this dilemma alone.

But there was one with whom he had shared the darkest secret of all.

A worm of doubt burrowed inside Farsight's chest, hurting him more than any wound. To speak to a non-t'au about the ethereal caste was wrong. This was all wrong, and he should drop it now. Shadowsun's hungry ghosts, he told himself. Nothing more. Kor'O Li Mau Teng had died in service to the T'au'va, fighting the hated orks.

How could it be any other way?

CHAPTER SIX

THE FEATHERED SERPENT

TWO IMPERIAL DAYS LATER

SALASH'HEI MESME ORBITAL SPACE RELAY
SALASH'HEI, ENCLAVE SPACE

'Well met, O'Shovah,' said Vykola Herat. She padded barefoot towards Farsight across the cool white floor, taking in the beautifully curved architecture of the viewing hall he had chosen for their meeting place. The high commander was standing on the observation deck on the outer rim of Salash'hei's main space station, his hands folded behind his back.

The view of the oceanic planetoids in front of him was spectacular, the depths of the void stretching away behind it. Something inside her wanted to fly away into that nothingness, to freeze her doubts in the cold darkness of space. She pushed the errant thought aside as Farsight turned, pressed his fingertips together, and bowed.

'Mamzel Thransia Delaque, my thanks for answering my summons in person,' he said. 'Blessings of the T'au'va shine within you.'

Herat bowed in turn. She appreciated the fact Farsight had kept her true name to himself, still referring to her by her official persona for the benefit of any eavesdroppers. The observation deck was empty except for her and the commander, but with drone intelligences so common in t'au society – and often so discreetly placed – you could never be sure who was listening.

‘This view is really quite spectacular,’ she said, truly meaning it. ‘I was quite glad to leave Vior’los when I heard you were heading out here. Salash’hei is a fine place to calm the troubled soul.’

Farsight absently inclined a hand upwards as if catching the sentiment, but said nothing, lost in thought. He was difficult to read, as ever, especially given that the lower half of his face was covered with a high collar that she understood as currently fashionable amongst the air caste’s pilots. It was an odd affectation for a senior member of the fire caste. Given Farsight’s reputation for eccentricity she did not ask after it, but she could not help but feel it was another piece of a puzzle that she needed to unlock.

Herat had caught a reflection of her Tarot card before coming here, when her thoughts dwelt on Farsight and his predicament. She had seen not the Philosopher King, as she usually did, but the twisted, starveling-thin figure of the Wretch. Something was going on behind his façade of composure, some manner of inner turmoil raging just out of sight. Yet with her own mind swimming in uncertainty, she had no way of divining what it was, let alone turning it to her advantage.

The vast globular spheres of Salash’hei shimmered and swelled beneath them, their blue-white grandeur marred only by the smooth ovals of water caste orbitals and the tiny spacecraft that attended them. To Vykola they looked like skipping stones held in suspended animation above the surface of curving, alien oceans. Where the spheres of Salash’hei met, forced together by their own gravity, they compressed and blended, sending sprays of scintillating

fluid bursting outwards in the manner of solar flares. The curving shapes caught the light of the Timbra sun, forming vast rainbow patterns in the skies. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

No wonder the water caste valued this world so highly, thought Herat. It spoke well of them, and of their determination to bring every world they encountered into the embrace of the T'au Empire. The fire caste had no real interest in the place, for they considered it largely indefensible. The massive Imperial pontoons that had once formed the foundations for archipelago-style cities were constantly assailed by the elements, and lashing storms wracked the surface whenever the gravitic anomalies of Salash'hei played havoc with the vast oceans. For the t'au military, the collection of planetoids was a way station to reach the Vorac Belt, and little more. But as a wonder of the cosmos, Herat had seen nothing like it.

'This gallery is a fine place for contemplation,' she said.

'Indeed,' said Farsight. He let the silence spread out for a few more moments before continuing. 'And given the prohibition on non-t'au personnel on the inner levels, a fortuitous place for us to meet.'

The t'au commander took something from his waist, beneath his robes. A notation disc. He met her gaze, holding it for a moment, his expression serious and meaningful. Though it was still somewhat strange to be in such close proximity to a xenos warlord, his wrinkled grey face and oddly jointed body had long ago ceased to repel her. Since the war for Dal'yth, she had become quite accustomed to the alien anatomy and flat, noseless faces of the t'au. Amazing what the human mind could adapt to.

Or slowly become.

The insidious thought made Vykola shiver a little. She grimaced, despite herself. Farsight took her expression as impatience, and made a swift gesture of contrition.

'Apologies for my delay. I come here to dwell on dilemmas, sometimes, and record my thoughts.' He held up the little

black disc. 'Though I fear my notation device may have become faulty. I must get around to having the kor address the matter.' He cast her a sidelong glance, and ran his thumb around its edge. A tiny gold light winked at its peak.

The device emitted a strange hiss that felt like it was reverberating not only in Herat's ears, but also the plates of her skull. The device incorporated a null emitter, anti-auspex, likely multi-spectrum at that. It reminded her a little of the large black disc that held the abominable intelligence known as Ob'lotai 4-0, the Warghost, another of Farsight's advisors. How a mnemonic imprint could act as a proper confidant, she would never know.

Herat felt a slight glow of pride that Farsight sought her out over those of his inner circle, these days. Then she remembered why, and the light inside her turned to darkness.

'You may not recall this notation disc, Vykola Herat,' said Farsight, his voice low and quiet. His voice was a little muffled by his high collar; only now did she realise he had worn it so that his lips could not be read in the reflection of the viewing screen. 'But during the *incident* in your quarters, it was instrumental in saving your life. It can emit a scrambler field, refined by my contact, O'Vesa, to manifest as white noise that can mask conversation.'

'I see,' replied Vykola. She concentrated for a moment, psychically reshaping her vocal cords and the inside of her mouth so her lips needed to move only the tiniest fraction when she talked. The biomancer's gifts had come far more easily to her since they left Vior'los; she did not like to dwell on why.

'A version of that same field overloaded the mind of the creature that dwelt inside Por Malcaor,' said Farsight.

Pain. Pain, repaid a thousand times over.

'I recall it only dimly,' admitted Vykola. Odd. She had meant to say that she remembered every detail.

'The mind-science visions that creature forced upon me,' said Farsight. 'They recur, sometimes. They mingle with

those I experienced when I was disabling the so-called warp drive of the Imperial vessel *Scabbard of Flesh*.'

'You spoke of them before,' said Herat. 'Do you believe them to reflect the truth?'

'I have thought long and hard about their nature. One property of that parasitic organism that has puzzled me was that it seemed...' He paused, squinting as he chose the right word. 'It seemed *honest*. For an entity so skilled in the arts of espionage that it infiltrated our caste system at the highest level, that seems strange indeed.'

'Strange does not even begin to describe it.'

'It told me of the hidden workings of the universe. Of the past and present.' He exhaled, a brief hiss she took as exasperation. 'Though I hate to admit it, I felt the ring of truth about each of those revelations. Even those it specifically imparted to disturb my sanity.'

'I see. Would you care to elaborate?'

'One of them was that our rulers have not been honest with us.' He stiffened his back suddenly, as if the admission were a knife driven into his spine. His eyes were wide and staring.

'Rulers rarely are,' said Vykola, shrugging. She fought back the urge to laugh; so young, these t'au. 'Surely you can appreciate that, often, a lie is needed to see a greater truth endure?'

'It is not that simple,' said Farsight. 'Or perhaps I should say it is not that complex. Our entire civilisation is built around the notion that the ethereal mind always makes the optimal decision to preserve the lives of the greater populace. It is the central tenet, the axis around which our entire philosophy resolves. The celestial caste always acts in the best interests of the other four.'

Herat raised an eyebrow. 'One cannot rule a star-spanning empire in such a benevolent fashion.'

'Humanity cannot!' spat Farsight, making a swift cutting motion. 'That is why the T'au Empire is superior!'

Vykola said nothing, aware that she had touched a nerve,

but she felt something change inside her, a fragment of sentience inflamed by the force of Farsight's emotion.

These fools do not deserve to rule the stars.

'I offer contrition for my outburst,' said Farsight, looking down whilst holding a hand out towards her. 'It was unseemly to ask for your presence, court your advice, then to verbally attack when I hear something I do not like.'

Putting aside the urge to take the proffered hand as a handshake, Herat made an attempt at the sweeping hands of the matter-put-aside.

Farsight frowned in mock horror. 'Suddenly I do not feel guilt. Your gestural vernacular is still horrendous.' He smiled, then, and Vykola felt the atmosphere lighten.

'And what of the orks, high commander? I hear from my contacts on Vior'los that you are in preparation for ground war.'

'A wise leader prepares for all eventualities,' said Farsight.

'You must have your anti-ork doctrine refined to a razor's edge by now,' she said.

The high commander sighed. 'The orks are not a foe that can be defeated with conventional means, Vykola. They breed in the dank corners of the worlds they infect, much like algae grows in the lee of a rock formation. O'Vesa has written a treatise on their propagation method, believing it has airborne elements. I am inclined to believe him. To leave them alone, even for a single generation, is an open invite to a recurring war.'

'They are formidable, despite their barbarism,' said Herat. 'This humanity has learnt.'

'Quite so,' replied Farsight. He was staring back towards the vast globules that formed Salash'hei, half lost in contemplation.

'They have long been the nemesis of mankind,' said Herat, aware she was losing his attention. 'Even when committing entire wargroups to their eradication, the Emperor's armies have achieved only escalation. The very act of engaging them ensures that more will be drawn to the

flames of war, eager for a chance to vent their bloodlust.'

'It is *dilemma*,' said Farsight, emphasising the human term. 'But they can be beaten, if their coherence is taken apart beforehand. The air caste have reported the forces we engaged in the Vorac Belt are withdrawing. I would dearly love to exterminate them, especially given the recent death of High Admiral Li Mau Teng. Perhaps their flight is enough.'

'Are you sure that they are in flight?' asked Vykola.

'They approach the gulf,' said Farsight by way of answer. 'They will not be seen in enclave space again.'

'Could it be they are simply choosing to attack the fringes of sept space instead?'

Farsight shook his head, paused, then shook it again.

'No,' he said softly. 'No, I do not think so.'

'Yet you just told me yourself that to attack them is to antagonise them, and attract more of their number. What if you have kicked the hornet's nest with such force you have sent it not into your own backyard, but that of your neighbours?'

'I am not sure what you mean,' said Farsight. 'The idiom does not translate.'

'The orks have reached an impasse, so they are likely to attack weaker prey,' said Vykola. 'Without closing them down completely, you may have merely passed the problem back to the core sept worlds.'

Farsight said nothing, his brow furrowed. Far below, the orbs of Salash'hei sent rainbow mists through the void.

'I suppose there is a chance they could reach critical momentum and threaten the sept worlds in the manner you suggest,' said Farsight. 'But it is slim.'

'Can you really gamble with the heartlands of your empire in such a manner?'

'No,' said Farsight, hanging his head. 'No, I cannot.'

Something inside Vykola burned with savage glee.

Blessed change, and soon.

'You are right, of course,' said Farsight softly. 'I cannot

take the risk.'

'A fully fledged greenskin crusade, hitting the sept worlds so soon after the Imperial invasion, could be disastrous,' said Vykola.

'In truth, I am not sure that the ethereals understand to what extent an orkoid invasion can gather pace, when word gets out that they have found a tempting target.'

'I know the orks of old,' said Vykola. She concentrated for a moment, fashioning a jagged mass of scar tissue across her collarbone, then pulled her velvetine collar down to expose the puckered mass. 'Always you must finish that which you start, high commander. To leave them is to invite defeat.'

Farsight sighed, and made the gesture of the binding snapped. 'Yes. They must be caught before they re-enter the gulf, or at the least destroyed when they leave it. Otherwise their trail may be lost, and we will have sent a deadly enemy right into the heart of the T'au Empire.'

Vykola said nothing.

'If I may confide in you for a moment longer?' said Farsight, turning to her.

'Of course,' she said.

'The orks are an enemy I understand. That which assailed you in your quarters, the entity that made its home in the Water Spider, Por Malcaor, I do not.'

Vykola sighed. 'I do not truly understand it, either.'

'You humans are bellicose, determined and extremely dangerous,' said Farsight, fixing Vykola with an unblinking stare. 'But at least you have notions of civilisation I can understand. When it comes to our warrior castes, there is something of an overlap in our codes of conduct, especially amongst the gue'ron'sha you call Space Marines.'

'I have made similar observations on record.'

'I shall be glad to leave the war against the Imperials behind. There is a purity to the extermination of the ork threat that appeals to me. The purging of Illuminas can wait.'

'I will not lie to you,' said Herat. 'That is a salve to my soul.'

'I thought it might be,' said Farsight. 'Your motives are not as hidden as you might like to believe, Vykola Herat.'

The inquisitor laughed, making sure to put just the right amount of self-effacing humility in the sound.

'Very little escapes the notice of one with your perspicacity, O'Shovah,' she replied. 'Very little indeed. But even you have blind spots.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE REAVER KING

TWO IMPERIAL DAYS LATER

DAGGA, ORK FLAGSHIP
VORAC ASTEROID BELT PERIMETER

'Gork's teef,' said Grog, absently picking a scab from his knuckles. 'That is one flash ride.'

The legendary *Blacktoof* had come alongside them, closer than any sane kaptin would ever have attempted. Grog felt like he could almost smell the ozone from the crackling broadside batteries of energy guns on its flanks. It was well within kannon range of the vast asteroid monstrosity that Grog had taken out of the Vorac Belt.

To attempt such an insane feat of steersmanship as coming alongside in a warzone was as clear a sign of the gittish nature of the kaptin as any other. Grog knew that on some level he should be objecting to the legendary freeboota muscling in on his territory in such a fashion. But in his heart, he was already resigned to being upstaged a dozen times over.

'He's here, boss,' said Drillfist, the big mek straightening

his grease-stained welding apron as best he could with only one hand. 'I just put da force fields back up again, quick as you like.'

'Good work,' said Grog. 'You got da teef ready, right?'

'Yeah, chief,' said Drillfist, waving towards the boxy chests in the corner of the cave-like bridge. 'Had the grots sort the gold-plated ones from da uvvers. Put 'em all on top, just like you asked. Should do the trick.'

'Good. He loves his gold, does the kaptin.'

'Yes, chief,' said Drillfist. 'Even the snotlings know that.'

'Snotlings!' cawed Dok Toofjaw's disembodied head from its perch atop the mek's gubbins-desk. 'Even eat da snotlings!'

'Alright, don't get smart,' said Grog. 'Has Big Gobba got the welcome party ready?'

'He has!' came a booming roar from the corridor at the back of the cave. 'Though it ain't a party til the kaptin sez so!'

Grog spun around, eyes wide, to see a monstrous beast of an ork clad in gold armour plates swagger into the light. Behind him came a motley crew of cyborks, gits and show-offs of all descriptions, but in terms of sheer extravagance they paled next to their leader.

The kaptin's armour seemed well made, gilded plates glinting in the half-light under a massive greatcoat plastered with glyphs that professed wealth, skill and limitless dakka. A massive bicorn hat, complete with a giant feather from some exotic saurian, crested a scar-ridged fist of a face, and one glimmering red eye stared out next to a black-patched socket.

'The kaptin, he has arrived, in da flesh,' said the newcomer, brandishing a massive kustom shoota that was emanating a deep and ominous hum. 'Or should I say "in da flash", hur hur hur.' Green light streamed from the cracks in the gun's ramshackle construction, reflecting from the fitted golden plate that glinted beneath the freeboota's sumptuous, glyph-laden greatcoat.

‘Kaptin Badrukk,’ said Grog. ‘About time ya showed up. We got some plannin’ ta do.’

‘Come ta kill me some gun-runts, simple enough,’ said the freeboota lord, shaking his massive kustom shoota. The weapon gave a thin and rising whine, as if it were about to detonate. ‘Show ‘em wot dakka really means!’ Laughing, he cuffed Big Gobba, who was standing nearby with his hat held meekly in front of him.

‘That’s the plan, yeah,’ said Grog.

‘Muggins ‘ere said you got da loot up here on the bridge.’ Badrukk leered at Big Gobba, exposing dozens of gold-capped teeth, then turned the same grin towards Grog. His own metal fangs suddenly felt rather inadequate. It was like looking into the mouth of an extremely wealthy shark. ‘Let’s see the good stuff then,’ Badrukk continued. ‘The kaptin likes his pay up front. Or didn’t yer runtherd tell ya? Wot’s yer name again?’

‘Grog Ironteef, da Warchief of Alsanta.’ Grog threw a bottle of his best squig beer at Badrukk’s head. Badrukk not only caught it, but bit off its neck in a shower of glass and drained it in a single draught, jagged shards and all.

‘Never heard of ya,’ said Badrukk, giving a throaty belch and picking a long sliver of glass from his tongue. He flicked it at Grog’s face; it pinged off the metal plate exaggerating his jaw. ‘About this loot, then. Nobody makes the kaptin ask twice, cos Da Rippa here speaks loud enough for the two of us.’ The freeboota brandished his ridiculously overlarge gun once more, a glowing cylinder of unstable plasma clunking into the breech as he depressed the trigger halfway.

‘You want a scrap, then fine, I’ll give yer that,’ said Grog. ‘I’ll punch yer fancy teef down yer throat, if ya like.’

‘Punch his teef!’ cried Toofjaw. ‘Gimme his fancy teef!’

Badrukk glanced over to the decapitated head, and much to Grog’s pleasure, the freeboota’s grin notched down a bit.

‘But no one’s letting off no dakka on my bridge,’ continued Grog. ‘Keep it fer the gun-runts ta taste.’ He took three

steps forward, the iron plates of the cavern floor ringing under his metal boots. 'Show 'im the goods, lads.'

A loose mob of grots, wide-eyed and nervous, opened the chests that lined the side of the room. The biggest of the gretchin surreptitiously shone a lumin-torch across the top of each chest, letting the light play just like Grog had told him. Yellowish reflections danced in the gloom.

'Gold teef,' said Grog. 'Ten chests of 'em. Consider it a jester of goodwill.'

'Right,' cackled Badrukk. 'We got plenty of jesters around here.' He backhanded Big Gobba in the mouth, sending the giant ork sprawling. Growling, the first mate got up fast, grabbing a choppa from his belt and swinging it at the side of Badrukk's head. Two of the kaptin's lieutenants grabbed Big Gobba by the arms before the heavy blow could land, holding him fast. Another put a knife to his throat, its blade the length of a human arm.

'These chests are good enough, I s'pose,' said Badrukk airily as Gobba growled and spat behind him. 'Though don't fink the kaptin don't know them teef don't go all the way down.'

Grog started back, doing his best to appear affronted. 'Don't know wot you're on about, mate. They're full to da brim.'

'The kaptin here's been a-reavin' for twice as long as you been alive,' said Badrukk, jabbing his gold-plated chest with a gnarled thumb. 'He knows somefing wot's too good to be true. You payin' in full, on time on targit? That's as fishy as a void whale's blowhole.'

'Don't 'ave 'em if you don't want 'em,' said Grog, motioning for his grots to close the lids. They did so with considerable effort, and the caskets clanged shut one by one.

'The kaptin already said he'd take 'em, didn't he?' said Badrukk. He motioned for the grots to bring them over, and at a nod from Grog, they dragged them as best they could.

'Now, what's the skivvy with these gun-runts?'

'They got us outgunned,' said Grog. 'Plain and simple. I fought 'em on Orka-Gnasha back when da Painboss here was still in charge.' Grog leant over and tapped his power hook on the cylinder of dirty water and rusted wiring nearby.

'Painboss! Painboss!' cried the dok through the speaker link, rolling his eyes madly.

'We got ten years of good fighting on that world, give or take,' said Grog. 'Then I got bored and left for a scrap with da humies instead.'

'Not wot we heard,' said Badrukk, grinning to show more toothy wealth than any ork could expect to hold in a lifetime. 'We heard you got a kickin' from the big red tauboss in his flyin' suit. Word is you lot ran off wiv yer tails between yer legs.'

Redd da Bullit laughed at the back of the cavern. 'Tails!' he said, cackling. 'We ain't got tails, mate. That's squigs.'

Grog cringed inwardly. Badrukk shook his head and spat a gobbet of phlegm on the floor, taking a fat cigar from the rim of his hat.

'Right bunch of idiots we got here,' he muttered, loud enough for Grog to hear. 'Blackburnz, do the honours.'

One of the kaptin's lackeys, a scorched and grinning maniac whose face was more skull than skin, held up the end of a heavy industrial burna and projected a tongue of flame.

'Cheers,' said Badrukk, lighting the foul-smelling cigar in a spray of sparks and puffing it into life. 'You lot aren't the kunningest, are ya? But ya got prox-himmity on yer side. And a decent fleet of roks. The kaptin can work with that.'

Grog felt his anger rise, but forced it back down. He had come a long way to assemble the right measure of firepower to take down the gun-runts, and brokered many a deal. All around him were specialists in the business of firepower - dakka-mad warbosses, big meks, Blood Axes with salvaged humie guns and even weirdboyz with a reputation for wanton destruction. Many of the crew he'd

got on side by telling them that Badrukk would be part of the same force, and that the spoils of war would make them all richer than any other ork alive. He could ill afford to put the lie to that now.

‘We got yer da teef,’ said Grog. ‘You got more guns on yer ship, right?’

‘Oh yeah,’ nodded Badrukk. ‘The *Blacktoof*’s packed to the gunnels with freebootas, all rarin’ for a propa fight. Lots of ‘em fought against these gun-runts before. We got enough shooty stuff alright.’ The freeboota motioned at the motley assemblage of heavy weapons specialists lining the balconies above the bridge; there were so many of them the gantries gave an ominous creak whenever more showed up to gawk at the parley. ‘Don’t look like you’re short of it neither.’

‘Got me a point ta prove,’ said Grog.

‘The kaptin can respect that,’ said Badrukk. ‘Anything them runts can do, we can do better, right?’

‘Right.’

‘So it’s the big red one you wanna kill, is it?’ said Badrukk, puffing on his cigar. Grog could still see the kaptin’s piercing eye in the gloom, despite the smoke surrounding him being as thick as a Deff Dread’s exhaust fumes.

‘Kill!’ echoed Toofjaw in response. ‘Wanna kill!’

‘Yeah,’ said Grog. ‘We had a good racket going back on the uvver side of da gulf, fighting against them lanky beak-heads, the kroot. Gork’s fists, but they’re good for a scrap. Always up for it, and I don’t mean any of this long-range stuff neither.’

‘Yeah,’ said Badrukk. ‘Vicious, them lads. They eat ya after they kill ya, right?’

‘That’s them,’ said Grog. ‘Get stronger doin’ it, too. More up for a fight than ever. Some even ended up lookin’ a bit like us.’

‘Like a buncha runts then,’ said one of Badrukk’s cronies. Grog ignored the barks of laughter from around the cave, but marked the scar-jawed culprit with a death stare. The

freeboota would get what was coming to him, soon enough. When the fighting got interesting, bullets had a funny way of hitting friends as well as enemies.

‘All the lads got some killin’ done when we fought them kroot,’ continued Grog, turning back to Badrukk. ‘Good enemies. Strong, fast and bitey. They don’t wear that flashy red armour their fancy mates love so much, and they don’t go flyin’ about the place neither.’

In the shadows to his left, Krobb grunted in agreement. As with most of the Snakebite clan, he disapproved of anything flying, other than the voracious buzzer squigs he kept as pets. ‘Some of them kroot were really big,’ muttered the herdmaster appreciatively, scratching his pet squig hound behind the earholes. ‘Them ape-lookin’ ones. They could break ya back with a single punch.’

‘Yeah,’ said Grog. ‘Right. So we boarded their big round ships, them war spheres, reckoning there woz even more fightin’ ta be had inside. Spent months splittin’ skulls in the depths, lootin’ all the guns and scrap and wotnot. Proper battles, like I told ya.’

A murmur of appreciation came from Badrukk’s crew, many of them fingering knives and guns at the thought of a massive space-borne brawl that lasted months at a time.

‘Let me guess,’ said Badrukk. ‘Then da gun-runts show up and spoil it for everyone.’

‘Yeah,’ said Grog, annoyed that the kaptin had nicked the end of his story. ‘Outranged us, just like they’re long-gunning us out in space right now. Every corridor was a shootin’ range. Didn’t have the dakka to match it. A good half of the lads died before the rest of us bailed out, but we were already making plans for havin’ another crack.’

‘And wot are they, then?’

‘Wot, cracks?’ Redd da Bullit spoke up from the back, eager to contribute. ‘They’re-’

‘No, idiot,’ said Badrukk, spitting a gobbet of tobacco-black phlegm in disgust. ‘Wot are your *plans*?’

‘Go after their mates,’ said Grog. ‘Cross the gulf, and go

for the same ones we fought before.'

'Runnin' away from the Red Runt, then,' scoffed one of the freebootas to Badrukk's rear.

'Nah,' said Grog. 'We're usin' his mates as bait. He'll come after us alright, with his pretty fleet. Fought us fer ten years back at Orka-Gnasha. He won't be able to stand by and watch us do over his pals.'

'An' we lie in wait, all guns ready,' said Drillfist, 'and when he charges in all clever-like, we shoot him ta bitz.'

Grog nodded. 'Then he's left his fort planets weak, see. This lot.' He gestured to the cluster of systems visible outside the force field. 'We double back, and wallop 'em good!'

A few of Badrukk's mates scratched their heads, but the kaptin himself simply pursed his lips around his cigar.

'Ya know, that might work. Long way to do it, but it gets ya lots of fightin', and gets round yer asteroids problem.'

'Right.'

'Could do a couple of invasions one after another. You got a runt planet and a loot-world in the same system.'

'That's where we're headed.'

'Then the kaptin's got good news for ya. He knows a shortcut across the gulf that'll do ya nicely.'

'So I hear,' said Grog. 'You sure it'll work?'

'It's da gulf,' shrugged Badrukk, the fringe of bullet casings on his epaulettes tinkling as he tapped his forehead. 'Only thing that's for sure is a blimmin' headache. But it's as good as you're gonna get. Besides, nobody gets to be shootier than the kaptin. Not you, not the gun-runts, not anyone.'

Grog felt a familiar surge of optimistic battle-lust grow within him. He would get his revenge on the Red Runt. He would do so not in space, but on solid ground, where the orks fought best.

The War of Dakka, they would call it. And he would win.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TRUTH OF FIRE

SALASH'HEI MESME ORBITAL SPACE RELAY
SALASH'HEI, ENCLAVE SPACE

'We will continue the extermination of the orks, and leave the Imperial presence on Illuminas as isolated as possible,' said Farsight, the broad twin toes of his foot nudging a stray speck of gravel back into its designated place in his elemental garden. 'We have no other choice.'

At the communion desk, Commander Brightsword leaned back in Farsight's command chair as if he were born to it. He raised his arms in a gesture of relaxation, folding his legs into a meditation pose. Since being invited to attend Farsight in his quarters, the young warrior had made himself thoroughly at home.

'Forgive me for stating the obvious, wise one,' he said, his tone somewhere between amusement and shock, 'but is that not in contravention to the intent of the aun's orders, if not the letter?'

'It could be interpreted that way,' admitted Farsight. 'Yet I

have been given the full authority to enact the wishes of the ethereal caste in all military matters, and – as the leader of the Great Reclamation – afforded the autonomy to make such a decision.'

'Are the greenskins truly withdrawing from the Vorac Belt?' said Brightsword. 'I must admit I thought that was a little unlikely when I saw it on the water caste informationals. Yet the cadrenet backs it up.'

'Oh, they can be said to be withdrawing,' said Farsight. 'From another perspective, they are heading back towards sept space to launch another invasion.'

'Across the entire Damocles Gulf,' said Brightsword, his manner suddenly serious.

'Just so,' nodded Farsight. 'They do not fear the vagaries of space travel. We must cross too, or else answer to our own consciences. We cannot simply send our adversaries back to the sept worlds and claim it as a victory for the enclaves. Do you not see that?'

'I am as keen to see the orks eradicated as anyone else,' said Brightsword. 'We still owe them for Arkunasha. It would be a grievous blow to morale to admit they are allowed to exist upon the threshold of the enclaves, there to propagate and strike at will.'

'Precisely,' said Farsight. 'I am glad you understand.'

'But... the ethereals have all but forbidden it, stoic one,' he continued, suddenly serious. 'So that is an end to the matter, surely?'

'"All but forbidden it" is the appropriate term,' said Farsight. 'They have not, however, actually ruled against it.'

'To cross the gulf is a serious undertaking, even with the air caste's hard-won experience in the matter,' said Brightsword. 'This all sounds reckless to me, high commander.'

Farsight gave a short laugh. 'Reckless?' he said. 'Is that not the wildfire decrying the candle flame?'

'Perhaps,' said the young warrior. 'But if you go through with this, it won't only be the ethereals you have to answer

to.'

'How so?'

'When Commander Bravestorm hears that he will have to abandon his plans to destroy the Imperial presence upon Illuminas, he may spontaneously combust with outrage.'

Farsight smiled ruefully. 'A poor choice of words, given his condition.'

Brightsword made the gesture of water flowing where it may. The finer points of social etiquette had never been his forte, and he knew it. The young commander's lack of tact was one of the reasons Farsight valued his counsel; much like Y'eldi, he would point out that which others would let slip by. In a society as cultured and cautious as theirs, it was refreshing.

'Do you not think the ethereals would simply forbid your action?'

'Not if it is already underway by the time they learn of it.'

'I must speak out against this,' muttered Brightsword, looking around himself before continuing.

'Go on,' said Farsight. 'O'Vesa has ensured we may speak freely in my quarters.'

'You must understand this entire notion is taboo, bold one,' said Brightsword. 'Given your prominence, it could cause schism.'

'If it becomes a matter of censure, I will simply blame it on a misunderstanding,' said Farsight. 'The aun will find a way to explain it away to the other castes, and turn the situation to their advantage. The water caste specialise in aiding them in such matters.'

'That much is true,' said Brightsword, nodding in agreement. 'They could claim a raging tsunami was a balm of cleansing water, and the masses would believe it.'

'I am counting on it. We need to destroy the orks, old friend, all of them. *'With its wounds left to fester, the injured beast becomes ever more the threat.'*

'Master Puretide speaks through you, as ever,' said Brightsword.

As one they touched their foreheads and hearts, eyes cast down. A silent moment passed before Brightsword spoke again.

‘Do you not risk making the Imperium the injured beast instead of the orks?’

‘If we do not follow the greenskin presence through the Vorac Belt,’ said Farsight, ‘they will fall back, regroup, and then descend upon us in great measure. Whether they do so here, in the enclaves, or on the other side of the Damocles Gulf, is immaterial. Millions of t’au lives will be lost. The Imperium is slow to act, this we know. We can exterminate the orks before returning to finish the cleansing of the enclaves, incorporating as many gue’vesa as we can.’

‘Do we have the strength to run the orks down?’

‘We have the strength of the T’au’va,’ said Farsight, making a cutting motion with his hand to hide his irritation at Brightsword’s constant questions. ‘And that is always enough.’

Brightsword shook his head. ‘It is my belief, high commander, that you risk placing a crack in the foundation of the T’au’va. You would court a return to the time of horror.’

‘I have no other choice!’ shouted Farsight, feeling the tendons of his neck become as taut as steel. ‘The ethereals do not understand the orkoid menace as we do! Look at Arkunasha. We had the beast all but eradicated, after ten long tau’cyr of sacrifice, and what do the aun do? They have us withdraw at the last moment! Our victory there was all but certain until they recalled us, and it was the next generation of fire caste that paid the price!’

‘After ten tau’cyr without resolution, perhaps they were right to do so. Perhaps we do not understand the orks as well as we think, *Book of the Beast* or no.’

‘Hard words to hear,’ said Farsight. ‘But you know as well as I that this is the right course. We left the orks to propagate on Arkunasha rather than closing them down

with a concerted effort. Would you not change that fate if you could?’

‘Of course,’ said Brightsword, his tone uneasy.

‘I saw the glyphic symbols on their asteroid ships, out in the Vorac Belt. They were the exact same as those we saw on the largest gun-wagon on Arkunasha.’

‘I recall it well, and the convoy it led. Was it not the conveyance of the war leader you called “Grog Boss”?’

‘It was. Though the tyrant Tooth Jaw is dead, we have an old war to conclude.’

‘Your mind is evidently set,’ said Brightsword. ‘I have sworn to fight by your side until the day I die, just as my predecessor did. But mark this, old friend.’

He stood up, came over to the elemental garden’s edge, and knelt down next to the high commander to meet him eye to eye. For a moment, the young firebrand seemed old beyond his years, and as careworn as Farsight himself.

‘This will not end well, O’Shovah of Vior’la.’

PART TWO

DARKEST NIGHT

'To strike! That is the distillation of purpose into a single perfect moment. Be the first to strike.'

– High Commander Farsight

CHAPTER NINE

THE DESCENT

TWO IMPERIAL MONTHS LATER

TAU'ROTA'SHA
ATARI VO

Por'O Zoa'ha leaned back in his recliner throne and tapped his broad, flat teeth with a perfectly shaped fingernail. His duties were done for the day. With everything in its right place, and all his contacts' attitudes aligned in the city's best interests, he had earned himself a moment of quiet reflection and meditation on the glory of the T'au'va.

He was busy wasting it on his scribe-disc instead.

The view of the capital city that stretched across the panoramic window behind Zoa'ha was breathtaking in its magnificence, the sunset turning the sky a gorgeous peach-and-cream that highlighted the splendour of the arcing roofs reaching impossibly high towards it. Zoa'ha spared it not a glance. Instead he stared intently at the *fu'lasso* puzzle 'Golden Ambassador' on the scribe-disc in his lap, totally absorbed. His neck ached, as it had for some time now, but his mind was aflow with a dozen tributaries of

information at once. The very concept of his physical well-being was all but forgotten.

A grid of nine boxes by nine, the fu'lasso puzzle had a tiny screed of t'au language in each of the segments that he manipulated with a tiny data-tether. He had been quite preoccupied by the puzzle since his mentor Por'O Va'nua had introduced it to him. Over the last few decs it had becoming quite the talking point amongst his caste, and he was determined to master it. The idea of the puzzle was to fill in each box with the right sentence fragment so that no matter which way the puzzle was read, a diplomatic phrase would form that would count as polite conversation, or at the very least not cause offence to the race listed at the top of the screen.

The race in question was 'Imperial Human.' It was considered one of the most difficult settings to practise with. Zoa'ha had spent countless decs on that aspect of the puzzle, but in a way, it was time well spent. To master the fu'lasso puzzle was to sharpen the wits to a point that diplomacy was as easy as drawing breath, and whenever the aun called upon the water caste to deal with the famously truculent and volatile gue'la, those wits needed to be sharp indeed.

Zoa'ha was lost in the wonderful tangle of meanings and subtexts when an alert symbol flashed on the top right of the disc's screen. He clacked his teeth together in irritation, swiping the symbol over to the panoramic lozenge of the window's sympathetic display so it could unfurl at a decent size; he would get to it in a moment. Then he registered the fact the icon was the split diamond of the ethereal caste.

He sat bolt upright, fumbling the scribe-disc so it skidded across the stylised tidal mosaic of the floor, and smoothed his robes.

'Open,' he said. The icon unfolded, glitched, and unfolded again to reveal the serene features of Aun'Fala'threi, the Truth Softly Spoken. The resolution was shockingly bad.

The image was pixelated in a way that made the ethereal's face seem as if it had some manner of abstract disease.

Zoa'ha leaned towards the display, his heart hammering fast. Direct contact from one of the aun was momentous enough, but for the fio to let the interface suffer was all but unheard of.

'Greetings in the... of... 'Va,' said Aun'Fala'threi, his image glitching and the audio breaking up for agonising moments. *'Suspend formality... little time.'*

Zoa'ha made an involuntary gesture of the humble supplicant, then grimaced and swiped up a diagnostic. *'Master Fala'threi, there appears to be some manner of interference with our communion link.'*

'That... problem,' said the aun, his drawn, flat features set in an expression of urgency. *'It... side effect of the... fleet. The Kor'vattru fleet suffered... sudden and spectacular force. Emergency cordon tactics have... only peripheral elements. Though primitive in... unprecedented electromagnetic... caste's communication... and ours to them.'*

'That sounds most troubling,' said Zoa'ha, his mind working frantically.

'Worse still... to the informationals... Farsight Expedition's long-range... analogues, the be'gel appear to be able to withstand... maintain momentum. If... atmospheric entry... vector, then... high-speed planetary impact within... of microdecs.'

'Planetary impact?' said Zoa'ha, his blood running cold in his veins at the phrase. He cast a glance towards the diagnostic, and was horrified to see the water caste's communion canals were already being disrupted. They were perhaps ninety-two per cent of their peak efficiency, and slowly dropping. *'And you wish the water caste to spread this message?'*

'No, dolt! Do not... for it... widespread panic. Work up a sanitised... your fellow ambassadors. You must... evacuation of all... ui rank or greater, cross-caste. Aun...'

priority. This should... evident.'

'Evacuation of all personnel from designated zones?'

'No! Listen! I... ui rank or greater! Even with every transmotive... other vectors at full... could not... must prioritise!'

The ethereal was gesticulating frantically now, his agitation almost as disturbing to Zoa'ha as the message he was struggling to impart.

'No time... explanation! Do... say in the... T'au'va!'

'Of course,' said Zoa'ha. 'I shall coordinate the evacuation of Tau'rota'sha immediately.'

The aun gave a curt nod, his gaze fierce enough to make Zoa'ha's guts turn to water, and then ended the communion abruptly.

Zoa'ha looked out at the sunset he had seen a thousand times, the stars shimmering high above peach clouds that turned to crimson and then to black. This evening, there was a new constellation up there, a single bright star surrounded by a cluster of others. He watched it as he laid a finger on the override receptor on his communion suite, mentally composing his message.

The false star was getting brighter. Soon, if it was what it appeared to be, that star would rival Atari Vo's sun.

A tiny urge to abandon everything and run to the transmotes pushed at the back of Zoa'ha's mind, just for a moment. He fought it back, aghast that such selfishness existed within him. 'Still as the calm lake,' he whispered to himself. 'Still as the calm lake.'

Tapping the haptic link that would give him access to his fellow *o* rankers via the water caste's infracom beads, he set his thoughts in order, and prepared for the most important broadcast of his life.

'Formality protocols suspended,' he said as the features of his water caste peers appeared on the lozenge before him. 'We must evacuate the city, but only of those who have ui rank or higher.'

'Clarity?' said Swiftflow, his oldest friend. 'What manner of

threat?’

‘Incoming invasion craft,’ he said, his voice steady even though his knees felt weak. ‘Be’gel. They are on a collision vector with Tau’rota’sha, and have some manner of scrambling device that is preventing the Kor’vattrra from effecting successful engagement.’

‘Will they not destroy themselves upon impact?’ said Swiftflow, her smooth blue face showing a mixture of confusion and suspicion.

‘They are be’gel,’ said Zoa’ha. It was answer enough.

‘Is this by the order of the aun?’ said Por’O Mensali’vo, the old ambassador’s silver skullcap gleaming in the evening sun as he leaned forward.

‘Of course. It is from Aun’Fala’tthrei, the Truth Softly Spoken. Though his communion link was glitching badly, beset by the same interference that is affecting us.’

‘Are you certain of his wishes?’

‘He was unequivocal.’

‘Then we shall make it so. Have you prepared a speech?’

‘I have,’ said Zoa’ha. ‘It will suffice.’

‘Then give it, whilst you still can.’

‘An interjection, if I may,’ said Swiftflow. ‘This means that all of *la* rank will be caught in the impact explosion? Will you not be damning millions to death by fire?’

‘That is the aun’s request,’ said Zoa’ha, a fist of sorrow clenching in his throat. ‘There is only so much room in the transmotes. Only so much we can do.’

‘Then every moment we tarry is more lives lost,’ said Mensali’vo. ‘Give the speech. We will relay it, and ensure the order flows smoothly to its conclusion.’

‘I shall do so. Go in the name of the T’au’va.’

Zoa’ha ended the communion, swiped it to cross-caste announcement, and took a deep breath, readying himself to damn millions of souls.

Not one of the *la* broke the cordon, at first.

The central transmotive station was a triumph of

architecture, not that this was unusual in the paradisiacal inner districts of Tau'rota'sha. A curving white arc of a monorail that led to a tapered hypersteel cylinder, it was an artist's brushstroke of a construction devised to adorn the forest of spires and towers like a necklace around the throat of a famous beauty.

The view from up here is breathtaking, thought Zoa'ha. He would have found it vertiginous, but for the fact he knew the monorail to be entirely safe. It wound throughout the tall buildings to convey the populace from communal habitation to caste-specific Progress Centres, and he travelled it every day, as did thousands of his fellow t'au. Based loosely on the Dal'ythan model, the transmotive allowed the lifeblood of the city to be carried around its magnificent sprawl.

This day, that lifeblood would be spilt.

Zoa'ha, being of *o* rank, was on the part of the platform nearest to where the transmotive would arrive. He was wearing a high collar and skullcap, together obscuring the most part of his face, for he had no wish to be recognised as the one who had delivered the message of their city's imminent demise.

Not for the first time, he wished fervently that he had a ta'lissera group to call his own. Around him tight-knit coteries of water caste officials and diplomats talked in hushed voices to one another. Groups of short, barrel-chested earth casters held each other by the forearms as they stood in tight circles, resting their foreheads together in silent communion. A few tall, broad-shouldered shas warriors of ui-plus rank walked slowly up and down the platform, pulse pistols held at ease; those of the other castes hastened out of their path when needed to let them pass. Their body language and wargear were a warning that the wishes of the aun, and therefore of the entire caste system, would be carried out to the letter.

The measure of drawn weapons was, of course, entirely redundant, adhered to more out of tradition than necessity.

Zoa'ha and his peers had often discussed such practices as a sop to the t'au society's warrior caste, done to stop them from feeling useless on a planet that had known no strife in Zoa'ha's entire thirty-tau'cyr life. The aun gave their orders to the other castes, the other castes obeyed the aun, and that was all there was to it. This day was proof of that.

Zoa'ha cast a glance towards the skies. The burning star was so close now it looked more like some vast, malignant sun, just as he had feared, with smaller stars dotted around it that grew larger by the moment. It hurt his eyes to peer at it, even when he squinted. He grimaced and looked down the transmotive rail, willing the conveyance to approach then and there. He was no earth caste aerospace technician, but he reckoned the ork invasion craft was a matter of microdecs away.

He sucked air through his teeth, smoothing his robe and conjuring his mantra to mind.

Still as the calm lake. Still as the calm lake.

As far as the populace was concerned, the false stars were a meteor strike that cruel chance had hurled towards their city. One of them was so large that even the Kor'vattra could not break it up before it struck. He himself had spoken of the impact that would be a serious setback to the city, perhaps even the planet. But through the strength of sacrifice it would be overcome. He had told the people of the city that it was a tragic twist of fate, nothing more. It would not stop Atari Vo from becoming a pre-eminent sept. Recovery plans were already underway. The sacrifice of those who would stay behind was the greatest act of all. They would be remembered forever as true members of the T'au'va.

All the pretty lies Zoa'ha and his fellow ambassadors could fashion, delivered not just with a straight face, but with every ounce of confidence and dignity he could muster.

He had left his own departure as late as he could, letting the subterranean shelters fill and the other transmotive routes bear his peers away. He had let thousands of others

board the first few conveyances before him, even when they were one lower rank than he, and he had every right as an o to go in before the ui-plus. But the aun's orders had been very clear, and he had left it as late as he could. He was above la rank, so he too had to evacuate to the designated safe distance, whether his conscience liked it or not. He was of more value than the la, and that was that.

The distinction was beginning to feel rather academic as the ork ships burned ever closer. Zoa'ha looked down the curving track once more and drummed his fingers on the notation disc at his hip. Still no sign of the transmotive.

Come on, come on, come on...

In the unnaturally hued sky, the burning star was growing brighter still. Zoa'ha held up a hand and viewed it through the cracks in his fingers. He fancied he could see something of its shape, lumpen and dark behind the white heat of whatever passed for its nose cone.

There was a low hiss to his right, almost imperceptible under the low susurrus of the t'au citizens saying their final goodbyes. 'Thank the T'au'va,' muttered Zoa'ha. The transmotive was finally inbound. He saw it speeding like some quicksilver serpent around the far edge of the Communion Tower, and felt a flood of relief.

A low hubbub broke out behind him, all along the platform. Zoa'ha turned, watching the parting embraces and anguished features of those whose ta'lissera bonds included citizens with different ranks. Fingers laced in the gestures of the T'au'va triumphant, pressed fists were flung open into the spread fingers of *Lhas'rhen'na*, the worthy sacrifice of shattered jade. Those of ui-plus rank took their places at the near side of the platform in good order whilst those of la rank shuffled slowly backwards. They were making their way towards the entrances to the Prime Communion Tower, one of hundreds of buildings that had already been consigned to oblivion by its proximity to the asteroid's extrapolated impact site.

Some of the younger t'au lingered. Zoa'ha saw rings of

juvenile graduates, many no more than eight tau'cyr of age, clinging onto one another, desperate not to break their freshly sworn ta'lissera bonds. The ties of communal love, pure and true, and of a family chosen rather than bestowed.

In places, their studied dignity cracked. Many were heaving, sobbing, crying out. A broken ta'lissera was an awful thing. This day, thousands of soul-bonds would be dashed to pieces, far beyond repair. The vast majority of the t'au on the platform did their best to remain stoic, but Zoa'ha could feel the tension growing thick in the air nonetheless. The evil star in the skies was throwing stark shadows across shocked and angst-ridden features the entire length of the platform. A sense of tautness pervaded, of imminent disaster that would strip away everything they knew.

He gritted his teeth. This was societal torture. And he had set it in motion.

Still as the calm lake. Still as the calm lake.

The transmotive finally slid into place before Zoa'ha, the sight of its sleek compartments letting him breathe again as it pulled to a halt and its doors slid open. Quickly and efficiently, those of ui rank and higher filed inside, pressing themselves in as far as they could. He went with them when it was his turn, wedging himself in so deep he could hardly breathe. The la rankers watched from the back of the platform, their faces solemn, stunned, numb with shock at the fate that had so suddenly snatched away the prosperous futures promised to them.

It's all for the Greater Good, thought Zoa'ha. Without the maximum number of senior caste members to teach the new generation, the fortunes of Atari Vo would be set back. It's all for the good of the T'au'va.

'I don't want to die!' shouted one of the la youngsters at the back of the platform. 'I don't! I want to go with you! Please!'

The water caste were experts in the arts of body language,

of unspoken cues, of those subtle ripples in societal fabric they could use to ensure the correct messages were received and understood across t'au society. Zoa'ha's particular field of interest was crowd dynamics. In that field of study was an awful social phenomenon that none dared speak of in public during times of strife. One that spread like a virus, and brought senseless death.

There came an awful moan, rising from a dozen throats, then a hundred. More t'au juveniles cried out, desperate to rejoin their bond-mates, to at least live or die as one with the rest of their familial group. As if on some unspoken cue, dozens of the youngsters scrambled past the thin cordon of shas personnel towards the transmotive doors. The leading members were clubbed into unconsciousness by the pistols and rifle butts of those few ui-plus fire caste that had been in the tower at the time of the evacuation, but the rest broke through, falling over themselves, crawling, being trampled at the side of the transmotive as more and more la followed in their wake.

'Calm yourselves, citizens, in the name of the T'au'va!' Zoa'ha adapted his voice to carry the nuances of a shas commander, as he had been trained. He put all his authority, all his power, into his words. He could hear his fellow caste-mates doing the same along the platform.

It was having little effect. The false sun had a greater authority of its own - that of life and death. It was triggering something primal in the hearts of his kindred.

The la were storming the transmotive now, pushing the last of the ui rankers inside with terrible, desperate force in such violent, ungainly fashion that heads were cracked bloody and the breath was driven from elderly t'au citizens. The knots of earth caste scientists pulled into one another to form living fortresses of fio uniforms, roughly shoving away any from the other castes that came too close.

Zoa'ha saw perhaps a score of air caste personnel trying to find a way up and out of the press, faces contorted with fear and long limbs gangling as they fought to climb onto

the transmotive's roof. Some of the surging masses at the platform's end were pushed around the nose of the transmotive and onto the rail beyond in the stampede. They scrabbled at their fellows to keep from falling, dropping onto all fours on the rail itself to keep their balance and even shuffling down its curve in some maniac hope of salvation. Those citizens at the back pushed more and more citizens onto the rail with such wide-eyed, animal intensity that several of those already on it toppled, flailing, to plummet thousands of metres into the city below. Distant screams from the far end of the platform painted a horrible picture; much the same was happening at the tail of the transmotive.

Zoa'ha felt the claws of panic clutch at his soul. There was sudden terror inside the carriage, now, as the ui-plus rankers realised the extent of their plight. There was no way the transmotive could move, not with the bodies of the la clogging up the rail on either end. The carriage was growing uncomfortably hot, and not just because of the sheer number of t'au pressed inside it. Jostling and repositioning gave rise to shoving, to bared teeth. The searing, killing heat of the oncoming sun was slowly cooking them alive.

There would be no escape.

Still as the calm lake. Still as the calm-

Zoa'ha caught an elbow in the side of the throat. His high collar was dislodged, exposing his features for a moment. He choked, his vision swimming.

'You!' came a vicious hiss. A shas'ui was there, teeth bared right in front of his eyes and broad chest pressing against him so he could not get his collar back in place. 'You put this in motion! Why did you not think it through?'

'There was no time,' Zoa'ha cried. 'We had to act fast to save the optimum number of lives!' He wriggled, trying to find more space to breathe. A fist came up to meet him, cracking his chin so his head snapped backwards and slammed into the transmotive's curved stanchions.

'Idiot! The la now block the rail! You've killed us all!'

'I could not anticipate-'

A sudden sense of serenity flooded across him, through him, in his mind and soul alike. He felt his heartbeat slow, his composure return. The shas'ui before him frowned for a moment, and turned away, his raised hackles relaxing and Zoa'ha entirely forgotten.

The t'au citizens in the carriage turned to the platform and stared. Past their shoulders, far down the platform, Zoa'ha saw a tall and slender figure, resplendent in the majestic formal dress of the ethereal caste, walking towards them.

Aun'O Atari Shovah Dou, in the flesh.

Where the ethereal passed, peace and good order spread out like the ripples in a pond. Panicking t'au, their faces contorted in atavistic fear, blinked as if waking from a dream and remembered themselves, standing straight and helping those pushed over and trampled under the stampede back onto their feet.

On walked Aun'Dou, wordless, head held high and hands held at his sides in a loose gesture of benediction. The bow wave of composure spread along the platform as he went, and the citizens outside the Zoa'ha's transmotive carriage calmed instantly as if a switch had been thrown, be they sturdy fio scientists, long-limbed kor pilots or stylishly clad Por diplomats. The sense of order being restored felt like cooling ice on the inflamed soul, despite the growing heat from the monstrous ork craft roaring low on the cusp of hearing.

The aun turned towards Zoa'ha's carriage, and the citizens that had been clamouring to get in mere moments ago parted in front of him like water from a boat's stern. Out of the corner of his eye, Zoa'ha saw the la who had been forced onto the rail regain the platform, pulled back to safety by those nearest to them until every inch was packed with citizens.

The aun walked, silent and unhurried, along the avenue that had opened up before him towards the door nearest

Zoa'ha. The ui-plus rankers in his carriage pressed back into one another to allow the ethereal dignity of space. So tightly packed was the transmotive already that Zoa'ha heard the dull snap of breaking ribs from those furthest back and the laboured, hurried breathing of those whose lungs were either punctured or compressed to the point of suffocation. Not one of the t'au made a word of complaint. But then, thought Zoa'ha, why would they?

The transmotive began to glide away, its auxiliary systems pushing it faster and faster as it shot along the mag-rail on the swiftest route out of the city. Buildings blurred past, the chance to appreciate their glorious architecture robbed by the sheer speed of the racing transmotive. As it curved around the edge of the Ada'hi Reservoir, joining the main network with a seamless transition and speeding off towards the suburbs, Zoa'ha got a good view of the heart of the city.

The invading spaceship had resolved into a vast, burning dagger of rock twice as tall as the Communion Tower and many times as massive. At its prow, green and orange flames burned as if around an invisible cone.

The transmotive shot on, accelerating so fast in its haste to clear the blast zone that Zoa'ha could feel the weight of Atari Vo's gravitational forces upon him. He kept his calm easily enough. With the aun in the carriage with him, and with no one making a sound, he had no need of his mantra.

Far in the distance, the impossible stalactite of the ork spacecraft ploughed towards the central districts. Several Manta missile destroyers, the pride of the Atarian air caste, made sorties as it thundered towards the earth, their railgun arrays and seekers lighting the flanks with tiny specks of fire. Though each was large enough to accommodate a full hunter cadre, next to the vast ork spacecraft they seemed pitifully small.

Down came the vast, jagged asteroid, its immense weight crushing the tallest buildings as if they were no more than dry stalks of grass. It drove nose first into the central

districts of Tau'rota'sha. In a blazing ring of light, it tore the heart out of the city, killing millions of la in the space of a single heartbeat. A rushing tide of debris and dust billowed out, for a moment seeming like it would consume the city entire. It billowed towards the transmotive, threatening to consume it, but slowed at the last as they sped on.

Zoa'ha nodded, just a little. He envisioned the sign of shattered jade; his fingers were pressed into painful dislocation by the muscular shas crushing him against the glass, and actually making the gesture of noble sacrifice would have been impossible. But he did so in spirit.

A regrettable loss of life, certainly, and a blow to Atari Vo's infrastructure. But whatever came out of the vast, hideous asteroid, the brutish invaders would be contained, eradicated and used as a point of learning for future endeavours. All was well as could be.

Of that, he was entirely sure.

CHAPTER TEN

THE RED SUNSET

SIX HOURS AFTER IMPACT

TAU'ROTA'SHA
ATARI VO

Farsight sat bolt upright in his command cocoon, listening intently for the low clunk of the *Inherent Fate's* grav-harness arrays releasing. It would be followed by the hiss of the deployment rails that would send his signature XV8 shooting out of the Manta's cargo bay into the wide Tau'rota'sha skies behind it, there to descend into the crucible of war. Piloting the Coldstar through the darkness of space was a fantastic feeling, but by twinning the voidsuit's artificial intelligence with his customary Crisis suit, he had reached a new peak of lethality in battle. For Farsight, the moment of the Mont'ka strike could not come soon enough.

The fact the t'au fleet had crossed the Damocles Gulf so swiftly was a true testament to the kor pilots charged with finding safe passage through its dangerous nebulas. The speed with which the air caste learned from their

mistakes - and codified the superior alternatives - was impressive. Farsight's thoughts turned to his first crossing; it had taken the expeditionary fleet many kai'rotaa and, after the disastrous Imperial ambush, cost them a full third of their manpower. This time, it had cost them nothing more than the fuel of their horizon drives. Those too were upgraded, the earth caste learning and iterating their improvements at an equally impressive rate. They had emerged from the gulf in good order and swiftly picked up the energy trails of the sluggish ork craft, though as yet the fio had no idea how the primitives had made such good speed themselves.

Much of that progress had already been wasted; to Farsight's mind, they had spent far too much time briefing for the assault at Atari Vo's skystations. He had told the air caste they were wasting resources in attacking the ork ships themselves, and that the only true victory would be won on the ground, with the death of the be'gel leader caste. But the kor had insisted they do their part, eager to give their lives to the T'au'va if needed, and with Teng dead, he could not force the issue. Rather than simply deploying the hunter cadres in their cargo holds and then moving on, the pilots were circling back around, engaging the asteroid ships to little effect. On his command-and-control suite he saw two wide-winged Tigersharks take heavy fire in return, and spiral smoking out of the skies.

Almost there, thought Farsight. The Way of the Short Blade was close at hand.

The uplink from Atari Vo was strained to breaking point by the intense electromagnetic radiation emanating from Grog's asteroid ships, but a selection of images was still reaching his cadre on tight-beam transfer, and had been reconstituted by the efforts of his earth caste support network. The world shown on his hex informationals had already been gouged by the crazed, psychopathic charge of the ork invaders - known since Arkunasha as the *ghoro'kha*, or 'death hail'. The vast majority of the

asteroids had survived the impact with the planet, for though they had nothing so sensible as retro-thrusters, grav-dampeners or even rudimentary landing gear, they had somehow stumbled across a kind of energy field that saw the impact of their collision converted to heat, light and sound instead of kinetic force. Whether by fortunate accident or some instinctual design, it had seen the prow of their vast dagger-shaped ship driven deep into the planet's crust, forming a massive crater and sending a bow wave of destructive energy racing out across the city whilst simultaneously cushioning the impact, to the point the spaceship made planetfall more or less intact.

The tactic, so risky and counter-intuitive it boggled the minds of the earth caste personnel who had previously theorised the spacecraft was out of control, had come as a devastating surprise. Farsight's warnings that the orks had landed similar asteroid-ships without serious harm when invading Arkunasha had been respectfully listened to, then put aside as highly outdated information. It was the citizenry of Tau'rota'sha that had paid the price.

The Atarian fire caste, together with the Dal'ythans that had been training with them, had mustered a cordon around the areas where the ork craft had crash-landed. They had begun with long-range engagements, using elevated Hammerhead and Skyray bombardments from the roofs overlooking the principal impact site. Thus far, Farsight had not heard much of their results - not with the electromagnetic interference of the giant dagger-shaped asteroid disrupting their comms - but with the respective reaches of the ork and t'au militaries, he could guess the outcome was favourable. The water caste were maintaining that the vanguard of the ork invasion, in choosing to attack a developed, well-defended city, would be shredded by long-range firepower.

The claim would hold true, for a time - until the rest of the ork horde came screaming out from their spaceship, and the death toll triggered the massed charge their race was

known for. Then the streets of Atari Vo would be thronged with a vast surge of invaders too numerous to stop.

The Dal'ythan cordon was some two kilometres away from the primary impact site. The native fire caste had deliberately ceded the city's communion, mercantile and garden districts to the orks until they had the requisite elements to drive home a killing strike. Farsight would have done the same. The fire caste had learned through a string of disasters across the Eastern Fringe that the best way to slow an ork invasion was not to give it a target upon which to build its momentum – even the fiercest predator, bereft of prey, will eventually starve.

Now, with the hunter's blade readied for the kill, Farsight and his companions would decapitate the beast before it could scar the planet any further.

A chime sounded in his ear, hexes unfolding on his command-and-control suite.

'High commander,' said Coldstar. 'Optimal disembarkation time in one point five microdecs.'

'Understood,' said Farsight, opening the cadrenet. 'Retaliation cadres, prepare for full-scale disembarkation and encirclement. This planet has suffered, and badly, at the hands of the be'gel. But we will not let those who have died here go unavenged. Blessings of the T'au'va be upon you, and may your aim be true.'

Golden icons lit his screen. When the full set had acknowledged his orders, he jabbed a finger at the air caste icon that would trigger the disembarkation process. There was a bass *clunk*, a hiss of hydraulics, and the rail holding his XV8 shot out the back of the now open ramp at the rear of the Manta. He and his fellow battlesuits were ejected from their skeletal release cradles with a jolting burst of air pistons. Triggering their jetpack repulsor fields, they dispersed into the skies.

'Red Sun formation,' said Farsight. His fellow Crisis suits were quick to comply, their Mont'ka tactics second nature after hundreds of practice engagements. Each team of

battlesuits was a descending arrow, the shas'ui at the tip and their guns aiming downwards into the city below.

'Disembarkation manoeuvre gold,' said Coldstar, reinstalled en route to Atari Vo.

'Then let us proceed.'

Farsight's command suite showed dirty smudges of black and green, clearly visible amongst the pale ochre earth and broken white architecture of the city's mercantile district. Ob'lotai 4-0 was the first to open fire as they fell; the single-drop grav-harness that further bulked out his massive Broadside battlesuit held his sturdy frame at an angle so he could send a volley of missiles hurtling in a long, oblique line as he descended. Lethal white cylinders shot from the boxy fists of his suit. They released long white contrails and swooped like a flock of birds, diving at the last to detonate with a string of explosions amongst the ranks of the greenskins below.

'First kills, Bravestorm,' said Ob'lotai.

'Hardly,' said the commander, sending a half-grey symbol of indifference across the command cadrenet. 'The Dal'ythans made their mark here long before we weighed in.'

'Let us compare kill ratios afterwards,' said Farsight, 'and we will match Vior'lan fury against Dal'ythan courage.'

'Fury, formulaic one?' said Brightsword. 'How can an artificial intelligence truly feel such a thing?'

'How can a clone feel anything authentic, when his life is but the latest of many?' replied Ob'lotai. He sent another volley of missiles sweeping down as if to accentuate his point, the snub-nosed cylinders blasting into the upper slope of a cave-like hole in the ork craft so that an avalanche of rubble buried the greenskins pouring out. 'At least I have the decency to stay biologically dead.'

'Enough,' said Farsight. 'Plasma rifle engagement range imminent. Fire at will.'

A slanting storm of energy poured out from the retaliation cadre's battlesuit teams, burning holes in the greenskins

massing beneath. More missiles joined the assault, flinging ork bodies high in the air.

‘Incoming,’ said Coldstar. ‘Shield up.’

A hard impact punched Farsight sideways, then another, spinning him out of formation.

‘In the name of the T’au’va, what was that?’ His doppel-holo flared red in the hip and the jetpack, listing slightly as Farsight leaned to compensate.

‘Under heavy fire,’ said Ob’lotai, his tone matter of fact. Solid shot could do little to the reinforced hulk of his XV88 Broadside. But in sufficient volume, it could rip a Crisis suit apart.

Farsight leant hard and angled his shield generator downwards, his decision immediately vindicated as more punching impacts came from the orks below. He zoomed onto the targeting hex he had dropped over them, and they sprang into focus: heavy weapon troopers, wearing gun harnesses so large they appeared more scrap metal than ork.

Sending two bolts of plasma scorching down, Farsight twisted away hard, one of the dual streams of bullets that shot towards him missing him by a handspan as the other deflected from his shield. A moment later his plasma shots hit their targets, each burning to death one of the orks too encumbered or too stupid to get out of the way.

A gang of orks lumbering out from a nearby ruin opened fire with low-slung cannons at their waists. Intense beams of green energy shot out from their guns towards the t’au infantry taking cover around them. The beams refracted harmlessly wherever they hit the flat surfaces of the city ruins, but where they hit the pathfinder teams moving in on foot to light up the orks with their markerlight designators, they punched straight through their armour as if it were made of parchment.

More heavy-set ork gunners were emerging from the ruins. Some shouldered crackling energy weapons that fired bolts of leaping blue-black lightning in seemingly

random directions, others carted massive multi-barrelled rotary cannons that whirred with a rising whine before giving vent to chugging fusillades. One of them canted the barrel of his gun vertically upwards, stitching an arc of bullets up the side of a building and into the Crisis suits dropping down to engage them. Farsight eye-looped a priority autokill. Coldstar targeted the gunner with his plasma rifle, blowing his brains out the back of his skull even as the commander sought a fresh target.

‘Well executed,’ said Farsight.

‘On your coordinates,’ said Coldstar modestly.

‘Engagement,’ said Ob’lotai over the command cadrenet.

‘Maximum disruption. Retain high ground. Isolate and confound, as before.’

‘Doctrine maps,’ said Farsight.

‘I have found a nest of them back here,’ said Stealth Commander Moata over the cadrenet.

‘Then hunt unseen,’ said Farsight. ‘It is what you do best.’

‘Prioritise kills via proximity,’ said Ob’lotai. ‘Ammunition reserves at eighty-eight per cent and dwindling.’

‘I will cover your blind spots, artificial one,’ said Brightsword. ‘T’au’va, there are a lot of them. Crux point of body mass and proximity, then descend.’

‘I am familiar with the Arkunasha protocols,’ said Ob’lotai, making his point with a triple volley of missiles that consumed a pack of orks with a low *thump* of detonations.

‘Can the ship itself be toppled, or part of it crumbled away?’ asked Commander Bravestorm. A gun drone’s relay icon pulsed, and Farsight flicked it up to show the Dal’ythan using his onager gauntlet to demolish a bombed-out wall and storm the ork entrenchment behind. Bravestorm backhanded two of the greenskins into a curving rail stanchion with such force that blood spurted from their mouths as they collapsed in the dirt. The rest opened fire, laying into him with crude axes, but Bravestorm stepped back calmly, his flamer consuming the others in a sudden inferno.

‘Perhaps, with your gauntlet, you could cause enough structural damage to the asteroid ship for a distraction,’ said Farsight. ‘Though we have suffered few casualties thus far. Keep the pressure on, traditional method.’

‘Of course, high commander.’

A massive, clanking monstrosity stomped up the ridge of one of the smaller impact craters around the edge of the vast bowl. Farsight turned to engage, only to be flung backwards by an explosion so powerful he was rocked in his pilot harness. His command-and-control suite froze, alert signals blipping.

‘Coldstar!’

‘My apologies,’ said the artificial intelligence. ‘Ordnance strike, yield unprecedented. The electromagnetic interference is compromising my reaction speed.’

The complex hexes of his command-and-control screen leapt back into life, and Farsight let go a sigh of relief as he felt his fingertip remotes activate once more. He knew how crippling a loss of power could be to a warsuit pilot; he had once defeated a gue’ron’sha strike force by channelling the entirety of Rala’tas’ energy grid, including that of its famously extensive light sculptures, into an improvised electromag pulse that overloaded their battle armour for a time. Though the orks had no such skill, and though all t’au battlesuits had complex systems to deal with such interference, they could not shrug off the baleful effects of the asteroid’s magnetic field altogether.

More orks, now, boiling over the rim of the crater. These ones wielded axes, bludgeons and crude pistols, a familiar sight to any who had fought on Arkunasha. Farsight ignored them, leaping high to arc over the head of the stout-bodied walker storming his position. At the apex of the jump, he angled his fusion blaster vertically downwards and opened fire. A column of superheated energy shot straight through the turnwheel-capped hatch of the walker’s pilot compartment, obliterating the greenskin inside. The walker clanked on for a few moments before

toppling over in the rubble.

‘Compliments,’ said Brightsword, his own fusion blasters cutting apart another ork walker with a double diagonal sweep. It fell backwards with the young commander’s signature ‘X’ mark across its barrel torso. ‘Satisfying kills, are they not?’

A hurricane of bullets caught Brightsword hard from the side, bowling him over and sending his XV8 skidding in a tangle of limbs. Dust billowed up, chips of false stone flying in all directions. The young commander tried to rise, only for another hail of solid shot to punch him back into the dirt, his flame-painted battlesuit covered in dozens of silver-rimmed bullet holes.

Farsight shot forward, interposing his shield generator and extending its field diameter wide as a third volley hammered in. Tiny explosions flared across the invisible disc of force, with many hitting his battlesuit’s legs where he had compromised his own protection to protect Brightsword. His holo-doppel flashed, but he ignored it, answering the ork firestorm with a volley of plasma bolts.

‘Get up!’ he shouted. Brightsword was quick to obey, not only rising but jetting high to disappear behind the tangled wreck of a sculpture. Farsight darted for cover, the ork bullets chasing him but not making it past his shield.

‘Field generator at fifty-eight per cent,’ said Coldstar.

There was a chorus of bellows from the ork gun nest to his left as Brightsword dropped down amongst them, his battlesuit spinning at the waist in a double revolution with his fusion blades weaving their eye-searing arcs high and low. Some of the orks tried to flee, but Brightsword’s warscaper drone followed close behind, emitting a field that increased the gravity around them and slowed their retreat to a crawl. Farsight felt little need to watch what happened next – the greenskins would be cut to pieces.

‘Feel better?’ said Farsight.

‘Perhaps,’ said his protégé. ‘Though I cannot help but observe these ones are rather better equipped than

previous be'gel forces.'

'They are still orks,' said Farsight, opening the cadrenet. 'We find their leader, and destroy him. All teams, assign body mass rankings to extant threats and concentrate fire on anything over the ninety-fifth centile.'

Farsight split his focus, a technique he had mastered on Mount Kan'ji. One eye scanned the force disposition suite, the other the aerial footage from the VX1-0 dronenet. Targeting symbols glowed over those orks that were undoubtedly part of the leader caste. On Arkunasha, the revelation that size equated to authority had seen them turn the tide of the war - there, perhaps one in twenty orks were the right size to be of the leader caste. Here, however, it was more like one in three.

'Expect more heavy resistance,' said Farsight. 'We are attacking a leadership node.'

Many of the hex-screens showed Atarian and Dal'ythan forces under fire, with the charcoal symbols denoting t'au death cropping up far more often than Farsight had anticipated. Even the Hammerhead and Skyray squadrons opening fire on the orks from the roofs of shattered buildings had been engaged by counter-battery fire from the cave-like hollows in the gargantuan ship's sides, primitive wheeled artillery taking potshots at the skimmer tanks as their gun rig comrades poured a solid stream of bullets into the t'au infantry below.

The vast crater around the ork spaceship, empty but for the debris of the impact site and the teeming streams of greenskins pouring from within it, was fast being turned into an improvised fortress. Teams of ork gunners were taking position all along the jagged, natural battlements of its rim. They hammered fire into the Atarians that ran in tight groups through the shattered remains of the city streets, the orks discharging great streams of ammunition whenever they saw even a glimpse of Atarian blue amongst the rubble. The concept of conserving ammunition was foreign to the orks. Ride out the initial storm, and the

momentum of their assault would falter.

Farsight clacked his teeth in irritation as a group of orks spilled over the lip of the crater on the far side of the crashed spacecraft and vanished into the rubble of the city beyond. He marked them for eradication, the dronenet's multispectral gaze conveying their heat signatures straight to the pathfinder teams in the streets. He zoomed as another group slid over the crater's edge. Their armour was painted with multicoloured stripes in a crude attempt at camouflage. The ruse would not fool a determined hunter, but with their forward elements taking such a toll on the encroaching fire caste battle teams, they stood a good chance of reaching cover without being engaged by the wider t'au force.

'These are not true orks,' muttered Farsight. The usual dynamic had been reversed; the be'gel seemed content to hold position, to infiltrate, to take up commanding positions. Against all precedent, they were waiting for the t'au to come to them, then slipping through the gaps in the cordon rather than storming forward in an unreasoning, frenzied tide. With every microdec that passed, more orks debarked from the colossal craft, and the chances of them breaking the quarantine and infecting the planet with their parasitic ecosystem grew higher.

A volley of fire punched into Farsight, knocking him from his feet. The holo-doppel showed a trio of bright red impacts on his upper shoulder. He scrambled into cover, watching fat chunks of street paving torn up as the volley stitched past into the ranks of the fire warrior strike teams beyond. He waited a moment, then broke left, only for the street to erupt in flinders of rock.

'What is that weapon? Ballistics report!'

'Gun emplacement,' said Coldstar. 'The capital spacecraft has opened its airlock doors, by my preliminary analysis, and the orks have deployed their artillery crews to join the fight.'

Farsight zoomed out, cross-correlating his cameras with

the dronenet. The vast pillar of rock had scores of cave-like holes. If each of them held an airlock, and each of those an artillery emplacement, their Mont'ka was as good as dead.

A winged air caste symbol unfurled on Farsight's command suite. *'Greetings of the T'au'va, high commander,'* said Y'eldi, the reflections of targeting reticules dancing across the sheen of his blue-grey skin. *'Permission to attack?'*

'Please,' said Farsight, 'and tell me you have not come alone.'

By way of answer, the command suite glittered with dozens of air caste icons converging on their position. Dozens of squadrons, from tank-killing Tiger Sharks to shoals of Barracudas, winged through the skies to punish those orks that had strayed into the city streets. Many of the aircraft were converging on the retaliation cadre's position, target locks flaring as they took aim upon the greenskins pouring out of the be'gel fortress.

Contrails streaked the skies. The giant stalactite of the ork spaceship was suddenly lit with dozens of explosions, smart missiles streaking into the cave-like airlocks and artillery emplacements to send plumes of fire roaring from within. They put Farsight in mind of the legends of Fio'taun drakes jealously guarding their lairs; the explosions of flame made the dark, towering edifice seem even more monstrous, but he took heart from the fact that every detonation meant another cluster of dead greenskins.

'Y'eldi, is the *Ores'Por'Kauyon* with you?'

'It is circling back around, yes,' said the young pilot.

'Is the primary ork craft in effective range of its railgun array?'

Y'eldi laughed. *'It has a heavy railgun. Whatever you want to kill, it has the range.'*

Farsight eye-looped the cavern from which the heavy artillery had punched him from his feet. 'This is likely an airlock leading to a principal artillery hangar. Please convey to the Manta crew that I would be grateful for its

demise. My commanders and I are currently pinned down by its guns.'

'How unfortunate,' said Y'eldi, pulling a face. A moment later there was a distant crack, like that of a whip, and then a ripping, whooshing roar that ended in a deep bass *thump*. Farsight risked a look around the edge of the shattered building he was sheltering behind. A swathe of the gigantic spaceship was tumbling away, rendered as if in slow motion by the sheer scale of the edifice. The artillery emplacement had vanished entirely.

'My thanks, Ores'Por'Kauyon.'

A blurring wedge of ochre appeared in the sky, speeding past the ork fortress-ship and curving away once more. Behind it, squadrons of Sun Shark bombers came in three by three, dropping their crackling payloads of plasma into the streets. The fire would cleanse them not only of the orks foolish enough to venture into the open, but also of the vile spoor they left behind with each death.

'Maintaining momentum is imperative,' said Farsight across the fire caste's command cadrenet. *'We must locate their leader and destroy him before the be'gel assault reaches critical mass. Prepare to cross into the crater.'*

'There is little cover with which to operate, beyond the lip,' said Bravestorm. *'We will be vulnerable.'*

'Only those bearing the Hero's Mantle will make the assassination run,' said Farsight. *'This planet has suffered enough. We storm the keep whilst they are still reeling from the air caste's strafing run. Moata, get your stealth teams in position on the eastern side to ensure none escape.'*

Icons blipped assent as Farsight's battlesuit teams converged upon the crater's edge. He called up an aerial view from the VX1-0 dronenet, but it was incomplete; the formation was coming under heavy fire whenever it neared the impact crater, both from above and below.

'High commander,' said Ob'lotai. *'Should we not wait for the native cadres to reinforce?'*

‘No,’ said Farsight. ‘I will not be party to another war that takes ten tau’cyr to conclude. Here, the invasion has not had time to spread.’

‘How will we ensure they are all slain, short of destroying the entire city?’ said Moata.

‘Cut off the heads of a Dal’ythan water hydra, and its sheer bulk becomes its foe,’ said Bravestorm.

‘Precisely,’ said Farsight. ‘With a swift and decisive strike, the invasion will be curtailed before it travels any further. This ends today.’

Eye-looping the three main elements of the retaliation cadre, Farsight sketched a trident attack that would cross the lip of the crater and drive home a crippling sortie into whatever lay beyond – even if two of the three tines were blunted, the third would reach its target. He reconfigured his energy reserves so his shield generator was at full strength, and leapt, his XV8 commanders laying down covering fire as they followed close behind him.

‘For the T’au’va!’

He was greeted by a battering, howling storm of firepower. The uneven, rugged rim of the impact crater was lousy with orks, and every one of them was armed with a bulky sidearm or heavy weapon. Beyond the rim he could see mob after mob of cannon-armed greenskins forming gun lines in the no-man’s-land between the crater’s rim and the dagger-shaped spacecraft. Some of them were opening fire at him with energy weapons, most of their shots going wide but each fizzing beam that smacked against his force field depleting it by several per cent. Others held the distinctive rectangular shapes of captured pulse rifles, howling in glee as they sent volleys of plasma hurtling towards Farsight and his battlesuit commanders.

The largest of the orks amongst them, their ostentatious greatcoats covered in glyphic symbols, lugged weapons that looked not so much like rifles as some grotesque hybrid of primitive motorcycle and portable cannon. The weapons gave a series of howling, staccato roars, fingers of

flame fanning out from each barrel as the orks squeezed their gun throttles and panned their evil-looking weapons back and forth. The support drones of Farsight's XV8 teams darted forward, their saviour protocols perceiving a genuine danger, to intercept where their masters could not evade in time. Most were shattered into pieces for their trouble.

The be'gel leader in the midst of it all, a giant of an ork wearing a massive, gold-edged bicorn hat and armour of golden plate, laughed uproariously as his oversized gun spat out fat cylinders of green-white energy. Farsight saw one of them splash from Bravestorm's shield generator, but another hit his iridium suit in the leg, tearing off the limb in a spray of molten metal and phosphor-bright flame.

Farsight's eyes went wide. Iridium was the densest metal the T'au Empire had ever manufactured, and a stray shot had melted it clean away as if it were no more durable than foil.

'Keep engagement,' said Farsight. 'I have the counterstrike.' Hurtling forward with his XV8 all but horizontal, he twisted to evade a stream of bullets, flipped head over heels to slam down in a gunner's crouch, and discharged his fusion blaster and plasma rifle at the ostentatious leader of the ork elite.

There was a flash of light so bright it triggered Coldstar's blacksun filter. When it faded, Farsight saw three things. One, the ork war leader was still standing proud, cackling as he levelled his plasma weapon to blast a salvo that chewed through half of Farsight's force field in a single second. Two, his comrades were directing a howling broadside of firepower at the t'au commanders, bowling them backwards to leave Farsight exposed. Three, an ork walker was storming in towards him, its engine belching fumes and the wrecking ball crane of its arm swinging wildly.

Firing his jetpack, Farsight leapt, but it was too late. The walker's crude bludgeon hit his off side as he took off,

buckling the torso unit and sending him careening to the left. He landed hard, half-rolling in his control cocoon to send the battlesuit staggering upright, only to be swathed in a conflagration as the ork war leader's flamer-armed comrade bathed him in incandescent fuel-fire. The scent of burning electrics and singed hyperplastic alloy filled Farsight's nasal chasm. He launched himself sidelong, putting a pillar of rock between himself and the ork gunners to buy himself time.

There came a dull roar from the edges of the crater, a roar that Farsight knew all too well. Then, from what seemed like every direction at once, a living tide of greenskin warriors boiled over the edge of the crater from the city beyond, brandishing axes and firing their sidearms in the air. The bellow of their war cry made Farsight feel nauseous, so much so he stabbed the sonic dampener for everything below a median frequency.

In the blissful lack of bass orkoid war-noise that resulted, he heard a thin, keening whine, insistent and getting stronger by the moment.

'Coldstar, identify that sound.'

'Unknown.'

The whining noise became a *crack* of displaced air which came from all around them. A thick bubble of green energy shimmered the length of the crater's rim, leaving the t'au infantry support on the outside of the crater with Farsight's retaliation cadre - now surrounded on all sides - stuck within the spacecraft's strange bubble shield. Several of his Crisis battlesuit teams took to the sky on reflex, only to be blasted back down by the artillery platforms in the honeycomb of caves lining the spacecraft's flanks.

Farsight felt his throat go dry. A crude Kauyon, but they had charged right into it.

'We got 'em good, lads!' shouted Grog, shouldering through the ranks of his crewmates to swing his cumbersome rotary cannon towards the giant red warsuits. 'They took da bait!'

Resting the cannon on his squigskin belt, Grog took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger handle. The magnificent weapon coughed, clanked and screamed as its servos engaged, the eight-barrel cluster at its front whirring fast as it unleashed enough dakka to kill a squiggoth twice over. The stream of bullets poured into one of the t'au warsuits near the rim, making it dance like a puppet before it came apart in a spray of sparks and red-black liquid.

'Got one!' he shouted, glancing down at his new gun approvingly. It needed a name, really - Badrukk called his shoota 'Da Rippa', after all. All the best guns had names. Perhaps he would call this one something killy.

'Dis gun's da Taukilla!' he screamed, hauling the massive thing into the air and letting fly a stream of bullets. 'Hear me? Yer all gonna die, ya gun-runts!'

'Taukilla!' screamed Dok Toofjaw's head from the murky cylinder lashed atop Grog's shoulder armour. 'All gonna die!'

'Roll out da wagons, lads,' roared Grog. 'Them flyin' ones and all!'

There was a shout of acknowledgement from the caves behind, throaty engines revving. Grog loved that sound; it was the battle cry of the giant metal beasts that all self-respecting ork bosses had at their beck and call.

Down from the cave-ramps came five many-wheeled battlewagons, each cab adorned with a jutting snowplough jaw. Two out of the five had gun-runts freshly impaled on their spiked rams, their pathetic bodies broken and covered in clotted gore. Grog chuckled to see some of them still writhing.

Cannons and mortars boomed as the battlewagons lent their power to the freebootas' fusillade, shells the thickness of Grog's arm ploughing into the enemy lines and detonating to send warsuits and disc-drones spinning away through clouds of flame. Though each vehicle's front was heavily armoured, their rear flatbeds were open, the better to carry a knot of Grog's heavily armed mates. What the

freebootas lacked in courage they more than made up for with firepower, and with the open construction of the battlewagons giving them a mobile firing platform, the lads were quick to join the fun. Each wagon was a mobile bunker, a fortress of dakka waiting to blast bloody chunks in the gun-runt army.

They were not alone. Emerging from the upper caves came captured tanks recovered from Orka-Gnasha, each vehicle customised by meks with a penchant for the unusual. The sleek curves and aerodynamic hulls of the skimmer-tanks had been given more edge, literally, by the mekaniaks that had salvaged them. Blades, rams and death rollas had been welded or bolted onto their chassis, but they still flew, just about.

As the flying tanks came forward, missiles corkscrewed from their gun racks, energy weapons stuttered, and spheres of plasma as big as Grog's head shot from strangely shaped gun-runt cannons to fly in seemingly random directions. The warchief hoped that Kaptin Badrukk was watching. There was nothing so funny as killing an enemy with his own gun.

Emerging from the largest cave of them all was *Iron Gutz*, a towering war effigy so large it shook the earth as it stomped forward into the fray. The walker had once been Grog's pride and joy, though it had taken heavy damage in the landing. The war effigy was slow, burned black across one side, badly dented and just as badly repaired, but it was moving, and still packed a punch.

The immense mega-blasta that formed the beast's arm crackled with evil green lightning. A dazzling blast shot into the nearest group of gun-runt battlesuits; two were caught by glancing blows, the blood red of their armour turned black as they fell smoking to the earth. The first of them was hammered into scrap by the secondary cannons on the iron beast's shoulders before it could get up. The second struggled to get upright, extending hands from its gun-limbs and rolling to a crouch, only to be pounced on by

a hollering mob of boys that hacked it apart with revving chainaxes.

'Ah, you gotta love good dakka,' said Grog, making a mental note to kick Drillfist out of the drivin' seat and have a go in *Iron Gutz* himself. He angled Taukilla up at the flashiest battlesuit, the one with the blue flames over its red hull, and opened fire again. He missed, at first, but panned the fusillade across until it punched the gun-runt backwards, focusing the fire to knock the battlesuit into the shimmering bubble field. There was a loud boom, and the flashy gun-runt dropped like a stone.

'Good shootin there, chief,' said Big Gobba, kicking over a crate of brass-shelled ammunition. 'Need more bullits?'

'More bullits!' shrieked Toofjaw, headbutting his cylinder.

'Don't mind if I do, Mista Mate,' said Grog, picking up the crate with his good hand and upending it into Taukilla's outsize hopper in a waterfall of tinkling shells. Around his ankles, grots scurried to put the overspill into the gun, leaping up and down to ensure none went to waste.

'Die, ya gitz!' shouted Grog, panning Taukilla's bullet stream back and forth. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kaptin Badrukk blasting a gun-runt suit into scrap metal with one hand and puffing on his cigar with the other, and resolved to get himself some of the foul-smelling things at the next opportunity.

The scar-jawed pirate that had cheeked him on the *Dagga* was not far away, a rokkit pistol in each hand. Grog moved Taukilla's bullet stream a little, and the ork was knocked sidelong, hollering in pain as his leg flew off in a spurt of gore.

'Oops,' said Grog, sharing a glance with Big Gobba. 'Wot a shame.'

The ground shook to the thunder of the battlewagons opening fire behind them. 'Waaagh!' shouted Grog, his throat stinging with the effort of making himself heard over the deafening fusillades. His crewmates took up the cry, trigger-grips squeezed tight as they expended a month's

worth of carefully hoarded ammunition in the space of half a minute. The red warsuits were dropping fast, now, their return fire dwindling by the moment.

Grog grinned fiercely, relishing the feeling of sheer brutal joy. It threatened to overwhelm him, to send him sprinting into the fray, to make him revel in the feeling of gun-runt limbs breaking and snapping in his fists, of soft flesh squirting hot blood into his jaws.

‘Time for all that later,’ he muttered to himself, ‘wot wiv them caught and all.’

Right now, Grog was having the time of his life.

Farsight was trapped in a hell of his own making.

Though he had never truly become one with the Kauyon as had Shadowsun, he should never have fallen for an ork’s version of the metastrategy. Come to that, there was no way the fire caste could ever be outshot by a race as primitive as the be’gel. And yet, at the blasted heart of Tau’rota’sha, his preconceptions were left in tatters.

Four out of his six Crisis teams were out altogether, their symbols charcoal grey. Brightsword was down, his battlesuit more silver than red with the volume of solid shot he had taken. Even Bravestorm was hanging by a thread, his iridium suit punched through with holes as he weathered a storm of firepower from the ork warlord in golden armour. And their route of escape was utterly, completely cut off.

‘High commander!’ came Moata’s voice over the cadrenet. ‘We cannot reach you! What are your orders?’

Farsight felt his fingers shaking with adrenaline, his mind aflame with a mixture of anger, confusion and shame. He had to buy himself a moment to think.

He landed hard and crouched behind his shield generator’s dwindling force aegis, desperate to find a state of composure.

He saw it, then, a thin strand of hope that threaded through the T’au’va entire.

‘Ob’lotai, detach droneform. Climb as high as you can and send a communion to the district’s surviving por – I want this craft’s field generator source analysed, located and destroyed. Send it relay as well as direct. I want every battlesuit between here and the safe zone on receive and transmit.’

‘That will take longer than a tight beam aimed at a single recipient, high commander,’ said Coldstar.

‘A single direct transmission is too great a risk, with the craft’s shields up and this level of interference. The message will be sent from as many sources as possible via the native water caste’s long-range relay to O’Vesa, and thence from him to Y’eldi and his fellow Manta pilots.’

Ob’lotai’s icon winked gold. A large black drone shot from the shoulder of his Broadside suit like a discus hurled vertically upwards, climbing at pace as it made for the area where the glimmering force field that protected the ship’s vast prow seemed to peter out altogether.

A glowing cylinder of plasma struck Ob’lotai’s disc-drone from below, sending it spiralling, smoking, out of control. It fell back towards the ruin of the battlefield, and clattered across the rubble.

‘No,’ said Farsight as the disc-drone dropped from the sky, clattering onto the ruins below to roll on its rim before wobbling to a halt. ‘No, it cannot end like this.’

Teeth gritted, he slid his plasma rifle’s yield to full and returned fire at the laughing ork that had taken the shot. Bolts of energy shot across the ruined terrain towards the greatcoat-wearing brute that had taken Ob’lotai’s droneform down, but they dissipated in a blaze of light a moment from impact.

‘Concentrate firepower on my mark,’ said Farsight, ‘the Way of the Short Blade.’

The Crisis suits, still taking fire from the ork gunners, abandoned their assigned targets and poured a killing volley of plasma at the knot of ork leaders at the centre of the crater. The greenskin force field held, against all the

odds. One, two, three of the cadre's battlesuits went down hard as they abandoned all thought of defence and simply walked into the ork fusillade, intensifying the firestorm no matter the cost.

A moment later, the greenskin warlord – and his entire entourage – disappeared entirely.

'Anomalous energy spike,' said Coldstar. 'They have teleported, commander, and they were not the only ones. I am registering several similar energy signatures.'

'We must look to our own,' said Bravestorm, standing unsteadily. 'We must recover the fallen.'

'I still exist,' said Ob'lotai from his XV88, turning his shoulder into a punishing hail of shells that rocked him back a few paces. 'I only sent a minimal part of my consciousness with the drone, just enough to send the message.'

'Thank the T'au'va,' said Farsight fervently. 'But we still have no way out of this ambush. With Ob'lotai's droneform relay down, I cannot see how we will find this craft's shield generator in time.'

'Then we take down as many of these ork gunners as we can,' said Bravestorm, 'and die for Atari Vo.'

'Not good enough,' said Farsight. 'We have to find a way out. The enclaves need us.'

'Vertical flight,' said Brightsword. His life signs registered dark steel, bordering on charcoal. Farsight could tell even that short phrase was a struggle for him.

'He may have a point,' said Moata. 'Our Mont'ka is truly lost.'

'We cannot prevail here,' said Farsight. High above them, the ork artillery crews were repositioning, mortar-like weapons sending munitions arcing high so their explosions crept ever closer to the battlesuits' position. 'Coldstar, is the shield consistent across the entire vessel?'

'It is not,' said the artificial intelligence. 'It has greater potency at the prow, by some margin.'

'As I thought,' said Farsight. The orks placed value on

frontal armour alone, and cared little for their rearguard. 'We will test the field's integrity at the apex point, even if we have to expend all our fuel in the process. Brightsword, can you make the jump?'

'Do I have a choice?' he croaked.

'I will aid you. Moata, are your ground forces still on the far side of the shield?'

'All teams are engaged,' said Moata. 'And the air caste have trouble of their own. The be'gel despatched air support from the upper recesses of their craft. Primitive fighter planes, bombers, and rotor-bladed single-man craft. They are crude, but heavily armed, and they swarm like insects.'

'Have your stealth teams clear a beachhead,' said Farsight. 'Eradicate all enemy assets a hundred metres south south-west of the crater's rim. We will aim for Manta extraction in that zone.'

'What of your retaliation cadre? Standard XV8s will struggle with that high a jump.'

Farsight cast an anxious eye across the command suite, his heart hammering. 'We are dying, Moata. If we can salvage even a dozen lives, it will be a miracle.'

'Then go, and may the might of the T'au'va go with you.'

Farsight looped his commanders' icons and traced a vector of escape from their position to the lee of the spacecraft, clinging so close to its grey-green mass that the gunners in its caverns would be unable to engage them before it was too late. 'Ob'lotai,' he said, 'Can you safely transfer the rest of your consciousness to your droneform and leave your XV88 on delayed orders to cover our escape?'

'I can,' said Ob'lotai. 'My motive units are shot, but I can still fight. Though there may be a degree of corruption in my data due to the electromagnetic field of the be'gel ship, we have no other choice.'

'Then I shall carry you, old friend,' said Farsight, bracing himself. He widened his force field's diameter once more, and ran from cover to retrieve Ob'lotai's drone. Large-

calibre bullets ricocheted from his shield as those orks that had not teleported away took their shots. He motioned to the lee of the fortress-ship and blasted towards it, Ob'lotai's Broadside discharging volley after volley of missiles to cover their escape even as the artificial intelligence remote-transferred his consciousness to the large black drone tucked under Farsight's arm.

'We leave now, hunters,' he said. 'But I promise you, those who fell today will be avenged.'

The words felt like ash in his mouth as he boosted for the skies, his commanders in his wake. It had been his decision to make the sortie, and his alone. If any were to blame for their deaths, it was him.

'Your involvement on Atari Vo appears to have been an unmitigated disaster, High Commander O'Shovah,' said Aun'Dou Xen, closing his eyes. The Atarian ethereal's expression was one of profound disappointment. Farsight thought he would remember it till his final day.

In the cargo bay of the Manta *Endless Potential*, three fire caste commanders sat before the ethereal like cadets on a bench. A pair of earth caste weapons scientists were busy seeing to Bravestorm in his heavily damaged iridium suit, whilst three more saw to the resupply of their battlesuits on the deployment rail that had mag-clamped them safely inside. The fio technicians muttered to one another, but Farsight and his commander said nothing. In the presence of Aun'Dou Xen, there was nothing to say.

Farsight felt a nagging sense of familiarity; though the ethereal caste made use of his image a thousand times a cycle and lionised him in public at every opportunity, in person the acid of their disapproval was all too common.

'Your involvement was counter-strategic,' said Aun'Dou Xen. 'Atari high command had made the decision to quarantine the invaders' impact sites, not to attack directly. We had deliberately ceded territory, so that the be'gel phenomenon of hyper-rapid escalation would be denied.'

You decided to trigger it instead. Now it is the people of Atari Vo and Dal'yth that must pay the price.'

'With respect, Aun'Dou Xen, I saw an opportunity to close down the invasion before it could take hold,' said Farsight. 'The orks can be likened to a disease. Left to spread at will, they are all but impossible to eradicate.'

'I have read your treatise, the *Book of the Beast*, high commander. Amongst its many contentions you say the be'gel are reactive in propagation. You maintain it is the very act of killing them that causes their population to swell, and the survivors to literally grow stronger. Have you changed your stance?'

Farsight felt his breath come shallow. 'I... I wanted to avoid this planet becoming another Arkunasha, honoured Aun'Dou Xen. The loss of t'au life would be colossal.'

'That is not your decision to make, high commander. It is not your place in the T'au'va to defend the sept worlds, just as it is not my place to affect the rescue of fire caste personnel. You should look to the duties entrusted you, on the far side of the Damocles Gulf.'

Farsight made a gesture of sincere contrition, unable to look the ethereal in the eye.

'Why are you here, high commander?'

'These orks hail from the Vorac Belt,' said Farsight. 'That is where we first encountered them, honoured aun, in an asteroid formation on the outskirts of enclave space. The be'gel travelled in those very same asteroids to Atari Vo. Their earth caste equivalent is opportunistic, and has some skill with field technology. Once they had made it clear they intended to cross the gulf, we believed it was imperative to stop them.'

'Again,' said Aun'Dou Xen. 'That is not for you to decide. The empire went to great efforts to send you to the far side of the gulf. I have received word the crossing was made at an extremely high cost, and that you arrived at your destination with your forces decimated.'

'An Imperial ambush-'

'Your numbers have dwindled further since that time,' interrupted Aun'Dou Xen, 'despite the ostensible conquest of the four principal worlds we identified for colonisation, and reports of one Imperial world still yet to be conquered. I find it hard to believe you are here, in the flesh, with your most famed commanders at your side. Who watches the enclaves?'

'Shas'O Arrakon is a highly capable commander who knows the enclave systems better than any other. He can be relied upon.'

'I am glad that is true of some of your caste, at least.'

The rebuke hurt far more than Farsight had expected it to. He could see, in the stiffening, defensive body language of his fellow commanders, that he was not the only one to feel its sting.

'I am not the Supreme Ethereal,' said Aun'Dou Xen, 'nor could I ever be. My province is Tau'rota'sha and its immediate environs. The containment initiative is working, and if our kor aerial footage is reading correctly, some of the ork leader caste have already abandoned the invasion. But this battle is far from won. As high commander, you may do as you see fit. This is a moment of destiny, O'Shovah of Vior'la. The path ahead is yours to choose.'

Farsight gathered his thoughts, the sense of standing at the edge of a precipice foremost in his mind.

Then he stepped off.

'I cannot in good conscience allow this planet to be consumed by a long and costly war that I myself put in motion by driving the asteroid-dwellers into deep space,' he said. 'The orkoid presence in the enclaves is so minimal they do not pose a true threat. Hence I intend to remain here until Atari Vo is freed from the shadow of greenskin infestation, and do what I can to help rebuild before returning across the gulf.'

'So be it, high commander,' said Aun'Dou Xen. 'So be it.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BURNING HORIZON

ADMISSION OF VYKOLA NIAMH HERAT 3-35

213.815.M41

+++ EXCERPTED ITERATION+++

O'Shovah's decision to stay behind on Atari Vo proved prudent, at first.

The commander made his name during the War of Arkunasha, quite literally. It was there that perspicacity, his strategic mind, and his aptitude in reading the behaviour of his enemies won him a reputation for seeing the cause and effect of war with startling accuracy. At times, it was uncanny; Ob'lotai told me once that his former pupil learned to think like an ork, and could anticipate the behaviour of that most unpredictable of races with exceptional regularity. His coming to understand the greenskin mindset was a turning point in the war, as has been trumpeted by the water caste ad nauseum. Before I left for Salash'hei, I think even I could have listed his ten most memorable victories, such is the frequency with which edited drone-footage of the war was projected onto the ash

clouds of Vior'los.

A long time ago, Farsight helped rebuild Arkunasha, wherever the orks took too much of a toll on the conurbations for them to be a practical defence against the rust storms. If what Ob'lotai and Bravestorm say is true, he did so with his own hands, clearing rubble and hoisting walls with his brightest and best, working alongside the earth caste whose duty it is to attend to such menial tasks. I know enough of the fire caste to know the idea of a battlesuit pilot doing something so dangerous is considered an act of madness, especially in an active warzone - a broken finger due to a stray boulder could botch a haptic link completely. But the fact remains, he did it, and more than once.

I truly believe Farsight acted out of a genuine desire to help his kin, regardless of protocol. No one expected him to do it, but there it was. These anomalies are not widely publicised, as the allegations of Farsight being 'vash'ya' already haunt him more than enough, since the business on Dal'yth. But in those displays on Arkunasha, he showed more of his true character and philosophy than any ethereal-sanctioned informational ever could.

Tau'rota'sha saw that same tendency writ large. We were billeted outside the city as the Farsight expedition's military joined forces with that of Atari Vo. After his abortive raid on the orkoid invasion craft, Farsight ceded overall control to the Atarian high command, and spent the rest of the war effort in an advisory capacity. It was likely the right thing to do, for it let the Atarians - devout practitioners of the T'au'va and therefore the obedient puppets of the ethereals - work together under a single vision without the famously hot-blooded commander from Vior'la complicating matters. Their quarantine strategy panned out, though it cost them countless square kilometres of territory and infrastructure. In constantly withdrawing, in giving the orks nothing to fight, they robbed them of the very thing that fuels their war

machine – impetus.

Retreat, retreat, retreat. It must have burned Farsight's very soul, and those of his commanders, but Throne above, it worked better than anyone dared to hope. Two rotaa later, the orks, bereft of enemies upon whom they could vent their spleen, started to fight each other. The rival wargroups that had been brought together in the name of conquering Atari Vo, by their nature clannish and fractious, turned upon one another.

Likely it didn't help that their war leaders were long gone by that point. It was a mystery how and why they disappeared, but high command was so relieved that they had departed they didn't look past it.

Something inside me, inside the mirror, told me it was all happening for a reason. That there was some greater plan at work, and that the orks had their part to play, just as I did. A wedge was being driven into t'au society, hammered in deep through the tensions of war. One well-placed disaster, and it could split the T'au Empire, so assured of its own supremacy, in two.

That thought gives me a guilty thrill of pleasure I thought I had left long behind.

Back on Atari Vo, Farsight had no idea of the cost his compassion, his guilt, would carry. After the planet was secured, we set off for the enclave side of the gulf once more. I know that decision galled Farsight, for long-range scans had determined Arthas Moloch as a target for ork invasion, and much of his agenda hinged around the total extermination of the greenskins in t'au space. Duty to his own hearth won out, in the end.

The Farsight Enclaves, as they are becoming known, are proof of just how dangerous the T'au Empire can be. Incredibly, in the space of a few short years, this little xenos civilisation has managed to conquer almost all of the worlds formerly lost to the Imperium and raise up its own infrastructure to link them together once more. Four principal worlds have each drawn one of the castes in

particular, though every caste has a major presence on every world in this strange cluster of systems.

First to be conquered was Vior'los, a world of volcanoes and fire that formed the energy breadbasket for the Great Reclamation's ensuing conquests. That planet was claimed by the fire caste above all, for there the war with the local Adeptus Mechanicus was intense, and required a great deal of commitment from the t'au military.

Lub'grahl is a world almost entirely bereft of water; other than its frozen polar regions it is largely an ochre wilderness of plateaus and mesas. It was soon turned into a vast weapons-testing zone, as far as I can glean; though the fire caste had designs on more permanent installations there, the gravity is very close to that of the t'au home world from which they take their name, and so the earth caste earmarked it as a planet upon which they can perform their experiments in something approaching neutral conditions.

Tinek'la is a planet like no other I have seen, essentially a world predominantly made of translucent crystal. The earth caste found a way to refine their ZFR propulsion engines using this material, and much of the expedition's air caste is being refitted there as a result. Its skies are dotted with orbital stations and technus docks.

Tinek'la acts as a way station from which the farther flung planets of the enclave worlds can be reached, notable amongst them Gue'vesa'rio, a planet once known on the Eastern Fringe as Evenchoir Secundus, but now a world remade in the image and philosophy of the Greater Good. Though there are die-hard Imperials still mounting a resistance war there, the vast majority of the population is 'gue'vesa,' and the remnants of its traitorous Astra Militarum have taken the devil's bargain of an easy life - and high-tech weaponry - in exchange for fighting on the T'au Empire's behalf. The same is true, but to a lesser extent, of the ex-Imperial planet Illuminas. I imagine that too will be renamed in time, just as with Gue'vesa'rio.

Salash'hei is strangest of all - not a planet so much as a collection of several vast and viscous liquid planetoids, all in thrall to each other's gravity. Each globular sphere of this oceanic cloud has a solid core surrounded by miles-deep oceans of saline water. This strange region, too, has been settled, and now has vast hover-cities gliding over the waves. I am told these disc-like metropolises are centres of great learning and debate, and that the water caste there seek to learn from the fluidity of Salash'hei itself.

After the horrors of Atari Vo, we were all in a hurry to return to the enclave worlds, I think. By this point the air caste had become familiar enough with the crossing, and we made the journey without major incident, spared the terrors of sailing so close to the empyrric storms of the warp itself.

What we found waiting for us back in the enclaves was horror enough.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE THRONE AFLAME

EIGHT IMPERIAL MONTHS LATER

VIOR'LOS HIGH ORBIT
FARSIGHT ENCLAVES

'No.'

Farsight sat stupefied, his mouth dry as he watched his worst nightmare unfold on the Manta's command console before him. They had made it across the gulf in good order, emerging from its anomalous nebulas into stable space once more with only minimal trauma. Though none would admit to it, they had all been hoping for some much needed rest and reinforcement after the cleansing of Atari Vo. Then, just under a dec ago, long-range data had begun to reach them from the enclave worlds themselves. It painted a picture of a war already in full flow, a conflict that had embroiled all four of the enclave systems and ravaged their principal worlds. The estimated death toll was already in the tens of millions.

Even from space, the enclave worlds bore the scars of ork invasion. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of black spots –

crater marks, each denoting a landing site of an ork asteroid ship – scarred Vior'los alone. The hexes sprung up, one after another. There was a similar story on each of the planet's peer worlds: Lub'grahl, beloved of the earth caste, was scarred by vast convoys of ork vehicles. Crystalline Tinek'la's skies were lousy with ork aircraft. Even elements of Salash'hei's endless oceans were blackened by the presence of ork armadas.

'How?' Farsight's dismay turned to anger, hot and liquid inside him. 'How could this have happened?'

You risked it all, said a voice inside him. *You gambled, and you lost.*

'I hate to admit it,' said Y'eldi, 'but these orks must know their way around the Damocles Gulf. Perhaps they know routes through the nebulae that we do not.'

'Better than you? Better than the finest minds in the air caste?'

'Maybe they had a head start,' said the young pilot. 'I have heard it said we spent far too long on Atari Vo.'

'These are not the same orks,' muttered Farsight. 'They cannot be. How could they be? These are raiders from outside the Vorac Belt.'

'As you surmise,' said Y'eldi. His tone made him sound far from convinced. 'Though a wise fire caste commander once told me that the orks, when they find an enemy that will oppose them capably, are tenacious foes.'

More hex informationals flooded the data stream. Some showed t'au cadres in full combat operations against hurtling, roaring fleets of ork vehicles. Others revealed aerial battles, squadrons of Tiger Sharks, Barracudas and Sun Sharks duelling with ramshackle ork fighters amongst a field of missile contrails. All of them demanded his attention, a hundred theatres of war all hanging in the balance, all desperate for one with the vision and logistical flair to turn imminent defeat into rousing victory.

'I am not that soul,' said Farsight under his breath.

'High commander?' said Y'eldi.

‘Nothing.’

‘What are your orders? Should we approach Vior’los?’

‘It is closest,’ said Farsight.

‘Is that a go-ahead?’

‘Yes,’ said Farsight, trying for something of his old certainty. ‘Yes, make for the principal space port. We have much work to do. I must confer with O’Vesa, and if all goes well, then I think I have an announcement to make.’

‘Of course.’

‘You come back to us, O’Shovah. In doing so, you turn the tide.’

Shas’O Arrakon was a giant of a t’au, proud of bearing and manner. He wore a dual scalp lock, and for good reason; the rings that denoted his victories were so numerous they could not be borne by one alone. Farsight knew Arrakon more by reputation than experience, though in the short dealings they’d had thus far, the Vior’losan had proved a capable and dutiful commander with a vision and thoroughness behind every one of his victories.

There were rumours that Arrakon deconstructed every engagement he had ever fought after each post-battle debrief, peeling back layers of cause and effect until he had a mind-map of every eventuality that could have occurred. In doing so he would already have learned the best course of action next time they were called upon to fight in a similar manner. It was said he thought of little else. Yet here, in council with Farsight, the muscular warrior made the open hands of the youth-yet-to-learn.

Upon making planetfall, Farsight and his fellow shas’o had hastened to Vior’los’ command nexus on the slopes of Mount Vasocris. Ostensibly, they were there to agree on a brief for the fire caste to unite their efforts against the ork invaders. In truth, Farsight had gathered them for quite another reason. He had been in lengthy conference with O’Vesa, and a breakthrough had been made. There was hope for the beleaguered enclaves yet.

But it did not lie with him.

‘I intend to bring salvation,’ said Farsight, ‘though perhaps not in the manner you expect.’

‘I assume our wargroups will combine forces as soon as feasibly possible,’ said Arrakon. ‘All of our forces are committed, and we are slowing the ork assault as best we can. I have long studied the art of turning a foe’s numerical mass against itself. Bolstered by your hunting cadres and your own mastery of war, we will turn a losing battle into a rout.’

‘You may well achieve that. Do you happen to know what manner of ork force we face on Vior’los? There are more subcultures than we originally assumed.’

‘I have been analysing their leadership structure,’ said Arrakon. ‘It is stratified by size, of course, but also along societal lines. They are led by a powerful warlord I have yet to face in person, O’Shovah, though I have a record of his icons, and his favoured tools of war.’

The Vior’losan swiped a finger, and a set of images appeared on the holographic informational in the midst of the fire caste officers. The holos showed massive tracked vehicles, each adorned with animal skulls and no few decayed t’au corpses upon their spiked rams. Along their flanks were glyphic symbols that sent a spike of fear into Farsight’s heart.

Guns. Intoxicants. Wealth. Strength. Cunning.

Warchief Grog. The greenskin war leader had vanished from Atari Vo, and none knew quite why. Not even Farsight had suspected the reason behind his disappearance. Now, the truth of his vanishing from the battle of Tau’rota’sha was horribly, blood-curdlingly clear. The ork had baited them in space, then planetside on Atari Vo, and then – when Farsight thought himself victorious – the ork had levelled a death blow at the newly founded enclaves. It was no accident. The war Farsight had started in the Vorac Belt, the fleet he had hounded across vast swathes of space, had spread back across the gulf to destroy everything he had

worked for in his absence. Grog and his piratical allies had outmanoeuvred him twice over.

Farsight straightened, and set his jaw. 'My commanders will work alongside you as long as needed, Shas'O Arrakon. They are well tempered in the fires of war, and collectively they have more wisdom than I could ever hope to exhibit.'

'And as for you, O'Shovah? I assume you will mastermind the reclamation from high command before leading us in the field. What do you intend your focus to be?'

For all his formality, for all his quiet confidence, Arrakon was clearly desperate for help. The question hung in the air.

'Reflection,' said Farsight. 'Study. I have doomed too many initiatives to failure, and will not make the same mistake again.'

The statement was greeted only by stunned silence. Farsight felt it was as if the air had been sucked out of the room.

'I am not sure I understand.' Arrakon's tone was cold.

'I have lost that which I once found came so easily - my judgement. My perspective is compromised to such a degree I can no longer function as the leader of this expedition.'

Bravestorm gave an awkward, strangled cough. 'But, high commander-'

'Do not fear, Commander Bravestorm. I have a replacement in mind. One who is closer to Master Puretide than even I.'

'You speak of Shadowsun?' said Moata, his eyes wide. 'Is she not in cryostasis?'

'She is, as is Kais,' said Brightsword. 'Farsight is the only soul in active service who can embody Master Puretide's wisdom.'

'Not so,' said Farsight. 'There is one closer to him even than I.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE REVENANT WITHIN

VASOCRIAN COLOSSEUM VIOR'LOS

The war museum on the flanks of the Vasocris supervolcano had a placement full of meaning. It had been built on the site of the battle against the Imperium that had proved the turning point in Vior'los' fortunes. Here began the reclamation of a planet twice won, taken first with words, then with battle. Here the slavers of the Adeptus Mechanicus had been pitched into the fires of their own hellish and wasteful energy farms, here the blood of men and t'au stained the pumice of the caldera in a thousand places - Farsight himself had forbidden the fio from cleaning it off, and thereby eradicating the sacrifice that had been made there - and here the earth caste had begun to perfect the geothermic science that to this day powered every principal world in the Farsight enclaves.

A heavy skimmer idled on the slopes of the Vasocrian Colosseum, awaiting Farsight's return from the earth caste

facility. Y'eldi had brought Farsight here in secret, choosing the Orca as his craft for three reasons. One, the unremarkable transport was the least likely of all the vessels in the air caste's hangars to draw attention from the water caste. Two, it had thrust enough to make it through the dark clouds of pyroclastic fallout that still swathed the top of the Vasocrian volcano range. Three, the craft's name, *Quest for Knowledge*, had pleased Y'eldi's sense of the ironic - the Adeptus Mechanicus they had driven from this site were obsessed with acquiring information, seeing the matter as a holy crusade through which they could honour their long-dead Machine-God. Farsight recalled O'Vesa holding forth on the notion that their hoarding of knowledge was more for the act of possession than its practical application, and his theory that the cybernetically enhanced members of gue'la society tended towards atavism and madness more than most.

The earth caste, on the other hand, was constantly seeking innovation. Only the most eccentric of their number placed a value on the lessons of the past. Farsight felt a smile tug at his lips. O'Vesa could definitely be counted amongst the most peculiar of the earth caste, if not of all the t'au he had ever met.

The flanks of the war museum were ridged with sweeping spokes that each ended in a giant, curving shield generator. The machines were idle, at that moment, but could be brought into instant effect by a single code phrase. Farsight walked between them, fighting his way through the whipping, ash-thick wind to approach the entranceway beyond. He placed the tip of his thumb against the sensor dent, and felt it grow warm to the touch.

'Through understanding, victory.'

Cross-referencing his vocal signature to that of his genetics, the airlock-style door irised open, allowing Farsight access into a rounded vestibule. It was dimly lit, not by conventional emitters, but by a series of sophisticated holograms that appeared much like statues.

Each depicted a benign and dignified fio in the full dress of his birth sept world. Motes of dust danced through them, giving them a surreal, sparkling quality; the place had been closed for some time.

Most of the holograms were unknown to Farsight, though he recognised that of Worldshaper, the terraforming expert who had brought the enclave worlds into optimal levels of habitability over the last few tau'cyr. A measure of her inner dignity shone out from her stance alone. He passed that of Fio'O Bork'an Ishu'ron, the creator of the ballistics suit concept devised to be the bane of Imperial Titans, and Fio'Ui Pna, creator of the dronenet, with her crown of antennae. To his relief, he could not find O'Vesa amongst the holograms. Even the socially inept earth caste supremo had the sense not to fashion a monument to his own edification - or had advisors canny enough to caution him against it.

Pacing to the back of the vestibule, Farsight located the portal leading into the heart of the museum. He was about to flick some live skin cells onto its receptor by way of identification when the door slid smoothly open.

Beyond it was a vast dome, its ceiling largely transparent to show the roiling black clouds of the Vior'lan ash storms high above. The orange fire of distant volcanoes played through them, sending shadows dancing across the museum exhibits dotted around the hall.

Some of the exhibits had been abandoned whilst still under construction, grav-scaffold drones and worker lamps casting them in pools of wan light. Farsight saw Fio'taun cannons exhibited alongside early prototype battlesuits, an early mor'tonium containment unit - thankfully inert - and even an exploded diagram of an Imperial warp drive recovered from the Damocles War. He saw a cluster of seismic fibrillator nodes, the devices that had proved pivotal to his victory over this very peak, and made a mental note to commission a few hundred more of the devices before he left. He saw field-contained energy

blades, detonators that were the size of fingertips yet would yield megatonne explosions, schematics for advanced Mako-class warships, and diagrams for a dizzying variety of drones adapted for everything from medical recovery to repulsor field projection.

The centrepiece of the exhibition was O'Ishu'ron's looming ballistics suit. Farsight recalled it from O'Vesa's workshops on Dal'yth, heavily damaged in field-testing against the gue'ron'sha but impressive nonetheless, and restored to full majesty. It was more a bipedal artillery emplacement than a battlesuit, its squat stance and bulky anatomy reminiscent of a Fio'taun *itsuro* warrior. Even Farsight, a strict advocate of the flexibility of the traditional Hero's Mantle, felt a thrill at the sheer presence and strength of the thing.

Towards the back of the museum Farsight passed an empty plinth. Under the apex of the rear roof, it was simple in design but given weight and prominence by its position. He spotted an informational hex glinting at its base.

O'Shovah (Farsight).

A voice came out of nowhere, startling him to the point he almost took a stance of combat readiness.

'The mag-lifts are incorporated into the pillars, high commander.'

'Of course,' he said, nodding and making his way over to one of the high cylindrical supports. A thin line of blue light spread around a round-cornered rectangle in one of the pillars, and the door to a single-person lift opened soundlessly. He climbed inside, and was transported down at such speed that for a moment he felt his stomach try to become better acquainted with his lungs. The lift slowed to a halt as if upon a cushion of compressed air, and the door hissed open once more.

Farsight emerged into a cold, cluttered laboratory, replete with brushed steel steriliser nodes, spinning autoclaves and complex medical machinery. A broad oval in shape, the lab had dozens of brushed steel tables, each of which was held

aloft by a gravitic repulsor array so it could be moved around with ease. Some of them had long silver tubes and ribbed wires leading down from above, each ending in some manner of probe, laser or flanged device. Farsight could only guess at their function. There were soft hisses and sighs of air emanating from more than one of the biological experiments displayed on some of the tables; he knew enough of O'Vesa's work not to look too closely. He was here for one thing, and one thing alone - the help of the short but broad-backed figure at the other end of the room.

'Fortune of the T'au'va shine upon you,' said O'Vesa. He did not turn, a breach of protocol that Farsight had fully expected. The high scientist was looking up at a cruciform figure held suspended above him; tall and thin, its arms and legs were spread-eagled and held in sheaths of chrome.

Sha'vastos. The Last Sword of Puretide.

'Let us suspend pleasantries,' said Farsight. 'Have you made any transformative progress?'

'If you had asked me prior to the last cycle, I would have said no. The study has been slow, and frustrating, especially given that this facility and the museum above it have been all but abandoned since the be'gel invasion hit Vior'losan soil. But as of the last six decs, I believe I finally have a breakthrough.'

'That is well,' said Farsight. 'We need him more than ever.'

'So I hear. Is the facility still safe?'

'I have made sure of it.'

Sha'vastos was amongst the finest of the Arkunashan warrior elite, finely honed in strategy and with a better command of etiquette and protocol than anyone outside the por. The old soldier had considered it the highest of honours when he had been chosen to harbour a Puretide Engram Neurochip. It had proven his bane - when the Imperials had used high-grade 'psyker' assaults, his implants had come up empty, glitched and sent him into a destructive feedback loop. It was the same story across the

board, with every enhanced commander crippled when their implants were found wanting. The Swords of Puretide, as those chosen for the operation were known, were swiftly disbanded at the order of the ethereal council. To the quiet horror of Farsight and his fellow commanders, the process of removing the neurochips from the 'volunteers' meant they were essentially lobotomised, then shuffled away from the public eye.

Only Farsight's actions had saved Sha'vastos from that fate. He had sequestered him in cryostasis until O'Vesa could find a solution to the delicate dilemma of untangling one mind from another. In doing so, Farsight had directly lied to an ethereal - Aun'Va, no less. It had been an unthinkable act of rebellion, and it had gnawed at him ever since.

Wisps of coolant trailed from Sha'vastos' arms and legs, the frozen state he had lingered in since Dal'yth replaced by a localised version that kept him operable. O'Vesa had proudly described it as a half-coma, a twilight condition in which he could stay cognisant, yet still have extensive procedures worked upon the architecture of his brain. He had maintained it was the only way they could finally extract the bioware that had been laced into his cranium, placed there as an extreme solution to counter the gue'ron'sha that had brought Dal'yth to its knees.

As Farsight moved closer, he saw that the top of Sha'vastos' skull had been cut away, detached from the forehead upwards and held suspended perhaps a foot higher than the rest of his head by finger-sized medical drones. Slivers of his brain were held at various intervals around his opened cranium, some discrete lobes or folds of tissue, others sliced like meat. Many had thin black cybernetic implants half-peeled away from them, tiny mycelia of dark wiring and synaptic mesh glinting wetly in the stark white glare of O'Vesa's worklights.

'This branch of medical science is quite fascinating,' said the high scientist. 'Especially with such unusual and

prestigious subjects. Ob'lotai was a breakthrough in artificial intelligence, and still improves with each new iteration. Brightsword is arguably the most successful repeat clone we have ever produced. Keeping Bravestorm alive after his duel with humanity's *god machine* is proving an exciting challenge. But Commander Sha'vastos here...' turning, O'Vesa made the gesture of the gift's recipient, 'he is unique.'

Farsight's stomach twisted. 'He is no *gift*. He is a leading member of the fire caste, and you promised you would not operate until you had devised a foolproof way to reverse the procedure.'

'I believe that to be impossible, sadly, though I have managed to find a way to allay his deterioration, and allow new synaptic pathways to be formed once more. He is essentially functional. We near the end of the experiments, and I am happy to say they have been more than seventy-nine per cent successful.'

Farsight said nothing, transfixed by the grotesque spectacle of his old comrade's mind reduced to layers of grey matter and biotech. He felt his pulse racing, the fire of outrage lighting in his blood.

'Will he recover in time?'

'Why not ask him yourself?' O'Vesa stepped back with a flourish, depressing three of his stout fingers onto a panel and sliding a set of holographic faders to the highest setting.

Sha'vastos' head twitched, a thick line of drool dangling from his lips. O'Vesa stepped forward quickly, laser-evaporating the saliva with an apologetic grimace.

'Shuruu...' said the elderly commander, eyes rolling. 'Sh...'

'Just give him a moment,' said O'Vesa. 'He is coming round.'

'Tell me he is not in pain,' said Farsight, fighting to stay calm. He had threatened to stab O'Vesa once, when he had experimented on Ob'lotai back on Arkunasha, but he could not afford to alienate the scientist now.

'No, he feels nothing,' said O'Vesa.

'Shorr,' said Sha'vastos. 'Sh... Sh...'

Nearby, O'Vesa's haptic gloves twitched, fingers dotting and sliding as he adjusted the levels of stimulation trickling from his neurode web into his subject's dissected brain.

Suddenly the old commander's head snapped up, his eyes clear and focused. 'I offer contrition for my lapse of protocolic standard, high commander, and for the fact I cannot accentuate with gesture. Greetings nonetheless, Shas'O Vior'la Shovah Kais Mon'tyr, in the light of the T'au'va.'

'And to you, old friend.' The sight of the distinguished officer held like a fly in a web of neural wiring, straining for a formal tone even with his brain pan open and his cerebrum cut into slices, made Farsight's skin prickle with heat even in the laboratory's cold and sterile atmosphere.

'Given that I am communicating with you at what appears to be normal capacity,' said Sha'vastos, 'would it be fair to assume that our honoured comrade O'Vesa has found a solution?'

'It would,' said O'Vesa. 'Provided I can reassemble your brain without major harm, we can discontinue the cryostasis altogether.'

Sha'vastos smiled, wrinkles forming at the corners of his eyes. 'That is a profound relief. I must return to the Dal'ythan theatre of war at the earliest possible juncture. I fear, at a critical moment, I have inadvertently abandoned the...'

He stopped, head twitching as if in spasm.

'Is he all right?' asked Farsight.

'He is... suboptimal,' admitted O'Vesa, squinting at his glowing data holograms. 'I must inform you it is possible the commander here may experience an episode.'

'An episode of what?'

It was not Sha'vastos that replied – but something wearing his skin.

'You come back to me, boy.' It was a deep, unhurried voice,

rich with gravitas. 'You seek to learn once more at the foot of the master.'

Farsight took a step back. He looked at O'Vesa, but the master scientist had his back to him, pretending to be absorbed in his data.

'Do not forget the lessons of Kan'ji, young Shoh,' said Puretide. 'In adversity, there is truth.'

'Do you realise that you are no longer upon the peak, master?' said Farsight.

'I do,' replied Puretide. 'I have been called upon to fight for the supremacy of the t'au once more, but in a new body. One more fitting for the warrior's art.'

Farsight watched slices of the elderly commander's brain quiver within their suspensor fields, the tiny silver wires in each piece twitching, and said nothing.

'Master Puretide, times are dire. We have need of your perspective, your genius. Four worlds are under attack at one time, an all-out assault on dozens of theatres of war. There are fu'lasso elements of the invasion that I cannot unpick, even with your teachings.'

'Those who seek swift enlightenment,' said Puretide, weighing his words, 'should not be carried upon a river of words. Sharpen your truth, boy. Start again.'

'I offer contrition, master,' said Farsight, making the sign of the unworthy student. 'We are far from the sept worlds, on the coreward side of the Damocles Gulf.'

'Then I taught you well. It was ever our destiny to cross the sea of nebulas.'

'As you say. Yet in my haste to eradicate the Imperials, I allowed the be'gel to gain a foothold in our new enclaves. With the humans all but beaten, I drove the orks from the Vorac Belt, and then pursued them, bringing them to bay upon Atari Vo. We scoured the sept world of their presence.'

'There was a heavy cost,' said Puretide, reading between his pupil's words. 'Far heavier than the T'au'va could allow.'

'Yes.' A knife of shame twisted in Farsight's chest. 'We

inadvertently allowed part of their wargroup to escape. The vanguard of those same elements crossed back to the enclaves whilst we were still engaged, making far better time than we ever have.'

'The be'gel race can intuit paths through the tempests of the void. They achieve through luck and instinct that which the air caste does through years of study.'

'So it seems,' said Farsight. 'I failed to destroy them, master. And now the fate of the enclaves is bleak. War rages on all four of the principal worlds.'

'Why do you seek out a cold ghost, boy, when you are needed in the fires of war?

'I am unworthy of overall command, master.'

'That is a lie.'

'It is not. The inner light for which I was named has guttered and died.'

There was a pause, then, the frigidity of the chamber seeming to settle into Farsight's bones. Then the master spoke once more.

'Elaborate.'

'My decision to cross the gulf into sept space was an abandonment of my duty. Upon Atari Vo, I led my cadre into an ambush, and thereby lost all my warriors save those of o rank. I have yet to face formal censure. Perhaps the time is too dire. But countless t'au have died because of my decision, and not for the first time. I have failed. I must reflect, learn and grow before I can consider myself ready for command once more.'

'You disgust me, Shoh.'

'I disgust myself. I feel unable to look at myself in a mirrorfield, let alone to be touted as a figurehead for reconquest.'

'And so you wish me, or rather an echo of me trapped in a clandestine fio experiment, to take your place.'

'I do not *wish* it. I believe it is the only course left to us, if we are to act in the true furtherance of the Greater Good. You said not to trust them all. I took you at your word. And

now I do not even trust myself.'

'Given your tone, perhaps you are right not to.'

'Please, master. I cannot command, not with my mental state so compromised. I must find balance. I must return to the peak.'

'You cannot,' said Puretide. 'That place is empty of all but memories. Another crossing of the gulf would consume you.'

Farsight had no reply.

'Do you not recall the Lesson of the High Pass?'

'I do,' said Farsight, shivering involuntarily at the memory of intense cold and starvation on the upper slopes of Kan'ji.

'Of course.'

'You do not. You have forgotten, boy, or you would not be here, blinded by your own myth. Seeking to learn anew the lessons of the past. Must I beat them into you once more?'

Farsight could only look down.

'You must walk the same path here. Apply the abstract, turn the principle into practice.'

'Of course, master.'

'Do you know where?'

'I... I think I do.'

'Then go,' said Puretide. 'With the aid of the fio, my host and I will take your place.'

'The ethereals cannot know you exist, master,' said Farsight. 'Not as Puretide, and not as Sha'vastos.'

'Then may we be thankful for the wonder of the Hero's Mantle. I will pilot a reserve XV8 as a saz'nami of this world's indigene commander.'

O'Vesa turned back, making the gesture of the challenge-readily-taken. 'A data mask can be put in place.' Farsight frowned at the interruption, but kept his peace.

'Go forth, Mont'ka-Shoh, and find your inner light once more,' said Puretide. 'Think clearly to furtherance. I know it was never easy for you. But you must, for the sake of the Greater Good. My host and I will salvage what I can of your war effort.'

Farsight knelt, sweeping his arm out wide in the gesture of the warrior subservient. The crucified, dissected angel of war above him stared down in something between contempt and sympathy.

‘Do not fail the T’au’va again, Shoh,’ said Sha’vastos. He shivered, and fell still.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE BROKEN KNIGHT

MANY TAU'CYR PREVIOUSLY

MOUNT KAN'JI
DAL'YTH

Shoh trudged along the scree-lined mountain path, barely registering the hard-edged rocks that wedged themselves between his toes as he went. So clotted with blood and scabs were they, so numb and covered with scar tissue, that such considerations as simple pain were long forgotten. He had something worse to contend with. Unlike pain, it did not fade with time, but instead grew slowly, steadily worse.

Snow danced and fell as if at play, dappling his pate and his shoulders, wondrous and enchanting on the surface but cold enough to kill beneath. Mount Kan'ji was a place of stark and soul-searing beauty, but at times it could be a harsh and violent master.

Almost as harsh and violent as Master Puretide himself.

It was Puretide that had ended Shoh's warrior's life. It was Puretide who had beaten him so badly his back was a mass of badly healed scars. It was Puretide who was responsible

for the bleeding between his toes, for the infected lynxclaw gouge-wounds on his arms and face, and for the frostbite and weather-mark that had turned his skin to craggy, crumbling ruin. But most of all, it was he who had put a monster inside Shoh's gut.

The gnawing, endless hunger had chewed away first his fat, then his muscle, and was now eating away at his mind. It was impossible to ignore. There was no proper food on this side of the mountain; he knew that from bitter experience. It had already been hunted barren, as it was every time the snow lynx predator-packs reached their peak numbers. Yet he had been forbidden to return the way he had come, and he knew the only way back to the waterfall was along the high path.

The high path was where the snow lynxes - those long-limbed, muscular beasts that were five feet tall at the shoulder and more cunning than any wolf - defended their territory with lethal efficiency. They hunted for the very same sustenance as he, but far more effectively. Over the aeons they had become perfectly adapted to the blizzard-dusted wilderness, and with a communal knowledge of every chasm and crevasse, they had every advantage. His fingers, too numb to use his sling, too palsied by cold even to wield a knife, were nothing to their claws. They were perfectly camouflaged ambush predators, and to hunt them was to die. It was the very reason Puretide had sent him against them.

On his first ascent, before he had even begun his tutelage under Master Puretide, he had slain one of the beasts with a lucky strike with his improvised slingshot. Rather than eating it he had used its body as a counterweight on a pulley set-up of his own devising, pitching its dead weight from halfway up a cliff to aid his ascent up the sheer faces of the northern slopes. It had been the leap of ingenuity that had convinced Puretide to train him in the first place. How foolish and wasteful that act seemed, now, to hurl away food. He knew with bitter certainty he should have

stayed put at the base of the cliff, and feasted on the red, steaming meat.

Killing a Kan'jian snow lynx was a feat, but it was possible, if the beast was roaming by itself. They did so in the spring, when in heat. But up here, in the winter, they numbered in the hundreds, and they always hunted in packs.

Shoh, on the other hand, was alone. More alone than he had ever been in his life.

On he trudged, his face turning numb, not bothering to shake off the snow settling on his brow. He had subsisted over the last few days on nothing more than ice water, lichen scraped from stone and insects caught from under the rocks; his body was rebelling with every step. Perhaps if he had Shas – or even Kais – to talk to, he could have seen past the fatigue and the constant hunger. Devised a plan that, if not worthy of one who carried the name element for *inner light*, would have nevertheless filled his belly so he could get a measure of perspective and last another long, cold night without dying from exposure. But he had been sent out on his own, to find a way by himself.

And he had failed. Faced with the prospect of another night on the mountain, or returning in disgrace, he had chosen to forsake his birthright entirely.

Leave Mount Kan'ji. Turn down the legacy of a Student of Puretide. Abandon his bond-mates, his legendary tutor and the trust placed in him by caste, by history – by the T'au'va itself.

All this he would do for a bowl of hot *fai* soup.

The scree slope wound down towards the lowlands. Down, at least, with no need to ever climb back up. He was fairly confident he would find an earth caste emplacement before he died, a tech-hub, or a cross-caste rendezvous point. There was more of a chance of survival in that than if he braved the High Pass, that at least he knew – and certainly more of a chance than if he returned in failure to Puretide's swordcane. His back spasmed at the thought of it.

In truth, it was not the master's wrath he feared the most;

not Puretide's face he saw night after night on the roof of whatever dank cave he had chosen to hide in. It was the faces of Shas and Kais that haunted him. Their inevitable disappointment, their disgust at his weakness, would pierce his heart beyond recovery.

He heard another rumble, then, deep and low. For a moment, lost in his own misery, he thought it was a death rattle from his guts. Then he realised it was Kan'ji itself, some distant shelf of snow sliding down from its perch. The mountain roaring at him, mocking him, voicing its displeasure.

Or perhaps...

Shoh stopped abruptly, looking off into the middle distance. Perhaps the great peak spoke to him not to scold, but to teach.

Perhaps Kan'ji wished to save him.

He cast around the path, digging out a fallen ironoak with half-frozen fingers and carefully peeling away its thick bark to form two short, curved sections. Woodlingers scuttled under his grip, startled by the sudden light. He grabbed the largest few before they could escape and greedily shoved them into his mouth, their squirting bitterness irrelevant. Then he clapped the wood sections together experimentally, nodding at the resonant sound.

The snow was playful, its rain gradual and thin. The season was turning, and on the upper slopes the snow was melting.

The slopes above the High Pass, where the snow lynxes made their sport.

If he could make it to the peak, if he could use sound as a weapon to trigger a big enough snowfall, he might just start an avalanche that would gather weight and speed enough to bury the predator packs. At the very least it would drive them off, scatter the hunter packs long enough for him to cross. He would traverse the stretch of mountain that led back to the master, to the next level of his training, and to the two souls he felt closest to in all the world.

And best of all, a hot meal.

He smiled, then, through the pain. Was it not a fundamental tenet of the fire caste war doctrine, to use the gifts of the landscape against the foe? How had he not seen it? It was not enough to fashion a sling, a spear, and bow and arrow, not enough to fight a duel rather than a war. He had to use the mountain itself. And with that distant rumble, Kan'ji had given its blessing.

Shoh watched the fat snowflakes for a moment as they danced down, reminding him of the lower peaks' cherry blossom in the way they whirled and played in every sigh and zephyr. Then he turned, looking up for a long moment at the snow-shrouded cap of the mountain that had shaped him, battered him, turned him into something new.

Tightening his loincloth around his emaciated hips, he pulled the worst of the scree-stones from between his toes.

And climbed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FOUR REVELATIONS

SEVEN DAYS AFTER THE RETURN FROM ATARI VO

TRANSCONTINENTAL OCEAN
VIOR'LOS

The saline ocean of Vior'los was beautiful, a sun-dappled vista of surging waves that seemed to stay strangely motionless as Farsight rocketed above them in O'Vesa's newest iteration of the Coldstar battlesuit. Rather than affording the impressive but short-range mobility of the Crisis XV8, the sleek machine was capable of true flight. It could function at extreme pressures, and even in the cold void of space; the Coldstar had been pivotal to his pyrrhic victory over an Imperial ambush the first time they crossed the Damocles Gulf, and to his rescue of the *Wing of Blades*. There was one fundamental difference, however – the artificial intelligence with which he had shared the original Coldstar was no longer present, instead remaining installed in his XV8 Crisis. At this moment, even though the t'au of the enclave worlds were dying in a dozen theatres of war, he needed solitude above all.

His radar suite gave a low chime, relaying the topology of the seabed as a three-dimensional graph at the top of his sensor suite. It had found a match.

He angled his flight, and dived, punching through the waves into the cold darkness beneath.

Farsight sat on the seabed, his battlesuit in cross-legged pyramid stance with its sampler cylinders deployed as makeshift anchors. Inside its confines, he too was in a position of meditation. He had been there for some seven cycles now, and his eyes had been closed for so long they were gummed shut. The suit's internal speakers relayed the subsonics of the sea around him, and he had purposefully dialled the atmospherics all the way down to keep the interior cold and damp. The hex-screen display was but a single image of the ocean around him, bathed in yellow-grey light by the Coldstar's exterior beams. It was as close to being on the ocean's floor as he could make it, and still live - for should he open the hatch, the pressure would soon crush him to death.

Sleek-bodied nightsharks swam around him, their long barbels brushing against the Coldstar's extremities before they circled away once more in search of softer prey. Glowfish, fat-bodied and iridescent with lilac bioluminescence, hovered like attendant drones, occasionally darting out their jaws to capture the lesser fish mistaking him for the beginnings of a reef.

Farsight's hunger was a distant, abstract thing, caged and trammelled as he had learned to do upon Mount Kan'ji after the salutary lesson of the High Pass. When he had first arrived, he had watched the bubbling streams of boiling water rising from the oceanic fissures for long decs, wondered at the columns of black by-product belched out by the strange organic chimneys above each crack in the seabed. There were hidden truths, there. Fire and water mingled in blissful paradox. From that strange marriage, chemosynthetic life forms had learned to thrive, even in

this, the most inimical of places.

He had dwelt long on that. Cold water and hot flame, existing together, and thriving. One did not extinguish the other, but instead combined, providing a new state that forced its way into being as it expanded with unstoppable energy. And from that, the source of a new impetus. It was a truth the earth caste had uncovered long tau'cyr before the time of the Mont'yr, before the fortification of the Fio'taun Plateau. An entire scientific revolution had been founded upon it, in fact. Yet somehow, to the wider society of the t'au the analogy had remained unseen. For one caste to stray into the sphere of another was forbidden.

Farsight struggled to open his eyes, and failed. He rubbed the build-up of secretions from his eyelids, his arms aching as they moved for the first time in decs. Practising the Seven Flexes, he coaxed life back into his fingers, clenched and unclenched his fists, and engaged with the Coldstar's haptic links. The command suite sprang to life, urgent data hexes and status reports flashing from Brightsword, from Moata, from Ob'lotai, Bravestorm, Y'eldi, Arrakon, even Sha'vastos - and therefore, in a manner of speaking, from Master Puretide.

He closed them all down without reading them.

Adjusting his thrust/vector suite for maximum yield, Farsight triggered his jets and climbed through the dark water. It felt like an age before he broke the surface, but when he did so it was with a new vigour, bursting from the waves amongst a shimmering explosion of droplets and a surge of acceleration.

He shot off to the south, angling his flight towards the mountains on the distant horizon.

Atop the high peak of the O'Res supervolcano, Farsight hovered motionless in his Coldstar. Its repulsor jets and gyroscope arrays were at maximum sensitivity to maintain his stability against the constant, whirling zephyrs that rose up from the caldera below. Though classified as dormant,

the volcano still set the air above its peak dancing with heat haze, the anger of the lava far below finding vents through the tiny gaps in the igneous rock of its bowl-like cap. Now and again the winds roared, hot siroccos raging from the plains below, but Farsight paid them no mind. The Coldstar was more than capable of maintaining its position. In his trance state, nothing short of a direct collision with an aircraft would jolt him out of his meditations.

He could not shake the feeling there was something missing. Some connection yet to be made. All the while, on every principal world, the death toll was mounting; he knew that in his soul. It had to be, for the orks were tenacious foes. A shadow of panic fell across him, but he pushed it down. Found his peace once more.

And with it, a measure of inspiration.

Opening his eyes, Farsight reached out, and made the complex finger-twisting gesture that released the lock on the Coldstar's plexus hatch. There was a hiss, and the front section of the battlesuit burst open, exposing him to the elements.

The control cocoon filled with the raw heat and eggy stench of the volcano below, a sour smell so bad it almost jolted him from his trance state. Yet the hot breeze now dancing around him dispelled the worst of it, tugging at his scalp lock and refreshing his filthy, unwashed skin. He depressed a push-panel in the control cocoon under his seat, and donned the thin respirator mask that popped out, covering his mouth and nasal chasm.

The combination of ambient temperature and mask was uncomfortably hot, making him swelter head to toe. Yet as he fell back into his trance state, he found another level of enlightenment.

This was the missing element. The place where fire and air blended together as one, forming hot, energetic winds that carried far across the planet, and brought the limitless rage of the volcano to the lands around at a far greater speed than fire alone could ever manage.

The pyroclastic cloud. Killing flame, borne on the wings of the lightest element of all, yet still potent enough to turn its enemies to statues of ash. He had made use of it once before, a localised strike wielded purely as a blunt instrument. Yet he had missed the greater truth within.

He closed his eyes once more, put the war from his mind, and smiled.

The walls of the Dara'kekya Canyon soared high on either side of the Coldstar, a thin crack of Vior'los sky all but disappearing as Farsight picked his way through the chasm's depths. There it was - an entrance into the caves. Part of the honeycombed tunnels, it was large enough to admit a battlesuit, albeit one crouched and bereft of weapons systems. He minimised his silhouette as if under heavy fire, and pushed inside.

At times the passageway opened wide into subterranean caves, ridged like the gullet of some godly beast. It was just as well, for the rivers of lava that snaked along the wider passageways would have done lasting damage even to a battlesuit had he not found room to cross them. On he went, following the map of the environment suite, at times having to retrace his steps in order to take another route when the passageways through the planet's crust became too narrow to traverse in practice. The stink of sulphur was even stronger, here; he had opened the battlesuit's olfactory samplers but once, and swiftly regretted it. No living thing walked these caverns, of that he was sure. To breathe here was to die.

Unable to progress any further, Farsight found a chamber, folded the battlesuit's vanes with a subroutine, then lay the Coldstar back as best he could. He reclined his control cocoon until it was horizontal, and slowed down his thoughts, finding his trance - that same state of paralysis and inner reflection that he had once been forced to endure under the toxins of the Kan'jian slate eel.

Decs passed, then more. Over time, as he let his thoughts

roam, something became clear to him on a deep and spiritual level. Here, amongst the rivulets of molten rock and the poisonous fumes, was another truth.

The truth of magma, of lava, of primordial wrath. An anger that was slow-burning, that was in no hurry to come, yet was impossibly strong. The anger of the planet's core, where earth and fire mingled as one.

Here, too, was a weapon, in the liminal space between those two elements. It was one he would take for his own, and use in the cause of freedom, no matter the cost. The power of vash'ya, the state of being between spheres.

It was taboo. Yet it was also a source of truth, and of power. This he knew, now, and willingly understood.

And it would be their salvation.

Farsight emerged from the Dara'kekyia Canyon with his fire lit anew. His Coldstar shot into the skies, veering north-east towards the burning wildfires of the Greater Varras Forest that had girdled the Vasocrian belt with thick black smoke.

He recalled walking in the forest's pleasant green eaves after the original Vior'los counter-invasion, taking peace from an ecosystem that was gradually returning to health after the sustained barrage of pollutants that had typified Imperial rule. Now, the forest was aflame, the jagged, cratered shard of an ork asteroid ship jutting from its canopy. The monolithic craft's sides were black with soot, cliff faces of rock crumbling away even as Farsight watched from afar. The wildfire around it was so intense that nothing could have survived there, not even an ork.

It was perfect.

Veering down towards the part of the forest's edge that was still burning hard, Farsight fancied he could almost feel the heat of the inferno on his skin. It was much needed. A force that could scour away his failure, burn away the last of his doubt.

Hazard strips lit across the top and bottom of his command suite. Farsight punched up the override, using all

eight fingers on the reader bank to override the Coldstar's stringent safety protocols, and dived into the heart of the forest fire.

A huge section of the forest's canopy collapsed as he smashed through it, flaming boughs crashing down like the lintels and beams of a fire-gutted building. Sheets of fire and smoke sprung up wherever the burning branches landed. He paid them no mind, stalking through the inferno with his blacksun filter engaged so he could see his way through the burning trunks and fallen boughs all around him. The temperature gauge flicked ever higher, for unlike with the magma flows of the canyon, he was not avoiding the flames.

Instead, he pushed further in.

The holo-doppel flared red, every part of the suit lit by hazard markings. He could feel the rising heat, now, even as the Coldstar's envirostasis suite fought to keep the temperature inside the cocoon at an optimum level. It was slowly failing, according to the readings, and yet with the personal override triggered, there was nothing it could do. The Coldstar artificial intelligence would have intervened, no doubt, tried to talk him down. But she was not here.

Another alert buzzed insistently on Farsight's hex-display. He eye-swiped it to the minimum setting - a flashing red and black line. Pushing the pain of his skin, his face, his eyes into a corner of his mind, he focused, and pressed onwards into the burning forest. More boughs came down, now, from the canopy, some so large they would cripple his sensors if they dealt the battlesuit's head even a glancing blow.

There was an evil smell building, infiltrating the Coldstar's cockpit. The nose-searing tang of burning alloy and adaptive hyperplastic burning, bubbling and melting away.

Farsight himself felt his skin begin to tauten, become so hot it felt like if he were to press a finger against his own forearm he would burn its tip beyond repair.

On he went, pressing further into the conflagration. Death

by the elements, this day, or a rebirth in flame. Only fate could tell. But either way, the inner light for which he was named would blaze bright, before the end.

The smell of burning keratin filled the cockpit. He looked down at his forearms; instead of the usual tanned grey of a Vior'lan native, his skin was darkening perceptibly. He punched in an auto-advance routine and closed his eyes, letting the Coldstar take over as he forced away his pain.

He could not afford to lose this fire. He needed it too badly. Pain would not take it from him, nor grief, nor uncertainty. It was his birthright, and he would claim it for his own.

He could smell his flesh burning, now, a horrible stench that disgusted him and made him hungry all at once. He opened his eyes and blinked through the stinging pain, unable not to look for a single heartbeat more.

His skin was a rich, deep black, shot through with veins of lighter colour where it had split under its own constrictions. The pain was an agonising, blinding barrage, a beast driven by instinct alone, threatening to close its jaws upon his mind and crush out all conscious thought.

Still he did not cry out.

As the control cocoon began to fill with smoke, Farsight flexed his fingers – a burst of agony coming from each one as the skin on his knuckles split – and engaged with the haptic link. To his relief, it took.

He leapt, engaged his jetpack, and shot into the skies. He was a glowing ember from a bonfire, an avatar of righteous wrath, a phoenix reborn from the flame.

And Vior'los, the spiritual son of his birth world Vior'la, belonged to him.

TINEK'LA

'This is Kor'el Skyblade. Is anyone else reading an anomalous power signature?'

A squadron of AX3 Razorshark strike fighters cut across

the polar expanse of the world-sized crystal sculpture that was Tinek'la. In the far distance, the ridge of the planet's nearest edge was just about visible through the glittering clouds, the unnaturally regular line of its horizon a pleasing sight to the t'au's aesthetic mindset. Skyblade carved through yet another cloud bank of crystal dust, each mass of tiny refractive particles glinting in the Razorshark's spotlight illuminators as they sent beams of light into the clouds.

'Affirmative, Skyblade,' said Kor'vre Bala'to from his own AX3. *'It corresponds with that of a fire caste battlesuit. Is that possible at this altitude?'*

'The shas have at least one battlesuit that is flight capable,' said Kor'la Dalar, the youngest of their squadron, yet arguably the brightest. *'They had them even before the First Crossing.'*

'Surely that is straying into the sphere of the kor's expertise?'

'It matters little to me, so long as they reinforce,' said Dalar, her expression grim on Skyblade's communion dash. *'There are so many be'gel craft on this planet, and these cloud banks are so thick, we're almost as likely to score kills by crashing into the orks as we are by shooting them down. This is a war that cannot be won with skill.'*

A hailing frequency appeared on Kor'el Skyblade's dash. He cast it a quick glance, turned back to his main view, then did a double take.

It was that of Kor'O Li Mau Teng.

'Break my ta'lissera,' he swore under his breath. *'That cannot be.'*

'What is it, Skyblade?'

'High Admiral Teng is hailing us.'

'But we registered his death, did we not?' said Dalar.

'We did.'

'Just acknowledge the summons and find out,' said Bala'to. *'We are expecting engagement in less than a microdec.'*

'Of course,' said Skyblade. He steeled himself, and tap-

flicked the hailing hex.

A face appeared, but it was not that of Teng. The informational hex unfolded to show a fire caste warrior Skyblade knew well, first from a holo his dwelling-mate had as a child, and of late from a thousand other pro-sept images. He was aged, his skin wrinkled and black, but it was unquestionably him.

‘High Commander Farsight,’ said Skyblade reverently. ‘You aid us at last.’ Skyblade’s control suite showed a deep-red battlesuit coming through the crystalline clouds alongside his cockpit, the ridge of vanes on its back angling to keep its flight path parallel with the Razorshark squadron. ‘This is a great honour, and I feel a great joy in my heart at seeing you again in person. But...’

‘You wish to know why I come to you, in particular?’

‘Put simply, yes.’

‘I have a way to break the deadlock between you and the ork air fleet, Skyblade. As the forward element of the air caste assault, you and your squadron are well placed to deliver it.’

‘And your ident? I thought for a moment that the admiral might still be with us.’

‘Teng trusted me with many things in our long friendship, amongst them an emergency override code that can bypass kor auto-protocols when needed. This war has raged too long, and I intend to use unsanctioned means to win it. Are the Razorshark AX3’s emissions still recycled?’

‘They are,’ said Skyblade. ‘As are those of our bond-craft, the AX39 bomber. Is that relevant?’

‘In these atmospheric conditions, more than you know. Listen well, transfer this code into your console, and cascade it to every pilot in your cadre under my authority.’

‘Of course, high commander.’

The crimson battlesuit peeled away, and shot into the clouds at impressive speed, turning to salute before disappearing with one last transmission.

‘This day, fire and air will be as one.’

After a second, Bala'to spoke up over the squadron's communion net. *'Skyblade, with the utmost respect, is that concept not vash-'*

'Hold your peace, Bala'to,' said Skyblade. 'Just watch, and learn.'

Dakkaboy laughed maniacally as he came spiralling out of the Tinek'la cloud banks, squeezing his gun-throttles so hard his supa-shootas all blazed at once. Some tiny voice in his head said he should be conserving his ammunition if he wanted to take the maximum toll on the gun-runt flyboys, but it was quickly drowned out by the thunderous *rattle-clack-rattle* of the wing guns shaking the cockpit all around him. His head fizzed with the joy of sheer firepower, his knuckles white on the throttles.

'Get 'em, boss!' shrieked Nikkum, his grot tail gunner, twisted around in his seat to stare out of the fogged glass of the canopy.

'I'm gettin' 'em,' shouted back Dakkaboy, spittle flying from between his tusks. 'I'm gettin' 'em, Nikkum!'

Coming out of a wall of yellow-grey cloud towards them were hundreds of t'au fighters, flying in perfect wingtip formation, each line staggered one atop another.

'Look at 'em all lined up!' Dakkaboy's lips curled back in manic glee. He could smell something nasty, some evil smell on the wind penetrating his canopy, but he paid it no mind. He raked his bullets across the gun-runt aircraft, punching into their wings, their cockpits, their pilots. In places he was rewarded with bursts of smoke and shattered panels, yet on they came.

'They wanna ram-off, boss!' screamed Nikkum.

'Let's crash 'em up then!' Dakkaboy turned around in his cockpit, gurning crazily at the rest of the Sky-Hogz. He caught Dogg-fighta's eye, and shared a manic grin. Beyond them he saw the Kill-Diverz, Boss Squadron, even the Maraudas. His fellow dakkajets, fighta-bombers and mek-jets were all there, clustered together to finally trap the

t'au pilots they had pursued halfway across Tinek'la. Hundreds of ork aircraft stretched away into the distance, no two alike.

After months of playing hunt-the-runt, a proper massed battle was just what Dakkaboy needed. His fellow pilots were already opening fire with their own heavy weaponry, the sky filling with streams of lead even as the t'au returned fire. The signature plasma and ion bolts of the gun-runts streaked past, leaving bright contrails in the air.

They were much closer, now. Really close. Dakkaboy turned back to his controls, hunched his shoulders, and accelerated hard.

Suddenly the t'au broke formation as one, winging away, veering, diving, spiralling even as they detached huge clusters of drones to cover their escape. Dakkaboy fired indiscriminately, howling with battle-lust and the manic thrill of victory.

'We scared 'em off, boss!' shrieked Nikkum. 'We won!'

Dakkaboy's eyes were drawn to a flash of crimson: one of the flying red runts, boosting forward before a roiling wall of yellow-grey cloud that was coming fast towards the ork fleet. Dakkaboy swerved hard after him, hoping to get a clean shot and bag the biggest trophy of the lot. As he did so, hundreds of his fellow ork pilots roared right past, disappearing into the fog-like pall ahead.

'Woz that da Red Runt out there, boss?' said Nikkum.

'Yeah,' said Dakkaboy, licking his split, scabbed lips. 'Let's get 'im before he gets us.'

The red battlesuit turned in mid-air and opened fire with the long-barrelled gun mounted on its shoulder. The shot streaked right into the cylindrical payloads of one of the fighta-bommers that had roared past Dakkaboy into the fog.

The red warsuit streaked off like a missile as the bombs under the ork aircraft's wings detonated with a dull krump. The yellow-grey fog bank lit from within, and combusted along its miles-long breadth in a spectacular string of

explosions.

‘Too late,’ said Nikkum.

Then the sky itself turned into killing fire. The ork airfleet burned, and soon afterward the war for Tinek’la turned into a slaughter.

LUB’GRAHL

An equatorial basilisk basked on a flat rock, lifting one pair of legs and then the other to avoid burning the soles of its feet. Its emerald-and-jade scales glimmered in the sunlight, their hue and sheen the perfect blend to attract a mate. The creature turned its crested head as a sudden roar behind it grew louder. Startled, it scampered away.

Not fast enough.

The lizard burst in a spattering of red innards as a fat-tired ork speedster roared over it. Swerving as if out of control, the vehicle bullied its way up the valley’s dry riverbed, throwing up great plumes of dust on either side as it juddered around the winding, makeshift road. It was the first of perhaps five hundred such vehicles, all careening, racing and murdering their way across the landscape of the once peaceful planet.

The tall earthen pillars of Lub’grahl’s equator looked like hundreds of giant, flat slabs stacked upon another and weathered by age. They formed a network of chasms that spread halfway across the ex-Imperial world. Too hot and arid an environment for the original t’au settlers to properly populate it, Lub’grahl’s equatorial waste had been seen as a perfect test bed for the earth caste’s weapons scientists.

To Grokka Fuel-guzzla, the wastes were the perfect place to indulge in his favourite pastime – driving recklessly at breakneck pace whilst letting loose streams of firepower at anything that moved. Here, on the world the gun-runts had given over to their mekboy tribes, the natives moved so slow they deserved to be killed, and killed good.

The gun-runts that lived here hid away in massive oval shells, shaped a bit like skimming stones or eggs that just sat there, squat and solid, on the ochre earth. They reminded the speed freek warlord very much of the whitespider nests he had enjoyed kicking over in his early years back on Arkunasha. The buildings were just as much fun to knock down, as well, each one he blasted apart with his prow kannons sending the idiot runts spilling out to waddle short-legged in front of his guns. Now and again, the gun-runt mekboys would try something in return, but none of them could fight worth a damn.

Almost all of the easy kills had been made, now, and the speed freeks were busying themselves racing instead. Still, thought Grokka, they had the gun-runts trapped. The rest of them would have to come out from their underground tunnels sooner or later, even if only for food. And when they did, Grokka and the lads would be waiting for them.

O'Vesa pored over the distribution suite of the *Ingenious Insight's* command deck, the warzone of the Lub'grahlian equatorial belt laid out before him as a rich vein of data. He had another sixteen hexes at full array around him, all active; his hands blurred between them as he orchestrated, refined and enacted a plan of dizzying scale.

A full half of the screens detailed the ZFR-capable elements of the Tinek'lan fleet that Farsight had sent across to Lub'grahl to make his insanely ambitious plan a reality. They were in extreme low orbit, as low as O'Vesa's calculations theorised they could go, and were inverting their repulsor drives and electromag repellers in an extremely delicate procedure that O'Vesa had extrapolated across the fleet. Each of them was hoisting one of the broad, oval habitations and laboratories that dotted Lub'grahl's wastelands, plateaus and spire mazes some forty metres into the air. It had taken some long night-cycles crunching the formulas needed to pull it off, but incredibly, it was working.

‘A coming together of air and earth,’ whispered the high scientist as he adjusted his calculations to compensate for changes in the ambient temperature. ‘Not easy bedfellows, no indeed.’ Yet even he had to admit there was something beyond sheer grandeur to the idea. With the habitats raised or relocated, the orks in the wastelands below were starved of targets – and more than that, they were vulnerable.

On the far horizon O’Vesa could see the winking lights of the *Eternal Dawn*, the inter-system courier that the fire caste had co-opted for the duration of the rescue. The vast winged ship hovered over Boghal, the Great Abyss of Lub’grahl. It was a chasm of such depth that the seismic fibrillators Farsight had commissioned on his return to Vior’los and deployed there would send tremors across the planet.

He glanced at the projection hexes once more, assessing the likely cascade effects, the tectonic overlap and the quakes that would topple the planet’s signature rock spires, burying the ork invaders that raced between them in landslides of unforgiving stone across the world’s surface. He cross-referenced them to the rebuilding prognosis, and the time it would take for Lub’grahl to become productive once more after the last orks were hunted down and eradicated. Less than seven rotaa, by his calculations.

‘The name “Farsight” is well earned, my friend,’ murmured O’Vesa.

He eye-flicked the culmination icon, the movement of his pupils triggering a serial earthquake that would entomb close to a million ork invaders in the space of a single hour. And with that single, nigh-imperceptible motion, Lub’grahl’s future was secured.

SALASH’HEI

Farsight thanked the genius of the earth caste for the tenth time that day. His Coldstar sunk ever lower into the pitch-black oceans of Salash’hei, triggering memories of Vior’los’

own deep and tropical seas. Not only had the fio made refinements to their ZFR drives that had borne him from one enclave world to another in record time, they had also provided the technology needed to plumb the deepest oceans in the entire sector.

The oceanic spread of Vior'los was shallow by comparison to that of Salash'hei, for the depths of the water planet reached down for miles. A pressure warning was steel grey on his environment suite, reddening gradually to full alert as the Coldstar sank further still.

The seismic fibrillator nodes he had mag-tethered to his XV8's waist acted like the weight belt of an ancestral por pearl diver. In conjunction with the sheer heaviness of the battlesuit and the ballast of water he had taken into his purge cells, they were enough to bear him downwards at speed. It had got very dark, very quickly, to the point that even his blacksun filter was struggling to provide a picture of the sea around him. He had switched to sonar imaging instead, and the ghostly forms of pelagic fish and snaking ocean-serpents flickered on his distribution suite. Now and again, he heard the deep, mournful cry of a Salash'heian leviathan roaming the depths.

Watching his pressure alert flicker bright red, Farsight was beginning to fear that the Coldstar's hull would split when a proximity alert sounded. Its *bip-bip-bip* increased in tempo until he settled on the seabed amidst a cloud of silt. Thermal designators blossomed over the sonic landscape across his distribution suite, showing the undersea topography that O'Vesa's colleague Worldshaper had told him was key to his plan. He turned slowly, and the informationals revealed a network of thick cracks in the seabed, disguised somewhat by layers of silt but nonetheless clearly defined.

Extending a hand from the XV8's right arm, Farsight detached one of the seismic fibrillators and placed it on a hard shelf of rock, mag-spiking it to the iron ore of the underlying mineral structure with a controlled pulse of

electromagnetic energy. It was an earth caste technique he had once had O'Vesa describe to him, but down here, there were none to disapprove of it. Walking slowly, carefully, along the undersea ridge, he found another viable point and set in place another of the flat discs.

Pre-prepared fio subroutines rippled along his data screens, guiding his progress. By cross-referencing them with the geological samples from the punch-cylinders he extruded from the battlesuit's heels, and with the Coldstar's processors doing the rest, the unstitching of the tectonic fault line was as simple as deploying the large, flat discs at the requisite points.

After several decs of slow, methodical work, the deed was done. Farsight ran a finger along the activation bar attached to the fibrillator chain, his sensor antenna sending out the precise frequency that would start the process. He was rewarded almost immediately with a deep, subsonic rhythm, pounding and insistent.

Around the edge of the rift, the seabed began to crack and shift, murky silt billowing through the black depths.

Water and earth combined, their cold anger slower and less showy than the vash'ya combinations that had set alight Tinek'la's skies and shaken Lub'grahl's spires to pieces, but no less powerful.

Farsight folded back in the battlesuit's hands, tucked its arms in tight, purged the ballast from his suit and made for the surface as fast as he could.

'Bloody gun-runts,' said Boss Kommodor Nailjaw. He put his good eye to his looted Imperial magnoculars, staring at the t'au disc-city floating over the waves in the middle distance. The zoom-lenses of the magnoculars were cracked and misted, but he used them anyway, as often as he could. Much like the *Fort-smasha*, that vast submersible his meks had retrofitted from the remains of their water-landed spacecraft, they had become as much a part of his sea admiral's image as his silver-fringed waistcoat and the

sheaf of maps he had his runts carry around with them.

'They never stay still fer long, do they, boss?' said Hedkutta, his second-in-command. The ork flexed his power klaw as if anticipating scissoring a t'au warrior in half, then spat over the rail.

'Keep pounding 'em with the long-range kannons until I think of something better.'

'Yep,' said Hedkutta. 'You got it, sea-boss.'

At the *Fort-smasha's* prow, artillery guns boomed. Flak burst amongst the swift two-man Piranhas that were making attack runs around the submersible like rippy-fish hassling a whale. Their small-arms fire scorched metal and even cut through the hull in places, keeping the boys on deck busy with returning fire, but ultimately they were doing no real harm. He had better targets to concentrate on. The vast disc-city in the distance, already aflame in places, took another direct hit from *Fort-smasha's* guns. A plume of fire and smoke rose up to join a score of others, disappearing into the skyborne rainbows of water droplets that drifted in Salash'hei's skies.

'Ha! The lads are getting better at this, ain't they?' crowed Nailjaw.

'They are, boss. Helps if yer target's the size of a spaceship, mind.'

'Don't be a git, Hedkutta.'

'Sorry, boss.'

More ork submersibles breached, plumes of water sluicing from their conning towers. They too opened fire with long-barrelled sea cannons even before their prows had splashed back down into the water. More plumes of smoke came from the fleeing disc-city.

'Copycats,' said Nailjaw. 'That's our kill, that is. Soon as it hits water, we loot it good.'

As the thunder of artillery intensified, the ork warlord found a fierce grin spreading across his features. Being a Blood Axe sometimes meant sitting out the actual fighting, and that had never sat well with him. The closest he'd got

to actual combat in the last few weeks had been firing the pivot-guns at the little two-man skimmers the t'au had sent to slow them down. But on a water planet, his Sea-Waaagh! was proving a damn fine idea, especially when it came to the business of unloading some serious city-breaking dakka onto the enemy's favourite stuff.

He could hear something else under the boom of gunfire, a low, subsonic throb that he couldn't place. He shrugged, and put it out of his mind. Some other kaptin or big mek having his fun, no doubt. There were plenty of them, now. The fighta-bomber pilots that landed on the broad flat deck at the back of the *Fort-smasha* said the ork ships numbered in the hundreds.

'More kunnin' than brutal,' muttered Nailjaw, 'that's us lot.' It had become a common saying amongst the orks that had been despatched to Salash'hei, as much to salve their need for close-quarters violence as to inspire them to more hard thinking. Still, after getting his meks to fix up a comms array that worked underwater, he and his fellow kaptins had learned to hunt from below, and in doing so had got the planet's floating cities more or less surrounded.

'I'd like to see them get away from this one, Hedkutta.'

The thrumming bass boom was getting louder. Nailjaw frowned. It sounded for all the world like it was coming from beneath them.

'Wot in Gork's guts is that bloody noise?'

'Boss!' came a shout from amidships. 'There's something new!'

Nailjaw turned to the other side of the *Fort-smasha's* deck. Well over a mile away, a red t'au warsuit was rising fast from the waves, a plume of water splashing down in his wake.

One of the point-defence guns on the submersible's conning tower roared, bullets chattering out in a great stream. Nailjaw grinned, but the flying runt was moving too fast for their gunners to track it, let alone lead the shot.

Then, in a blur of red, it was gone into the clouds.

'Dammit,' said Nailjaw, absently cuffing one of his grots so hard the little greenskin smashed his head into the ship's rail and toppled unconscious into the sea.

The booming grew louder again, and the deck beneath Nailjaw's feet tilted. It seemed, for a moment, as if the listing disc-city in the middle distance was getting further away.

'Boss,' said Hedkutta. 'I think there's somefing weird going on. Somefing's pulling us backwards.'

Nailjaw shook his head in exasperation and made his way to the stern. There, he noticed three things. The first was that the booming noise was even louder here, a bass thump throbbing through the waves; its steady intensity gave him the beginnings of a headache. The second thing he noticed was the waves – for some reason, they were going in the wrong direction.

The third, as he turned to look over the stern, made him drop his magnoculars.

A massive cliff face of water was coming towards them, growing higher by the moment. It was coming straight for the *Fort-smasher* at terrifying speed, a storm of saltwater rain driven before it.

'Dive!' shouted the sea-boss, but the roar of the oncoming tsunami and the deep bass throb underneath muffled his words. He looked around, desperate for a way out. In the far distance, the hovering disc-city had righted itself, and began to rise.

Then the first wave struck. The *Fort-smasher* and its fellow submersibles were caught up, raised high, and dashed to pieces on the ice-cold water. Again and again the seas of that oceanic planet vented their fury upon the invaders that had dared their wrath.

Before another cycle had passed, Salash'hei became the third of the enclave worlds to be liberated from the orks.

VIOR'LOS

The howling, shrieking storm of soot particles that Warchief Grog Ironteef had been studiously ignoring for the last two days had suddenly got very close, very quickly. It surrounded him, in fact.

‘Boss,’ said Big Gobba, looking back at *Iron Gutz*. ‘Storm’s pretty close now, innit.’

‘So we push through it!’ shouted Grog, baring his tusks. He turned from examining a decapitated ork corpse in a primitive uniform, and gave Big Gobba a death stare until he looked away. ‘We’ll give any gun-runt that tries his luck a good lot of dakka, just like usual.’

‘Push through it!’ shouted Dok Toofjaw from the jar strapped to Grog’s shoulder plate. ‘Push through it! Dakka dakka dakka!’

‘You tell ‘em, dok,’ said Grog. ‘We got plenty o’ fight left.’

In truth, he didn’t feel quite so much bravado as he was giving off. Some instinct in his guts said he was in real danger. The sootstorm was bringing back nasty memories, and lots of them. Memories of Orka-Gnasha, where the storms were made of rust instead of sand, and left bloodless corpses wherever they passed.

Here, on the Red Runt’s volcano planet, the storm that had been battering their outriders had left behind plenty of ork bodies. They were burned badly – there was flame somewhere, inside all that soot – but their flesh was still red inside, like a grox steak. At least they still had blood left in them, thought Grog.

Shame about their heads.

At the end of each day, Grog’s Blood Axe allies had gleefully recounted every ghoulish detail of the corpses they had found during their mechanised patrols. Yesterday they too had failed to return, just after Badrukk’s lot had left the planet with three ship’s worth of loot. Grog had just now begun to find out what happened to his Blood Axe allies. Burned clean off, the Blood Axes had said, when talking about the decapitated bodies. It was a phrase that Grog had turned over in his mind for weeks, now. *Burned*

clean off. Now the Blood Axes had proof, but likely not in the way they would have preferred.

'You fink the Red Runt's hunting our mob, chief?' said Big Gobba. 'Ain't heard nuffin' from the lads for a while now.'

'Most likely,' said Grog. 'Save us a job in finding him.' He looked back at the pack of battlewagons growling along the dust-strewn road that led back to the ruins of the Imperial city. They and *Iron Gutz* were still his pride and joy, and he kept a close eye on them.

To be fair, there was nothing else left to keep an eye on.

'He's cheated,' growled Grog, shaking his head as he trudged on. 'He knows he can't do it in a proper fight. So he fought like a proper git. He's cheated.'

'You wot, chief?' said Big Gobba.

'He! Has! *Cheated!*' shouted Grog into the raging storm.

Something red glimmered in the soot clouds, just for a moment.

'Zog this,' said Grog. He ran over to *Iron Gutz*, hammering his power hook on its massive snowplough gut.

Nothing happened.

Growling, the warchief dug the hook in between the two central door plates and pulled, propping a boot on one of its jutting tusks and really putting his back into it. For a moment, it wouldn't budge. Then there was a sharp crack, and the front of the giant machine hinged open, revealing a dark interior. Up in the driver's cage, Drillfist was gawping like a madboy.

'Wotcha, boss,' he said. 'Storm's comin'.'

'Get out,' said Grog. 'My turn.'

'Dunno, chief,' said Drillfist slowly, picking up a rivet gun from the side of his throne-like controlling seat and pointing it right at Grog's face. 'I reckon if you're that keen on gettin' in, I ain't that keen on gettin' out.'

'Get out!' shouted Toofjaw. 'Get out!'

Grog shouldered through the door plates just as the rivet gun spat red-hot bolts of metal. They hit home with a dull *thunk-thunk-thunk* into the pig-iron jaw that covered his

chin, stinging his face but doing no real harm. Grog was already inside before Drillfist could reload, reaching up with the double curves of his power hook to rake at the big mek's legs. He felt more rivets slam into his neck, his shoulders, the hand he brought around to cover his face, but the scent of blood was thick in his nostrils, and he was too far gone to care.

Reaching up, Grog slashed at the mek with his cyborg arm, tearing and gouging. Drillfist's shins were soon ripped to a mess of flesh and exposed bone as the powered double hook did its work. The mek bellowed in anger and pain, but Grog would not be stopped. Blood sluiced and gushed as one of the mek's legs came away at the hip.

'You're makin' a right mess of my drivin' seat!' growled Grog, locking his double hook around the driver's cage and hauling himself up to grab Drillfist by the neck. The big mek whirred his own cybernetic limb into life, bringing the spike-ridged drill tip around fast. It chewed through Dok Toofjaw's jar in a spray of glass splinters and murky liquid.

'Kill!' shouted the disembodied head. Then the drill ripped through its cranium with a shrill screech of burning bone, sending the head flying away amongst a tangle of cables to gibber its way to a final death in the dark hold below.

The whirring steel of Drillfist's arm was suddenly inches from Grog's good eye. Grog leaned back, trying to stop the ugly blur of metal from blinding him, or even yanking his skull from his neck.

Closer came the tip, closer and closer.

Grog's double hook gouged into Drillfist's collarbone. He braced his knees on either side of the driver's cage and yanked hard, pulling the big mek sharply to the right to slam his head against the stanchion of the controlling seat. Grinning fiercely, Grog slammed the mek's head into the metal bars once more, battering it over and over again. A fizzing mass of sparks came from the brain-plates over Drillfist's old head wound. He slumped, thin trails of smoke coming from his nostril and ear. The shrieking weapon-arm

that had been a fingernail's width from Grog's eye lowered, then whirred to a halt as the mek slumped down.

'I'm the boss here,' said Grog, spitting on Drillfist's corpse and yanking the door panels closed.

Pulling the lever that released the roll cage, Grog hoisted out the big mek's body and threw it down into the oil-slicked hollow of *Iron Gutz's* interior to land with a satisfying thump. With a grunt of effort, the warchief swung his bulk inside the driver's cage, snarling as he sat in a thick pool of Drillfist's blood. A vid-screen fizzed and crackled next to his head, doing a half-decent job of showing the view in the storm outside.

There he was, descending like a sky-giant come straight from a runtherd's tale. The flying warsuit was sleek and poised, and it looked far deadlier in that moment than *Iron Gutz* could ever be. Grog waggled the lookin' lever, and the camera zoomed back. Behind the Red Runt were the battlewagons Grog had counted on as his escape plan. Each of their cabs was burning with an intense white fire.

'You'll die for that,' spat Grog. He yanked the go-lever and squeezed the gun-throttle, sending a fusillade of shells roaring out into the storm. It forced the Red Runt to bring up his shield, its mek-style bubble field sending most of the wrist-thick projectiles pinging away in streaks of light, but as Grog had planned, it at least kept the warrior blind for a critical moment.

He pulled the walker's claw-lever right, and *Iron Gutz* sent its ape-like wrecker arm - a tool of destruction that Grog had seen shatter an Imperial bunker - swinging for his adversary's torso. Just as it was about to hit the gun-runt, he dropped like a stone and disappeared from sight.

Grog fired on reflex. *Iron Gutz's* barrel-like cannon arm discharged its fury once more, a hundred bullets roaring out in a storm of dakka that resounded deafeningly around its metal interior as he panned it back and forth.

A moment later Grog saw a pair of red metal hands push their fingers through the hinged metal doors that he

himself had broken open only a few short minutes ago. The panel doors swung open, and suddenly the red warsuit was right there in front of him, forcing its gun arm into the hold.

‘No ya don’t!’ shouted Grog, leaning out of the driver’s cage to send his double hook arcing out in a wild, desperate swing. ‘This is my planet now, ya red git!’

A lance of eye-searing energy speared out from the battlesuit’s arm, filling Grog’s vision entirely as the storm roared its fury outside.

And in that moment, the ork invasion of the Farsight Enclaves was doomed to failure.

PART THREE

FALSE DAWN

*'The T'au'va frees us from the anarchy of disunity and
the tyranny of the self.
It frees us from corruption, jealousy and petty ambition.
What more wondrous gift can there be than to
understand from birth one's place in the universe?
Than to know, with utmost surety, that you live and die
in the name of enlightenment and reason?
We will bring this precious freedom to the galaxy's
suffering masses,
Even if we must do so at the barrel of a pulse rifle.'*

- Aun'Lan, On Truth

The entity's vast, feathered eye blinked into real space, flares of iridescent warp flame curling from the edges of its gelid sphere as it turned its attention once more towards the relic world.

After millennia of stasis, with its wastelands barren of action as well as life, the planet's potential simmered to the point it glowed like a second sun. It was a crux point, a fulcrum upon which the fates of billions would turn. The seeds of change – planted there so long ago, in the form of an invasion from a brutal warrior caste that was all that was left of a once mighty empire – were to finally bear fruit.

For the entity, it had been a wait of interminable length, whilst also being no longer than a single beat of a tindermouse's heart. There was no time in the Realm of Chaos, not in the sense of mortal reckoning. But the fruition of a complex plan, the coming to be of a long-held

potential, that was worth waiting for, however long it took to come to pass.

The idiot-savants had ransacked the planet, plucking priceless treasures and psychically potent wards from the ruins and waving them about as if they were no more than blunt instruments. They had no more conception of that which they had found than a hound that picked up a magister's sunstaff in its maw, thinking it merely a stick. Those that would follow, the new ones, they were just as ignorant.

It was high time they were educated, the better to bring change.

The fabric of time and space was weak there, especially above the sigil-emblazoned plaza at the heart of the fallen civilisation. Again, the invaders were ignorant to the fact, though they avoided it through instinct. Bereft of a true foe on which to vent their endless aggression, they had attacked one another simply to relieve the boredom they had found amongst the riches they had claimed without effort. Their culture had grown, thrived, fashioned technology and spaceships through trial and error, left the planet, and from the spoor of their culture left behind, grown again to begin the cycle anew. Their civil wars had spilt blood in great measure, but none on the sigil. They knew, on some level, that it was a place of ill omen, where realities spliced together.

But the contrarian's new protégés had no such instincts. In their naïveté they would open the way. They would let the gate yawn wide, then quail in terror at that which lay beyond. In such moments, the entity found something akin to pleasure.

For then, only then, would the truth set an empire of falsehood ablaze.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE OTHER SIDE

TEN IMPERIAL YEARS AFTER THE ORK PURGE

ADMISSION OF VYKOLA NIAMH HERAT 3-43
809.825.M41

+++ EXCERPTED ITERATION+++

What we found on the other side of the gulf was a nightmare.

Arthas Moloch is a planet named in the prehistory of the Imperium, settled by Throne knows what manner of civilisation. I had a feeling Farsight would eventually go back there, after eradicating the ork presence from a dozen different worlds. The first time we were in this region of space, he chose to purge Atari Vo instead, but his obsession with overcoming the ork threat demanded his return.

The relic world was the second of the two planets invaded by Warchief Grog of Alsanta in his foray into sept world space. I believe Farsight had always regretted not cleansing it of the greenskin menace the first time around. He and his commanders outfought the tyrant Grog on his return to Vior'los, Farsight ultimately scouring his invasion from the principal enclave worlds through the cultivation of

a series of natural disasters. Rumour has it that the warlord's ashen remains adorn Farsight's command throne in a sparkling memorial sphere to this day. Yet he could not consider the victory truly won until all traces of the ork's hordes were destroyed.

Arthas Moloch was always the one that got away; it had special significance to Farsight, and it was to be cleansed, no matter the cost. It was a symbolic act, and one that was to prove the t'au superior to the orks once and for all.

The crossing of the gulf passed comparatively quickly. I entered cryostasis quite willingly, the voice inside my heart happy to let events unfold. It was impressive how methodical the t'au had become in the act of negotiating the gulf; once tentative, they had adapted time and time again to cross it with confidence. One of the water caste told me, quite proudly, they had got the chance of an abortive disaster down to less than nine per cent.

As soon as I saw the planet hanging there in space, a silent orb as pale as an arachen egg, I knew something unnatural was going to happen there. Something worse, somehow, than the sheer destruction the orks were capable of visiting on their enemies. Viewing it not as an image on a data-slate, but directly from the Manifest Dream's bridge, I could read something of its psychic spoor, and it fairly glowed with menace.

There was something unsettling about that grey sphere, like the quiet mystery of a fat-bodied chrysalis yet to hatch. It felt full of creeping vileness, in no hurry to disgorge it. I kept my peace on the matter. It was not as if I could put my feelings of trepidation into words that the t'au would understand, or pay any heed to, especially after the masterful publicity coup of the Great Ta'lissera of Vior'los, a caste-wide ritual of affirmation with which Farsight had brought his broken worlds back into true.

They aren't big on foreboding, these t'au. They think of themselves as brave futurists who scoff at superstition and the notion of supernatural entities. The vague disquiet of a

gue'vesa, even a Kindred Soul such as myself, would not stop them for a moment.

As for my loyalty to the cause, well, the high commander had seen me in action in the caves under Vior'los. He was there during that low point in my life when I attacked the psychic manifestation of a Space Marine Librarian I believed had been corrupted by the flames of the warp. That's what I tell myself, anyway. Whatever the reason, I had more than proven my willingness and aptitude to fight in the name of the Greater Good, and condemned myself thoroughly in the process. At least some good came of it. That day I had earned the trust of the t'au high command, and so here I am, one of Farsight's closest advisors.

Trust. It is a currency, I believe, and I have accrued much of it over the decades since my first inveigling into t'au society. How much I deserved was another matter.

At first, the operation seemed pretty straightforward. Acting on air caste information from low-orbit scans, the t'au sent in sets of recorder drones small enough to escape notice and zeroed in on the only forms of life we could find - those of the orks looting the ancient ruins of that planet. They had massed within a ruined city of white stone, its tumbled statues and pillars making it appear something like the depictions of ancient Altantea on old Maestra Vensa's study walls.

As a Kindred Soul, I had access to the strategic overview. I recognised the orks' crude skull-and-spanners icons from the Ordo Xenos files I had perused during those few hours I spent amongst the grimoire stacks of Fort Veritas. Known as 'freebooters', the orks hailed from a greenskin subculture that used trade and barter over and above the rough monetary system of using their own teeth for currency. A formidable foe, an ork with a brain.

As for any potential natives to win over to the Greater Good, the t'au found nothing. On entry into low orbit, Commander Farsight and his fellows had scanned the planet's surface from afar, and found no signs of recent

civilisation. In fact, the earth caste's remote analysis revealed no living creatures there at all - not insect analogues, nor algae, nor even the simplest slime moulds. The ruins the orks were looting were the bones of a culture that had long ago gone to dust.

By the look of the statues that were dotted around the ruins, whatever that culture might once have been, it wasn't quite human. The statues depicted strange faceless beings, looking to me like emaciated mannequins. It gave me an odd shiver just to look at them.

Clearly the long-gone people that had made these statues valued the hermetic arts, for their architecture was replete with hexagrammatic designs. Many of the statues were adorned with much the same icons. The t'au didn't seem to be bothered by them, as their drone teams explored. I suppose Farsight and his cadre were looking at the place from a purely military standpoint, rather than casting an anthropological or aesthetic eye; they had the water caste to do that for them, after all. Even Farsight seems to miss the fact that such compartmentalisation can be a weakness as often as it is a strength.

Perhaps they simply didn't realise that the symbols had arcane relevance. I knew them well enough, and what they were intended to ward against. Something inside me squirmed whenever I looked at them, forced me to look away. The intensity of the feeling was proof enough that I was not alone, inside my soul. The parasite inside me hated those symbols, and yet it wanted me down there, ready to tip fate this way or that with a choice morsel of advice in the Philosopher King's ear. I knew I had to find a way down there, somehow.

I think the t'au were pretty certain of victory, given the scattered and disorganised nature of their prey. Over the last few clashes with the greenskins, Farsight's 'ork-killer' cadres had honed their hunter's doctrine to a fine art. With lists of parameters and target priorities guiding every decision, they dismantled the ork war machine piece by

piece wherever they found it, reassessing and then engaging again whenever the complexion of the engagement changed. Once more their ranged firepower was the deciding factor; on one mission I had seen hundreds of orks shot dead before they even knew they were under attack.

They had no real reason to believe the battle for Arthas Moloch would be any different.

Looking back, I believe the greenskins' invasion of Arthas Moloch was not wholehearted, but speculative, done either for the rich salvage to be had there or as a delaying tactic to buy their warboss more time to wreak havoc outside Farsight's crosshairs. Divided and with no native technology or resource to cannibalise, the orks there should have made for easy prey.

But they were not the true danger. That was a threat far worse than any alien race - the stuff of Chaos itself.

The very thing that was eating me from the inside out.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE SUNDERED VEIL

THE GREAT STAR DAIS
ARTHAS MOLOCH

‘Initial estimate at fewer than sixteen hundred life forms, Commander Farsight,’ said Coldstar.

Farsight narrowed his eyes as his custom XV8 shot across the ivory-white dust fields of the planet’s endless wastelands. Even on this dead planet, it was somehow comforting to have the AI’s perfectly enunciated t’au accent back in the command cocoon once more; twinned with the design of battlesuit he had mastered long ago, it had learned from him in turn, compensating for the old age setting into his bones. Yet the substance of her words disquieted him.

‘Sixteen hundred,’ said Farsight. ‘For a whole planet. That does not seem right.’

‘In comparison to Atari Vo, it would be reasonable to conclude this extermination mission will be swift and simple.’

Less than a kilometre ahead, the ruins of a long-dead civilisation sprawled across the horizon.

‘Perhaps. It still seems strange to me. Where are the rest of them? Last time we scanned this planet they numbered in the tens of thousands, and they multiply with great speed and efficiency. According to O’Vesa’s simulations, this planet should be infested from one end to the other.’

‘You sound disturbed by that, high commander.’

‘I would say perplexed. Sixteen hundred ork corpses will be a welcome sight, yet we have enough military force to take down ten times that number. How long has it been, since Atari Vo? After all these kai’rotaa of hard-fought victories, it seems...’ He trailed off.

‘Too easy?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Farsight. ‘A blessing indeed.’

He could feel it, in his chest, that sense of imminence. Was it anxiety? Disappointment? Relief, or a mixture of all three? T’au did not live for much longer than fifty tau’cyr, usually, and he was already far beyond that. Even the finest treatments the earth caste medical centres could provide would not keep him alive indefinitely. If this was the battle that finally concluded his long war against the orks, it was well timed.

‘They appear to be clustered amongst the ruins of the ancient temple complex due west of our landing zone, high commander,’ said Coldstar.

‘They scan as temples, these buildings? Built by whom?’ Farsight zoomed in on one of the ruins, and saw strange shadows burned into the plaster of the walls. The humanoid scorch marks had arms raised as if to shield against some monstrous detonation. They reminded him of the shade-ghosts that O’Shaserra used to speak of, long ago on Mount Kan’ji.

‘Inconclusive,’ said Coldstar. ‘There are stylised statues here in abundance, however. They are close to human in anatomy, but none have facial identifiers. Most of them are shattered and broken, but those that are intact map with

the icons and archetypes of the pantheonic gods worshipped by primitive societies.'

'Please expound. It may be vital to understanding this planet's original people. Perhaps it will shine a light on the nature of their demise.'

'Of course.' Coldstar flicked up a hex informational to the top right of the main view, inside it the image of a serene female holding a sheaf of wheat. The statue was made of some kind of age-discoloured marble, according to Coldstar's long-range density scan. Around its throat was a golden choker that seemed completely untarnished by the passage of time. The one behind it held a long-bladed scythe strung with jewels; Farsight noted it also had elaborate jewellery around its neck. They stood in regular intervals around a large, raised dais.

'They appear to be exemplars, holding items appropriate to their role.'

'And the ornamentation?'

'Anomalous. Further inspection required. Given the primary mission, I would advocate leaving further analysis until post-engagement.'

Farsight hooded his eyes. For what felt like the hundredth time, he felt a keen exasperation towards O'Vesa and his fellow weapons scientists for devising an artificial intelligence that gave unprompted tactical advice, and to a high commander of the fire caste at that.

'Let us complete the sweep, then move in,' said Farsight. 'Mont'ka on my mark.'

'Acknowledged.'

Farsight eye-flicked the cadrenet. 'Encircle and move in,' he said, 'all fire caste *la'ruas* stay in the lee of the ruins as necessary to ensure non-detection. All air caste assets remain on hand but out of visual range.'

The idents of his shas'ui and their kor'ui equivalents flicked bright, gold and in good order on his command suite. Completing their encirclement, they began to close like a noose on the greenskin strongpoint.

Farsight saw flickers of movement on the horizon and veered into cover on instinct. His Coldstar put a shattered, circular temple between his position and that of the orks in the distance. Behind him, the crimson transports of his strike force followed his trajectory, the sleek Devilfish craft coming to a smooth halt to avoid kicking up a storm of dust and alerting the orks to their presence. Farsight opened a hex-link and watched the pathfinders inside disembark with signature efficiency, hustling into the ruins with their drone support hovering silently alongside them.

To Farsight's eye there were perhaps fifty ork invaders in the quadrant he had designated as his primary target. With his XV8 crouching low behind a shattered temple wall, he leaned out, pivoted to allow his antenna a full scan, and tucked back in again. He flicked through the footage, scene by scene.

The orks at the heart of the complex were holding up trinkets to the light, dusting them off, and attacking each other whenever one found something the others thought was worth having. They were the same breed that he had fought at Atari Vo, by the look of their gnarled skin and penchant for piercings, yet they seemed to Farsight even more basal, as if they were younger or more inexperienced in the ways of war than the warriors of Warchief Grog.

To Farsight's experienced eye it appeared the orks hadn't quite got the hang of appraising things. In their magpie-like avarice, they didn't seem to care what was made of what, or how well, provided the item in question was shiny and unusual. Stylised weapons and outsized trinkets taken from the statues were being roughly stockpiled, some of the smaller items shoved roughly within crude hinge-boxes they had left scattered across the place.

Coldstar enlarged a hex, showing some lesser greenskins on the outskirts of the throng. Perhaps half the height of their masters, the runts were idly scrawling graffiti on the walls of the ruins, chasing fang-mawed pets through the rubble or picking their large noses to examine their

dubious bounty. The trap was all but set, and still the orks seemed oblivious to the fire caste's presence.

After Atari Vo, Farsight was in no hurry to plunge in with guns blazing, suspecting a cunning ruse or flanking attack to be hidden just out of sight. But the more he watched them, the more it became clear these orks were every bit as oblivious as they appeared.

'All stealth units in position, commander,' said Moata. 'Should we commence?'

'Not yet,' said Farsight. 'I am still awaiting the air caste's analysis. Patience is as fine a weapon as the blade.'

'A lesson Shadowsun has already taught me well,' said the stealth commander.

Farsight let it go; now was not the time to discuss the finer points of metastrategy. He squinted at the air caste hex on his display, and sent a blip command, ordering his comrades in the skies to submit their data. A few heartbeats later the hex enlarged, Y'eldi's aerial capture of the ork distribution patterns broken down amongst a scattering of tactical analysis.

Farsight overlaid his own observations and patched the data through to his team leaders, eye-slashing routes of attack on his drone relay feed, looping priority targets and highlighting contingencies of retreat should a mobile attack strategy be proven necessary. The time was right, he could feel it in his blood.

He took a deep breath, centring himself, and then breathed out a single word.

'Mont'ka.'

The cadre's attack was devastating. In the space of three seconds, the outlying elements of the greenskin army came apart under a sustained fusillade of plasma. Farsight cast a glance at his analysis readouts as he moved into position. By Coldstar's reckoning, the orks had suffered over fifteen per cent casualties before a single gun was raised in response.

His jets roaring, Farsight flew in, touching down in a puff of dust to sprint past one knot of orks and open fire on another. He slashed sideways with the beam of his fusion blaster into the first knot, keeping it parallel to the ground to maximise its kill-yield as it curved through their ranks. With his shock assault covered by long-range support from his Skyray and Hammerhead gunships, he had to contend with nothing but a desultory scattering of bullets from his prey as his guns cut them to pieces.

Explosions blossomed around him as the orks roared in shock and war-lust, opening fire in a volley of solid shot that would have been devastating to a conventional infantry force. One of his cadre's XV8s tumbled from the skies, then another, then a third, each reeling from a missile detonation or sustained barrage, but their brethren covered their retreat. The vast majority of the ork-killer cadre's icons remained bright and gold upon Farsight's command suite, pouring fire into the unruly mobs as they scrambled to pick up weapons and mount badly made warbikes.

The high commander's eyes flicked left and right as he designated target after target, bright lozenges of plasma fire burning from his long-barrelled rifle to sizzle into one greenskin after another. When the orks counter-charged, roaring from side streets in scattered mobs, they were met by scything fire from the gun drones that Coldstar had auto-looped into her datanet.

The largest of the orks were highlighted, as per protocol, and where they came forward they were met by a slicing beam from Farsight's fusion blaster. One of the ork leaders he cut apart at the waist still somehow fought on, its upper half firing its boxy pistol in his direction even as it bled to death in the dust. He jetted over and stamped its skull into the rocky ground with a satisfying crunch, adapting his targeting designators to drop crosshairs over the next ork to come for him a moment later. The greenskinned monster was treated to a double beam, the fusion blaster slashing in

twin diagonals so that the ork fell to the earth quartered and twitching.

‘Commander Brightsword must be shown your close order fusion protocol,’ said Coldstar. ‘He would approve.’

‘It is not for him to approve or disapprove of my methods,’ said Farsight, obliterating the top half of an ork walker’s barrel-shaped torso with a twin shot from his plasma rifle. ‘Though as ever, he is welcome to watch and learn.’

The circle of the t’au attack was growing tighter as the cadre closed upon the statue-lined plaza at the heart of the conurbation. Where a counter-assault broke through Farsight’s overlapping attack formations to push through, the T-shaped fighters of the air caste flew in low, strings of pulse bombs dropping down to detonate as blazing spheres that left nothing but blackened craters.

To the west a mob of hulking ork warriors charged towards a tightly grouped team of pathfinders. The t’au fire warriors latticed their shots, leveraging the crossfire of the drone team across the other side of the street. Incredibly, two of the orks made it through to charge the gun line. They swung massive, double-handed engine-axes in brutal arcs, chainsaw teeth ripping to shreds those t’au who still held their ground to buy their teams time to escape. Kicking, biting and headbutting, the wounded orks smashed their way through the t’au and loped down the street towards the next line of defence.

Farsight bared his teeth, shooting one of the lumbering beasts in the back and leaping in to kick the other with force enough to send it skidding down onto the dais beyond. He put a plasma bolt in the creature’s gut as it stumbled to its feet, another in its heart, and a third in its throat to make certain of the kill.

The creature burned white before it died, as if set alight by some invisible source of flame. Farsight frowned, unsure for a moment whether it had been caught in a burst of burning sunfuel launched by one of his XV8s, or something else.

‘Commander, danger close!’

A battle roar came from Farsight’s flank as a pair of orks charged headlong out of a nearby building. He was already diving, corkscrewing in mid-air so the Coldstar came up with its plasma rifle levelled. He eye-flicked three reaction shots, and a moment later the orks were beheaded, their necks left as smoking stumps.

The largest of them came forward nonetheless, its headless body staggering and stumbling before falling to its knees. In doing so, it crossed a perimeter engraved in the hard stone of the plaza to mark the edge of the dais.

The corpse finally toppled over, slamming over the line to spurt blood from its severed arteries all over the dusty white ground beyond. That part of it that had crossed the perimeter glowed, as did the blood pouring from its opened veins. Farsight kept one eye on it even as he laid down new targeting solutions with the other; around the ork’s neck, gore formed small puddles that glimmered as they bled into the recessed runes that marked the dais’ circumference. The symbols remained unmarred by the passage of time, it seemed, but Farsight’s autotrans could not read them.

He leaned back in his control cocoon, the Coldstar swiftly jetting away from the site as a knot of orks charged in from the south. He matched their pace, flicking up a hex of the scene behind him to ensure he was not backing into a crossfire, and shot them one after another, each plasma blast planted in their centre mass. They too fell to the dusty ground, thick red lifeblood spurting out onto the paving stones of the dais.

On a hunch, Farsight enlarged the hexes of his shas’vre team leaders. The encirclement at the raised plaza had gone well, with the air caste killing or driving back those orks who had managed to break through their lines and escape into the ruined city beyond. His fire warrior strike teams had taken position in the buildings that lined the perimeter of the circular plaza, eager to make best use of the cover they afforded.

There was a pronounced killing ground around the edge of the raised dais, for there was nothing to shelter behind; it was precisely the sort of no-man's-land that the t'au war machine could leverage to form a devastating killing field. Wherever the orks made a sortie across it, they soon fell. A loose circle of corpses was forming, the blood from their wounds pooling around them and running in little rivulets that soon found the strange inscriptions at the edge of the circle.

Farsight frowned as he noticed a strange bass hum on the cusp of hearing. It was getting louder, and seemed to be gradually rising in pitch.

'Coldstar, find the source of that anomalous auditory signature,' he said. 'If it denotes incoming enemy forces, I would know of it.'

'Of course,' she replied, sounding slightly offended. 'No discernible source as yet.'

'Keep trying.'

'Acknowledged, high commander.'

The ork survivors were huddling together, now. They too thought that something peculiar was happening; their earlier bravado had dissipated to leave a kind of wild-eyed mania, but they still fought hard.

On the far side of the city plaza, those pathfinders and breacher teams that moved into close engagement to push back each ork assault were losing almost as many as they killed, for even a direct hit from a plasma carbine was not necessarily enough to slay a greenskin at full charge. T'au bodies joined those of the greenskins, scattered across the street so their blood mingled with that of their enemies. Where those orks who made it through the cordon were picked off at range by the seeker missiles and burst cannons of the Skyray gunships, their corpses flared white, the strange fiery emanations of their deaths seeming to linger more and more with each fresh kill.

'What is this phenomenon?' said Farsight to himself. 'It disturbs me.'

‘No analogue as yet,’ said Coldstar. ‘Further data needed.’

The white fiery energies released by each new kill blended together, now, coalescing perhaps four metres above the centre of the dais. They formed a crackling disc of energy that bathed the entire scene in a strange silvery light. The strange hum was getting even louder, its discordant oddness reverberating in the back of Farsight’s mind.

‘Cross-reference anomalous sensory input and proffer conclusion, please.’

‘Conclusion still pending.’

Farsight breathed out hard through gritted teeth and took another string of shots, four more orks falling to his plasma rifle’s precise bolts. Their corpses, toppling to the ground, glowed so brightly his blacksun filter cut in to prevent his vision from being compromised.

‘High commander,’ came the voice of Shas’O Moata. ‘What manner of anomaly are we witnessing?’

Farsight did not answer. The bass thrum had accelerated into a single, long note that reverberated in his bones, now seeming to emanate from the giant disc of energy that had coalesced above the open kill-zone of the plaza. The apparition hung there shimmering, like a mirage. Farsight slid filters over the visual and audio relay, but it still hurt his eyes to look at it.

‘Mind-science,’ he whispered.

Then, to his horror, the disc-like mirage began to rain blood.

‘Fall back in good order, silver to electrum,’ said Farsight, looping the elements of his strike force upon his command suite. ‘Observe the anomaly carefully whilst maintaining engagement. Unknown hazard. High possibility of mind-science attribution.’

In silent answer the battle line thinned before breaking apart and folding away into four strongpoints. His warriors were already closing ranks by the time he turned his XV8 to a new heading, taking a rearguard stance even as his foremost strike teams hustled back to their Devilfish

transports.

The icons of his teams, turned bronze by his order to withdraw, winked back into gold as they made it beyond ork weapons range. Not that any of the greenskins were doing more than sending brief smatterings of bullets their way. They too had been cast into confusion by the shimmering disc of energy that had appeared above the plaza. Crimson rain was pouring from the underside of the plate of white fire. On Farsight's monitor-hex he saw it thicken to become semi-liquid hail, then gory clots the size of a t'au's fist.

His cadre renewed their attack; as more orks fell, even more foul blood saturated the ground. It seemed to be coming in far too great a proportion, gushing out from each corpse like a river suddenly undammed. The fist-sized clots of blood falling from the disc grew to the size of small rocks, then boulders, each one splatting down in a shower of gory fluids.

Eyes wide in a mixture of curiosity and horror, Farsight could only watch as several of the strange crimson anomalies unfolded. They were not boulders as they seemed, but alien figures that had been curled in foetal balls, each unfurling to reveal a long-limbed, horned terror whose scarlet skin glistened under the unclean light of the disc.

The apparition was a portal, then, likely opened in response to the ferocious battle that had erupted in the depths of the abandoned city.

'Hold fire,' said Farsight. 'Potential hostiles emerging from unclassified ingress zone.'

The creatures rose one by one, tongues the length of Farsight's plasma rifle unfurling to lick at the air. Pink-white cauls of unreality sloughed from horn-ridged backs and knobbled, crimson shoulders. The newcomers reached up towards the shimmering white disc, and pulled strange, jagged blades from the blur of energy, each seeming darker than pitch.

‘Commander?’ said Coldstar, her target designators flickering between the symbols for targets, bystanders or allies.

Farsight fell back on protocol. ‘New arrivals, unknown species. Assigning temporary designation “Molochite”.’ The term would do for now, even though he had a suspicion they were not the native creatures of this planet.

He zoomed in on the red-skinned things, feeling slightly uneasy at the sight of wet black eyes and long, distended jaws. The creatures were bipedal, horned in the manner of the Kan’jian ibexivore, and they moved with a strange, crooked gait that was somehow uncomfortable to watch.

Farsight reminded himself not to judge this new alien race by their appearance. After all, the kroot were not easy on the eye, and their habit of cannibalism had become tolerated in the name of the T’au’va, if not condoned. These Molochites were an unknown quantity, and prudence demanded they be analysed before engagement; as the t’au had found out early in the first sphere expansion, an unprovoked act of aggression made out of a lack of understanding could trigger a costly war.

The malice that exuded from every aspect of them told Farsight a non-aggression pact was extremely unlikely. He sketched a set of targeting solutions. As soon as one of the beasts made to attack a t’au, Farsight and his fellows would cut them down in an instant.

As if at some unseen signal, the creatures charged the orks with a terrifying scream. The sound pierced Farsight’s mind with its intensity. It was the sound of nails driven into twisted spines, of people burning alive, of the mad joy of a psychopath giving full rein to his bloody urges.

The creatures ploughed into the staggered, reeling knots of greenskins that had been matching their crude, solid-shot weapons against the long-range firepower of the t’au. The Molochites lashed out in broad sweeps with their odd two-handed blades as they charged. The weapons were jagged, malformed even, but where the swords struck,

greenskin heads flew, limbs were lopped clean from bodies and chests parted as if they were made of nothing more than wet mud. Welters of blood drizzled from each wound to join the sticky red gore spattered across the plaza's pebble-strewn stone, until gore spilled over the edges of the dais in trickling waterfalls.

'Whatever manner of alien these things are,' muttered Farsight, 'their shrieking is adversely affecting my mental state.'

'It does not match any known soundform,' said Coldstar.

'*Commander,*' came Brightsword's voice over the cadrenet. '*Your orders?*'

'New element sighted. All teams, increase distance from targets by one hundred and twenty per cent.' Farsight eye-sketched a new perimeter. '*The wise adapt.*'

'*Acknowledged.*' Gold blips of acquiescence lit across his command-and-control suite.

More and more of the strange red creatures were unfurling themselves from the storm of gore that was lashing the dais. Not all of them were bipedal; among the newcomers were gigantic canids, twice the size of kroot hounds and with large frills of skin protruding from their throats. Almost as soon as they had gained their feet the beasts pounced on the orks running into the fray, the creatures so thickset and heavy they bore even the greenskin war leaders to the ground. Cruel fangs sank in, the beasts tearing great chunks of flesh from their orkoid victims. Farsight noted the quadruped creatures all had elaborate collars of brass around their muscular, scaly necks. Domesticated by their biped handlers, but fierce nonetheless.

'They have trained attack canids, much like the kroot,' said Farsight. 'Do not engage them unless they come within close assault range.'

Farsight scanned the strange blood-coloured newcomers for technology, but none of the creatures had guns. They were animalistic, savage in a way that made even

greenskins seem genteel by comparison. Those not tearing into the orks with swords were slashing at them with long nails, tearing away flesh in wet handfuls and even sinking long needle-like teeth or jagged fangs into their victims to send gore squirting in all directions. Some part of Farsight took a fierce pleasure at the sight.

‘Commander,’ said Coldstar. ‘You are straining forward in your harness. Do you wish to advance despite your orders?’

‘What?’ said Farsight, ‘No.’ He screwed his eyes shut, and gathered his thoughts. ‘The newcomers have a pre-Fio’taun tech-level, no ranged capacity evinced. They are formidable at close quarters, so much so they have an estimated five-to-two favourable kill ratio against the orks. Threat assessment copper, rising to bronze within standard plasma carbine range.’ He turned off the cadrenet for a second. ‘Coldstar, relay back to cadre support aboard the *Manifest Dream* and see if they have any data on this race.’

‘At once, commander.’

There was a rising roar of engines under the din of the bellowing orks and screaming Molochites. Farsight grimaced as a pair of badly made ork vehicles burst out of a side street, the solid-shot guns strapped to their sides hammering out a fusillade that cut down a pack of crimson-skinned hounds. Behind the ork vehicles came a pack of horned riders in close pursuit. Their steeds were colossally built quadrupeds that looked somewhere between a Vior’lan monoceros and an earth caste machine-sculpture.

The second ork vehicle clipped a ruined pillar as it took a tight corner, went out of control, and flipped once, twice, three times down the narrow street. Three of the massive red-skinned steeds slammed into the wreck head first, the first two buckling its chassis, the third crashing right through it in an explosion of shrapnel and flame to charge after the other two careening ork vehicles.

The leading ork jalopy swerved hard to avoid the riders thundering after it. It was too slow, and the foremost rider slashed away its rear wheel with a curving sweep of its

blade. The vehicle skidded hard, spinning back to front before crashing into the side of a withdrawing Devilfish as the Molochite cavalry plunged past into the melee beyond.

The t'au skimmer lurched, its rear engine crashing into the wreckage in a spray of sparks, and began to list. Anti-grav engines whined as it attempted to pull away from the vehicle that had collided with it, but the force of the wagon's collision had meant it was stuck fast. Already the ork crew of the vehicle were taking their axes to the rear of the t'au transport, too preoccupied with the Devilfish to see that a group of Molochite warriors was loping towards them from behind a colonnade of pillars.

'Devilfish Team Natar'wa, channel maximum power to right engine and swivel to full horizontal,' said Farsight, threading a pulse of plasma through the pillars to kill the ork vehicle's gunner in a puff of blood. 'The be'gel are upon you.' The Devilfish's icon winked in acknowledgement, and a shimmering heat haze burned from the stricken engine unit at its stern, cooking the orks climbing atop it.

The greenskins scrambled back even as the Molochite riders leapt into the fray, hacking at their heat-scalded prey. Farsight pushed in close, sweeping his fusion blaster around to cut the front of the ork vehicle clean away so the stricken Devilfish could pull free.

A Molochite swordsman came at him, hissing. He took its first blow on his force shield, then shot it in the mouth with his plasma rifle. He was already turning away when he realised that the plasma shot had sizzled into the creature's jaws without harming it; it simply glowed, laughing hollowly as it darted forward to strike again. The beast filled the prime hex-screen, scrabbling with long claws at the outside of his battlesuit.

There was a burst of light, dampened out by his blacksun filter. The creature came apart in a cloud of hovering, stringy matter in front of him.

'Killshot from drones deployed by the Devilfish,' said Coldstar by way of explanation.

'My thanks, Team Natar'wa,' said Farsight, sending an icon of gratitude. 'I have it from here.'

'Commander, we cannot move out of the fire zone just yet. Our stern engine is still compromised. It will not lift us for long.'

'Turn it off altogether,' said Farsight. The team inside blipped their response. Carefully adjusting the XV8's thrust/vector suite, he put the flank of his Crisis suit to the damaged engine and, extruding a hand from his gun limb, held the listing side of the tank upright.

A pack of red-skinned hounds the size of horses bounded towards them, their eyes glowing in the gloom. 'Go,' shouted Farsight, his battlesuit's own repulsor pack compensating for the broken engine. The Devilfish righted itself, and they drifted fast towards the perimeter of the closest strongpoint.

The Molochite hounds came in close, the pack letting the largest of their number lead the assault. Farsight took a shot with his free arm's plasma rifle, tearing away one of its front legs and half of its chest. Incredibly, it increased its pace, a lopsided and staggering charge that saw it leap over a shattered statue and hurl itself towards him with mouth agape.

Farsight brought his shield generator around and pushed its levels high to release a pulse of energy. In a flash, the invisible disc of force hurled the creature backwards into its fellows. Another leapt in. With his shield still recovering, he met this one with a sweeping kick. The creature twisted in mid-air and clamped its jaws around his battlesuit's ankle. It shook like a crocodilian in a death roll, yanking his XV8 hard and nearly causing him to lose his grip on the Devilfish. He placed his plasma rifle's barrel on top of its skull and shot it through the head.

The beast's brain pan was a smoking crater, but somehow it kept gnawing for a few more moments, gouging silvery lines in the hyper-alloy of his battlesuit before he finally prised it off with the tip of his rifle. He fired again, at the

centre mass this time, and the Molochite hound fell apart in strings of nameless matter. Its weird dissolution reminded him of calligrapher's ink dropped into water.

'Engage the rest,' said Farsight, eye-looping the warriors of the strongpoint he was retreating to and linking them to the pack in close pursuit. The t'au riflemen opened up, catching the oncoming hounds in a hurricane of hissing plasma that saw the creatures punched to the ground, then blasted to nothingness. Farsight heaved the Devilfish past the encirclement cordon, then turned back to the fight in the centre of the plaza.

'Anything from cadre support on this species?'

'Negative,' said Coldstar, enlarging a hex that showed a horned Molochite hacking through a pair of orks, spittle flying from its mouth. 'It is my contention close engagement should be avoided.'

'Strange to relate, I concur.' He reopened the cadrenet. 'Full withdrawal, all teams,' he transmitted. 'I would have the measure of this portal before we recommit.'

The various elements of the t'au cadre fell back in a series of smooth cover-and-retreat set pieces, Farsight himself standing between the stricken Devilfish and the roiling melee back at the rune-emblazoned dais. There was something frightening about that disc of energy glowing above the carnage, its intense light sending flickering, dancing shadows across the plaza. Many of those shadows were moving as if they had a life of their own, writhing like primitive devils depicted on the walls of the ancient Fio'taun caves.

Moving his icon on the thrust/vector suite, Farsight increased the Coldstar's repulsor fields. He rose six metres into the air, taking care to remain hidden behind a vast but headless statue. Then he looked back down at the disc from his new vantage point, trying to make sense of the shapes in its strange unlight.

And gazed into hell.

The glowing energies of the disc spread out to claim his

vision entirely - not on the viewscreen of his command cocoon, but in his mind's eye. It filled his perception, a burning vision framed by thrashing tentacles of unlight that wrapped themselves around his conscious mind and refused to let go. He felt as if his face were being lowered towards a bubbling pool of lava, the intense heat crisping not his skin, but his psyche, raw and unprepared for such a profound attack.

Visions assailed him, thrust into his mind by some malevolent force.

He watched layered reality, white and chrome and beautiful on the outside, slough away like melting wax. It revealed a twisted, skeletal wasteland beneath. He saw hundreds of thousands of t'au slaves, all smiling so hard they bled at the corners of their mouths and stained their teeth with gore. They were bound in glowing chains to the hands of heedless giants, massive robed behemoths several hundred metres in height, who dragged their slaves like rag dolls through a wilderness of broken glass and grasping, snarling horrors.

Hundreds of smiling t'au died with each giant step, but always there were more to replace them, pushed out from tube-ridged carousels that protruded from the ground. Each infant was pre-packaged and shrink-wrapped, its birth-caul somewhere between a shark's egg purse and a rations packet. The tiny t'au within struggled to get out, ripping their cauls with shaking fingers. As soon as they shucked off their translucent coverings and stood up, a beam of harsh light burned down at them, its intensity peeling back their eyelids to force itself into their minds. Getting larger and older by the moment, the t'au youngsters drooled, then grinned. They picked up the chains from the corpses trailing in the dust and unclasped them, only to close the collars around their own necks.

In the middle distance, vassal races of all shapes and sizes were branded like cattle by empty battlesuits whose gaping control cocoons dripped with blood. Those of the slave

races that dared break free from the processing lines were blasted in the back by killing plasma, each double beam shooting out not from weaponry but the sensor optics of the battlesuits that herded them into the throng.

Farsight blinked, his mind reeling.

The capital world, T'au, was beset by the ravages of outright war, its elegant towers toppling into a red-lit fug of smoke and flame as crimson skimmers and battlesuits rained down fire from above. The skyline faded away to reveal an endless plain of hot brass shot with bubbling rivers of blood. The spires of t'au civilisation crumbled like dry Dal'ythan clay to reveal vast towers of bone and pillars of stacked skulls. Some were so high they disappeared from sight above clouds of soot and pollution.

The roar of distant battle clamoured on the edge of hearing. In the foreground were wargroups of t'au, divided by caste as in the time of the Mont'au, each group clad in the colours and raiment of their original tribes. They no longer stood united by the Greater Good, but as deadly rivals, shrieking their hatred at each other as if possessed by a mania ten times worse than that of the Time of Terror.

Blood ran on the dry earth in rivulets. As Farsight watched, the little streams rose into the air, funnelling themselves into the mouths and eyes of the t'au fire caste to drive them into apoplectic frenzies of killing violence. Farsight saw himself amongst them. He was clad as a warrior king, a crown of bones protruding from his brow, screaming in triumph as he throttled O'Shaserra with one hand and O'Kais with the other.

He blinked again.

The vastness of space glittered, cold and uncaring, broken only by an impossibly vast hexagonal structure around a hole in space. On the sleek arcology before him a crowd of t'au cried out in pain and terror as some manner of grotesque fungus burst from their limbs, then torsos, then mouths and eyes, the odd growths stretching up to intertwine into a throbbing, pulsating mass of plague-

ravaged flesh that leered down at him. Rancid fat and toxic phlegm poured down like rain, rivers of infected drool gushing from its blubbery lips as the creature grew vaster still. It reached up to the hexagonal structure and hauled itself upwards, blotting out a hundred thousand suns with its flabby immensity as it squeezed its way into the portal-like hole in space. Somehow Farsight knew that on the other side of that hole was the cradle of t'au civilisation, and that the godlike creature pushing its way through there could no more be stopped with military power than a creeping, invisible plague could be stopped by a balled fist.

Another blink.

A landscape of tortured, inflamed flesh stretched out into the distance. Stumbling blindly on bloodied feet were aliens of a hundred different species, naked and confused. Towering bipedal ballistics suits the size of skyscrapers stalked amongst them, their elegant lines and clean sept heraldry obscured by the corpses tied like ablative armour to their limbs. They were piloted by nothing more than necklaces of brains held in strange glowing spheres. The giant machines called out fragments of phrases that Farsight recognised as the invective of the water caste, each carefully crafted sentiment and cunning entreaty punctuated at random by the same bellowed refrain - 'JOIN OR DIE!'

Where the aliens ran from them, the ballistics suits opened fire, obliterating those who rejected them in sudden firestorms that turned them to ash on the wind. Where the inductees simply cowered, the t'au giants would catch them up in clawed hands, then hold them close to their anatomy where they were bound by living chains to form another layer of fleshy armour over the pristine alloy of the suit itself. The screaming of the victims bound to the titanic battlesuits clawed at Farsight's mind, a symphony of pain that pushed itself into his soul.

Blink.

Peace on Dal'yth. The aun caste were massing to hear the

words of the Supreme Ethereal, walking through twilit gardens towards the vast spires of a crystalline fortress. They blurred and shifted as he watched, splitting into two, then combining, then splitting again as they talked animatedly about the wisdom they were about to receive.

The crystal fortress shimmered in the evening light, unfolding so that its panels of reflective material sent a kaleidoscope of images glinting in the air. Each showed the crux point of a new war being declared, a new atrocity being committed, a new act of treachery or manipulation that would see countless lives changed for the worse.

As the ethereals gathered, joining hands in a great circle of supplicants around the towering edifice, the last of the crystal fell away to expose a vast abomination, blue and pink and burning with warp fire all at the same time, the flaming eye sockets and gibbering maw set into its chest recounting words of madness in a hundred thousand languages. The ethereals took up the chant, blending and blurring into one another to become a set of reflections so fractal and complex that they showed a thousand warzones, a trillion deaths, all somehow forcing itself into Farsight's consciousness at once.

Blink.

The galaxy screamed, and ripped along its length. The works of those long-fallen empires that had held back the dimension beyond reality had been purposefully shattered, hunted down and cast into the dust. The fabric of real space had weakened, thinned, and - like a dam broken apart by ceaseless impacts across its length - finally burst.

The terrifying truth of the hellish dimension was writ large, scarring the heavens with a lurid weal of purple, pink and blue. The disc-portal of Arthas Moloch was a single drop of poison in comparison to this ocean of toxic damnation, a rising tide of anarchy that would turn the history of the galaxy on its head.

A dread certainty slithered within Farsight's mind, a serpent slick with blood wrapping itself around his frontal

lobe. This was no threat, no awful spectre of that which might come to pass should the evils of the galaxy be allowed to triumph.

This was the truth, and it was inevitable.

The visions sped up, battering at his mind, becoming a blur of motion that never ended. He saw every star in the night sky going supernova in quick succession. The tiny suns winked out one after another until the inevitable heat death of the universe stole the skies entire. In their wake there was only a burning god and his hateful brothers in darkness, their insane laughter echoing across the lifeless void as they sought new realities to corrupt and despoil.

The terrors pouring into Farsight's mind layered one atop the other, suffocating his consciousness. Blind with panic, he screamed within his battlesuit, palsied hands inadvertently driving the Coldstar in a tight spiral that saw it spin out of the sky and crash headlong into the cratered landscape beneath.

Then, at last, blissful darkness.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE GAOL

THE *MANIFEST DREAM*
ARTHAS MOLOCH

Farsight awoke with a shout of denial, thrashing around in a strange half-liquid that was trying to drown him. Needles of pain stabbed his eyes as he desperately tried to make sense of his surroundings.

But he could breathe.

The odd feeling of thick liquid between his fingers triggered memories of Dal'yth. It dawned on him he was ensconced in a healsphere, and therefore safe aboard the med-bay of his fleet. Around him he could just about make out earth caste orderlies, their low voices murmuring beyond the transparent walls of the healsphere as they made minute adjustments to the various machines accelerating his recovery.

Thank the T'au'va, his cadre had completed the withdrawal from that hellish place. They had left the warzone of Arthas Moloch behind.

Farsight's mind still felt inflamed, poisoned by the terrible visions he had seen on the planet below. His eyes burned, feeling like they were horribly swollen, but he dared not close them again for fear of seeing after-images of the visions he had witnessed. He ran through a check of every muscle and tendon, tensing and relaxing them each in turn to ensure his will and his body were one. It was a technique taught to him by Master Puretide, painstaking but thorough. The act of assessing his body's status usually helped him get some measure of control over his mind.

They had just been waking nightmares, he told himself. Figments of the imagination with no more basis in truth than a nocturnal hallucination, sent by some freakish mind-science to distress him and undermine his inner strength. Yet they felt seared into his consciousness, each memory a still-raw wound in his psyche. There was something about them, some ring of truth that he could not shake.

'Can you hear me?' he managed, his words robbed of their usual crisp enunciation by the respirator cup-mask he wore. He had learned to hate that device, back on Dal'yth; though it occasionally funnelled restorative fluids in either side of his mouth, it made speech very difficult, especially when robbed of the ability to make the correct accompanying gestures.

'I said can you hear me?'

One of the earth caste attendants looked in his direction. The fio scientist placed three fingers of each wide, stub-fingered hand on the exterior of the healsphere to initiate the vocal relay. A tiny pop burst in Farsight's ear as an auditory channel was established via his interior comms bead.

'We can hear you,' said the orderly. 'You must remain still as best you can, and heal.'

'What is the status of the Arthas Moloch operation?'

'We have been told by the aun not to divulge that information. They say you must heal, and that all else is secondary.'

The ethereal caste. They always knew best. The entirety of t'au society was built on that one supposition. And still Farsight could not shake the image of the colossal figures striding across a field of broken glass, chained but smiling t'au trailing in their wake.

'I am the expedition leader. I must assess the current situation and give orders accordingly. Patch in the information that I may study it. That is a direct order!'

The earth caste fio'ui made a tipping gesture of contrition, multiplying its intensity with the casting-forth gesture of his free hand. 'I cannot set in motion the expulsion protocol, high commander,' he said, his broad flat teeth set in a grimace. 'I am acting under the express orders of the aun.'

'They think me too valuable an asset to risk,' said Farsight. He stabbed a finger at the inside of the sphere, but the interior informational the motion should have conjured failed to appear. 'The danger we left behind on Arthas Moloch is far more severe than they realise. I must speak to them. To anyone.'

'They said you might say that,' said the fio dolefully, turning away. 'Team Fio'kais Rinyon, I regretfully conclude we must withdraw from our observations. The aun divulged that the rhetoric of the fire caste can inflame even a balanced mind.'

'You must listen to me! I formally discharge myself from your care. Fetch your superior, Fio O'Vesa. He will teach you your place in the T'au'va. Better yet, allow me egress and I will teach it to you myself!'

The earth caste attendants withdrew silently from the room, their medical drones hovering out in stately procession after them.

'T'au'va curse you!' shouted Farsight, pounding on the healsphere as hard as he could as the door shut behind them. 'We are fighting that which we do not understand!'

Then they were gone, and the room fell silent once more.

A long and painful dec of waiting slid past. Farsight did his best to find inner peace, and in doing so, think of a way out of his predicament. Hideous, mind-numbing flashbacks assailed his wounded psyche, each threatening to capsize his sanity and send him into a state of thrashing animal panic.

He forced himself to focus, conjuring recollections of his time with O'Shaserra. The most recent was still fresh in his mind, a vivid oil painting daubed in haste over the wan watercolours of distant memory. Its painful intensity overrode all others.

He still recalled her harsh words, her insistence that he take his hand from her arm as she went into cryostasis, her biting tone as she sent him away. Even the memories of the good times on Kan'ji had been painful since that day on Dal'yth, bittersweet since their awkward parting. But at least they were real.

He felt his mind slipping away. Tiny white petals fell outside the mouth of the cave.

'The scars of the mind are always worse than those of the body,' said Kauyon-Shas, running a spit-slicked finger down the long, open weals where Puretide had taken his stick to Shoh's spine. He grimaced, but did not flinch as she dug the splinters and pieces of grit from the clotted wounds criss-crossing his back. 'The wounds within will breed fear. Resentment. In time, hatred.'

Farsight nodded, the salve of her gentle touch enough to keep his temper from flaring again. 'It is a sad truth.'

'Unless we remove them,' she said, 'just as I remove the foreign bodies from these wounds. Unless we cleanse them, to prevent the infection taking hold.'

'And just how does one do that, Shas, with a wound to the psyche?' he asked, sucking in his breath as she dislodged a particularly large splinter from the flesh next to his spine. 'I fear my mind is aflame already.'

'Slowly. Deliberately. With patience and great purpose.'

She stroked the skin of his back next to the wound, signifying that she was finished. 'Just as we heal from a broken limb by treating it with care, then gradually stressing it to regain our strength, the same can be achieved with the mind.'

Farsight nodded, fighting to hold back a heavy exhalation of his true feelings.

'Avoid the master's wrath for a few days,' she said, her voice soft and reassuring. 'Then test him anew, just as he tests you, should you feel the need. But let the wounds of the mind heal a little first.'

'I suppose there is good sense in that.'

'Well of course there is,' she said, her tone affronted. He smiled, then. He knew her well enough now to know when she was playing up to her reputation. It was something their bond-mate Kais had never really understood, but then as Shas had said, one who had mastered so much in the arts of war could not be expected to understand the subtleties of peace as well.

'You can train your mind in any way you please, Shoh,' said Shas. 'It is a powerful thing. More powerful than even the master knows.'

The memory faded. It was as close to a compliment as O'Shaserra had ever given him, and Farsight had treasured it ever since. He would live up to her claim, he thought, his swollen eyes narrowing in the thick liquid of the healsphere. Repay her faith in him, over and over again.

As to the matter of how, he had no idea.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE PHOENIX

THE *MANIFEST DREAM*
ARTHAS MOLOCH LOW ORBIT

Vykola Herat lay sleepless in her chambers, staring up at the ceiling of her well-appointed room. She was trying her best not to look at her pics of Xyndrea for the twentieth time that cycle, but she knew it was a losing battle. Where was the harm?

There was no escaping it; she missed human contact, and badly. An evil little voice in her mind told her she was overcompensating, that she was just doing it to convince herself she still had human emotions, and to deflect the fact that the feelings she had for Xyndrea were ebbing away with each new dawn.

Given the horrors she had seen in the mirror over the time since she had left cryostasis, she craved a meeting of minds with someone she trusted. There was no way a t'au could even come close to understanding what she was going through. Loneliness was not something an inquisitor would

admit to, let alone one of the Ordo Xenos, deep in the territory of those aliens they studied – usually, the better to kill them. But it was true. She felt vulnerable, and afraid. She had even drafted an open astropathic summons to her old psyker comrades Malagrea, Cobliaze and Darrapor, though she knew that if she set it in motion, it would likely bring more harm than good.

Face the fear, Vykola, she told herself. Stare it down. Master it.

She got up from the bed, moving over to the water disc and waving the back of her hand across it to conjure its tiny fountain. A mirrorfield shimmered into place above it as it sent its arcing waters into the air.

She could hardly bear to look in it; last time she had done so, she had seen feathers in her hair, iridescent and lined with tiny barbs. She had considered it a hallucination until her questing fingers had found them to be quite real. They were attached to her head, yet nerveless, and on some level she knew they were not quite a part of her. It had been a painful experience, plucking them out, but it was the damage to her mind that she feared would linger. She had been corrupted by the very thing she sought to eradicate, and it would not let her go.

Herat steeled herself, and looked into the mirrorfield. This time it did nothing more than reflect the smooth, symmetrical features she had been presenting to the cosmos for over a decade.

Relieved beyond measure, she splashed water onto her cheeks and throat, then scowled, pursing her lips. The single card of the Emperor's Tarot, tattooed on her forehead, showed not the Shrinedaughter card that represented her partner Xyndrea, as she had expected. Instead it showed the regal countenance of the Philosopher King, inverted.

'No accident,' she muttered to herself.

She needed a kindred spirit. But perhaps a Kindred Soul would do.

Commander Farsight's head jerked up as the door to the med-suite hissed open. He saw a blurred silhouette, too tall to be fire caste yet too athletically built to be one of the kor, slide inside the room. The alien furtiveness of the newcomer's movements were all O'Shovah needed to place her identity.

'Thank the T'au'va,' he breathed.

Vykola Herat approached the healsphere, her smooth features distorted by the curvature of the apparatus. 'Can you hear me?' she said, laying a hand on the outside of the healsphere to activate its sonic transfer suite. 'Place a hand on the plexi-sphere if you can.'

Farsight nodded, complying.

'I don't know why you were in my thoughts,' she said. 'But it seemed right to come here.'

'I thank the T'au'va that you did, Mamzel Delaque. Your mind-science guided you, no doubt.'

Herat looked askance. 'I don't think that's how it works.'

'It matters not!' hissed Farsight, his mind suddenly burning as his emotions took hold. Inside his chest, something grabbed at his heart. 'All that matters is that you are here, and that you listen to what I have to say, in the name of the Greater Good. This expedition's future depends on it.'

Vykola took a step back, and glanced at the door.

'I offer profound contrition,' said Farsight. 'I have suffered a great agony, and it is affecting my mental state.'

'What happened to you?' asked Vykola. 'Your eyes...'

'They are bloodshot, no doubt.'

'They are worse than bloodshot,' said Vykola, raising an eyebrow. 'You look like you are at death's door.'

'I saw some manner of vile phenomenon, down there on the relic world,' said Farsight. 'It is likely you are the only person I know that will understand what it was, Mamzel Delaque. To me, it looked... it looked like a portal.'

'Go on.'

Farsight heaved a shuddering sigh, a strange pain

trickling in his lungs. His head was ringing, but he forced himself to concentrate. 'We were purging the aliens as per standard ork-killer protocols. We had them surrounded in an area where they were easy to corral and catch in a crossfire. It was some manner of primitive temple, we thought. But as they fell, a strange disc of energy coalesced above the central plaza zone. It shimmered with light, but had no discernible source.'

'And something came out of it, I presume?'

'You know of this manner of event already, then?' His tone was accusative, despite his attempts to keep it level. It was no real surprise that Herat was well versed in such anomalies; it was one of the main reasons he sought her counsel. But he could not shake a feeling of slight resentment at the fact she was privy to so many secrets.

'Why else would you call it a portal?' she answered.

He pursed his lips. 'Some manner of alien I have not yet encountered emerged from it. They... they came amidst a rain of liquid, red in colouration. It mapped on my substance analysis suite as arterial blood.'

Vykola frowned, but said nothing.

'Perhaps some of their number died in a teleportation incident,' said Farsight, already doubting his own rationalisation even as he spoke it, 'and their remains exited the portal at the same time as those who made the transition intact.'

'Is this room secure?' replied Vykola, her voice lowered. 'Is it likely that any are listening?'

'Are you at all interested in this information, Kindred Soul?' He suddenly made his expression severe, hoping something of it would translate even through the distortion of the sphere's duraglass. They would almost certainly be under surveillance, and the charade of their formal relationship had to be kept up - for now at least. 'I am finding it hard enough to revisit these memories even without distraction.'

'I am,' said Vykola, frowning. She narrowed her eyes

before replying. 'Yes, I am, high commander. Of course I am. This temple area. Tell me more of it.'

'The portal was elaborate,' said Farsight, nodding to let her know she had performed her part in the theatre well. 'There were symbols I did not understand around its edge, but as is protocol, I took a record for eventual translation by the water caste. I can have Coldstar patch them across to my notation disc if my personal effects are within this theatre.'

'You can?'

'Yes. Prototype uplink bead, inside my throat. O'Vesa's work.' He twisted, pressing close against the duraglass. 'Can you access the storage drawers? My disc is inside the closest. It is still faulty, to my shame.'

'This one?' She rapped a knuckle on a flattened cylinder marked with the symbol of the fire caste, then placed her hand flat upon it. 'These containers are heat activated, are they not?'

'After a fashion.' Farsight felt his heart sink. 'It is keyed to a t'au standard biological signature. You, as a human, will exude too much heat to activate it. Plus there is the small matter of you having one too many fingers.'

Herat shrugged in the manner of her kind. 'Not necessarily.'

'I am unclear as to your meaning.'

'I am well versed in biomancy, dear commander,' she said holding up her hand. Her fingers melded together into a single flat slab of flesh, then parted again, becoming four digits rather than five. 'I learned this manner of manipulation long before my tenth annual feast. And changing one's body temperature is easy, especially to match that of the earth caste. They always maintain much the same threshold, it seems, no matter the circumstances.'

Farsight felt his gorge rise at the sight of such flagrant mind-science, finding it deeply unnatural, but said nothing as she placed her hybridised hand upon the flattened cylinder of his personal items. The container sprung open

with a slight hiss.

Herat took the notation disc from within, smiled triumphantly, and ran a thumb around its rim. A tiny light glowed on its uppermost side, but it did not activate.

‘Nothing,’ she said, her smile fading away. ‘Is it keyed to your specific bio-signature?’

‘*Learn to shorten your reach,*’ he replied.

The notation disc responded to his code phrase, a cascade of lights glittering across its rim as it projected a low hologram of its interaction screen.

‘Ah,’ said Herat. ‘A double lock.’

‘*The wise adapt.*’

At the second code phrase, the disc emitted the multilayered barrage of white noise that Ob’lotai had gifted him back on Dal’yth. Farsight breathed out slowly, glad that he could at last speak freely, and began to tell Herat something he would never entrust to anyone else.

‘The creatures I saw dropping out of that portal,’ said Farsight. ‘They were not like any others I have ever witnessed, whether in the T’au Empire or beyond it. They did not seem to obey the laws of physics as I understand them.’ He shook his head, his features creasing. ‘As the t’au race understands them.’

‘How so?’

‘It was not a teleportation incident that caused the rain of blood. They came from the blood itself, Herat. They were born out of clotted blood.’

‘How so?’

‘At first they emerged out of clumps of gore no bigger than a fist, or perhaps a torso. They unfolded, limbs extending, as if growing from infancy to adulthood in a matter of moments. It was highly disturbing.’

‘New alien species can be unsettling at first contact, can they not?’ She gave a tight smile as she cocked her head, smoothing her hand back to its former incarnation with the sound of popping knucklebones. Something in her tone told Farsight she was testing him.

'It is true,' said the commander. 'I am no stranger to encountering alien races that elicit a feeling of disgust.'

'I am well aware of your thinly veiled feelings towards me, commander.'

'This is no time for levity,' said Farsight sternly. The throbbing in his head was getting worse. 'These Molochites...'

'The apparitions, you mean?'

'Yes. I first named them on the assumption they are native to the planet, but now I am not so sure. I thought perhaps the anomalies could be explained by mind-science. Not the psychic doctrines of the humans, but those of another species entirely.'

'It is possible,' said Herat, her tone strangely tight. 'In fact I think that is the most satisfactory explanation.'

'And I think the best lies include a measure of truth,' said Farsight, 'and also that there is something you are not telling me. I saw things, down there. Visions of evil, hideous interpretations, or just nightmares, all forced into my mind. Things that would have broken a younger version of myself. I have a suspicion these Molochites are malevolent towards all other life, and are not creatures of our dimension at all.'

Vykola inclined her head. 'Go on.'

'We engaged these creatures in battle after they made their first move against us,' said Farsight. 'At first, they seemed content only to attack the orks we had as our primary targets, and we were more than happy to let them. Then some of the orks broke the perimeter. We had contingencies, of course, but we had not factored in a second hostile force. The red-skinned creatures attacked us at the same time as the orks, and we found ourselves engaged on two fronts.'

'That is still the case, as far as I understand.'

Farsight frowned in puzzlement. 'Clarify, please.'

'Many of the initial attack elements are still on Arthas Moloch. Weren't you aware of that?'

A tight knot of anger and despair clenched in Farsight's

chest. He had assumed, as the high commander of the assault, that the rest of his cadre had honoured his command to withdraw. He had assumed they were already aboard the same vessel. To think they were still down there, at the mercy of some alien race that could shrug off plasma blasts at point-blank range, beggared belief.

And if the ethereals were still down there too...

'Kor'vesa disc, contact O'Vesa,' said Farsight. His notation device winked, the symbol of the stone dragon flickering upon its hologram screen to unfurl into a hex-window. It pulsed once, twice, three times, before resolving into the flat, grinning face of his earth caste ally.

'O'Shovah, greetings of the T'au'va to you,' he said. *'How may I be of service?'*

'I am held incapacitated within a healsphere in the med-bay of...' He looked pointedly at Herat.

'The Manifest Dream,' she whispered.

'The Dream. I have formally discharged myself from the earth caste's service.'

'Yet you remain within the sphere?' said O'Vesa.

'As I said,' said Farsight through gritted teeth. 'I turn to you for extraction. Override my incarceration, please. This should be well within the capabilities of your rank.'

'Certainly,' said O'Vesa. He moved his fingers as if manipulating an invisible screen, tiny dots of light on the tips of each digit, then sat back. *'Ah,'* he said. *'Unfortunately, you appear to be severely wounded. You have bled from multiple contusions in the brain, and your heart has stopped on two separate occasions in the last dec. There is only a thirteen point six per cent chance of surviving to see your next rotaa if you forgo earth caste care at this juncture.'*

'And yet it is up to me to make the decision. As high commander of this war effort, I order you to release me.'

'In any case, the remote override is not responding. Fortunate, perhaps, given the micro-haemorrhages in your cerebrum.'

‘Such a simple artificial intelligence as the healsphere can refute one of fio’o rank?’

‘Usually, no,’ said O’Vesa. ‘*This is unprecedented.*’

‘A higher authority has intervened, it seems,’ said Herat.

‘Mamzel Delaque, can you override it?’ said Farsight, growing desperate. ‘You still have the right heat signature, I presume.’

The human gestured towards the cascading earth caste readouts on the med-suite’s primary screen. ‘I wouldn’t know where to start, I’m afraid. A notation disc is one thing, but as to cutting-edge medical programs...’ She let the statement hang in the air.

‘I have no time for this,’ hissed Farsight. ‘I need to be down there, salvaging as many lives as possible from this disaster. How many t’au have we evacuated thus far? What percentage of the original expedition has left the planet?’

O’Vesa moved his hands quickly, squinting as he read ghosted screeds of data. ‘*But for yourself and a minimal honour detail, that would be nil,*’ he said.

‘What? My cadres have been left down there?’

‘*It appears so.*’

‘I need to gather my fellows,’ said Farsight, pulling at the fine cannulas and gel-wraps that bound him within the healsphere. ‘This is not a safe haven. This is a prison.’

O’Vesa’s eyes widened. ‘*High commander, I would not advise—*’

Farsight balled a fist, focused hard, and punched the wall of the healsphere. It did little more than send a ripple across the thick transparent shell. He punched again. Still nothing. The gel-like liquid inside was robbing his blows of much of their force.

‘Are you certain this is what you want?’ said Herat.

‘Yes!’ shouted Farsight. ‘This is vital!’

‘Then allow me,’ said Herat, making a fist of her own. It glowed, the bones of her hand clearly visible as pink and blue flame flickered around it. Striding over, she brought her fist down like a hammer. One blow, and the healsphere

was suddenly crazed with jagged lines. A second, and the front of it fell away like the shell of a cracked egg, broken duraglass shards clattering to the sterile floor amongst a flood of gelatinous fluid.

Farsight toppled out in a tangle of tubes and gel-wraps, landing clumsily on all fours before scrabbling upright and straightening his spine to find some semblance of dignity. He felt the clawed hand of pain clutch again in his chest, but fought it down.

'My thanks,' he said, tearing the respirator cup-mask away. 'O'Vesa, can you at least open the suite door?'

The earth caster swiped a finger, and the door to the suite slid open with a slight hiss.

'It appears so,' he said.

'Then let us leave. Facilitate a communion to the commander-level cadrenet, please.'

'Boosting now,' said O'Vesa. *'You should have contact.'*

'Is my XV8 operative and in dock?'

'It is indeed. Bay one-zero, all repairs complete.'

Farsight grabbed a heat-capture wrap from a nearby gurney and wrapped himself in it, taking care to cover as much of his face as possible.

'I cannot believe I am a fugitive in my own expedition,' he muttered as he bustled out of the door. 'How did it come to this?'

'You must follow that which your heart tells you,' said Herat. Her voice sounded strange, for a moment; it was deeper, and had a mocking tone underneath its sincerity.

Farsight paused on the threshold for a moment, wrapping his capture-wrap tight and staring hard at her strangely symmetrical eyes.

'I always do. You know this of me.'

'Not always,' said Herat. 'But more so, these days.'

He frowned, but said nothing. 'My thanks for your help,' he replied, bowing in lieu of making the gesture of the gift's recipient; he still held the wrap tight around his torso and the lower half of his face. 'Blessings of the T'au'va

upon you, Mamzel Delaque, but I must get back down to the planet.'

'I'm coming with you.'

Farsight was about to contradict her, but then looked at the shattered healsphere and the slick of gel that had held him fast until her intervention. 'Very well,' he said, motioning with his head for her to follow him as he looked down both sides of the corridor. 'But be aware, whatever species it is that has afflicted that planet, it is so strange and dangerous it may be the end of you. And if you do return, you may be forever changed.'

'Perhaps so,' said Vykola as she set off after him. 'Change is inevitable.'

The *Manifest Dream* swept on through space, carving back towards the same peninsula it had left not so long ago. Farsight glanced at his notation disc's display, smiling grimly as he walked along the corridors with Herat close behind.

Y'eldi had fulfilled the commander's course correction well, it seemed; the craft's new vector was a wide parabola, so gentle a change of direction that only an air caste operative would notice it. Even should they check the reason, with Farsight's authority behind the change of heading, none would think to question it twice.

The ethereal caste would be incensed beyond measure if they realised their orders to withdraw were being countermanded, but they had not the innate sense of direction that all air caste t'au were born with. By the time they discovered Y'eldi's little 'mistake' it would be too late. As the pilot had put it, they would still be withdrawing eventually, just in a far more roundabout fashion than perhaps intended.

Farsight had felt a strange mixture of pride and shame at the fact Y'eldi had been prepared to deliberately misinterpret the ethereal caste's orders - likely trickled down from Aun'Diemn, or perhaps even Aun'Tipiya - in

favour of those from Farsight himself. The pilot had always been an independent thinker within the bounds of t'au society. But O'Shovah had a nagging feeling that the pilot's decision to aid Farsight, when it was uncovered, would lead to permanent reassignment. Perhaps even total disappearance.

'Y'eldi,' said Farsight under his breath as he hurried along the corridors of the *Dream's* fire caste quarters. 'Old friend. You need a new honorific. Firewing, perhaps. If we live long enough, I will make sure you receive it.'

'I beg your pardon, high commander?' said Vykola, close on his heels.

'I spoke only to myself,' he said. 'We have more pressing concerns.'

It had taken only a few microdecs for Farsight to reach his intended destination, but even that delay had felt interminable. Several air caste operatives had looked down on him in confusion as he hustled past them with his capture-wrap pulled tight around his shoulders, a gue'la auxiliary in his wake. None of them, however, said anything, or made a move to stop him. The caste system was so robust, and the t'au so unwilling to believe anything untoward could be happening, that they simply accepted his presence. To them they were witnessing some strange fire caste behaviour, and they had no need to understand it. Everyone had their own part to play in the T'au'va, after all.

By the time Farsight reached the meditation chamber he had designated as a meeting point he felt his anger burning hot.

'I should not be creeping around the corridors of a spaceship, twitching at every sign of movement,' he said. 'I should be down there on the planet, leading my caste-mates, eradicating the stain of the orks from the system and saving as many lives as possible from the Molochite scourge.'

'If there are any left to save, that is.'

'Yes, thank you for that, Mamzel Herat.' She seemed to be

growing more capricious by the dec.

When the high commander thumbed some of his skin cells onto the receptor, the door of the meditation chamber gave a dull burr, a tiny expression of denial. Small though it was, it made Farsight's blood burn within his veins. Even here his authority had been rescinded.

He tried again, but still the entrance would not yield.

Herat was already reaching over to put her hand close to the portal - in her guise as Thransia Delaque, a Kindred Soul, she had high clearance of her own - when the door suddenly irised open.

'Welcome, high commander,' came a familiar voice.

Inside were five of the fire caste's finest. Brightsword, seated in cross-legged meditation with his warscaper drones hovering like attendants on either side, opened one crystal-clear eye as Farsight moved in. Sha'vastos was already at full attention nearby, his back ramrod straight and a glint of fierce warrior pride in his eyes as he made a gesture of gladness. He nodded his head, just a fraction, in thanks.

There was Ob'lotai's incarnation of a large black droneform, the rim of his disc dipping in respect; he had been reconstituted after the battle of Tau'rota'sha, his exterior data display now reading 5-0. The tactical map of Arthas Moloch he was projecting into the centre of the room was impressive in scale and detail. Moata, the Burning Chameleon, was examining it, the broad-shouldered stealthier in plain view for once as he looked up at Farsight and laced his fingers in the sign of unity.

Finally there was Bravestorm, not there in person, but as a relay hologram from the iridium Enforcer XV8-02 that was both his weapon and his life-support system. The Dal'ythan commander's projection was every bit as hideously burned and disfigured as his true form, for the commander would not shy away from his predicament, nor sanitise his desire for vengeance. His blackened body was clad in full fire caste apparel, sitting at ease despite the occasional spasm

of pain.

'Greetings in the name of the T'au'va,' he said, making the sign of a visitor gladly received. *'And may I compliment you on your striking appearance.'*

Farsight shucked off his heat-capture blanket before his commanders, standing before them in nothing but a medical underwrap. 'Better now?'

'I think I preferred it before, shameless one,' said Brightsword, picking up a full-body interface suit from a nearby curvedesk. The young commander threw the bodysuit over, and Farsight caught it, dressing for battle with as much dignity as he could muster. He could almost feel Herat smirking behind him, but with his heart thundering and a migraine lurking at the edges of his brain, he found it hard to see the humour in the situation.

'Are we to redeploy now, high commander?' Moata seemed tense, the tendons of his tattooed neck taut. 'There are cadres operative down there. Why were they left leaderless? Would you mind briefing us on exactly what is going on?'

'We are indeed on a heading for Arthas Moloch,' said Farsight. His throat clenched at the admission, echoes of horror haunting the edge of his mind, but he pushed them back.

'I thought the ork-hunting mission was aborted after you became incapacitated,' said Bravestorm. *'I heard it was refocused into a wider sweep.'*

'Partially true,' said Farsight. 'My recon cadre is still down there, of that I am sure. Yet I fear they are being deliberately left to die.'

'What?' said Bravestorm. *'How can that be the case? What purpose would it achieve?'*

'What indeed?' said Herat from the back of the room.

'Is the human necessary for this discussion?' Moata's tone conveyed his feelings about the matter quite clearly.

'Mamzel Delaque is with me,' said Farsight. 'She may understand the foe we faced on Arthas Moloch better than

anyone.'

'She *may*,' said Moata, 'implying that she also may not.'

'There are more than just orks down there,' said Ob'lotai, cutting across the tension.

'Far more,' said Farsight. 'There is some other manner of creature upon the planet, perhaps native to it, perhaps not. Their race is not archived. I have named them Molochites, for now. They do not obey the laws of the physical universe as we understand them.'

'Respectfully, high commander, the same could be said of the nicassar,' said Sha'vastos. He made the rising sun of a new dawn with his fist. 'It could be another alien race to bring into the embrace of the T'au'va.'

Herat gave a harsh bark of laughter. Farsight cast her a glance, and she fell quickly silent.

'What do you know of these creatures, peculiar one?' said Brightsword, turning to the Kindred Soul.

'They are not from Arthas Moloch,' replied Herat with a smile. 'I can tell you that much.'

'The principles of the T'au'va remain the same,' said Bravestorm. *'We must deal with them peacefully if we can, and excise them only as a last resort.'*

'Commander Bravestorm advocates peace,' said Brightsword. 'This is a salutary day indeed.'

'They are not Imperial,' said Bravestorm. *'Unlike those armed forces we failed to address on Illuminas.'*

Farsight shook his head, his expression dark.

'There is truth in Bravestorm's words,' said Moata. 'This may be an obvious question, high commander, but what is the aun's guidance on this matter? Surely they must have appended some water caste operatives to monitor the expedition? To ascertain whether this new race can be assimilated?'

'The ethereal caste do not yet know of them,' said Farsight. 'This is a fire caste initiative, and it will remain so. They cannot be expected to monitor every action of every cadre. We are going down alone.'

Moata said nothing, his face as immobile as stone. Farsight thought he saw the stealth commander slide a hand into a compartment of his tunic, but could not be sure; his head was pounding so hard his vision blurred at the edges. He certainly could not risk the gross breach of etiquette in asking the stealth commander what he was doing. His fellow officers were loyal to him, but ultimately, as with all t'au, their foremost priority was the T'au'va itself, and they trusted one another implicitly to act in its best interests.

All well and good - that was how it should be. But there was a part of Farsight that was no longer sure what that meant.

'We will be returning to Arthas Moloch in force, and extracting the expedition assets still planetside,' said Farsight.

'All of us?' said Brightsword, inclining his head in Herat's direction.

'I will be going with you, one way or another,' she said. 'It is the right thing for me to do. The right thing for all of us.'

'We are going into battle against orks, and some manner of hostile alien species that none of us truly understand,' said Bravestorm. 'Yet we will not flinch from it. We would not do so even if we were going in clad only in the raiment of Fio'taun.'

As he spoke, Brightsword and Moata both made the sign of courage in the face of fear.

'Yet the fact remains,' continued Bravestorm, 'we will be waging war in the Hero's Mantle, and you, Mamzel Delaque, will not. In fact, given your propensity to go into battle in civilian dress, it is unlikely you will survive.'

'I have fought more formidable warriors than even you, Commander Bravestorm.'

'I doubt that,' said Bravestorm, his voice cold and certain. 'I faced down one of the Imperial behemoths that your people call "God-Machines". Alone, I engaged it in single combat, and though it bested me, the confrontation led to

its neutralisation.'

'A God-Machine,' said Vykola, smirking. 'How very impressive. T'au'va grant that there are no more of them! Yet if my suspicions are correct, we will soon face a foe that makes even a maniple of Imperial Titans seem tame by comparison. You should look to your own safety, commander, not mine.'

Bravestorm pursed his lips, his expression that of a master assessing a precocious student.

'It is not Mamzel Delaque's capabilities I am concerned about,' said Farsight, sweat beading on his brow. 'Her presence will be extremely controversial with the aun, but it will likely be overlooked next to the fact of my own attendance. They believe me to be sequestered in a healsphere in the *Dream's* med-bay.'

'High commander, I beg you to reconsider,' said Sha'vastos. 'For you to go into battle against their wishes, if not against actual orders, is bad enough. But to engage an as yet unquantified alien race? That is to risk extreme censure.'

'To the empire at large, it will be spun as noble defence,' said Farsight. 'They cannot risk losing face if they censure me for it.'

'True,' said Ob'lotai. 'Of all t'au, one of o rank cannot be seen to disobey.'

'In all extant protocol, there is no precedent for a Kindred Soul to represent the T'au'va at a first-contact engagement,' said Sha'vastos. 'That is the province of the water caste. If they are not present whilst an alien delegate is there in their stead, it will be obvious you have gone against their orders.' He made the sign of surety denied. 'You cannot afford more accusations of vash'ya, commander, more allegations that you seek to be all things to all castes.'

'Even after the Second Purge?' said Farsight. He shook his head, making the hand-over-fist sign of progress hidden away. 'I suppose you are right. Nonetheless, I value our

guest's talents highly, especially in the field of gue'la mind science. Were she t'au, I would say she had earned the right to wear the Hero's Mantle.'

'But she is not t'au,' said Ob'lotai.

'An insight from beyond the mortal sphere,' said Brightsword. Farsight shot him a look.

'Purely in terms of anatomical logistics, she could not don it,' said Ob'lotai, undeterred. 'Even if she had earned the right.'

'Honoured Ob'lotai 5-0,' said Herat, making a passable attempt at the open hands of the Inquiring Student. 'What if I *was* t'au? Could I don it then?'

Sha'vastos spoke up. 'In extremis, the taboo that prevents one who has not earned *vre* rank from donning the Hero's Mantle can be temporarily relaxed at the discretion of one of o rank,' he said. 'However...'

'My XV88 has had an empty crew compartment, of late,' said Ob'lotai. 'In theory, were you t'au and had you O'Shovah's permission, you would be welcome to join me as my passenger. But the simple fact is you will not fit without extensive refitting of the control cocoon.'

Herat nodded thoughtfully. 'An individual's shape can be altered, you know.'

'With surgery, perhaps,' said Ob'lotai, his tone halfway between apologetic and confused. 'But that procedure would be impossible to achieve before we return to Arthas Moloch.'

'Do not count on that,' said Herat. She closed her eyes, breathed in deeply, and changed.

As Farsight watched, the human psyker seemed to radiate light, translucent skin showing bright veins and bones glowing within.

'This is forbidden,' whispered Sha'vastos, his eye twitching as he tried to maintain a mask of composure. 'Surely you cannot allow her to employ mind-science in our presence, high commander?'

'I can,' said Farsight. 'And I will.'

Slowly at first, but then with gathering speed, Herat changed before his eyes. She seemed to be shrinking in on herself, her legs buckling and shifting to form recurved lower limbs and arched, broad-toed feet. Farsight could hear the faint sounds of bones cracking, gristle grinding, cartilage popping into place. He saw a sheen appear on Herat's skin as it turned from smooth pinkish white to a leathery grey. Her nose dwindled and caved in on itself, forming an olfactory chasm as her eyes swelled into the alert, bright orbs of a t'au.

Farsight felt a pang of disquiet as Herat's features slid towards a true t'au visage - not quite hitting the mark, but getting close enough to make him feel distinctly uneasy. She was becoming not one of the fire caste, as he had anticipated, but one of the por. She would pass for a t'au in low light: as a close analogy of a water caste - slighter in build than the fire caste, but far closer in anatomy than the willowy kor or stocky fio.

And she would likely even fit inside an XV88's command cocoon.

Farsight felt the atmosphere change in the room as his comrades watched the unnatural display with open awe. He could almost taste the tension in the air. There was something not right about the transformation, even beyond the oddity of such a procedure happening in the first place.

'Gue'la shapechanger,' breathed Sha'vastos, crossing his fingers in an ancient Fio'taun warding sign.

'Just so,' said Herat, her voice now the smooth tone of a t'au diplomat. 'Well, after a fashion.'

'You bring such a living weapon into our caste council, high commander?' said Moata. 'What guarantee is there she will not shape her arm into a blade and behead you as she walks at your side?'

'Only my judgement,' said Farsight, fighting down his own disquiet. 'Plus my reflexes, my decades of combat training, and my striking good looks.'

Brightsword gave a sharp exhalation of laughter, and the

atmosphere lightened a little. Mock vanity always entertained the fire caste, in Farsight's experience. It was such a bizarre concept to them, so very human, that it could spur a moment of bonding when they needed it the most.

'The question remains,' said Moata, not a trace of mirth in his tone. 'Is your pet Kindred Soul safe?'

'I was recently given cause to think of the kroot,' said Farsight. 'Allies of long standing, and proven in battle time and time again. They form an extremely valuable part of our empire. After the pact of Pech, the Golden Ambassador Aun'Wei himself said the Greater Good would have been lessened had they not joined us. Do the kroot not change shape over time, Stealth Commander Moata? Do they not hyper-evolve as a matter of course, ingesting the genetic material of their prey and adapting to glean the most strength from it?'

'They do,' admitted Moata.

'The kroot have unsavoury habits, cannibalism not least among them, and they smell even worse than humans-'

'How kind of you to say so,' interjected Herat. Farsight cast a glance towards her; she was still changing, just a little. Some aspect of her appearance gave him a feeling of profound unease. It was somehow... familiar.

'Yet we ally with them every new day,' he continued. 'We do not hold prejudices, as we once did, concerning their unusual abilities. Perhaps we should keep a similarly open mind with the humans.'

'Perhaps even with the Molochites,' said Sha'vastos.

'Perhaps,' said Farsight. Herat gave a snort of disdain at the concept, but his fellows paid it no heed. No doubt they thought it was very human to be aghast at the idea of seeking peace with a race that looked so monstrous; it was well known that humans could not understand that unity was blind.

But if they had seen what he had seen, seen the fangs of those creatures drawing forth geysers of blood from torn

flesh, seen them fighting on with their brain pans open to the sky, seen them rise from nothing more than clots of gore...

He kept his peace for now. Confiding his suspicions about the Molochites would only rock the boat at the least opportune time.

Farsight turned towards the Kindred Soul, and felt his heartbeat pulsing hard in his chest. Vykola Herat had finished her strange metamorphosis, and recognition hit him like a kick to the solar plexus.

She had become Por Malcaor. The Water Spider, who he himself had banished in orbit over Vior'los. A *daemon*, was the term, but in the form of a t'au.

'Not a wise choice, Mamzel Delaque, nor a noble one,' said Farsight. His fists bunched at his side. Then he heard laughter, deep and assured. It was coming from directly behind him.

Ob'lotai was laughing. It was a sound Farsight had not heard for long tau'cyr. The deep bass chuckle of the dead warrior rolled out, filling the room.

'I think I am beginning to see why you like her so much. You evidently share a taste for controversy.'

'I am not sure what you mean,' said Herat, her deepened voice a strange blend of human and t'au.

'You can change your shape, Mamzel Delaque, yet you choose that of a diplomat rather than a warrior, who would fit the Hero's Mantle perfectly,' said Bravestorm. *'I do not understand.'*

'The por body shape is the closest form to my own.'

'It will be a little uncomfortable for us both,' said Ob'lotai, 'but she will fit in my command cocoon in this guise. I can take her to the fray.'

There was a chime from the door, the symbol of the aun appearing above it. Farsight's migraine came on full force for a moment, taking the sight in one of his eyes. He massaged his temple and it ebbed away a little.

'Mamzel Delaque, Commander Sha'vastos,' said Farsight.

'Your presence here may be considered problematic. Please retire to the rear vestibule, and seal the door. I will address the nature of our diversity when we have less pressing matters to attend to.' He made the interlaced fingers of unity, not pushing them into full ta'lissera, but making the point all the same.

Herat nodded and slunk to the back of the chamber, Sha'vastos walking stiffly after her to close the door behind them just as the portal at the meditation chamber's front slid open.

Two ethereal guard were first to enter, the towering warriors as imposing as ever. Their wide mantles and fanned halberds gave them even more of a sense of presence. They had broad chests and shoulders, yet moved with grace, an idealised t'au physique halfway between that of the fire caste and that of the ethereals.

The room harboured five of the fire caste's finest, fierce warriors all, yet at close quarters the ethereal guard would outmatch any of them. Theirs was a ceremonial duty, of course - not even the most traumatised t'au would think of attacking an ethereal, even in his wildest dreams - yet it was a duty kept out of tradition, a statement that the ethereal guard were a precious resource, and honoured to the hilt.

'Blessed day,' sighed Moata, making the sign of grateful greeting as those the guards were escorting crossed the threshold.

Three members of the ethereal caste, bedecked in the regalia of the high aun council.

It was said to be visited by one ethereal was an honour, a privilege talked about for tau'cyr to come. But to have three attend, in person, was historic. Farsight felt something inside him pull towards them, yearning for their approval as a child does for that of a beloved mentor. He could feel the same fascination radiating from his companions; they were all straining forward, as if their personal heroes had entered their sanctums to bless them

with every benediction they had ever craved. Only Bravestorm seemed less than enraptured. His projection stood at formal attention, but without the same fervour in his eyes.

‘In the name of the T’au’va, I present to you the council of the aun,’ said the eldest of the two ethereal guard. ‘First amongst them comes Aun’O Dal’yth Mon’tyr Ts’uam Diemn.’

Aun’Diemn stepped lightly into the room, her piercing blue eyes meeting Farsight’s gaze unflinchingly. He found himself looking away on instinct. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his fellow fire caste officers trembling with nervousness and anticipation.

‘May I present the second of their number, Aun’ui Vior’la Mesme Doth’ra Xa,’ said the guard detail’s spokesperson. Aun’Xa was a young male, serene and self-possessed despite his tender years. He smiled as he entered the chamber, displaying perfect white teeth, and made the winged sign of the T’au’va Blessing From Above.

‘Third, I present to you Aun’vre Elsy’eir J’kaara M’yen Los.’ The last of the aun was old, older even than Farsight, yet still he moved with a dancer’s grace, sweeping into the room with his head held high. Despite being the least senior in rank amongst the ethereal delegation, Aun’Los was dignity and authority made flesh.

Farsight felt a great pressure upon him to speak. He pushed down the feelings of conflict inside him, and forced himself to focus on protocol.

Something in him knew this was no accidental visit, no coincidental crossing of paths. One amongst them had alerted the aun of their meeting, of that he was sure, and he was all but sure it was Shadowsun’s old pupil, Moata. He forced his anger down.

‘May the blessed sun of T’au itself shine upon you,’ said Farsight, making the sign of the delighted host. ‘I was not expecting to be honoured in such a fashion.’

‘You may count yourself fortunate,’ said Aun’Diemn. ‘We

have guidance to offer you in this most trying time.'

'We heard you had been injured, high commander,' said Aun'Xa. 'It is a salve upon the soul to see you active, if only just.'

'I was wounded more in mind than in body,' said Farsight. It was technically true, after all. His muscles still ached from head to toe from the ordeal he had been through over the last kai'rotaa, his head pounded fit to burst, and his heart occasionally spasmed with such intensity his vision blurred. Yet it was his psyche that had been shaken the most.

The ethereals stared hard at him, their judgement feeling like a physical force pressing down upon his shoulders.

'Are you truly fit for duty?'

'I am.'

The lie hung in the air, merely a pair of words on the surface, but a profound rebellion beneath. To lie to the ethereal caste was treason against the T'au'va in its basest form.

'I could not simply wait whilst my warriors died in my name,' said Farsight, unable to bear the silence. 'Once I felt mentally capable of rejoining the fight, I discharged myself.'

'Then the earth caste did not see their duty through to completion,' said Aun'Diemn, raising her index fingers to her lips. 'Interesting.'

Another simple word, but one pregnant with implications. Farsight felt sure he had cast a shadow on the earth caste team that had allowed him to escape. Perhaps they would not be seen again. He thought of Admiral Teng, then, and Wellclaim - once his proponent in the water caste, now disappeared not only in person, but from all those records he had consulted after Dal'yth.

'There were no earth caste personnel present at the time I took it upon myself to leave,' said Farsight. 'If there is to be any form of retribution for my rash actions, let it fall upon my head.'

‘We have heard word that you encountered another race upon Arthas Moloch, high commander,’ said Aun’Los, his hand sliding sideways in a motion of transition. ‘One that has yet to be welcomed into the Greater Good.’

‘They are unknown to me at least,’ said Farsight. ‘I have not heard confirmation on their nature from the water caste.’

‘It is strange that you did not see fit to inform us,’ said Aun’Xa. ‘The air caste have submitted their report, as protocol demands, as have several of your fellows in the fire caste. The information you withheld was most illuminating. Perhaps your personal recording device, the notation disc you seem so fond of, is irreparably broken, and that is the source of your failure to inform us?’ The elder held out a beringed hand, and looked expectantly. ‘Give it to me now, and I will ensure you have a replacement more fitting to your line of duty.’

With no other choice, Farsight took his notation disc out from his medical underwrap and offered it with both hands to the ethereal. The jamming frequency that was installed within it, should it be identified as such, would be traced back to its creator, Ob’lotai, and possibly result in his dissolution as an artificial intelligence. But to keep the disc, to fail to hand it over immediately, would damn them all.

‘These Molochites are indeed a strange race,’ said Farsight. ‘Though there is no information detailing them upon this disc, I am afraid.’

‘I am not certain they are from Arthas Moloch at all,’ said Aun’Diemn. ‘Our understanding is that they attacked the be’gel via a portal of some kind.’

‘That much is true,’ said Farsight. ‘I had of course compiled a report of my own, but as I was struck down during the fight, I did not submit it at first. I was in the business of collating the observations of my fellow-’

‘That is illuminating,’ said Aun’Xa, making the hand-cutting sign of cessation. ‘But we have already drawn our conclusions. We will be joining you on your return to Arthas

Moloch. The fire caste elements on the surface are keeping the newcomers engaged in the meantime. There is much to be learned of this new race, and we must be there to ensure the correct conclusions are drawn.'

Farsight merely nodded. He had no wish to be cut down again. The words of the Water Spider, that creature that had shown its true face in Herat's quarters, came back to him.

Your whole culture is built on lies... The ethereals, they are using you all like puppets... It was they who killed your master...

Farsight's eyes narrowed, just a little, but he put the thoughts aside.

'The fire caste elements still engaged with the Molochites are accruing valuable insight from watching these creatures fight the be'gel,' said Aun'Los. 'Yet as ever, their understanding is limited to the sphere of war, just as water caste personnel do not truly belong in the field. We would observe these creatures ourselves, the better to learn of their true nature, and make the decision as to their ultimate fate when necessary.'

'With the utmost respect, I fear that your attending in person is taking a grave risk,' said Farsight. 'We understand little to nothing of these creatures as yet.'

'The air caste have sent high-resolution footage,' said Aun'Diemn. 'We understand them well enough. They are a simple race without military assets to speak of, yet still they may serve the T'au'va.'

'They are extremely dangerous,' said Farsight. 'Further, the be'gel are still active. You risk your lives.'

'You propose we fail in our duty to shine the light of the T'au Empire even in the dark corners of the galaxy?' said Aun'Xa, his young brow furrowing as if in confusion. 'Is it your place in the T'au'va to caution us against observing the forces of a nemesis?'

Aun'Diemn cast a sharp glance at Aun'Xa, just for a moment. Farsight did not miss it, nor the use of the term

that had precipitated it. There were layers of meaning here, but the sheer force of the ethereals' combined presence made it hard to peel them away.

'This race you speak of has no ranged capability,' said Aun'Diemn, 'No armour, no machines of war, and a pre-Fio'taun level of technology. If we are not to inspire our people against these primitives, when can we do so?'

'They appeared from a portal that was invisible to our scans,' said Farsight, his tone as level as he could make it. 'The planet is covered in the dust and ruin of a shattered civilisation, and it is highly likely they are the vector by which it was laid low. We cannot prepare for every possible ambush site when their method of attack is so unusual.'

'The high commander is right,' said Brightsword. 'These aliens reek of mind-science. Perhaps the creatures we have fought thus far are only a vanguard, sent to test the orks in much the same manner that we send our bravest allies into battle to learn of the foe.'

Farsight felt a surge of warmth for his protégé's support, a paternal pride flooding through his soul at the feeling of having the young warrior openly standing by his side. Brightsword's words would cost him dearly, likely doing immeasurable damage to his career and possibly seeing him transferred out of the reproduction programmes. It was possible he would be cloned no more, and his legend would die before it had reached its peak. But in voicing a contrarian opinion, he had given his mentor an opening.

Farsight would not waste it.

'Who is to say another group of such creatures could not appear from nowhere and attack you whilst the rest of us are engaged? We must understand them before we escort any of our beloved leaders to the fight. We cannot risk a teleportation assault on your position.'

A moment of hideous silence hung in the air, the tension crackling thick. To gainsay a single ethereal's point of view was unheard of, let alone three.

'Is this conclusion shared by all of you?' asked Aun'Xa.

'With respect, the orks are an unpredictable foe unto themselves,' said Commander Bravestorm from his hologrammatic projection. *'They are a known quantity to the fire caste, but part of that knowledge is expecting them to act in an anarchic and counter-intuitive fashion. They alone could threaten your presence, even if the Molochites could not.'*

'You discount our trusted ethereal guard too easily,' said Aun'Diemn with a tinkling laugh. She made the sign of tutor-lightly-admonishing-pupil, but Farsight could tell her levity was staged. 'They are charged with our protection, and have yet to fail us. That is a rare claim indeed.'

The implication gnawed at Farsight's gut, memories of past failures swilling within his mind in humbling profusion. He pushed the pain aside. He had to focus.

'With Aun'Tipiya and Aun'Tefan having returned to sept space, we have but three aun to guide us,' he said. 'Should the worst occur, we will be left without any aun presence in the Farsight Enclaves whatsoever. It is a risk we cannot take.'

Aun'Diemn narrowed the Y-shaped shio'he on her forehead, then flared it in exasperation. 'We realise active warzones are hazardous, high commander,' she said. 'The aun must fight in the name of the T'au'va, just as with any other caste. Surely you can understand that?'

And must be seen to fight, said a tiny voice in Farsight's mind, *so the water caste have fresh ways to sing your praises.*

'Of course,' he said. He forced a thin smile, but inside his heart clenched, pain shooting through it as if he had been stabbed by a dozen barbed needles.

'We have no time for debate,' continued Aun'Diemn, making the curt chopping motion of the matter-at-an-end. 'We have our orders from Aun'Tipiya, just as you have yours from us. You are the high commander of our expedition, O'Shovah, and we still rely on your judgement in matters military.'

He bowed, then, making cupped hands as she continued.

'To honour your appraisal of the situation, we will despatch not one battlegroup, but three, to better reinforce the fire caste presence already planetside. You will content yourself with this compromise. You and your commanders will escort us to Arthas Moloch in person, and you will protect us as we appraise the race you call Molochites first-hand.'

'Let it be so,' said Aun'Los, nodding serenely. 'And let it happen as soon as possible.'

Farsight felt defeat well up inside him. The ethereals were likely right, as ever, and there was no way he could refute a direct order without censure - even from his own commanders.

'We shall arrive planetside within a matter of decs,' he said, 'and you may begin your observation. On my oath as a warrior and as leader of this expedition, we will keep you safe.'

He felt his heart clench again, a pulse of pain shooting through his shoulder, and shook as if an unseen assailant had grabbed him from behind. But he did not let his face betray a single iota of the pain wracking his chest.

Aun'Diemn stared at him, long and hard. Then she nodded, making the sign of the T'au'va before ripping it away with such swiftness her displeasure was clear for all to see. She turned and left without a word, her entourage following swiftly behind her.

A long silence hung in the wake of the ethereal delegation's departure. It was Bravestorm who broke it.

'*High commander,*' he said, making the gesture of the humble messenger. '*Do you think these Molochites to be as low a threat level as the aun assume?*'

Farsight's thoughts went back to the giant crimson canid gnawing on his battlesuit's ankle, and how it had taken a plasma bolt to the head without so much as flinching.

'No,' he replied. 'No, Commander Bravestorm, I do not.'

There was something undeniably *wrong* about the Molochite beasts. Yet the creature had worn a collar of some kind, brass in colouration – and therefore even if not trained by its masters, it was at least in a form of animalistic alliance with its bipedal equivalents. If they had the technology needed to create bladed weapons, if they hailed from a post-metallurgical stage of societal advancement, then they likely had a language – and as the water caste liked to say, if they had a language, they could be dealt with.

But to think of them in such terms was a mistake. Something told him they used language as a weapon, nothing more.

An ache spread across Farsight's brow as the disc-like portal whirled in his mind. Images of terror and ruin flickered in the corners of his vision, as the ache threatened to consume his brain entirely. He forced his mind to focus once more, thinking of those lessons Master Puretide had beaten into him over so many hard years atop Mount Kan'ji.

Master Puretide, whose last words to Farsight before his death had set him on a course that had deviated, inch by gradual inch, from unquestioning reverence of the ethereals.

Do not trust them all.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE MOTLEY WITHIN

ADMISSION OF VYKOLA NIAMH HERAT 3-54
921.825.M41
+++ EXCERPTED ITERATION+++

After the fire caste council in the Manifest Dream's meditation chamber I felt a strange sense of peace blanketing my nameless unease. As we prepared for the second expedition to Arthas Moloch, I felt something akin to my old focus; for once, my psyche didn't feel like it was being pulled in two different directions at once. The thing inside of me felt oddly comfortable in the skin of a t'au. It wanted me down on Arthas Moloch for its own reasons, something that had to do with completion, I think, given the regularity with which I saw the Hooded Executioner in my mind's eye. I had no more insight into it than that.

I was fine with that. Whatever it took to end my ordeal, even if I was going down there to die.

The t'au do not like their status quo being challenged, for all their protestations that the Greater Good will prevail over all outside influences. Farsight was already suspicious

there was something wrong with me. I could feel the threat of discovery thickening around me, like a cloud of flammable gas filling the room and just waiting for a spark. When the Warghost Ob'lotai inadvertently gave me a chance to get away from that fear, to escape from the sword of fate that hung over me on its dwindling thread, I seized it with both hands.

I'd practised assuming xenofoms before, despite the Callidus Prohibition. I believe any inquisitor-ranked biomancer in my situation would have done much the same, just in case espionage or a quick escape plan demanded it. Last time I had tried it, the experience had been inordinately painful, and I freely admit the mockery of a t'au-form I had managed back then would never have passed as the genuine article. All I achieved was to make myself look hideous beyond belief, a grotesque hybrid of human and alien staring back from the mirrorfield that made me feel sick to behold. It is seared into my mind, even now.

This time, assuming xenofom was as easy as sliding into a pool of cool water. I was going for a generic fire caste anatomy, rather than a specific imitation. I missed it by a mile, but judging by Commander Farsight's reaction, I could tell at once that I managed a facsimile that shook even him; the Water Spider, no less.

It was painful, but oddly thrilling, to feel my bones reshaping, my muscles attenuating and my height shrinking. Under my darkening skin, the hard muscle and bone of my physique moulded itself like clay. I could feel my hair shrinking back into thickening follicles, my teeth flattening out and my nose shrinking back to fold into my face. It was a slightly pleasant, slightly sickly sensation.

I must admit that right then, the potential for misdirection and subterfuge that my newfound skills afforded me sent a guilty thrill through my chest. Yet I think I knew the real reason why I had made that change so readily, in my heart. The thing that had nestled inside my soul was consolidating

its grip, and to that creature, changing form was as natural as walking.

It is another powerful reason to get down to Arthas Moloch, and to end it all. In the meantime it is no more than I deserve, to be locked in this strange and unsettling form.

There was a time, as a trainee in the schola progenium, when I would have given anything to be able to hone my skills to the point I could assume xenoform. To wear the skin of the alien in order to bring it low – a wolf amongst sheep, in the mould of the Officio Assassinorum operatives I idolised as a youth.

That desire has softened, over time, over the course of the Damocles War and the terrible waste of life that typifies the Imperial war machine. Whether I meant to or not – and to this day I can't tell you whether it was a conscious process – I began to empathise with the t'au and their myopic, naïve worldviews. I advised them with their own best interests rather than steering them into destruction. I even fought for their cause against my own race. And now I have all but become one of them.

Perhaps that was inevitable, given that I was brought into the Inquisition for my abilities as a chameleon. Perhaps our masters foresaw it, and determined they could win advantage out of it. It's all irrelevant, now, given that which we will likely face upon Arthas Moloch. Irrelevant, given the abuse my soul has taken over the last few years. I am one creature on the outside, another on the interior, and, I fear, a third being inside that.

Becoming t'au is better than being myself, I think, at this stage. It's certainly better than embodying whatever monstrous spirit lurks inside of me. I am a grotesque parody of an individual, more dissonant than the worst of those haunted by multiple personalities. I am a being of multiple species.

Multiple dimensions, perhaps.

I keep telling myself I am Vykola Niamh Herat, underneath

it all, but it's not true any more, is it? I have been reliving my memories, replaying old victories and old traumas every time I feel the strange, lumpen differences of this new form, trying to remind myself that I am still human. Lying down is uncomfortable, not physically so much as mentally. I take a weird solace in that, knowing that I am still at least partially discomfited by this anatomy. Still an operative of the Inquisition, going to great lengths in the service of mankind.

That said, I still have moments of rising panic. The face in the mirrorfield... it reminds me so much of the Water Spider. The host body of the creature that tried to kill me. Even though I kept the colour of my eyes the same, purely out of sentimentality, that face I wear does not feel like a mask. There's something deeper at work here.

Try as I might, I cannot seem to turn back. I tell myself it is purely because I need time to recharge, but I cannot conjure so much as a shiver in the flesh, no matter how long I work at it.

Is my old face, my Tarot tattoo, my entire identity lost to me? Have I fallen so hard for the lure of the T'au'va? Have my abilities started to flow so easily because of some final acceptance of my chimeric nature?

Something dark inside me knows the truth. I feel it gloating, smiling in the night. I go to Arthas Moloch in the skin of another, there to meet my fate, and take a step towards redemption. Or failing that, dying for the right cause.

If only I could divine what that was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE FIRES OF THE WARP

EIGHT HOURS AFTER INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

THE NAMELESS CITY
ARTHAS MOLOCH

Vykola Herat sat awkwardly within Ob'lotai 5-0's control cocoon, horrified and fascinated in equal measure at the battle still raging across Arthas Moloch's haunted ruins.

The t'au's clinical machine of war was closing around the whirlpool of anarchy and destruction in the city below them. A battle raged, a clash between the orks and something spoken of in hushed whispers even in the Emperor's Inquisition – a foe that made Vykola's chest feel so tight she might suffocate.

She was safe in the XV88 Broadside, she said to herself. Safer than most, in fact, hiding in the body of a t'au ambassador that was in turn hiding within an armoured cocoon, a warsuit ten times more advanced than an Imperial Dreadnought. In fact, she was protected by the best state-of-the-art war-tech that sickeningly precocious race could provide.

Informational hexes flashed up before her as Ob'lotai 5-0 conveyed the battle outside as best he could. Updates in the blocky t'au alphabet spooled here and there in darting screeds, too fast for her to translate. To her left, a hologrammatic representation of the giant battlesuit stomped forward in miniature, keeping pace as it had ever since the XV88 had been airlifted into the designated warzone. The tiny Broadside was a barrel-chested, bipedal shape, with boxy missile launchers atop its shoulders and a railgun that would look more at home on a tank. The latter weapon system was held in front of the suit's chest as if it were no more than an infantryman's rifle.

'That is the damage control suite,' said Ob'lotai, clearly monitoring the direction of her gaze. She knew enough about t'au warsuits to realise they were controlled by the motion of the pilot's eyes as much as their hands; the construct's blasphemous intelligence was assessing every twitch, every glance. 'Should a section turn from gold to silver, I have taken damage enough to hinder my combat efficacy. Should it turn red, I will consider retreat, more for your sake than mine.'

Every so often her eyes would linger on her grey-blue skin, the wrongness of her body, and suddenly the dissonance of her situation would hit her. She felt again the revulsion of her mutiny of form, the existential dread of her alien physique rising up to claim her once more from the inside out. She was t'au, now, on the outside at least. And here she would fight as one.

'Engagement in approximately seven microdecs,' said Ob'lotai.

The t'au had returned to Arthas Moloch in full force. Thus far, the battle had hit with the speed and power of a full-scale Adeptus Astartes assault. The xenos had rained fire from above, slaughtering whole swathes of enemies to little or no loss. Literally hundreds of deep-red battlesuits had descended from the skies, their firepower a slanting storm of plasma that hurled swathes of enemies burning to the

ground. It seemed to her an aerial ballet, complex but so well delivered it was as if the t'au strike had been rehearsed a hundred times.

Perhaps the imagery she was seeing on the Broadside's distribution suite was edited as carefully as the rest of the t'au's war footage. The hexes enlarged on the interior of Ob'lotai 5-0's control cocoon could well be part of a water caste *por'sral* campaign, carefully chosen to show the best possible angles of the fire caste cadre strike. Perhaps it was all a mirage, a complex and elaborate trick, and she had never even left the *Manifest Dream's* cargo bay in the first place.

Then again, perhaps Farsight's cadres were genuinely more well supplied and skilled than any Imperial force – and in time, they would turn that deadly focus against the Imperium on a scale so large they would redefine the battle for the Eastern Fringe.

'Five microdecs,' said Ob'lotai.

Maybe, answered a tiny voice inside her, it did not matter at all. Though the t'au plainly did not realise it, such material concerns as wealth, conquest and planetary allegiance paled next to the terrible truths of the universe. There were wounds in the cosmos, gaping lesions from which poured an evil from another dimension.

She was watching one of them now, unfolding at the city's heart.

'Two point two,' said Ob'lotai.

Daemons, they were called. The nightmares of all living creatures – of humanity, she corrected herself – made real. She could see flickers of red skin in the ruined city ahead.

Soon, she would be amongst them.

The thought made Herat's blood curdle. She had seen the creatures depicted only in the woodcut-style illustrations of the Ordo Xenos' most secret texts, those that dealt with the crossover between their spheres of influence and those of the Ordo Malleus. Taboo as it was, the subject had held a dark fascination for her since she had first graduated into

the Emperor's Holy Inquisition.

At the first, she had dismissed the creatures as the spoor of fevered minds. They were isolated to a few specific locales and populations too backwards or incautious to know when to leave well enough alone. Yet their legacy was always there, if you looked hard enough, on every world in one form or another. They were like a faint shadow, always out of sight for those who looked towards the sun, who clung to the brightly lit future of their dreams. But those who dwelt on the past, who looked backwards into darkness, could discern their presence, the ripples of causality that had seen their kind doom hundreds of worlds over the Imperium's long history.

They were a source of abject terror and repulsion to those who knew the truth. And here they were, close enough to touch. Close enough to spread their damnation like a plague.

Hexes flashed up, forming a mosaic of information harvested not only by Ob'lotai, but by the data-latticed network of drones he had positioned around the site of the Great Star Dais. The t'au cadres were following up their vertical assault as their earthbound assets moved into place, the whole set piece clicking together in an encirclement so ordered and well coordinated it felt as if she were part of a machine.

A hex enlarged, showing a ruined wall to Vykola's left bursting into debris. In the roiling dust, jagged shadows moved fast. A pair of daemon riders came charging through the white clouds, massive monoceroid steeds crushing rubble with their piston-driven legs. Behind them came a throng of red-skinned monsters, lanky yet hunchbacked, their impossibly long tongues tasting the air and swords of black metal glinting in the wan light. As one, they shrieked their war cry.

'Blood for the Blood God!'

Vykola felt something coil invisibly within her, the entity that had wormed its way into her soul recoiling as if stung.

‘Engagement,’ said Ob’lotai. Vykola saw the damage control hologram step backwards, swinging its railgun around. The first of the riders burst apart on Ob’lotai’s targeting hex, a hole punched right through its chest to send red ichor firing backwards in a fountain of gore. The sucking whoosh of the impact was so powerful it sent the rider’s giant metal steed tumbling back into the rubble beyond as if struck by a wrecking ball.

A split second later, half a dozen targeting reticules flickered into life over the throng of crimson-skinned creatures following the strange riders. ‘Missiles released,’ said Ob’lotai. A flock of blunt white cylinders hurtled outwards, each arrowing towards one of the horned warriors to detonate with a staccato crack of explosive force. Limbs flew, chests were rent apart in explosions of stringy gore. Another salvo, another set of kills, though the largest of the daemon riders swatted away the missile coming for it at the last second with a flick of a blade.

Vykola concentrated hard on the creature’s leering face as it closed the distance, all her hatred and fear brought to bear upon it. Her head throbbed, feeling as if it were being slowly crushed in a vice. Then the daemon crumpled in on itself. A heartbeat later its steed was struck right between the eyes by another railgun shot from Ob’lotai, the monoceroid falling headlong into the debris of a broken temple wall before disincorporating in a puff of crimson mist.

‘Target group neutralised,’ said Ob’lotai.

‘Ouch,’ said Vykola, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hand. Feeling some manner of liquid smearing on her cheeks, she inspected them only to find they were stained with blood. ‘That’s not good.’

She blinked away the red film across her eyes. The pulse of psychic power with which she had killed the daemon rider had come easily to her, at first, but something about the daemon – or rather its steed, to be precise – had held her back like a wall of adamantium, blocking her out.

‘Kindly refrain from using mind-science within my

battlesuit's confines, Mamzel Delaque. I fear it may scramble my data. Given that data is all that is left of me, I do not wish to take that risk.'

'Understandable,' said Herat. 'But I cannot just sit by and watch.'

'You must content yourself with the role of advisor,' said Ob'lotai. 'I would greatly benefit from your insight as to what these creatures are, and how best to defeat them.'

'They are not familiar to me,' she said. 'But I am a fast learner. I will do what I can. I know enough to realise they are lethal beyond anything I have faced before. Your cadre should not underestimate them.'

'After Atari Vo, I doubt High Commander Farsight will underestimate any alien race ever again.'

'These ones are not aliens,' she said, before she could stop herself.

'I am afraid I do not understand, Mamzel Delaque,' said Ob'lotai. 'What else could they be? Robotic constructions?'

'Sorry. Bad translation, no doubt. And it's Herat, by the way. Vykola Herat.'

Beside her, the hologram was stomping forward again, railgun swivelling for new targets. The proximity displays showed the enemy only a few hundred metres distant.

'So the name Thransia Delaque is a pseudonym,' said Ob'lotai. 'Is it a secondary name element, or is it entirely false?'

'It is false. My apologies for misleading you.'

'You humans are a fascinating species,' he said in return. To Herat's left, the proximity sensor blipped red. 'We can return to this duplicity later. I fear we must engage.'

The largest hex of the XV88's command suite showed a pair of crimson-skinned daemons scrabbling through a gap in a first-storey wall. Blood drizzled from their distended mouths. Vykola recoiled at the sight, making the sign of the aquila. Ob'lotai sent a pair of missiles winging towards them, and the horned monstrosities disappeared in a blaze of flame. Not even a smear of blood was left in their wake,

just blackened and smoking stone.

'No corpses,' said Ob'lotai. 'Interesting.'

'A quirk of their alien physiology, perhaps,' said Vykola.

Ob'lotai stomped forward once more, turning the corner of a shattered building. 'There are many more of them with which to cross-reference that datapoint.'

'So I see.'

The plaza ahead was lit by a massive, glowing disc that hung suspended above a raised dais ringed with shattered statuary. Drizzling out from that portal were ropy strings of pink and blue matter that coalesced to form odd, slender-limbed figures. A knot of horned red bipeds and armoured orks were hacking into each other at the south edge of the dais. Beyond them, a group of strange wheeled cannons that looked as much flesh as metal opened fire upon the melee from the west.

On the far side of the plaza, Herat could see Farsight and his Crisis teams descending from the skies, white fire blazing from their plasma rifles. The triangular shadow of *Ores'Por'Kauyon*, the great Manta missile destroyer that had borne them into the fray, moved smoothly away to hover over a large, rubble-filled square in the distance, its railguns punching holes in the daemon swarms engaging the furthest-flung elements of the t'au cadre.

The entire tableau was lit with a stark light that sent strange shadows flickering and dancing everywhere. Herat noticed with a shudder that near the shimmering disc-portal, something was wrong with the shadows of the t'au - instead of reflecting the anatomies of those casting them, they were those of jagged and horn-crested devils.

On another screen was a towering, avian daemon, blue skinned and cruel of aspect with iridescent wings sprouting from its back. The XV88's structural analyser flashed red - an inconclusive read, as best as Herat could make out. The beaked monstrosity was hurling blasts of pink fire into the ranks of the cadre's pathfinders, each warrior struck by the flame twisting into horrible shapes that hurt Herat's eyes to

behold.

A greater daemon, then. A concentration of Chaos powerful enough to damn an entire world by its sheer presence.

Ob'lotai railgun's recharge hex turned gold. There was a sudden, sucking sound as the weapon discharged, followed an instant later by the signature whip-crack of its cylinder hurtling away so fast it was invisible. The daemonic creature was struck in the flank - not by the deadly projectile that Ob'lotai had fired, but by a squirt of quicksilver that balled harmlessly on impact, then floated upwards as if gravity had been inverted upon it.

'Inconclusive ballistics report,' said the artificial intelligence. 'That anomalous result is likely evidence of a shield-tech level as yet unseen in such a primitive race.'

'They are not truly primitive, these creatures,' said Herat. 'They are... *other*.'

The recharge hex on Ob'lotai's screen turned gold once more.

'Analyse fire parameters.' He adjusted his rail rifle crosshairs a little, then took another shot. This time the deadly projectile, its progress recorded and slowed on the ballistics report hex, transmuted into what looked to Herat like a scattering of strange, translucent insects. Beetles, perhaps, or dragonflies. Either way, Vykola found it deeply unsettling.

'What in the Emperor's name...' she said.

'That is physically impossible, as far as we t'au understand it.'

'And yet it is happening,' said Vykola. 'We must find another way.'

'*Status report, commanders.*' Farsight's hex unfolded on the control suite alongside that of Moata, Brightsword, Sha'vastos and Bravestorm. Their replies cascaded across the cadrenet.

'We have the northern quadrant in stealth four, aun elements safe, but we're losing peripheral-'

'Fusion blasters at thirty-two per cent and little guaranteed-'

'Iridium does not appear to be proof against-'

'Honoured leader, our cadre element has encountered little correlation between-'

'They won't die!' shouted Herat over the mingling alien voices. 'Tech isn't reliable. Neither are psychic attacks. They do not obey the same laws!'

'So we determine which targets are immune to which weapons,' said Farsight, *'share findings and redeploy our target priority as necessary. You must look to your own stratagem. I am under heavy attack from-'*

His hex glitched and folded into itself, as did that of Moata.

'You heard his order,' said Bravestorm. *'Execute it.'*

Ob'lotai looped an icon of closure onto those of his remaining commanders even as he zoomed in on three of the ruined streets around them at one time. Missiles streaked ahead, blasting the creeping figures in the rubble into clouds of dark smoke.

To the flank, a gang of strange, capering creatures cartwheeled through the ruins of what Vykola took to have been a temple. They came to a halt as if at an order, and whipped their arms around – each of which had far too many joints – to send sheets of multicoloured flame roaring out towards Ob'lotai.

The Broadside stepped back, but he was too slow to evade the flames altogether. Vykola felt him stumble, then right himself in a rifleman's pose, the rubble under his knee crunching as he steadied himself.

'Contrition, Herat, under critical damage,' said Ob'lotai. The damage control suite flashed red as it updated, the hologram showing a leg that looked as if it had been gnawed, mangled even, by some vast invisible beast. *'Mobility twenty-three per cent.'*

'How? I thought these suits were all but indestructible? I have seen one take a krak missile to the chest and walk

away without so much as a limp.'

'I have no answer to that question.'

An unmistakeable feeling of being watched took hold of Vykola, and just for a moment, she knew what it was like to be prey.

'That birdlike creature,' said Vykola. 'It's coming for us. I can feel it.'

Another hex leaped into focus on the command suite. A massive avian daemon-thing was striding through the rubble, its three-toed claws crushing the scatterings of alabaster in puffs of dirty white. It screamed, strange wisps of colour whirling around its head as the air in front of its beak shimmered and condensed into puffs of white flame.

'Time to make that twenty-three per cent count,' muttered Vykola.

Ob'lotai moved, clumsily, to interpose a high wall between them and the oncoming creature. A moment later the stone parted like a pair of curtains, the blocks tumbling away to reveal the creature staring down at them with its beady eyes.

Ob'lotai sent a flurry of missiles up to meet it. At the last moment before impact, they turned into a flock of bats, flapping away in every direction at once.

'Detach auxiliary,' said Ob'lotai, his tone flat and heavy. There was a clunk of a mag-lock disengaging from behind Herat's head. A new hex sprang into life on the command suite with a disc-like icon of a drone. 'Fire seeker missile.'

From the other slab-like shoulder of the battlesuit, the large and sleek-looking missile that Vykola had seen when boarding Ob'lotai detached with a whoosh, streaking out as the avian behemoth stepped over the parted wall. The creature shimmered, becoming insubstantial enough that the missile passed straight through it. As it flew onward, the daemon tapped the projectile with the tip of its long, twisted staff. The missile hung suspended before it as if frozen.

The avian horror reached out with a claw, plucked the

missile contemptuously from the air, and hurled it like a dart straight back at Ob'lotai.

The XV88, too bulky to move away in time, was rocked by the explosion. Alarms chimed, the hex-screen shimmering and glitching as the Broadside fought to restore itself.

'That is reason enough for transfer, I think,' said Ob'lotai. 'I will orchestrate your extraction if I can. If not, farewell.'

Herat saw a transfer lozenge flicker into life on the XV88's control screen as the artificial intelligence transmitted his vital information to the auxiliary drone hovering low in his shadow. It was filling quickly, but with the vast amount of data that amounted to Ob'lotai's intelligence it was far from complete.

The plexus hatch of the Broadside was suddenly pierced in four places at once, claws punching straight through the thick hyper-alloy of its carapace. Vykola cried out as hooked talons curved in towards her. Alloy ran like slop around each rune-inscribed claw. Sparks fizzed as the readouts and display screens were crushed into ruin, and flames licked out from yawning fissures in the corners of the control cocoon. Then Ob'lotai's hex-screens burst into plastic-sheathed shards as the creature tore away the hatch and hurled it across the debris of the battlefield.

Vykola felt the hot winds of Arthas Moloch blast into her face, the small fires at her feet leaping high to lap at her shins. The sense of physical pain was nothing to the scrutiny of the immense daemon creature that leaned down towards her, its glowing eyes boring into her mind.

She resisted the urge to screw her eyes shut and curl into a foetal ball at the sheer otherness of the thing leering down. Instead she kicked, thrashed, tore at the harness that was keeping her within Ob'lotai's shell. But with the artificial intelligence either lost or already transferred to its backup, there was no way her ally could help her, and the manual release was not responding.

Then the monster spoke, its words somehow intelligible despite being a mingled non-sound of breaking glass,

nursery rhymes and screaming, dying animals.

'A fleshy insect, trapped in the wrong chrysalis. How delectable.'

Vykola felt something within her mind burst. She sent a pulse of psychic force spiking out into the creature's face, but nothing came save a terrible headache and the feeling of tears of blood dribbling from the corners of her eyes.

The creature laughed, shrill and high; Vykola recognised it as her own hysteria from her Time of Trials. It leered down at her, so close she could feel its body heat. She concentrated hard, and her skin shimmered, hardening for a moment and taking on a metallic sheen before returning to the dark grey of soft t'au flesh. Her powers had abandoned her. Desperate, she scrabbled at the push-panel compartment that Ob'lotai had told her contained a pulse pistol, but the damned thing would not open.

'Just occasionally,' said the daemon, ***'I treat myself to a little barbarity.'***

The creature opened its hooked jaws, the thick stink of burning flesh emanating from its gullet, and leaned down. From within its throat came a three-pronged tongue, a pink and glistening serpent that wound through the air. Eyeballs glistened on each protrusion of the strange pseudopod; they came in so close that when they blinked, their lashes caressed Vykola's neck. She pulled desperately at the safety harness that was keeping her trapped within the control cocoon, its very security damning her to being slowly cooked alive by the beast's impossibly intense energy. Then the beast's jaws tilted and closed around her head, its tips placed on either temple like a pincer poised to crush.

Something inside Vykola's chest writhed, surging up into her throat, and she spoke.

'Aagha'cra'zax'hasthra.'

Agony. She coughed out a welter of blood that splashed down her harness. Her mouth burned thick, as if she had taken a belt of moonshine from an oilcan still.

The beast reared back in surprise, cocked its birdlike head, then extended its neck to come in low once more, fixing her with a deep black eye the size of her fist.

'Well met,' said the daemon, waving away a pair of missiles sent screaming towards it. The projectiles veered into one another, detonating harmlessly. ***'I had not thought to encounter you again, little daemon.'***

'Gogh'hokra'thrassh,' said Vykola, the sound a guttural growl far deeper than any human throat should have managed.

'Indisputably,' it replied, and this time its voice was as clear and cultured. ***'But you can say little other than the truth, as I hear it, since your exile. Even in this diminished state.'***

Vykola said nothing. Not because she chose to, but because she was doing everything she could not to be violently sick.

'You appear indisposed, little brother. I rather fear it is my doing. The Great Changer knows you can ill afford another setback. Allow me.' The monstrous vulture-thing reached down with one of its rune-etched claws and cut through the control cocoon's harness as if it were no more resilient than paper.

'Go, weave your webs, little spider, and may they lead you back to the crystal labyrinth in time. If you make it back, seek me out. I commend your ingenuity in choosing such interesting hosts.'

The distinctive T-shaped fuselages of a squadron of t'au fighters bore down on the beast from behind. Vykola fought to keep her expression level, silently willing them to kill it. Perhaps the t'au pilots heard her, for a moment later the ground around them was consumed with strafing fire.

'One moment.'

The beast leaped high, its iridescent wings sending ripples of colour across the ochre skies as it spread its pinions full. It turned in flight, then whipped out its twisted staff in a lateral sweep. A crackling half-circle of pink lightning

coalesced into forms that looked to Vykola like feathered serpents, then shot out to the t'au flyers, each striking one in the cockpit. She heard thin screams on the edge of hearing, then watched hopelessly as the aircraft peeled away, one after another, to spiral down into the wrecked city and explode in puffs of flame.

Vykola was already out and running before the greater daemon had landed once more, the great black disc-drone that Ob'lotai had transferred his data to shielding her as best it could from the creature's eyeline. She darted into the shadow of a statue's plinth, flattening her back against the stony legs of the rearing horse-thing atop it.

A strange, fungus-skirted daemon with weirdly jointed arms floated past with its back to her. The creature pivoted in mid-air, sending twin columns of flame shooting from its hands to consume an out-of-control ork transport veering down the thin streets. She felt a backwash of heat, but then Ob'lotai's disc was there once more, his cool black shadow falling across her to protect her from the worst of the fiery cascade.

The entity within her writhed, desperate to get out, yearning to join the fight. Her vision dimmed as the creature flexed its control, burning with black fire on every side.

Perhaps a hundred metres distant, a monstrous, winged horror was charging headlong after Farsight, its horned visage contorted in an expression of purest rage. The high commander was falling back before it, his plasma rifle punching holes in its ruddy flesh. The air shimmered around the daemon as it bellowed its war cry, greataxe raised.

'Blood for the Blood God! Skulls for the Skull Throne!'

The creature inside her recoiled at the words, its hatred and fear of the behemoth mingling with her own terror as if it were an instinctive, animalistic response. Herat wracked her brain; there was advantage here, she could feel it. It

seemed reasonable to conclude the two types of entity on the planet were allies only in the loosest sense, united in a common cause only for a time. And what was that cause? What did the two daemon races hope to achieve? The answer hung just out of reach.

The entity inside her was psychic. Powerfully so. This much she knew. That which hurt psykers could therefore also, in theory, hurt the entity. And there were plenty of things here that had hurt her mind when she had attempted to use her biomantic powers upon them.

Find the worst of them, fight through the pain, and she might forge a weapon against the creature that had all but claimed her for its own.

A fusillade of ork bullets pinged from the marble flagstones less than a metre from her position, chips of stone stinging her shins. She screwed her eyes shut, curling up in the lee of the statue's plinth, and prayed to the Emperor for deliverance.

Stealth Commander Moata of Vior'los paced forward, the compensators in his XV25 battlesuit taking the weight of each step so he made hardly any sound at all. A full suite of electromagnetic bafflers, audio dampeners, white noise generators, multi-spectrum deflectors and chameleon fields did the rest. To the scanners of a civilised race, he would have been all but invisible, as would all three of the XV25 teams he led around the perimeter of the landing site to establish a skirmish zone he had coded Stealth Four. To the low-tech enemy of the Molochites, he was likely nothing but a blur.

The aun were guiding a masterful defence of the zone at the periphery of the Nameless City. Having taken position amongst the most defensible ruins they could find – those of a colonnaded building with twisted silhouettes marring the walls – they were directing the volleys of serried ranks of fire warriors, who blasted long-range pulse rifle fire into the endless ranks of the Molochites charging their position.

Behind them a team of three heavy-set Broadside battlesuits stood like sombre giants, missiles shooting from their boxy fists whenever the enemy made a concerted attack.

‘Honoured Aun’Diemn,’ said Moata over a closed channel. ‘All landing site zones reading gold. Do you wish me to recommence standing surveillance of the high commander?’

‘Keep a hex open, but ensure it is mono directional,’ came the reply. *‘Whilst the castle stands tall, its nobles may hunt unfettered by doubt.’*

‘As you say,’ said Moata. He called up a drone-link to relay footage of Farsight as he cut his way through the Molochites near the star dais.

The fire warriors were calm, methodical, almost trance-like in their accuracy and efficiency, picking off the red-skinned creatures that darted across the streets wherever they dared to show themselves. Where one rifleman’s shot hit home to no effect, another would take on that target, and the first would pick another, repeating the pattern as necessary until the killshot was made. If an enemy appeared that could not be laid low with pulse rifle fire, the Broadside would engage until it was pounded into nothingness. According to Moata’s control suite, their mutual kill ratios were rivalling those of the XV8 teams at the glowing disc-portal of the star dais.

‘These Molochites are fearless,’ said Shas’la Var’kia, youngest of his team. *‘They charge into the teeth of our guns.’*

Moata saw another pocket of Molochite aliens clustering behind a ruined wall, some of their number licking their blades in a grotesque exaggeration of battle-lust.

‘They are learning to gather in force beforehand,’ said Moata across the stealthnet, putting his back to the upper half of a two-floor staircase. It led downwards into a crypt and upwards into nothing at all. ‘On my mark, thin them out. Locate staging posts and eliminate. Overlap fire zones

until nowhere is safe.'

The stealth commander stepped out from behind the ruined wall, bringing to bear both the burst cannons of his customised XV25 and opening fire on the knot of crimson bladesmen. Three of them were torn into ragged strips of flesh, dissipating into nothingness as the rest ducked low. Some manner of discorporation technology, thought Moata, teleporting the wounded to a med-facility before the moment of death.

The rest of his team joined their firepower to his from four different angles, laying down hails of plasma from their quad-barrelled burst cannon that tore apart the Molochites seeking shelter from Moata's vector of attack. The stealth teams had them wherever they turned: avoiding one meant exposing themselves to another.

'They will learn fear, soon enough,' said Moata, gunning down another pair of Molochites as they sprinted for safety. 'They will realise what it means to spurn the Greater Good.'

Something massive burst from behind the broken spires of a nearby building, a vast flying alien with curling horns and a greataxe that trailed flame. It was closely followed by another of the red behemoths, leathery wings beating hard as it climbed. Behind that another massively built creature was heading to the west of the dais; avian this time, it was long-necked and feathered in the manner of a Vior'lan roc.

'Bring them down, Broadside Team Temar'cai,' said Moata, 'I want them grounded for the crossfire.'

He heard the signature whip-crack of an XV88 discharging its rail rifle, and the closest airborne horror had its wing torn from its shoulder in a burst of gore. Moata opened fire as the monstrous thing's momentum brought it into range, stitching bleeding holes across its neck even as seeker missiles blasted craters in its abdomen and thigh. It spiralled down into the ruins of the city, bellowing in anger, its roars of indignation answered by harsh barks as if from a pack of hounds below. The other turned in mid-flight, folding its wings and diving out of Moata's sight.

‘Good enough,’ said Moata. ‘Consolidate and prepare for heavy engagement.’

He saw flashes of red amongst the ruins, muscular canids loping past their position without so much as a glance in their direction.

There was a wordless shout from the team’s communion link. Moata saw Jaa’ta, one of his own stealthers, opening fire at one of the giant canids, but the plasma volley did not fella it. The beast turned, the weird frill around its neck popping wide as it barked in savage anger, then pounced. Its jaws closed around Jaa’ta’s battlesuit with a gristly snap. The rounded torso of the XV25 cracked like an egg.

Moata watched in horror as the beast’s jaws crunched the battlesuit to ruin, the pilot within torn apart in a gory display of gouged flesh and spurting blood. Jaa’ta’s death scream came loud over the communion link before Moata eye-stabbed it silent.

‘*Shas’o?*’ came the voice of his la over the communion link.

‘Do not engage,’ said Moata. ‘Maximise stealth tech, let them pass at first, then engage from the rear. At close quarters we–’

There was another scream as one of the hounds pounced on Shas’la Var’kia, yanking her backwards from her place of concealment to dash her on the streets. Her stealth suit’s chameleonic malfunctioned at the impact, and she was pounced upon by two more of the things. She was caught in their jaws, and they pulled, shook and tore her limb from limb.

‘It got Var’kia,’ said Shas’la Un’da. *‘They can see us. How can they see us?’*

Suddenly the hounds were everywhere. Moata saw one leaping for him; he swung one burst cannon around as the beast’s jaws opened wide, letting it swallow the barrel of his suit’s right gun-limb and opening fire down its gullet. Incredibly its teeth still pierced the metal, one of its incisors almost scraping against his bare flesh. He placed the muzzle of his other cannon in between the thing’s

glowering eyes and blasted its skull into dissipating sludge.

Another came in hard from the right. Moata hurled himself backwards as it leapt, kicking it in the hip to send it tumbling down the steps of the crypt. He scrabbled upright, firing his intact burst cannon down the stairs as the canid's evil red eyes rose from the shadows of the basement. It disappeared in a cloud of blood and glowing plasma.

'They're all over us!' shouted Un'da. Then he screamed, and his audio cut out.

'Teams Moata and Fara'dui,' came Aun'Diemn's voice over the communion link. *'You are strong in the ways of the T'au'va. Hold that in your heart, and you can never truly be defeated.'*

Moata found himself nodding, his battlesuit bobbing slightly as it echoed his movements. A great sense of peace, of competence, of surety that all was well settled across him. How could he fear the unknown, when the certainty of the T'au'va would always lead to victory?

Another one of the muscular hounds stalked past him, frill rippling as it growled and sniffed, but it seemed suddenly oblivious to their presence. Moata saw Fara'dui across the street, but the beast ignored him too.

'Do you judge the time right, shas'o?' said Fara'dui.

'I do,' replied Moata.

They opened fire as one. The beast came apart, welters of blood splashing the rubble as the rest of the creature disincorporated into pinkish mist. Two more of the creatures turned into the streets, growling and casting about for their prey. Stealth Team Heloi'gui appeared from the ruins behind them, fanning out. They shot the canids in the backs, their burst cannons flaring bright. The Molochite beasts' thickset bodies skittered down the road in a spasming dance before bursting apart in splashes of gore.

'Targets neutralised,' said Heloi'gui.

'Three kills made here,' said Shas'la Tunde from the eastern side of the landing zone. *'Re-establishing*

perimeter.'

'Hold it fast.' Moata ran at combat pace down the street to the inner perimeter of the landing zone. The fire warrior cordon was under heavy attack, now, fully engaged in keeping the Molochite swordsmen at bay. The Broadsides were facing a spiralling cloud of what looked like Dal'ythan bladerays. The creatures shrieked in hideous, piercing voices from their spined mouths, their hunting calls mingling into a chorus of the damned. The glistening beasts curved through the air as if underwater, their wide wings angling as they darted and weaved.

The aun's XV88s were blasting the flying creatures apart with missiles and even railgun shots, but the shoal hurtling from the skies had safety in numbers. Moata added his own firepower, streams of burst cannon plasma pouring straight up like tracer fire to kill two, three, six of the flying Molochites. Their foul ichor rained down as they disincorporated. It splattered across Moata's suit, some even dripping through the holes the canine attack beast had torn in his right weapon limb. No matter how many he killed, there were always more, emerging in bursts of light from the skies over the Great Star Dais.

Suddenly the swarming rays were overwhelming the Broadsides, too close to target effectively. Each swoop came closer to the leaders at the heart of the formation. The ethereal guard lashed out with their honour blades to consume those who threatened their master in blazes of discharged energy. Aun'Xa himself, the Hope of Youth, cried out his exhortations, steeling his warriors and inspiring the t'au around him to fight with everything they had. They took a tremendous toll, pulse rifles bullseyeing the manta-like creatures as the ethereal guard weaved their weapons together in a canopy of blades that killed again and again.

It was not enough.

Moata cried out a warning as three swooping rays flicked out their tails, the club-like protrusions at the end knocking

aside the halberd-like blades of the ethereal guard. Three more battered the warriors senseless. Then the largest of the sky rays' number swooped vertically downwards. Moata opened fire. His streaming plasma bolts did not hit the creature, but flowed around it, orbiting it like bioluminescent shrimp gathering around a food source.

Then the creature's scything wing lashed out, and clipped Aun'Xa's head from his body.

Moata felt something curdle within him. An ethereal had died.

'High Commander O'Shovah!' he roared into the cadrelink. 'We are compromised! Help us!' He looked at the observation hex in the corner, but Farsight was embroiled in combat with one of the winged monstrosities he had driven off earlier. The high commander broke off, trying to bring his firepower to bear on the behemoth before it could negate his ranged advantage. For a moment, Moata thought the Molochite giant stared right at him through the visual link, an expression of gloating triumph twisting its gargoyle features. It said something he could not understand, bubbling blood spilling down its chin.

Moata was suddenly surrounded by enemies. He opened fire indiscriminately, blasting away at those around him. Red, near-naked bodies mingled with crimson-armoured horrors, twisted mockeries of t'au that leered and screamed as horns pushed from their helmeted foreheads. He heard himself screaming, desperate to spill the blood of the enemy, no matter who they were. His broken gun-limb he used as a club, battering and breaking the bones of all those in arm's reach. With his intact burst cannon he killed, and killed again, blasting holes in the torsos of anything that fell under his crosshairs. He was dimly aware of a monstrous form winging its way down from above, vast pinions blotting out the stars as its scaled feet bowled over a Broadside battlesuit. Its long staff tapped the sensor head of another, and in a shimmer of light, the entire XV88 - pilot and all - turned to translucent crystal.

'Death!' screamed Moata, blasting away at the avian Molochite. 'Red and bloody death to all who oppose the T'au'va!'

'And death unto you, little one,' said the avian giant in a perfect Vior'losan dialect.

It reached out its magister's rod towards him, the staff elongating to impossible dimensions until it was all Moata could see. He felt it tap the front of his XV25, and saw the front of the battlesuit craze with veins of pale diamond before becoming transparent.

He looked down. He was becoming transparent, too, his hands turning to crystal as the curse spread up his arms to his chest. It did not hurt, strangely.

Then he saw the feathered monstrosity close its wings around Aun'Diemn, and a spiritual pain far worse than any physical agony wrenched at his soul.

It was the last thing Shas'O Moata ever felt.

Vykola screamed as her eyes were forced back open by the being inside her.

There was a thunder of hooves as a stampede of metal-skinned daemon chargers hurtled past her refuge. She could taste their blood-rich stench on the air, and felt a powerful urge to flee. One of the horned riders saw her. It cried out in triumph, yanking the brazen collar around its steed's neck and hauling it to bring the monoceroid staggering left. The creature and its rider disappeared for a moment behind a statue of an impossibly tall infant, the thump of hooves ebbing – and then growing distinct once more as they came out the other side, charging straight for her.

She knew on some instinctive level the thing was an incarnation of bloodlust, the unforgiving need for indiscriminate violence made manifest.

She focused her mind, sending a pulse of sheer revulsion straight at the creature with the intent of sending its physical form staggering away. The collar around the

beast's neck glowed cherry red for a moment, but other than that, her biokinesis did nothing. Dread seized Vykola, her hand grasping for the pulse pistol that should have been at her waist. It closed on nothing. She had never managed to eject it from Ob'lotai's control cocoon.

Seconds left, at most.

There was a bright, strobing light as a Crisis battlesuit slammed down ten feet away with weight enough to crack the flagstones. Lances of energy flashed from its gun-limbs, spearing out with such intensity Vykola could see them clearly even with her eyes screwed shut. The battlesuit crossed the beams in a giant, burning X-shape just as the daemon closed the distance, its steed's horn lowered, at full gallop.

The Crisis commander's timing was near perfect. Both rider and steed came apart, slashed into jagged pieces, then disincorporated in a cloud of reddish mist.

'Brightsword,' said Vykola.

'Well met, vulnerable one,' said the battlesuit commander. 'I take it Ob'lotai has not fared well.'

'He escaped in his servitor-disc,' she said, taking umbrage at his tone. 'And I am far from vulnerable, young warrior, no matter what skin I wear.' She concentrated hard, calling on the memories of steel, and this time her body took on the sheen of hard, impervious metal.

'I have no doubt of it,' said Brightsword. 'Yet our friendly new allies-to-be are even more unpredictable than you are.'

A shoal of flat-bodied daemon beasts, manta-like in shape but gliding through the air rather than the water, veered around a broken henge to dive straight for them.

'Behind you!' cried out Herat. She held out a warding hand towards the glittering creatures, and two of them burst apart in showers of wet muck and fleshy scraps. It sent a fierce thrill of power through her. The others veered in close to Brightsword, fanning out in all directions. His fusion blades flared bright, cutting two of them from the skies, but the rest spiralled and swooped under his cutting

beams. One of the creatures slashed its wing into his XV8's flank, opening it in a shower of sparks. Another two affixed their strange tusk-like mouthparts to his shoulder, disgorging hissing blasts of white-hot energy that melted fist-sized chunks of metal from his battlesuit.

'Bravestorm,' said Brightsword. 'They are on me, please assist.'

There was a roar of jetpack engines, and a massive iridium battlesuit touched down in a cloud of dust, crushing the remains of a delicate statue underfoot. The weapon system on its shoulder disgorged a fierce plume of flame that played across Brightsword's battlesuit, turning the outer layer black but doing little harm. The sky-shark daemons, however, were reduced to scattering ash.

One of the creatures, largely untouched, detached with a piercing shriek. It flip-flopped in mid-air to soar towards Bravestorm as he strode forward, flamer roaring, then looped around the fire to dive at his sensor head. He backhanded it with his massive oversized gauntlet, and it burst apart, spattering the debris and ruins all around with multicoloured ichor.

'This race uses a variety of attack beasts,' he said, flicking daemoniac effluvium from his sizzling fist. 'Invertebrates, by the remains.'

'My thanks, formidable one,' said Brightsword. 'And also to you, Mamzel Delaque.'

Herat inclined her head, then made the sign of the T'au'va and slipped away into the rubble. The two crimson battlesuits were large, obvious targets; both ork and daemon would attack them on sight. She had no desire to be close to them for long. More than that, there was no way the t'au commanders could help her on any level other than the physical. Farsight, perhaps, had a deeper understanding than most, but he had his own battle to win. One within the strictures of the T'au'va rather than without.

A cloud of dust and stone splinters billowed through a

nearby archway as she picked her way across a street. She put an elbow across her eyes on instinct, but the shrapnel simply rebounded from her metallic skin. So long as she didn't breathe any of the dust in, she was impervious to such trivial dangers.

Narrowing her eyes, she took stock of the ruins around her, and darted for cover.

Bullets pinged from her shoulder, knocking her off balance but failing to pierce her flesh. She staggered, planting a foot on a crumbled plinth, and then righted herself, running onwards with her breath coming fast to slide into the scree-strewn quadrangle of a shattered temple. Heart pounding, she took another moment to assess.

The trick of turning flesh to metal was one of the first she had mastered, locked away in the steel coffins of the prison ship as a youth. She had nothing better to do than to become one with her surroundings, to internalise the power that might otherwise have led her to the stake or the pyre. Today was one of a long string of disasters turned aside by what she saw as a simple trick of corporeality. Others considered it the worst kind of witchcraft. The t'au, though suspicious of psychic activity of any kind, were open-minded enough to let their allies employ it to their advantage.

But they still had so, so much to learn.

Waiting for an opportune moment amidst the smoke and the fire, Herat crossed the rubble-strewn stretch between the statue and a nearby ruin, interposing the mangled remains of an XV8 battlesuit between her and a scattering of ork veterans. A skirmishing mob of daemon foot-soldiers picked their way through the shattered alabaster ruins, giant war-canid beasts prowling in front of them. Herat made herself as small as possible, putting the shattered leg of the battlesuit between herself and the hunters, but judging by the sniffs and growls of the canids, they already had her scent.

There was a flash of bright red in her peripheral vision.

One of Farsight's breacher teams, well-drilled infantry with snub-nosed carbines, emerged from the broken foundations to the right and unleashed a devastating fusillade of plasma fire at the hunting pack. The daemons shrieked – not in pain, but in something that seemed more like fierce glee. Even as the plasma fire thickened they rushed headlong towards the breachers. One of their number was shot down, then three, then four as the plasma fusillade intensified. The last few canids, collars glinting as bolts of bluish energy streaked past them, ducked and slid below the volley before charging in once more.

'Move,' muttered Vykola to the t'au fire-team. 'Run.'

The t'au stood their ground. Once again the plasma weapons spat fury, bowling over three of the hounds, whose loping run had turned into an all-out charge. Vykola saw the two giant canids nearest the t'au leap high, bounding over a fallen pillar towards the gunners – and honed her mind to a point, concentrating all her focus before letting fly.

The psychic attack should have burst the creatures apart mid-air, or sent them sprawling at the very least. Instead it filled her vision with dark crimson and made it feel like an axe had slammed into her forehead.

She sprawled into the dirt and the dust, wiping tears of blood as she snivelled away a drizzle of gore from ruptured veins in her olfactory chasm. The pain was overwhelming, a throbbing thunder roaring in the back of her mind. She told herself it stemmed from the rushing of her arteries, an auditory hallucination caused by the psychic backlash. But in the back of her head the thunder of blood in her ears grew louder, more like a voice – or like the malicious, booming laugh of a mad god.

Her vision cleared, a point of focus growing more and more distinct to show a sky ravaged by explosions and ruins lit by the ominous, shimmering disc-portal that discoloured the city around her. She knelt in the powdered rubble, debris crunching beneath her as she cast about

herself for a weapon. A length of twisted rebar lay nearby, its end embedded in a block of stone. She pulled it towards her, wincing at the scraping noise as she yanked it free from the rubble, then looked back over the fallen pillar towards the skirmish between the hunting pack and the t'au breachers.

There, less than three metres away, was a red-skinned hound the size of a carthorse. Its ears were pricked up, its nostrils flared wide. It locked its evil scarlet eyes with her, and growled low, the sound an echo of the thunder in her mind. Around its neck a thick frill of skin stood out, a collar of brass glinting between its scales and the grotesque leather ruff of its neck.

The creature bunched its muscles, and pounced.

Reality unfolded, strobing as if caught in a child's zoetrope. *She saw the forking paths of causality ahead – visualised the beast colliding with her to close its jaws around her neck and rip her head free in a spray of arterial blood. Then the last-ditch psychic attack, which saw her eyes burst from her skull in a devastating psychic backlash. The creature missed its bite, but shoved her backwards so she toppled into the rubble and broke her neck on a scattering of debris.*

Then, a flash of inspiration. This thing could not be slain by psychic means. Its creator, its patron, its master, had ensured it.

Vykola swung the length of rebar hard. It connected with the side of the creature's head even as it leapt for her, as perfect a strike as she could have wished for. The hound twisted as it fell, spasming hard as it scrabbled in the dirt. She was already upon it, turning the rebar around in her hands to slam the jagged end of the metal down into the beast's head. It lashed out a claw, taking her legs out from under her. Her shins burned, opened to the bone despite the steel of her skin. She went down hard. The beast twisted, pouncing on her with animal swiftness as she struggled to rise. The rebar was knocked from her hand.

The daemon hound pinned her arms, her shoulders. It reared high to roar its victory, savouring her panic. Its scaly body crushed her into the sharp-edged debris. Her chest felt as if it were on fire. The blast-furnace stink of its breath filled her senses. Teeth longer than her fingers spread in horrible profusion as it opened its jaws wide. The pain in her torso coalesced, and with a heave, burst outwards from between her ribs. Jagged spars of crystal lit from within shot out like blades, impaling the daemon beast. It howled, the sound of anguish resolving into a ragged growl, and reared backwards.

Her body locked together with that of the daemon, Herat was pulled up with it. She fought away the instinct to send a pulse of biomantic force, and instead picked up a jagged rock from the ground nearby, slamming it into the side of the creature's head over and over again. Her psyche burned, funnelling every iota of strength she had into her metal-hard limbs. The rock crumbled in her hand as she pounded it into the creature's head. Teeth splintered and cracked, hissing drool splashed in thick ropes across her neck. The creature's rear claws ripped at her thighs with force enough to disembowel a grox. The metal-tearing sound of its brazen talons scoring her legs was like a chorus of screams.

Its head was a mess now, a lump of ragged meat, soupy ichor and shattered daemonbone. Still the creature raged, bucking and slashing, fiercer than ever. She shoved it hard, scrabbling back to give herself some space, but it didn't work. The scintillating spears of crystal that had sprouted from her ribcage still connected them. It came with her as she fell back, its breath in her face truly awful. The rune-inscribed collar on the creature's neck glowed dully. She felt the fiery strength inside her dwindle. It was a horrible ebb of hope, like a survivor expending his last firewood only to see it gutter and die out.

As her surging vitality gave way, her skin, dull gunmetal and lustrous, turned to the inert grey of a water caste t'au,

then to the peach-brown tone of her true form. Desperate, she grabbed one of the creature's fangs and yanked it sideways, keeping its jaws from her throat for a little longer.

The daemon beast's claws ripped at her, opening her hip, gouging her calf. Thick lines of pain spasmed along her legs.

A single thought made its way through the pain.

Something about the creature was denying her power. She had seen the same thing happen when she was within Ob'lotai's control cocoon, and launched a mental assault at the daemon riders on their war-beasts. They had worn brazen collars too; they too had glowed when she had focused her powers upon them, and her psyche had turned into raw agony.

Could it deny another psychic being in the same way?

Her hand found another rock, this time twice the size of the last one. She put every iota of her willpower and strength into her arms as she grabbed the beast by the brazen collar, brought the rock up and around, and pounded it into the creature's mouth. The daemon screamed in anger and denial, its leathery frill shaking wide, and the daemon inside her screamed with it. The hound shuddered and began to melt, deliquescing into a crimson slurry that hit her like a trough of gore emptied all at once.

The metal collar remained, slick red from top to bottom. It burned to the touch, red-hot with unnameable energies. She forced herself to cling onto it despite the fact her every nerve ending screamed to let it go, despite the fact her parasite shrieked and gibbered in fear at its touch. The collar dwindled in her grip, shrinking down from a wide hoop that would have fitted over her shoulders until it was perhaps a third of the size. She felt something give, and with a dull *clack*, the collar hinged open.

Eyes staring wide, agony wracking her legs and a cluster of migraines threatening to split her head wide open,

Vykola Niamh Herat put the daemon collar around her neck, and clasped it shut.

A tidal wave of pain ripped through Herat's body and soul, obliterating conscious thought. There was only agony. Every part of her was aflame, every tiny hair, every cell screaming its own protest. Somehow she did not pass out. She would not allow it. For there was something inside her that was faring worse, and she did not wish to miss a moment of its punishment.

The creature inside Herat – that insidious psychic echo she had harboured since the Water Spider had put part of its fire inside her back on the *Manifest Dream* – writhed as if electrocuted by a colossal pulse of current. She could feel it thrashing, spasming within her astral form, the pseudopods of its invasive presence contracting and withering away. Its screams came from a dozen mouths at once.

Something about the collar was anathema to it, even more so than it was to her. For though she was a psyker, and one of the most powerful on the Eastern Fringe at that, she was a creature of flesh, blood and bone – and of that, the collar approved. But the thing inside her had no form to call its own, no physicality of any kind. It was purely psychic energy. The collar had been made as the bane of all such things, for the one who had forged it hated sorcery with the heat of a raging sun. Even as the hellish artefact ravaged her mind, it was banishing the creature within her.

More than that, it was annihilating it.

The moment the collar had been clasped around her neck, the creature inside her was doomed. It could no more escape than a mouse swallowed alive by a lion, consigned to an agonising death in the gastric acids of its predator. And even though its claws scratched at the insides of her soul, even as the collar burned her mind from the outside in, she savoured the daemon's pain, and drew strength from it.

Blood, she thought. Only blood, flesh and bone. These things have value. The incorporeal form does not.

Something hideous tore its way from her mouth, then, a shapeless form of fire and light with a suggestion of flailing limbs. She caught it with her bare hands, forcing it back down, breathing in great gouts of its essence as a lucid dreamer breathes in air to fly. It screamed again, a dozen voices protesting all at once.

No escape for you, thought Herat. The agony was dimming, and her conscious mind was gaining focus by the second. *You wanted so badly to live within me, now you pay the price. You will die inside me, Neverborn, and rise no more.*

A surge of pain, something akin to heartburn but a thousand times worse, seared in her throat from her belly to her neck. She threw her head back and let loose a piercing scream. It was a human sound, and nothing more.

Something ruptured within her. The spikes of crystal that had protruded from her chest shimmered, and disappeared altogether as if they had been no more than an illusion.

With a last surge of effort, she tore the daemon collar from her neck, and flung it into the dust. The pain she felt was indescribable, but it was at least real.

Then, there was only a hunter's calm, and a sea of blood to salve her wounds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE BRINK

THE NAMELESS CITY
ARTHAS MOLOCH

Farsight lay in the off-white dust of Arthas Moloch's ruined city, a winged red giant rising above him like a death-ghost come to claim him for the darkness. His chest pounded, constricted, pounded again.

A warning flashed bright on his med-analysis suite.

••• CARDIAC FAILURE IMMINENT ••• DISENGAGE AND
SEEK EARTH CASTE SUPPORT IMMEDIATELY •••

The Molochite giant's war cry boomed out once more, deafening even with his control cocoon's audio dampeners at full. Its tattered pinions and vast, barrel-like torso blotted out the light of the disc-portal in the distance, but still its eyes glowed red within its silhouette as it loomed in towards him.

Despite all his training, despite all his efforts with the Way of the Short Blade and the long studies he had made of the legendary warrior Aun'Shi's sword-forms, he was

hopelessly outmatched. Even in retreat, he had been caught by the monstrosity's whip and dashed down to earth. One of his battlesuit's limbs had been torn clean away; the creature's strength had been so immense it had simply ripped the weapon system out of the joint. His other arm had been partly crushed beneath a massive brass-shod hoof, and his plasma rifle's smooth cylinder was buckled into uselessness. Its hand was still functional, at least. Bereft of any other weapons, with the daemon's killing axe raised high above him, he reached towards an ancient metal blade held in the grip of a fallen statue.

Farsight's heart pounded fast, so fast it felt it might never slow down, just accelerate until it burst within his chest. His vision blurred grey at the edges. Bright spots danced before his eyes like fire-daemons rejoicing in his imminent death.

One chance left. A shining blade that had somehow reflected not the sensor head of his XV8 as it scanned it, but his own panic-stricken features, despite the fact there had been a handspan of opaque layered alloy between them.

Fighting through the pain, he extended a four-fingered hand from his battlesuit, and with a focus born of his last few breaths, scrabbled the blade free from the statue's grip. He lurched upright, kneeling in a dying warrior's approximation of the Stance of Stone.

'Sha'vastos,' he managed over the shas'o cadrenet. 'Take command.' His breath was coming in quick, painful gasps. 'And thank you, warriors. All of you. It has been an honour.'

The winged monstrosity's axe fell, its blade aflame, pitiless and sharp enough to cut rock.

The relic sword rose to meet it.

All of reality seemed to focus, to dwindle to a single point where axe met blade. The sword sheared straight through the burning greataxe as it came down, and the daemon's weapon fell in two parts to the dusty flagstones.

The Molochite roared its anger, its face contorted in

wrath.

‘- - IMPERTINENT VERMIN - -’ read the autotrans. ‘- - YOU WILL PAY IN BLOOD - -’

Farsight saw the axe haft coming for him a moment before it happened, and whipped the giant blade across in an aggressive parry. It cut through the axe haft and severed a finger from the hand that held it.

The pain in his chest subsided, replaced by a thrilling sensation of victory against the odds. His warrior soul, close to extinguished by the death of his certitude in the T’au’va, burst into life.

The giant drew its whip back, flames trailing from the bladed iron star at its tip.

‘- - BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD - -’

The whip came hurtling in, a sharp crack ripping the air. Farsight’s relic sword was there to meet it. The spiked roundel at the whip’s end came apart, split down its length - as did the iron chain behind it. With an eye-flick, Farsight diverted the battlesuit’s power into a sudden, rushing attack, its jets burning blue-white as the XV8 shot forward to slam the beast off balance. He brought the relic sword around, a blur of dull white metal aimed at the beast’s midsection. The monster twisted with surprising speed, avoiding the blow by a hand’s breadth.

‘The phoenix rises,’ said Farsight. ‘See how it burns.’

The creature’s face contorted once more, a Fio’taun theatre mask of grotesque emotion as it re-evaluated its prey. It was truly hideous, this thing, a caricature of anger and unreasoning hate. This was no alien species. This was a creature from beyond, as unnatural and foul as the thing he had fought in Mamzel Herat’s quarters back on the *Manifest Dream*. It hailed from a different caste, perhaps, but it was a daemon nonetheless, sent to threaten all the T’au’va held dear.

And it would be exterminated, thought Farsight, as would all its repugnant kind.

The creature brought a heavy, scarred fist around in a

roundhouse punch. Farsight raised his shield generator to block it. Though its deflection field was sparking and useless, it was still a disc of metal, and it deflected the most part of the blow. Its force bowled him aside nonetheless – according to the ballistics report, the force behind the blow would have been enough to smash a Fio'taun fortress wall.

His damage control suite was all but entirely red now, the battlesuit close to ruin. But Farsight had never felt more alive.

'You do not scare me, beast,' said Farsight. 'I have slain Imperial tyrants, ork warlords and psychic abominations. I shall destroy you too.'

'-- WEAK FOOL -- BLADE WILL NOT SAVE YOU --'

The Molochite made to swing another gnarled fist, then at the last moment kicked out, its hoof slamming into Farsight's midsection. His battlesuit flew up and back, but he stopped it abruptly with a push of thrust from his turbine jetpack, quickly reversing direction to charge in again. The beast spread its wings wide with a crack of displaced air, and it launched into the skies to meet him.

He swung his sword as the beast came for him. The creature pivoted away, lashing a fist in a backhand blow. This time Farsight had read its intent. The relic blade flashed. The beast's entire hand fell from its wrist, drizzling blood as it spun end over end to land in a ruined temple below. The blade had mutilated it where his fusion blaster, not long before, had left only a shallow scar.

The giant Molochite roared, snapping its wings to lunge forward with shocking speed. It closed its massive, fanged mouth over the sensor head of the XV8 battlesuit, and pulled. He heard the metal protest as it was wrenched this way and that, yanked off balance. He tried to angle the blade into its flesh, but the daemon was crushing him with a wrestler's strength, pinning the relic sword against his chest. There was a vicious snap as the sensor head was twisted upon its mount; had the XV8 been a living creature, it would have had its neck broken. He heard a loud, sharp

crack as the hull of the battlesuit split along its seams. The hex informationals in front of Farsight fizzled with static, only a third of them holding out.

‘Redistributing,’ said Coldstar, folding the less vital hexes to leave those he had marked as indispensable. Farsight glanced at the damage control suite. The battlesuit was mangled almost beyond repair. At any moment its structural integrity would fail altogether – he would die in his own mantle, crushed by the sheer, impossible strength of the Molochite that had him in its inescapable grip.

A sudden hurricane of plasma filled the air, fusion beams searing out amongst the storm of glowing beads. It seemed to surround him entirely, coming from every direction at once, but not a single flicker of damage appeared on the holo-doppel. He glanced at the cadrenet, and saw the icons of his commanders converged close to his own.

‘Sha’vastos,’ said Farsight. ‘Brightsword. My thanks.’

Suddenly the XV8 was mobile once more, staggering to right itself as Coldstar took control. The command suite showed the beast retreating, winging past him to curve around in the skies and out of sensor arc. He twisted with a flare of jets, pursuing it with a hot thrill of hunter’s intent.

‘Not over,’ he said.

‘Operational parameters at overall thirty-one per cent efficacy,’ said Coldstar.

‘Duly noted,’ said Farsight. ‘But we still have work to do. All forces not engaged in the Short Blade, muster at the north-east henge structure and re-establish coherency.’

Icons converged on Farsight’s command-and-control hex, those still in gold making haste for the designated rallying point. Many others were blinking red, ruddy grey, or even, in the case of Aun’Diemn and her veteran escort, the charcoal of an untimely death. Aun’Xa had been slain in the defence of the landing site, another senseless tragedy. Moata too had died, by his symbol readout, no doubt giving his last in the ethereals’ defence.

Farsight felt every loss like a spike to the heart. He had

warned them all. But they had insisted, and now a precious jewel of the T'au Empire was shattered forever.

The giant Molochite was heading for a fountain in the middle distance. It dropped its barbed whip and reached out its hand towards the shimmering disc above the Great Star Dais. Strange jagged tendrils of red un-light stretched out towards it. The hellish energy coalesced into a weapon in the beast's outstretched hand, the exact image of that same axe Farsight had destroyed mere moments before.

The axe shimmered into full corporeality, and the beast dived for the long-dry fountain on the far side of the square.

The muster point at which Aun'Los' icon had been stationed for the whole of the battle.

Something died inside Farsight as he realised the creature's intent. It was already too far away. In pausing to coordinate his battlegroup, he had let the creature escape.

The beast's axe rose high, glinting in the foul light of the disc-portal, then came down on the fountain - and the t'au sheltering within - with force enough to crack the entire edifice. A chorus of t'au shouts pierced the air, anguish and denial mingled in heartbreaking protest at a loved one suddenly slain. They could only have come from Aun'Los' escort detail.

Aun'Los' icon turned grey. It was a sudden transition, so much so that the axe blow could only have landed true. The beast leapt high, massive wings snapping out to take the weight of its heavy-set physique, and climbed unsteadily into the skies.

Farsight leant forward sharply, his thrust-vector suite copying the movement to send him hurtling after it, but it was already away into the dark, oppressive clouds.

Had the Molochite beast known about the aun? And if so, how? Two ethereals dead, one under heavy attack and too far away to reinforce. One axe blow, one billow of flame away from losing all guidance. From the death of hope.

Farsight felt the fierce elation that had flooded his system

cool and die away. He was alive, but he had failed. He had to see it with his own eyes, to gaze upon the legacy of his mistake. He leapt, a shallow parabola that took him over a storm of firepower and raging flame to the shattered fountain.

He felt his throat constrict as if an unseen hand was throttling him, some daemon residue that came not from a portal, but from within.

Aun'Los lay there, cut in two from crown to groin. The two halves of his corpse glistened in the wan light of the portal. As he watched, a saz'tral took off his cloak and draped it over the cadaver for the sake of decency, but it was too late. The sight was already burned into Farsight's mind. One of the finest t'au minds alive, slain without anyone to stay the blow. It might as well have been by his own blade.

He felt his features crease in grief and confusion. Somewhere in the back of his mind, in the symphony of destruction around him, there was a wrong note. But he could not place it.

A column of flame rose in the west, and screams carried on the wind. The awful, keening noise of a t'au army that has lost its ethereals in battle rose up, first as a few mournful voices, then the entire cadre as their headsets relayed the news.

The *arru'kuatha*, it was called – the scream of a thousand souls.

And it was his fault. He had left too small a guard to escort them, left their side in order to prosecute his own war.

Farsight heard a mourning wail resounding in his control cocoon. It had come from his own throat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

THE GREAT STAR DAIS
ARTHAS MOLOCH

‘Regroup at given sites,’ croaked Farsight. ‘Coordinates appended. I repeat, regroup immediately.’

The symbols of assent were slow to appear. His teams were still reeling from their loss. How could they not be?

Some blazed away at the nearest Molochites, insensible to his orders. He eye-flicked their icons, pushing their shas’ui leaders to acknowledge with the highest priority, and one by one they too turned gold as they moved into the designated strongpoints.

The gangling, pinkish creatures that had taken the north-east of the plaza were cackling now, dancing in odd fits and spurts as they cast fire into the air in celebration and pulled at the faces of the smaller, blue incarnations to make false smiles of their downturned lips. Earlier in the battle, at the first sight of the jewellery and gemstones the creatures sported, he had offered them wealth by way of truce,

hoping to bribe them or at least give them pause as the t'au forces rallied.

How foolish that attempt seemed now. The Molochites valued death, and death alone.

The pink-skinned daemons hurled their strange flames at the t'au nearby, but the fire-teams were wise to the danger now, and had taken position in defensible ruins that were mostly intact. Where the fire struck, the alabaster stone of the rubble was transmuted into something impossible, each lick of flame weakening the strongpoint with every caress of unnatural fire. But it was better than the alternative.

Farsight saw something strange about how and where the flames died out, eye-looping the relevant hex for future study. Just to the east of the dais, near the team designated La'rua Tsmynen Ka, the flames were guttering away in a circular radius around a tall, faceless statue. He felt a flash of suspicion, and zoomed on the area.

The statue was wearing a strange amulet around its neck, its shape a six-pointed star that was horribly familiar to him. It was the same symbol he had seen in his mind's eye in the confrontation with the Water Spider, back on the *Manifest Dream*. That same symbol that he, in a flash of inspiration, had carved into the flesh of the false water caste dignitary as they were crossing the Damocles Gulf – or rather the creature that was wearing his skin.

The throbbing headache that had coloured his perception since leaving the healsphere seemed to subside a little every time he looked at it. Somehow, deep in his mind, the hexagram shape represented some manner of salvation.

'Coldstar, scan for that six-pointed symbol at a radius of point five kilometres.'

'Affirmative.' A tiny circle appeared, filling with gold as the XV8's intelligence suite parsed its own data and that of the VX1-0 dronenet. The icon flashed, and the command-and-control suite unfurled a hex to show an aerial view of the battle site.

Arthas Moloch's nameless city had become a smoking

hellscape. Charcoal-grey and black icons dotted the image like the grave-slabs of some morbid Imperial tombfield. As he had thought, amongst the ebb and flow of war there were areas where the daemons were conspicuously absent, each centred around similar statues – some broken, some intact – that ringed the portal at regular intervals.

All those statues that they avoided were adorned with some manner of jewellery, a platinum glint against the dull white of the stone. As Coldstar brought up a detailed view, Farsight saw that each of them incorporated that same six-pointed star. He watched a group of daemon cavalry wheel away from one of them mid-charge, taking a longer route to their prey instead of passing beneath the statue's shadow. Even when they could have mounted flank attacks on t'au positions nearby, they kept a wide berth.

He'd missed the patterns the first time they had encountered the creatures, put such counter-intuitive behaviour down to the sheer otherness of the Molochite race. Now, it was all slotting into place.

'The vision,' said Farsight. His heart clenched, then, a knotted ball of pain that turned his sight black for one desperate, alarming second.

The med-suite flared red.

••• CARDIAC FAILURE IMMINENT ••• DISENGAGE AND SEEK EARTH CASTE SUPPORT IMMEDIATELY •••

'High commander?' said Coldstar.

'Nothing,' gasped Farsight. 'Just... just link me to the nearest team to the robed statue, second battlegroup.'

'Link open, commander.'

'La'rua V'ral, retrieve the hexagram icon from the statue you are using to anchor your position. I am inbound.'

'Affirmative,' came Shas'ui V'ral's reply. With one eye he watched her climb up the broken pedestal of the statue, but the medallion was out of reach. Borrowing a markerlight from a nearby comrade, she shone its beam onto the dull silver of the statue's adornment. A moment later the team's gun drone attendant flew up towards it, lifting the

designated artefact delicately with its grav-field and transferring it back to its leader.

‘Carry the artefact against the flame-beasts, Shas’ui V’ral.’

‘High commander?’

‘Just do as I say!’ he roared, his temper suddenly flaring. His chest convulsed again, the pain making him grind his teeth. Microdec’s left, perhaps. He had to make them count.

‘Of course,’ said Shas’ui V’ral, making a one-handed gesture of the admonished supplicant. She walked towards the flame-hurling Molochites, the amulet held out in both hands as if it were a gift. Farsight saw that the heat coming from the creatures was so intense her armour was darkening, wisps of smoke coming from her fingers, but she pressed onwards. As she did so, the creatures recoiled, and the flames the Molochites had spread to the alabaster flagstones recoiled with them, leaving pristine white stone behind.

‘High commander,’ said Shas’ui V’ral, her voice filled with awe. *‘It repels the foe.’*

To secure victory, the wise adapt.

‘Open the cadrenet, full spectrum,’ he said. ‘All fire caste personnel, this is High Commander Farsight. Muster at the designated points. All three groups converge in support of lead elements. Each highlighted team’s shas’ui is to effect a method of recovering the hexagrammatic artefact from each statue, image appended. Then bring them to my position east of the dais. Do so immediately, in the name of the T’au’va.’

Battered, confused and desperate for an end to their ordeal, his teams did not hesitate. They converged upon the sites, glad to have a concrete goal other than survival, some of their number fighting their way through fire and brimstone to reach them and suffering horrendous losses in the process. But they would rather die than fail him.

Several hexes, each a relay from an observation drone, were arrayed around Farsight’s command suite. Each showed one of the statues he had marked as critical. He

made for the closest, east of the Great Star Dais. He would reach it before the fire warrior strike team picking its way through the rubble, but not by much.

A cascade of assent symbols lit his screens. The howling of the daemons grew more intense as the t'au withdrew, and their foes realised what they intended. Streams of multicoloured fire roared out from the pink-skinned daemons that had been cavorting in glee mere moments before, but now they attacked with a deadly focus. Crimson bladesmen pulled themselves from stringy pools of clotted blood under the light of the dais and hurled themselves, screeching, at the t'au lines, only to be cut down by the overlapping fields of fire of the cadre's fighting withdrawal. A retreat in good order was as sure a weapon as advancing fire; perhaps better.

The overconfident enemy can be drawn, like poison from a wound.

More of Puretide's wisdom, and a tenet that had been used against him, to his shame, on Atari Vo. Yet these Molochites were more heedless of caution than any other race Farsight had encountered - even compared to the orks, still charging the t'au wherever they could at the edge of the dais. They would be obliterated in the open field of war.

'Strike teams, breacher teams, form perimeters around each statue. Overlap fire. Expend ammunition at will.'

Again, the shas'ui sent symbols of assent. The withdrawal was proving costly, with more symbols turning black and grey on his hex-displays every microdec, but it was working. His teams were racing across the plaza, their gun drones laying down covering fire as they concentrated on pushing a few metres ahead.

'Crisis teams only to engage the foe on the perimeter of the portal,' said Farsight. A howling daemon bladesman came for him; he put it down with a pinpoint thrust of his relic sword. 'Use flamer and fusion weapons only. I want all wounds cauterised, be they ork or Molochite. These creatures take power from vital fluids, and we and the orks

are providing all they need. Not a drop of blood is to be spilt upon the dais. All fire-teams to enact extreme defence, all wounded Crisis assets to withdraw immediately, reserve committed to replace when needed. On my lead.'

The rash of gold symbols upon his hex informationals was almost immediate. Farsight smiled. Who could stand before the unity of the T'au'va?

A team of fire warriors hustled over to his position, their shas'ui staggering under a vicious hip wound. Supported by one of her la rankers, V'ral held out the oversized amulet in the shielded gesture of the gift-given-in-the-storm.

Farsight bowed a fraction, pushing the tip of his relic blade delicately through the string of platinum beads that formed the amulet's necklace. He raised the sword in salute, sending the medallion sliding down to the hilt with a swift hiss of metal on metal.

'My thanks, honoured V'ral.'

A hex flared, that of La'rua Bochan - exhausted but triumphant. *'High commander,'* he said, *'we have also achieved our objective.'*

Farsight turned to see a tight-knit group of breachers picking their way towards him over the rubble, seven warriors in a circle with their backs to their shas'ui. Bochan held up the amulet he had won from the south of the dais, and Farsight extended the relic blade towards him, plucking the artefact from his hands with the tip of the relic sword as he had with V'ral, so that it too slid down to the hilt.

'Coldstar, bring us in close. Does my new blade have any ferrous resonance?'

'It has a magnetic signature, high commander, though the alloy of its construction is unknown.'

'Can you put a mag-field through what is left of the shield?'

'Affirmative.'

'Excellent.'

Farsight turned the relic sword around, clamping it to the

underside of his shield with a metallic clang so the amulets could not slide free. 'Much as I would love to, I will not be using it in the engagement to come.'

'High commander,' said Coldstar. 'With all ranged capability neutralised and the sword stowed, how do you intend to fight?'

'With my mind. Trust me, faithful helper.'

'I am still not sure as to your stratagem,' said Coldstar, an edge of cold formality in her tone. 'Please illuminate me as soon as you can as to your plans.'

'A modified Kauyon. I will form the bait. The strike teams can hold the Molochites long enough for it to work.'

Farsight leapt high and came down with a bass thump at the edge of the Great Star Dais, his landing hard enough to send plumes of dust rising in all directions.

'All near *orkboya*,' he shouted. The be'gel language was something he had studied on Arkunasha, and he remembered its curt, growling phonemes well enough. '*Krumpa warah*, leader fight!'

A few of the be'gel in the ruins turned, their faces lit as grotesque masks as they tried to figure out whether to plunge into combat against the swirling melee of Molochites and t'au at the heart of the dais, or take down the one-armed red war machine that was shouting behind them. Several turned to him and snarled, one raising a gun to fire wildly in his direction, but with most of their kind shot dead in the streets, they did not charge.

Farsight searched his memory for orkoid invective. It was there, under the trauma of the red sands of old; the crude greenskin culture and the piecemeal syntax that typified it. He had broken it down through the means of glyphs, a cross-caste technique that had been part of his censure as vash'ya - for linguistics was the water caste's concern. Nonetheless, it had seen a critical breakthrough in the long stalemate of that desert world.

'Coldstar, drop my voice two octaves before the next projection.'

‘Affirmative.’

‘You are *buncha-runtz!*’ he boomed through the XV8’s speakers. The roar was loud enough to shake dust from the nearby ruins. ‘Fail to bash no-arm *bigadredd! Weka-gitz!*’

It was good enough. The nearest pack of greenskins gave a great war cry and ran towards him, bellowing as they brandished their engine-axes. He let the first ork come in close, a massively muscled brute with thick plates of metal covering its shoulders.

The XV8 stomped forward at full extension with its arm thrust out in a lunging punch. Its metal fist hit the ork in the face with bone-cracking force, sending the greenskin tumbling backwards with a roar of indignation.

That was a language the orks understood perfectly. Dozens more of the creatures stampeded from the ruins, converging on him from four separate directions. Farsight waited until they were almost upon him, and then leapt into the sky.

Bravestorm and Brightsword came from the shadow of a ruined Hammerhead behind, tearing forward on engine plumes of shimmering heat. Bravestorm’s shoulder-mounted flamer sent a whooshing plume of conflagration to consume the foremost ork warriors. Several greenskins came on through the fire, burning and blackened but still raging. They were cut in half with clinical precision by Brightsword’s slashing fusion blasters.

The scene was repeated nearby as the Crisis teams followed their commanders’ lead, the intense heat of their flamer volleys turning the orks to so much charred and stinking meat. In those rare places where skin split and blood fell, the backwash of heat quickly evaporated it, sizzling, to red-black stains upon the off-white stone. Not ones to shy from a fight, the orks charged anyway. Fear of fire was something the brutish race clearly had yet to learn.

But they would learn it this day.

Sha’vastos strode from the mouth of a side alley choked with ork corpses, his own flamer adding to the intensity.

Bravestorm grabbed a charging ork war leader with his onager gauntlet, twisting hard at the waist to fling it into the second storey of a ruin some fifteen metres to the south. Brightsword swept his fusion blasters sidelong, the twin beams scything around at neck and groin height in a wide circle that stopped short of Bravestorm by only a finger's length. Seven orks fell dead, bisected into cauterised lumps of flesh.

Then, all of a sudden, there were no more greenskins within the perimeter.

'Keep fire intensity on the dais,' said Farsight from his vantage point some fifty metres above the zone. The disc-portal called to him, demanding his attention. He felt his head throb, threatening to split.

••• RISK OF CARDIAC FAILURE CRITICAL ••• read the medsuite. ••• DISENGAGE AND SEEK EARTH CASTE SUPPORT IMMEDIATELY •••

He pushed the pain to one side. 'Coldstar, trim all hex images to ensure the portal is not shown, retain maximum information otherwise.'

'Affirmative.'

Without the unnatural light of the portal to distract him, Farsight found some of his old focus returning. His tactic was beginning to work. The influx of the crimson Molochites, bolstered by a near-constant flow of reinforcements from the Great Star Dais, was thinning.

'Intensify scouring,' he said, relishing the words.

His Crisis teams had moved into their optimal places now, their fire warrior comrades keeping the lesser Molochites from interrupting their purges. The disc shimmered bright as flames leaped to meet it, but no more of the Molochites were appearing, and more died with every microdec. Where the bladesmen came forward in their rushing, screaming attacks, the Crisis suits bounded out of harm's way, their burst cannons taking the creatures' legs as soon as they left the perimeter that Farsight had outlined on their own command suites. A great howl of frustration and

rage went up from the crimson aliens – denied the blood they craved, they were robbed of sustenance and reinforcement in one fell swoop.

A hex flashed on Farsight's command suite; La'rua Qutan had recovered a hexagram amulet, and the team was sending it towards him. Their gun drone skimmed into view at speed, the medallion double-looped over its jutting pulse rifles.

'Unorthodox method,' he said.

'Nothing about this engagement is orthodox,' replied Shas'ui Qutan, sending the sign of the Opportune Strike.

'True enough,' he said. 'Coldstar, release my sword.'

'Done,' said Coldstar, the magnetic field dispersing. Farsight took the relic blade's hilt as it dropped and used its tip to untangle the third amulet from the drone's rifle barrels. Despite the sword being weighted strangely, such a feat of dexterity came easily to him. It felt as if he had used the weapon for many kai'rotaa already..

'Do you intend to use these antithetical symbols to drive back the Molochite attack?' asked Coldstar.

'No. I intend to halt it altogether.'

One of the massive, feathered creatures that Farsight took to be a Molochite commander gave a piercing cry, half a madman's scream, half an eagle's hunting call. As one, the blade-winged rays that swooped above the battle changed course, making for Farsight and the Crisis suits around the portal that still shone bright in the midpoint of the city. The monstrosities converged upon their position, casting great sheets of blue flame from their staves and forcing back the breacher teams that were holding off their foot-soldiers in tight, overlapping firing lines. Through the fires the pink-skinned Molochites danced, cartwheeling and leaping across fallen masonry, slowed not at all by the flames of Bravestorm, Brightsword and their fellow Crisis suits.

United in a single assault, the Molochites had numbers enough to swamp their position twice over. Fire-teams sent missiles and plasma bolts into the horde, blasting great

craters in their advance, but there was no breaking them.

‘Concentrate fire on the bladesmen and the cavalry,’ said Farsight. ‘If fire cannot harm them, they will swiftly encircle us.’

Brightsword’s crossed blades appeared as a minor command hex, flipping to reveal his youthful features. ‘A *warning, armless one*,’ he said, sliding an informational across the cadrenet. ‘*Enemy war leaders on vertical attack vector*.’

‘Corroborated,’ said Coldstar, her tone urgent. Farsight punched up a red-bordered hex to see three of the muscular red giants he had fought before, one missing a hand and with gore still spurting from its stump. They were diving vertically from the clouds, axes raised and wings furled as they hurtled towards him. Three sets of red eyes, and glinting in them all was the desire to see him brutally slain.

‘- - YOU WILL SUFFER FOR ETERNITY - -’ spooled the autotrans. ‘- - BATHE IN YOUR BLOOD - - TAKE YOUR SOUL - -’

Farsight cut the XV8’s thrust and dropped to the flagstones fast. Arthas Moloch’s bruised sky was blotted out entirely by the bat-winged monstrosities.

His doom had come for him.

He spun in a low pirouette and flicked his sword hard to the right.

The three medallions that had been looped around the weapon slid from his blade to shoot towards the portal. They ignited as they sailed away from him, each a little comet of white fire.

A cacophony of daemonic screams rang out. Killing axes ripped the air.

Then, as the medallions passed burning into the portal, the entire dais exploded with cataclysmic force.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE EXECUTIONER

THE NAMELESS CITY
ARTHAS MOLOCH

‘High commander?’

Farsight blinked away unconsciousness, disengaging his remote haptics on instinct and rubbing his eyes to restore some kind of focus. His head was splitting, his heart lurching, but the XV8 was upright, and still operative.

‘High commander,’ said Coldstar, ‘the Molochites and their portal are gone. But this is still an active warzone.’

‘They are gone?’ Farsight fought through the mental haze on muscle memory, re-engaging with his control suite and calling up as wide a variety of hex viewpoints as possible. Sure enough, there was not a sign of pink, blue or crimson flesh amidst the utter ruin that had once been the Great Star Dais.

‘They teleported away from the battle the moment your medallions hit the portal,’ said Coldstar. “A leap of intuition precedes a great victory.”’

‘And the ethereals?’

‘They were confirmed dead before the explosion, high commander.’

It felt as if a Fio’taun grave shroud settled upon him, then, smothering the fire inside.

His reverie was broken as a fusillade of bullets punched into his XV8, knocking it off balance. He spun, his temper flaring hot at those who had the temerity to disturb his grief. Orks, a small group of them, sheltering in the remains of a broken-down vehicle and opening fire with its point-defence guns from the other side of the plaza. More solid shot pounded into his XV8, sending brief flickers of red across the holo-doppel.

A snarl escaped his throat, growing to a cry of wordless anger. His heartbeat was thundering, now, and skipping irregularly. He leant hard, the thrust-vector suite turning the battlesuit on its axis as he leant into a swooping dive. The orks did not scatter, but gave voice to their own war cry, a bellow of animalistic rage. Their fire focused, punching in so hard he could feel each impact, but he did not turn aside.

‘Critical damage levels approaching,’ said Coldstar. ‘Please avoid unnecessary engagements.’

Farsight answered only by swiping his blade in a low arc that cut straight through one of the orks and the gun-chassis that encased him. An arc of blood jetted out, glittering silvery-red in the twilight. The bifurcated ork corpse pinwheeled away along with the mangled remains of the gunnery position, leather seat and all.

A thrill coursed through Farsight, something akin to the righteous joy of a hunter’s kill well made, but even more potent. It did not pass, but lingered in his muscles, empowering him.

He slashed the blade right as one of the creatures broke its fist on his shoulder armour with an ill-advised punch. He cut it diagonally in two from the hip to the collarbone, the blow almost contemptuous in its swiftness. Too easy, in fact,

for he had compensated by leaning left as he made the strike, only to find no resistance. He turned hard, regaining his balance with a foot planted on the wagon's rear sponson turret, and took the Stance of Seven Deadly Cuts.

There had been barely a whisper of effort at the passing of the relic sword. Farsight had originally put it down to the thing's sheer size and heft, but he knew enough about material science and the tolerances of a battlesuit's strength to know it was not that simple. There was some property to this artefact that made it exceptional, deadlier than anything the earth caste had yet devised. He could feel it as a weight in his mind as well as in the haptic relay of his gauntlets.

••• CARDIAC FUNCTION REGULATING ••• read the med-suite.

Another ork came in, this time wielding an axe made of two badly constructed circular saws. It was larger than the rest, and it pushed the axe down as a lever, the twin saws grinding into the hypermetal alloy of the suit. He heard the thing's guttural laughter, hateful and crude.

'Please address this most recent assailant,' said Coldstar, the holo-doppel flashing brighter than usual as if to make a point.

Farsight shucked a shoulder and the battlesuit shrugged with him, catching the axe and ripping it from the beast's hands. He elbowed the thing away with his good arm, and then - even as it fell from the side of the vehicle - slashed the relic sword out to catch it in the neck. The ork's head flew away as if it had been clipped off by a perfect executioner's strike. Farsight felt another surge of energy thrill through him, liquid vitality rippling through his bones and invigorating his tired muscles.

••• CARDIAC FUNCTION NORMAL ••• read the med-suite.

Farsight barely spared it a glance. He was already on to the next ork, kicking it hard in the chest to break it free from the gun harness that it was desperately trying to bring

to bear upon him. He flipped the sword around, rolling it over the back of his hand, and drove it point first into the base of its neck to impale the beast through its entire torso. He felt the terrific pulse of gratification once more as he yanked his blade free, sending the ruined corpse flailing into the dirt.

••• ALL BIOSTATIC LEVELS ELEVATED ••• EXCEEDING ESTABLISHED PARAMETERS •••

‘Commander,’ said Coldstar. ‘Are you feeling at battle readiness?’

‘More than readiness,’ said Farsight. ‘I feel invigorated. Unstoppable.’

Another slash of the blade. Another dead ork. Another pulse of energy.

‘Your health levels are anomalous. They are exceeding that of Commander Bravestorm under the most potent of hyper-stimm injections.’

‘Then let my blood sing,’ said Farsight. ‘Too long I have denied it.’

A threat designator blipped, insistent and annoying. He silenced it with a glance. His disposition hexes showed two orks flanking him, one climbing atop a mangled turret brandishing a giant wrench, the other aiming a multi-barrelled gun at the side of his head.

He slashed right, taking the arms and gun from the ork to his side. Turning in a full circle, he put the giant blade through the other ork’s chest, twisting it through ninety degrees to mangle the beast’s torso completely before withdrawing it. Alien blood mingled with motor oil on the flatbed of the ork vehicle, drizzling from the sides of the wreck onto the dry white dust below.

‘Proximal threats neutralised,’ said Coldstar. ‘Recommend immediate withdrawal to strategic-level engagement only.’

Farsight panned the XV8’s mangled head around as best he could, raising and lowering its sensor aerial. The suit’s holo-doppel was flaring red in a dozen places; it was missing an arm, its shield generator had been reduced to a

battered disc of metal, and its plasma rifle was buckled into a twisted cylinder.

He had never felt more lethal.

‘Recommendation denied,’ he said.

A series of thin screeches came from a nearby building. He saw flashes of green, and turned his observation hex to heat sensor. Diminutive greenskin life forms scurried in the rubble, turning some manner of junkyard artillery piece around to face him.

He leaned hard and blasted his jets to shoot over towards the ruin. His heart was thumping hard in his chest, but now there was not so much as a flicker of pain.

‘Coldstar,’ he said. ‘Patch into the VX1-0 dronenet, and cross-reference with air caste data. I want to know how many greenskins there are left on the planet.’

‘Pending,’ said Coldstar. A numeral flicked up on the top left of his command-and-control suite, ticking upwards rapidly.

It stopped at twenty-four.

‘T’au’va’s grace,’ said Farsight. ‘So nearly there.’

‘High commander,’ said Coldstar. ‘Are there not strategic concerns that would be–’

‘Just locate the orks, please.’

A crackling bolt of intense green energy shot past him, missing him by several metres. He snarled in contempt, jumped, and smashed feet first through the ruined wall of the greenskin artillerists’ temple building, just where the XV8’s structural analyser had told him the ancient brickwork was weakest. The force of the impact sent rubble slewing down onto the scrap-metal gun that had discharged the energy shot. Greenskin slave-creatures screeched, waving their arms and scrabbling for their pistols. The full-grown ork that accompanied them bawled its orders to fight, laying about itself with a stout lash of knotted leather.

Down came the relic blade. The ork was the first to die, its head and one of its shoulders sliced clean through so the upper quarter of its body tumbled away from the rest. The

frisson of energy blossomed within Farsight once more, something like the joy of submerging fully into hot water mixed with the kick of a potent liquor.

He stamped down on one of the runt-creatures, breaking its spine and ribs with a satisfying crunch. Another died on the tip of his blade, lanced through and then flicked away. This time the hunter's thrill was barely noticeable. Farsight put it down to the fact the creature was far from worthy prey. Nonetheless, the numeral in the top left of his command-and-control suite ticked down.

Twenty-one.

'Threat detected, left quadrant,' said Coldstar.

Farsight glanced at the leftmost hex, raising his battered shield as one of the lesser creatures took a potshot. It ricocheted away from the broad disc. As the greenskin turned to run, he brought the edge of the mangled shield down, flattening the creature against the jagged white rocks of the tumbled wall.

Another idiot beast dead, another green stain on the galaxy eradicated.

The three remaining runts were scattering in all directions. He cut one in two with the blade, stamped on another as it tripped over the corpse of its broken comrade, and leapt over the head of the third as it fled in panic. He landed right in front of it, turning at the waist with his sword outstretched to cut the hated thing in half.

A guilty thrill ran through him. He had duty elsewhere, but he was so close, now, to completing the work of decades. The Molochites, having seemed so important only a few decs ago, had dwindled to little more than background texture in his mind.

The numeral in the top left had dropped sharply; clearly his warriors were still engaging, and doing some of the work for him. He fought back an unseemly pang of anger. This war was his. He was the one that should close it down.

He blinked in surprise at the strange surge of thought - what did it matter who killed them, so long as they were

killed? He put the question aside, turned back to the flickering light of the dais in the centre of the city, and bounded back into the fray.

Fifteen, now.

‘Locate the largest greenskin target,’ he said.

‘Due east, one hundred metres,’ said Coldstar. ‘A war leader, by his mass.’

‘Plot the swiftest route we can afford without burning out the last of our power. I shall plan the attack.’

A hex flicked up on the command suite. The beast was an obese brute with a distended belly covered in tattoos. It was almost as tall as the Crisis suit it was busy bludgeoning into scrap metal with a massive spiked mace.

A flicker of recognition became a dread certainty as Farsight zoomed in on the creature. On the beast’s gut, stick-figure orks fought hulking beasts with massive tusks; he had seen those exact pictograms – this exact ork warlord, in fact, he was sure of it – on the red sands of Arkunasha. Given the randomness of ork interstellar flight, the chances of the same beast being here, on a backwater world in a completely different star system, were astronomically small. He knew enough of the Kauyon metastrategy to know the ork was likely bait, being used by a third party, and he the mark. But who had laid the trap, and to what end?

As Farsight watched, the ork caught the suit by the neck, roared with effort as it raised the XV8 high, and then slammed it back down so hard the entire battlesuit bent in the middle at an awkward angle. There was a thin whine of servomotors as the Crisis suit struggled to rise, then fell back.

Farsight ran forward as fast as he could. He burst through the other side of the ruined temple and sprinted through an archway to cross a nave lit by the disc-portal beyond. Dancing shadows writhed and flickered around him, seeming to beckon him into the darkness. He ignored them, his vision set on one thing and one thing alone.

The numeral updated as his cadre closed the net. Eleven greenskins left on Arthas Moloch. That meant eleven left in the entire system, if the air caste's analysis was correct. The imminence of his victory over the greenskins gave Farsight a fierce energy.

He burst from the archway on the far side of the temple at full sprint, then leaned into the run and put his boosters into it. The ork was levering open the fallen XV8's buckled plexus hatch with the hilt of its outsize mace - shaped like a crowbar, it was surprisingly effective. The ork ripped the hatch away with a roar of triumph, and reached in to haul the pilot out amongst a tangle of torn harnesses.

Farsight leapt, blade glinting in the unholy radiance of the disc. One of the creature's acolytes cried out a warning from the rubble scattered around. The leader-beast turned, already lashing out with its mace and firing from the hip with the ugly weapon strapped to the back of its wrist. More by luck than good aim, a bolt hit the relic sword, deflecting it just as Farsight was angling it down for the kill.

The heavy mace came around fast and smashed the sword from Farsight's grip, sending it spinning away. He slammed shoulder first into the giant ork, hard enough to barge it into the fallen XV8 with a crunch of bone.

The numeral was still changing. Seven left, now. But the war leader before Farsight was far from dead.

The fat-bellied beast bellowed in outrage, lashing out to pistol-whip Farsight's sensor head. His hex-screens fizzed with static even as he punched the rim of his shield into its maw. It roared in anger and pain, headbutting the XV8 with a resounding clang.

'Operational efficiency at two point two per cent,' said Coldstar. 'We must withdraw immediately, high commander.'

'No.'

His chest heaved with something close to panic. He had to close the beast down. Half of his hex-screens were out,

compromised by the dislocation and cracked lenses of the battlesuit's sensor head.

Farsight sent the edge of his shield out in a roundhouse blow, hoping to connect with his adversary's head. He was rewarded only with a metallic clang as it rebounded from the fallen XV8 beyond; the ork had slid aside at the last moment. As his battlesuit staggered, off balance, he cast around at his informationals, desperate for a glimpse of his foe.

The numeral at the top left of his screen had changed again as his teams completed their hunts. Only one ork life form, now.

By definition, it had to be the one about to kill him.

The crowbar hilt of the creature's crude metal mace suddenly rammed its way into the control cocoon through one of the XV8's broken seams, yanked this way and that to crack open the chest unit entirely. The battlesuit's screen went entirely black. Its power conduit had given out, and its reserve, already expended in the duel with the giant Molochite, was empty.

Farsight felt a moment of crippling terror as the crowbar lunged forward towards his gut. Only one chance left.

He grabbed the manual release above his head, unclasp his harness with one hand even as he put his thumb on the ident sensor and yanked the lever down sharply.

The plexus hatch opened with a hiss of hydraulics, slamming right into the hulking ork's forehead. The beast stumbled back, stunned. Farsight leapt from his Hero's Mantle, drawing his bonding knife from its harness even as he burst out of the control cocoon. He lunged, sinking the blade to the hilt in the creature's eye socket.

The beast toppled backwards, and Farsight rolled away even as the Coldstar thumped down to crush the creature's body into the dirt. He came up in a crouch, eyes searching desperately for a weapon, but the creature was truly dead, thank the T'au'va.

He did not feel a thrill, then, as he walked up to the

muscular corpse and pulled his knife free. Instead he felt an ebbing mix of exhaustion and slow, welling sadness that fought to claim him, body and soul.

It was done. There were no orks, no Molochites, nothing alive here but the t'au under his command.

But the cost...

Farsight looked around himself, taking in the landscape of rubble, scrap metal and dust. Smoke poured from a dozen wrecks, reaching up as pillars towards the heavens. Mangled bodies dotted the ruins, but there was no sign of the Molochites, not so much as a single cadaver.

His battlesuit, a sparking, mangled wreck, was chest down in the dust, the ork war leader's corpse pinned beneath it. Around him, a few scattered la'ruas were forming a loose perimeter. His eyes lingered on scores of dead and critically injured t'au, their recumbent bodies mingled with those of the barbaric monstrosities they had finally expunged from the sector. Already they were being lifted gently by teams of specialist med-drones that had been despatched as soon as the hostiles count had reached zero. The machines cast their anti-gravity fields in a broad spectrum to raise the wounded with the utmost care, carrying them in exactly the same position they had fallen until they could be properly attended. The dead would be afforded the same dignity.

Amongst them, somewhere, were the mutilated cadavers of the three ethereals that Farsight had sworn to keep safe.

He collapsed to his knees, a soul-deep feeling of loss settling like snow thickening upon his shoulders. Though he felt not a single pang of physical pain, his former elation had been quenched completely.

'High commander,' said the shas'ui of the nearest breacher team. 'We are victorious.'

'That is not so, shas'ui,' said Farsight softly. 'That is not so.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE SPOILS OF VICTORY

TRANSIT VOID-LANE THAR'UA
MOLOCH SYSTEM

The *Furthest Extent* glided over the ruined landscape of Arthas Moloch. Farsight watched a display of disposition hexes from his recumbent position in the vessel's recuperation-grade med-suite as Sun Shark bombers let a steady rain of plasma spheres burst upon the landscape. There was something calming about it, seen from above, despite the fact they were raining fire across the landscape. With each explosion there followed a silent white blossom; it was a little like watching time-lapse footage of a field of flowers opening.

The generators slung beneath the Sun Sharks' fuselages allowed them to rain a functionally infinite amount of incinerating ordnance so long as they kept momentum. They were criss-crossing the landscape in near-perfect order, like earth caste agrarians deploying bio-germinate. But their intended harvest was death, not life.

Where the white fire of the plasma burned, furrows mingling into fields of flame, the ruins were scorched clean of ork spoor, and rid of their curse. The earth caste themselves would not be far behind. Given time, they would treat the rest of the planet with atmospheric terraforming machines that would ultimately ignite the air in a vast flash-fire, scorching away any final spores in one single killing inferno before allowing the planet to slowly recover.

Cleansing first, new life second. It was the earth caste's 'scour and seed' theory made manifest. Yet there would be no new life on Arthas Moloch, at least not that of the t'au or its allied races. The place was haunted, that much had been made abundantly clear, and Farsight had already personally ordered it quarantined in all official records.

This world, and its secrets, would burn. The T'au Empire would take nothing from Arthas Moloch, but for agony, loss and grief.

That, and the relic sword that even now hummed with potential at the back of Farsight's mind. That, and a hundred dizzying implications.

As soon as Farsight had returned to the *Manifest Dream*, an earth caste detail had attended him, three stocky medical personnel making concerned noises as they scanned him head to toe with their data wands. They had hustled him into a med-suite at the first opportunity with a display of sycophancy he found particularly irritating, then doubled down on their preliminary investigations, checking and rechecking with their olfactory chasms pursed in expressions of distaste and confusion.

He still lay there, now, fingers tapping at a projected screen so as to coordinate the efforts of the battlegroups as they withdrew from Molochite airspace. The chamber's threshold alert chimed brightly, the stone dragon icon of O'Vesa glowing over the smooth round arch above.

Farsight rubbed his temples, attempting to massage away a tension headache lurking on the fringes of his consciousness. 'Enter,' he said. The threshold door hissed

open, and the Stone Dragon stepped in.

‘I assure you I am fit for duty, O’Vesa.’

‘That is what I came to see you about,’ said the master scientist. He placed the back of his hands in a V shape, making the sign of the Valley of Woe. ‘That, and the tragedy.’

‘It is beyond awful. It is unthinkable.’

‘It is. How did it happen, may I ask?’

A heavy sigh escaped Farsight, and he rubbed his eyes. ‘That the celestial caste goes to war of its own volition is known. They answer to no one but their fellow aun. As is protocol I ensured the ethereals had full escorts, but when the enemy chose to prioritise their destruction, I was too far away to intervene. It was my failure, in the final reckoning. I underestimated the Molochites, and their understanding of the aun’s importance. I fully expect *malk’la* to be brought upon me, and to be stripped of rank as a result.’

O’Vesa frowned. ‘Arthas Moloch was still a victory, in many ways.’

‘A victory won at too high a cost!’ shouted Farsight. His anger subsided as suddenly as it had flared up, dampened down to a simmering sense of shame. ‘I offer contrition, old friend. I did not mean to react in such a manner. Perhaps I am not in a fit mental state for proper conversation at this time.’

‘I do not place blame,’ smiled O’Vesa. Farsight knew those slate-grey eyes had watched a hundred atrocities without flinching, each manufactured in the name of progress, but at that moment they seemed filled only with benevolence. ‘I understand, O’Shovah. The loss of even a single aun has a horrific impact on every caste. For the expedition to lose all three in a single engagement is enough to shatter the soul.’

Farsight just nodded, the grief robbing his words. His teeth pulled back in a grimace, and his eyes lost focus, their clarity robbed by despair.

The two sat there, silence stretching between them.

'I failed, O'Vesa. I failed in the worst possible way.'

""The wretched have one advantage over the dead. They may yet find atonement".'

Farsight looked up sharply. 'You know of Puretide's teachings?'

'I have heard your commanders speak of him many times,' said O'Vesa, 'though I would not presume to read his works, as that is the business of the fire caste alone.'

Farsight kept his peace. He had often thought, in those quiet moments between wars, that the earth caste could benefit a great deal from the tenets of honour laid down by Puretide.

Perhaps, now that he was de facto commander of the enclaves, he could make it so.

He chased away the thought before it could take root, but it lingered in the back of his mind, scared off by the reflex of conventional thought but refusing to be banished altogether.

'Are the bodies of the ethereals in state for their proper memorial upon our return?' he asked.

'They are,' said O'Vesa.

'And do you happen to know if contact has been established with the nearest Aun'ar'tol? Whether Aun'Tipiya or Aun'Tefan have called for my censure?'

O'Vesa shook his head. 'Not this close to the gulf. The interference it causes upon our comms spectrums is quite extensive.'

'I see,' said Farsight. 'Then I will face their judgement upon my return to the enclaves.'

'There has been no talk of any malk'la, to my knowledge.'

'I would not expect you to understand the rituals of the fire caste, nor to be privy to the decisions regarding it. Is the Coldstar's data recoverable?'

'Your battlesuit and the Coldstar intelligence will be ready for your requisition within the rotaa,' said O'Vesa. 'Incidentally, my thanks for retrieving that Molochite artefact for further study.'

'I did not retrieve it on your behalf,' said Farsight, his eyes narrowing. 'It is mine, and mine alone.'

'It belongs to the T'au'va, as does everything else, of course. Still, it is a potent symbol of your victory upon Arthas Moloch, or so the water caste claim. I assume you wish us to optimise the blade for further use?'

'I had considered that option, yes.'

'A more fitting hilt and a balanced housing will allow it to interface with the XV8's gauntlet, giving you much improved reaction speed.'

'I see. And naturally, in the course of this optimisation, you will study it extensively.'

'That process is already underway,' said O'Vesa with what he thought was a charming smile. 'Without the ethereals, and with you under ongoing medical investigation, I took the initiative and began the after-action analysis.'

'Did you?'

'The sword is a curious find. The structural analysers are finding no correlations with existing metals thus far, other than with the medallion recovered by the ground teams. Even then it bears little resemblance on a molecular level.'

'We still have one of the hexagrammatic talismans?'

'Oh yes,' said O'Vesa, nodding enthusiastically. 'If that is what you wish to call it. I believe rather than being a "talisman", as you put it, it is a contra-empathic field generator that disrupts neural waves. From the footage of the battle, it appears the Molochite race find these devices most discomfiting.'

'Indeed,' said Farsight. 'I think it may run deeper than that.'

'So many anomalies to study,' said O'Vesa, barely containing his glee. 'Foremost amongst them, and the main reason for my presence here, is the matter of your rude health.'

'We fire caste find combat invigorating,' said Farsight, shifting awkwardly. 'And we fight hard, even when wounded.'

‘The extent of your wounds prior to the second engagement was such that you should already be dead, or in a comatose state post-trauma at the very least,’ said O’Vesa. ‘And yet you appear to all scans to be at the median point of your life rather than the end phase of a span that has already been extended to extreme levels. These do not correlate with your last diagnostic, which had you at advanced age and a high state of cellular deterioration.’

‘The wonders of cutting-edge fio med-support,’ muttered Farsight.

‘Not so,’ said O’Vesa. ‘I examined the records from your last stay in our care. There is something else at play here, I am certain of it. Something that happened on Arthas Moloch. Let me illustrate my point.’

The high scientist held his data wand parallel with the floor and moved it upwards gradually, drawing up a mirrorfield behind it. Farsight saw his own reflection, and felt his heartbeat quicken in his chest.

The reflected image was not that of a t’au in the winter of his life. Though the lines of care were still there, though the scars and blackened skin from his ordeal on Vior’los still marked him, the musculature, the sheen of the skin, were that of a warrior in his prime.

Farsight said nothing, gazing at his own reflection.

The face of a stranger, both young and old at the same time, stared back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NEW HERESIES

ADMISSION OF VYKOLA NIAMH HERAT 3-48
032.832.M41
+++EXPURGATED ITERATION+++

This epistle has proven extremely difficult to write. I hope it reaches you, Xyndrea, but in many ways, I also hope it does not.

It is with a profound sense of loss that I pen this missive, from what seems to me to be the most comfortable and luxurious cell on the Eastern Fringe. The t'au do not quite know what to do with me, now, and have me sequestered until the matter of my future here can be decided.

Amongst the ranks of the t'au, the return journey across the Damocles Gulf was haunted by a pall of grief so thick it was almost tangible. That time seems to me an age away, now; the preparations, cryogenic procedures, and the long watch of those who volunteered as a skeleton crew all a distant memory. Those who had done garrison duty last time around were forbidden from putting themselves forward, so that others might share the ua'lenta, a t'au

concept loosely translated as 'the Price of Years'. That said, when I looked into the matter it was not as cut and dried as that principle would suggest. I believe it was seen as counterproductive to have some of the t'au aged out of usefulness to the wider war effort. Though the water caste broadcasts maintained that all was well, as they usually do, I had a feeling there was specific intent behind the selection of who took the long, cold sleep and who kept watch.

As a non-t'au, the prohibition did not apply to me; I could have a nice long cryo bath and stew in nothingness despite the fact I was effectively a prisoner. I resigned my position as a Kindred Soul - it reflects better on the office if such a departure is voluntary, though believe me, I had no choice - and requested to go under. I needed the rest.

I am not the advisor I used to be since Arthas Moloch - not the same person, even. My legs have yet to heal, despite my abilities, but that is the least of my concerns. I fancy I've given Farsight more than enough guidance for the time being, and I'm not even sure I was always in full control when I was doing so. Have I been a puppet of flesh, thinking myself independent but in truth made to speak on another's behalf? It is too disturbing a notion to dwell on. Of the time before Arthas Moloch, my memories are patchy and scant.

The Molochite Tragedy, as the water caste is calling it, saw the loss of all three of the ethereal caste sent to watch over Farsight's expedition. You will already know that is as taboo as it is possible to get in t'au society. To lose one of these high priests of the T'au'va is considered a crippling disaster, but for the expedition to lose its last remaining members of the aun in one fell swoop? That is supposed to be utterly devastating.

I say 'supposed to be', because as far as I can tell, t'au society still works without them.

Farsight is convinced he will have to undertake the trial the fire caste call 'malk'la', but as yet, none have called for

it. No one wants him to fail it, I think, for then they really would have no figureheads left, and the leadership vacuum would be immense. Throne's sake, they call it the Farsight Expedition, this entire initiative. Without him, where would they go? Where would they find their poster child?

Brightsword is too young and rash, I think, even now. The fact he secretly wants the role of high commander so badly is exactly what disqualifies him for the role. Bravestorm is selfless to a fault; an impressive sight in his iridium battlesuit, but eye-wateringly hideous beneath it. I saw him in the flesh, once, and to say he is badly burned is a grotesque understatement. Sha'vastos is officially deceased, Ob'lotai is actually dead, and Moata gave his life in vain on Arthas Moloch.

Without their beloved Farsight they would have nothing to focus their efforts around, nothing but a slow dissolution. Given the deliberate weighting of the castes so that one dominates each of the principal planets in the four enclave systems, that divergence would possibly even court a return to something like the Mont'au, that time when the castes fought against one another for supremacy. Whether he has done so deliberately or not, Farsight has engineered a system where he is the lynchpin for an entire string of planetary conquests, and they cannot do without him. I personally believe it was not a calculated measure, but a by-product of the water caste utilising his image so extensively for their own purposes.

Already the grief felt over the loss of the ethereals has begun to fade into acceptance. Time, as we know from bitter experience, can heal even a wound to the heart. They are spinning it that theirs was the sacrifice of shattered jade, and it enabled the t'au of the enclaves to finally be free of the orks that had hounded them even as they hunted their old adversaries in turn. Personally, I see the entire thing in a different light. I believe the ethereals wanted to understand that which defies all logic, and trusted no one outside the aun to draw the right conclusions. They dipped

their toes in those inky-black seas that lie beyond reality, and were quickly savaged by the monsters within. So quickly, in fact, I cannot help but think there was agency behind it, that the ethereals too were led to that point just as was Farsight. That somewhere, perhaps not even in this reality, there is another player in the t'au's destiny, deliberately diverting the course of fate to its own ends.

And who stands to gain from a de facto military coup? Farsight himself, of course, but he could never deliberately cause the deaths of his ethereal masters, not even by omission of action. The same could be said of the entire species, I feel.

As the grief of the enclaves has cooled, a new level of hero worship has grown around Farsight. The water caste made sure of it, as ever, showing carefully doctored footage that focused on Farsight's victories over the orks on the relic world, and kept the so-called 'Molochites' in the background. The water caste very much wish to forget the truth of Arthas Moloch, it seems, allowing the assumption to be drawn that it was the orks that killed Aun'Los, Aun'Xa and Aun'Diemn. I can hardly blame them. They have plenty to distract them, especially with their living legend, their Student of Puretide, walking amongst them.

Farsight's controversially liberal attitude towards the idea of one caste mingling skill sets with another already seems to have bled out into the enclaves to some degree, even over the course of the Damocles Gulf crossing. Perhaps I found that more noticeable, having spent the time in cryostasis; no doubt the change was gradual, invisible to those experiencing it in real time. But the t'au mindset here has changed subtly, I am sure of it. It is a fascinating development of their sociopolitical structure, which has until now been extremely resilient in its cultivated blindness. Even in the face of the horrible truth, they convince themselves that all enemies can be overcome with skill, self-belief and unity. If only it were true.

The high commander returned to a true hero's welcome in

the enclave worlds. He has capitalised greatly on the expedition's victory, though I fancy I know him well enough to see the shadow behind his facade. Even in the space of a few months Farsight has put into place an impressive array of initiatives, scouring the ork presence everywhere it is detected with merciless focus. Lub'grahl has been restored to its former reflective quietude, on the surface at least, with every dwelling and laboratory reinstated after the seismic burial removed all trace of the orkoid invaders. Since that time every life lost during the ork invasions has been commemorated with a white oval, a little like the graves of an Imperial cemetery world. It was no doubt a point of pride for the fire caste to do this, to ensure that everyone robbed of their dignity and recognition by the ork invaders was afforded that which Farsight believed they deserved.

The fiery heart of the planet Vior'los has been harnessed once more under Farsight's collaboration with O'Vesa and his caste-mate Worldshaper. She is one to watch, a fine example of a 'hidden menace' who poses more threat to the Imperium with her advances in terraforming than any number of fire caste commanders do with their military acumen. Their bleeding-edge technology has advanced to such an extent that even far-flung satellite worlds are kept well supplied by Vior'los' energy exports. The firestorms that Farsight engendered there, artificially inducing cyclones that scoured those lands infested by the orks, were so fierce they have rendered the planet's ecosystem functionally sterile, but the swift installation of modular biodomes has allowed controlled growth to flourish once more.

Project Tinek'la, which Farsight told me he saw as a massive waste of resources upon his return from Atari Vo, is now back on track. One need only look at the night sky from any of the principal enclave worlds to feel a sense of wonder and communality from Tinek'la's lambent, artfully sheared surfaces. Perhaps it was worth shaping it after all,

to reinstate the t'au's faith in their manifest destiny as masters of the cosmos.

Salash'hei has essentially taken the role of diplomatic hub through the virtue of its stunning beauty. It is a centre of edification that has in many ways filled the hole the ethereals have left, for in following the teachings of the Golden Ambassador the water caste keep the sept worlds' legacy alive, just as the fire caste keep Puretide's teachings foremost in their minds at all times.

The principal worlds are connected by trade routes plied by hundreds of ZFR-capable ships per day. Despite centuries of conditioning that it would soon flounder without ethereal guidance, t'au society out here is thriving.

I asked Farsight flat out, once, whether he had communicated with sept space, or requested some more aun overseers to replace the ones they lost on Arthas Moloch. He shook his head, made a gesture of futility, and left the room without further comment.

I think perhaps in that singular, silent admission, he rebelled against the structure of t'au society more than any other member of his race before or since.

And what is my place in all this? Of that, dear Xyndrea, I am no longer sure.

I am no longer a biomancer, that much I know. Those powers that once came easily to me - too easily, in fact - have shrivelled and died away, turning to so much dust in my memory. It is a sacrifice I made gladly, readily, in order to escape the warp creature that I believe had parasitised me for so long.

I still have the burns that the arcane collar seared into my flesh. I have dressed them, padded them, worn throat-claspers around them, and even worn unfashionable ruffs, but they refuse to be hidden for long. The ragged burn-scars itch, blaze, insist on being seen, a mark of shame and triumph all at once. It is my blessing and my curse, for every time I touch that hated cicatrix that rings my throat, I feel my emotions flare hot.

It is the strangest thing, but I swear my temper has grown shorter since I have borne it. I have fierce dreams, though I remember them rarely. Is that really such a surprise, given that I took an artefact likely forged in the energies of another dimension and clasped it around my throat? What would our colleagues in the Ordo Malleus make of that, I wonder?

What would you?

I don't expect you to love me, now. I have been through too much. I had the spawn of one evil power within me, and now wear the slave-mark of another. I am broken beyond repair, a plaything of entities so far beyond me that I cannot hope to refute them. To return to the Inquisition now would be to die. Only in t'au society can I hope to hide from the hangman's noose, the hunter's pyre. Here, I shall become gue'vesa, one of countless billions, and live a new life.

It is a wonder I am still able to do something as normal as to pen a missive. Perhaps there is enough Vykola left in me to spend my last few years wisely.

Perhaps not. Perhaps I am damned, and the reprieve I have won for myself is temporary, and bought at terrible cost. Amidst that cost, I fear, is our soul-bond.

In truth, I do not know. But I do know this has to be my last letter to you, dear heart, lest I endanger us both. I must look to obscurity now as my saviour, and hope for better days to come.

Goodbye, beloved. I will always adore you.

Vyk

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

AFTERMATH

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER

SHAS'AR'TOL VASOCRIA
VIOR'LOS

The planet Vior'los burned with a new sense of purpose. Through the lozenge windows of the Shas'ar'tol communion room, Farsight could see rebuilding works in the middle distance, the earth caste's FX-09 Leviathans lowering new habitation hexes in a tessellating pattern over freshly made foundations.

He watched, outwardly calm, whilst his commanders were at council behind him. Under those smooth white plinths were the remnants of Imperial rule, the wreckage of the ork invasion, the whole sorry history of Vior'los. The first human settlements, the legacy of the Silken Conquests, the Imperial counter-invasion, the Great Reclamation that drove most of the humans off-world and turned the rest to gue'vesa, the ork assault of Grog Ironteef - and, finally, Farsight's crusade of artificial firestorms that had seen the planet scoured clean. All of it would be buried in a matter

of a few short rottaa.

The earth caste were admirably focused, and their rebuilding strategies fell into place with practised ease. He had watched similar endeavours on a dozen worlds brought into the T'au'va, and the sight usually made a warm swell of pride rise through Farsight's soul. But not today.

The high commander's mind turned to the cost in lives for the thousandth time. That, and the lies that had been put in place to shore up the edifice of the T'au'va within the Farsight Enclaves. They were so thick, so cloying, that Farsight thought he might choke on them.

The ethereals had died willingly on Arthas Moloch, leading a courageous strike against the odds to ensure the orks could be purged once and for all.

There were more ethereals inbound to aid the enclaves, just as there were more t'au of every caste from the sept worlds to reinforce them with new technology.

The Molochites were but another alien species. They had been offered a chance to join the T'au'va, and refused. They were too alien to be able to communicate, more like animals than a race capable of higher thought.

The Imperials had been driven from the Farsight Enclaves - not once, but twice - and they would never be coming back.

The orks were finally defeated, already relegated to the status of a fading nightmare by the steady march of progress.

All these and more the water caste had spun time and time again, the streams and tributaries of their carefully worded truths flowing together to form a river of falsehood that buoyed up the t'au people, yet had jagged rocks beneath the glittering surface, just waiting to tear at the flesh of their society.

And then there were the greatest lies of all. That there was nothing more to this reality than the material dimension. That the t'au were the rightful inheritors of the galaxy. That the T'au'va was pure, righteous and

incorruptible.

These facts, once inalienable, Farsight now knew to be false. So did the tight-knit minds of the ethereal caste; he was sure of it. They had expended t'au lives with callous disregard, claiming benevolence all the while. They had seen to it that those who challenged their rule, even those that came across unpalatable truths, were removed from society at large. And most damning of all, Aun'Xa had spoken of a 'nemesis' before the return to Arthas Moloch – they had insisted on going to study it themselves, despite the fact it flew in the face of every established procedure.

The word had stuck in Farsight's mind ever since. How could a society have a nemesis, yet be so utterly unaware of its existence? It could only be the case if the very highest powers in all society decided to keep it secret – and in doing so, blind an empire.

And should he expose the ethereals, whether intentionally or not, he would disrupt the status quo of the entire race, shaking the foundations of its philosophy. The doom of the T'au'va would come not from the orks, nor the Imperials, nor even the Molochites that lurked beyond the cosmic façade of order and reason.

It would come from him.

'High commander,' said Bravestorm. 'Are you not joining us in council?'

'Of course,' said Farsight, 'I was distracted for a moment. The efficacy of the fio's work is spellbinding as ever.'

'The immediate danger may be past, accomplished one,' said Brightsword, 'but the future of the enclaves is the matter at hand. A hearth-fire untended may glimmer and go out.'

'It is the future of the entire t'au race that occupies my thoughts, Brightsword,' said Farsight. 'Not merely that of the enclaves.'

“Learn to shorten your reach!” quoted Brightsword, his tone authoritarian despite the half-smile on his lips. “If your foe can come close enough to negate your striking

power, all stratagem is lost.”

Sha’vastos made the pursed lips and crossed fingers of the statement abhorred, though even he had a glint in his eye. Nearby, Ob’lotai chuckled, his sense of humour rebuilt into iteration 5-0 through O’Vesa’s lengthy code work after Atari Vo.

Farsight sighed, and it felt like part of his soul departed from his lips. There was no fire inside him, then. No instinct to spar with his old friends, to rail against Brightsword for quoting his own wisdom back at him. He just felt tired, and lonely, and ancient.

Yet his reflection in the viewing window was more youthful than it had been for long tau’cyr. His near-death on Arthas Moloch had been somehow reversed, and ever since he had stood invigorated. A side effect of the dark powers he had seen on that cursed planet, perhaps – some mind-science blessing that he had never asked for, that made him feel tangled and conflicted in ways he could not name or process. It was undoubtedly something linked to the realm he had seen every night since, with the spinning disc and its visions of the hellscapes beyond reality forcing its way into his dreams.

He had seen the evil truths behind reality, and it had divorced him forever from his people. How could he keep those truths to himself, without them eating him alive? How could he be the hero the enclaves needed, with the burden of such knowledge upon his shoulders? Knowing that the ethereals had kept the nature of the universe from the other castes for so long... it was vitriol upon the spirit and the mind.

Outside the window, on the shoulders of Mount Vasocris, the dust thrown up by the hustle and industry of Vior’los’ recovery moved like flurries of snow, swirling in patterns rich with hidden meaning.

THE WINTER AFTER THE CROSSING OF THE HIGH PASS

Shoh looked out across the valley at the waterfall beyond, or rather what was left of it. Thin trickles of water covered the flank of the mountain, most of which had frozen into a sculpture of a hundred thousand icicles. Kan'jian ibexes picked their way across it, sure-footed as the mountain goats of the lower slopes, to pick at the last of the lichen that had dotted the waterfall's banks. As he watched, sections of the great rock detached like crumbling clay, and fell down into the chasm beneath.

'This part of the mountain is dying,' said Shas, her hand brushing his as she climbed the last few metres to the lookout point. 'It is a sadness.'

Shoh nodded. He felt that sadness on a very personal level, for it was he that had caused it.

The previous winter, when Master Puretide had sent him out to slowly starve, he had reached the nadir of hopelessness. There, at the bottom, he had found inspiration. By climbing to the peak above the High Pass and clapping together two pieces of shaped wood to create sharp, sudden noises, he had started a targeted avalanche that had caused a massive section of Mount Kan'ji's snow to tumble down across the home territory of the snow lynxes that had barred his path. It had killed a vast number of them in one fell swoop, and allowed him to pick his way across the top of the resultant drifts after repurposing the same wooden tools as makeshift snowshoes. At the time, it had seemed a fine leap of logic, for it had saved his life.

Now, however, the mountain was paying the price.

With the snow lynx population so dramatically reduced, that of their natural prey had boomed. The spiral-horned, gormless-looking Kan'jian ibex had bred so quickly it had effectively conquered the slopes through sheer numbers. The beasts had ripped, torn and eaten every green thing upon the mountainside's upper peaks, including the tough green-black iron lichen that could grow in even the harsh conditions of the upper slopes. That weed had inveigled its barbed roots deep, and wherever it was tugged from the

stone, it left a legacy of crumbled rock behind it. Where the mountainside's exterior had been weakened to the point it became scree, whole sections fell away, each landslide redefining the shape of the peak and killing another swathe of plant life in the process. With so many species of flora buried, the fauna would follow soon after in a cascade of consequences that would ripple across Kan'ji's ecosystem. Not that the ibexes had the slightest conception of the disaster they were causing. It was in their nature to eat, just as it was in his to fight.

'Look at them,' said Shas. 'They are ravenous.'

'So we hunt them,' said Shoh. 'It will be hard going, but with Kais, we can make an impact, and set things right.'

'So you can play god once more,' said Shas, her anger cold and measured where his was hot and sudden. 'You cannot mend your error with even more death, Shoh. To rectify one disaster by causing another is to follow a path that leads only to cataclysm.'

'The master's words,' said Shoh.

'No, bond-mate, they are mine. But I see by the look on your face you have learned that truth already. Leave the mountain to recover in its own way. It is eternal, and you are not.'

Shoh said nothing, admonished.

'A grand Mont'ka will always have a price, Shoh. You seek to use the landscape as a weapon, to bend the world around you with your intellect. In doing so, you denature it. A true hunter works in harmony with the elements. Use them as a net, or a shield, not as a bludgeon.'

'Perhaps you think Mount Kan'ji would be best rid of me,' said Shoh, blurting out the words before he could stop himself. 'Perhaps you see that same thing in the T'au'va.'

'Never, Shoh,' said Shas, turning to face him. Her gaze held him, then, as she took his hands, drawing him in with the intensity of her emotion. 'I would never wish you gone. But if you ever leave, know this. I will come for you.'

'High commander,' said Sha'vastos, breaking Farsight's reverie. 'What of the standardisation of our defences?'

'I leave that to you, old friend, and to Arrakon,' said Farsight, motioning over at the massive warrior to receive a nod of respect in return. 'These are his worlds more than they are mine. He was born here, after all. And your time is nigh, I know it. Your connection to Master Puretide is more profound than any other. Even that of his foremost students.'

A stunned silence filled the room.

'High commander,' said Bravestorm. 'The enclaves need you.'

'They do not,' insisted Farsight. 'They have you instead, my protégés and most trusted friends. Why do you think I have trained you in every aspect of statesmanship I know, as well as in the arts of war?'

'We are not fit to rule,' said Brightsword.

'Not individually, no. I do not think any one soul is fit for that duty.'

Sha'vastos fell back into his seat, the implied criticism of the office of Supreme Ethereal enough to cast his features in a rictus. Farsight forged on nonetheless.

'Alongside O'Vesa, Worldshaper and the new Elemental Council,' continued Farsight, his tone getting surer by the moment, 'you will guide the enclaves in my stead.'

'Then what of you, master?' said Brightsword.

'I have seen too much. These worlds have been brought to the edge of disaster by my strategies, and they need time to heal, as do we all. I will no longer be the stone that starts the avalanche, the spark that lights the raging wildfire, but leaves only ruin behind. I need to distance myself, before I become the very thing I have tried to fight all these years.'

'And what is that, may I ask?' asked Sha'vastos.

'A disruptive influence upon the course of the T'au'va.'

No one spoke, for a time.

'For you to leave us again,' said Sha'vastos. 'It is unconscionable.'

'It is the very reason I requested the earth caste prioritise your recovery, Sha'vastos, and the water caste devise a fitting story that explains it. With Master Puretide's wisdom alongside yours, you will see furthest of all.'

Sha'vastos made a sign of thanks, but it was inflected with a motion of query. He looked as if he was struggling with an honour beyond measure and his greatest fear all at once.

'More than that,' said Farsight, planting his hands on Sha'vastos' shoulders and looking him straight in the eye, 'you believe in the T'au'va more than any other soul I know.'

'And you do not?' said the elderly officer, his back ramrod straight.

'Not in the same way. I have another path to walk. Farewell.'

Head bowed, Commander Farsight made his way past his commanders, made the rising sun of brighter futures, and left for good.

VASOCRIAN COLOSSEUM VIOR'LOS

The storm glowering in the Vior'losan skies had yet to break. O'Vesa was looking forward to hearing it venting its fury uselessly on the dome of the colosseum's roof. There was something he enjoyed about the sound of rain outside when he was comfortably ensconced inside a building; the impotence of it, the feeling of nature denied, was immensely pleasing to him.

Glancing up at the thunderclouds through the dome's windows, O'Vesa made his way through the cool, quiet halls of the Vasocrian war museum. He ran his fingers across the plinths of their finest exhibits. O'Vesa always felt a quiet sense of accomplishment when he looked over them, not because he had designed many of them himself, but because they had not been lost to the march of progress. So much in t'au society was cast aside, scaffolding made

redundant by the greater edifice of the future.

His mind turned to those few exhibits that he kept sequestered down in the lower levels. The Dal'ythan Crown, that jellyfish-like device that had made a neural map of Master Puretide and ruined his brain in the process. The original version of the resultant Engram Neurochip – genius in action, yet fatally flawed. The failed, hideously mutated clones of Commander Brightsword, euthanised in their birth carousels, yet kept as datapoints to ensure the same genetic errors were used as stepping stones to a greater understanding. Lab-grown samples of flesh, burned horrendously to simulate the hideous wounds sustained by Bravestorm upon Dal'yth, then injected with a wide slew of stimulants to ensure they could still function. Libraries of dissected aliens hailing from a score of species, humans and kroot amongst them, their biology painstakingly analysed in case their genetic secrets held the key to victory via sterilisation, plague or atomic deconstruction.

Such was the cost of progress. He understood enough about the wider t'au society that certain members of the other castes found such spectacles upsetting. Farsight was foremost amongst them.

He could not see why. Were the exhibits not manifestations of sacrifice, in its purest form?

Inclining his head to imply the matter's irrelevance, O'Vesa walked around the majestic immensity of O'Ishu'Ron's masterpiece, the prototype ballistics suit he had codified as the Stormsurge. Beyond it, he saw the once bare plinth under the apex of the rear roof. He was shocked to see it was empty no more.

The deep-red XV8 battlesuit that O'Vesa had worked on a hundred times over his career was there, lit from below and posed as if charging forward, its vast, alien blade held out wide in one hand and a hexagrammatic medallion clutched in the other. Its force field generator was active on low power, surrounding it with a sphere of protective energy – a statement, more than a genuine defence.

Disturbed, O'Vesa sent a communion pulse to the high commander on instinct, his fingers dancing across his cuff-screen without his conscious instruction. He looked down after a few moments, but there was no response. Not even a location sign.

Somehow, he knew there would be no reply. The feeling of intuition was odd, unfamiliar, but it was somehow compelling despite its surety lying outside of raw data. It was a very uncomfortable sensation, but somehow, it felt... right.

The high scientist took out his data wand, mystified, and passed it across the anomaly. The protective field was not strong enough to turn aside a shot by any means, but would repel a transgressor attempting to touch the suit - or the relic sword. O'Vesa already knew several ways to bypass it, if it came to it, but the energy shield had been raised for a good reason, just as the XV8 had been left for a good reason. Whether Farsight was still alive or not, that he would respect - for a while, at least.

The thick Vior'losan rain began to fall hard, heavy raindrops pelting down like fingers beating on the duraglass. An odd thought crossed the high scientist's mind; by the sound of it, this particular rain was the exact same viscosity as t'au blood.

The thunder outside broke hard. For a moment, the deep, rumbling roar sounded as if it came from some impossibly vast entity, like the bellow of an angry god denied its prize.

EPILOGUE

There was a deep weariness in the exile's bones. Despite the fact he had walked ever further into the Vior'losan wastes for sixteen days and sixteen nights, his fatigue had little to do with physical exhaustion. At one point a pack of hungry leonids had slunk out of the thick scrub that dotted the vast, anonymous wastes, gradually closing the noose, and crouching as if to pounce. The exile had not drawn his knife. Yet when the alpha drew close enough to sniff him, it had whined, and the pack had left for easier prey.

He could hardly blame them. Still, they had realised their mistake too late. One day soon, he would hunt them in turn.

Or perhaps he would starve himself to death.

The low peak ahead, one amongst thousands of similar structures, had natural hollows in its façade. They reminded the exile of a skull's hollow sockets. Another unwelcome hallucination, brought about by hunger,

dehydration, or perhaps incipient madness.

But they were shelter nonetheless, and not far.

By day's end the exile was climbing vertically up the cliff face. The solutions to each vertiginous problem of the ascent came easily, but they were complex enough to keep all but the most determined of hunters from his door.

Hauling himself up over a lip of rock to the largest of the caves, he stumbled inside. He had seen no animal tracks around the cave's mouth; some ancient instinct of his caste had made it impossible not to look. There were, however, several scatterings of ashen ork bones amongst the rubble – the remnants of those invaders that had been taken by the firestorms, no doubt, and scoured clean by intense fire.

A fitting place to think, then, and to hide.

The exile sat in the dead centre of the cave, assumed the mindset of deep thought and, as the night wore on, watched the sun rise into a flushed sky of rose and scarlet. As the decs slid by the light of the new day grew stronger, and he watched the stars gradually accede to the dawn.

One amongst the celestial objects kept his gaze. It disturbed him, on some level, though he could not say why. He closed his eyes for a moment, but he could still see it long after its after-image should have faded. The star was still there, and he felt as if it were staring back at him in accusation. In his imagination, tears of unlight formed a halo around the fringe of feathers, each a mourning for that which would never be. Then they too winked out, and the vision was gone.

The last of the stars faded away, replaced by the light of a new dawn for Vior'los. A red dawn. But for once, it did not light a fire within him, nor speak of endless promise.

It called to him not at all.

T'AU XENOLEXICON

T'AU WORD : BEST TRANSLATION

AUN : Ethereal/Celestial

AUN'AR'TOL : Ethereal caste high command

BE'GEL : Ork

D'YANOI : Twin moons

EL : Second highest t'au rank

FIO : Earth

FU'LLASSO : Overly complicated situation (lit. 'cursed mind knot')

GHORO'KHA : Death hail

GUE'LA : Human

GUE'RON'SHA : Space Marine (lit. 'engineered human warriors')

GUE'VESA : Humans who have joined the T'au'va (lit. 'human helpers')

J'KAARA : Mirror

KAIS : Skilful

KAU'UI : Cadre

KAUYON : Metastrategy of patience and ambush (lit. 'Patient Hunter')

KAVAAL : A temporary grouping of contingents (lit. 'battle')

KOR : Air

KOR'SHUTO : Orbital city

KOR'VATTRA : The t'au navy

KOR'VESA : T'au drone (lit. 'faithful helper')

KO'VASH : To strive for (lit. 'a worthy cause')

LA : Lowest t'au rank

LA'RUA : Team

LHAS'RHEN'NA : Euphemism for noble sacrifice (lit. 'shattered jade')

M'YEN : Unforeseen

MAL'CAOR : Spider

MAL'KOR : Vespide (insectile mercenary race)

MALK'LA : Ritual discipline meted out to leaders who fail the T'au'va, often lethal

MESME : Combination

MONAT : A solo operative (lit. 'lone warrior')

MONT'AU : The Terror - a barbaric time of civil war

MONT'KA : Metastrategy of the perfect strike (lit. 'Killing Blow')

MONT'YR : Blooded (lit. 'seen battle')

MOR'TONIUM : Highly reactive alloy used as key element of ion weaponry

M'YEN : Unforeseen

NONT'KA : Time of Questioning (concept used by
Ethereal caste only)

O : Highest t'au rank

OR'ES : Powerful

POR : Water

POR'SRAL : Propaganda campaign

RINYON : Metastrategy of envelopment (lit. 'Circle of
Blades')

RIP'YKA : Metastrategy of cumulative strikes (lit.
'Thousand Daggers')

RUN'AL : Observation post, small blind or bunker

SAZ'NAMI : Ethereal honour guard/enforcer of the
T'au'va

SHAN'AL : Four Ua'sho 'commands' under Ethereal
guidance (lit. 'coalition')

SHAS : Fire

SHAS'AR'TOL : Fire caste military high command

SHAS'LEN'RA : Cautious warrior

SHI : Victory

SHIO'HE : Olfactory chasm, t'au scent organ equivalent

SHOH : Inner light

SHOVAH : Farsight/Farsighted

TA'LISSERA : Communion/Marriage/Bonded; sacred

ritual for t'au groups

TA'RO'CHA : Unity of a specific trio (lit. 'three minds as one')

TA'SHIRO : Fortress station (spacebound)

T'AU'VA : The Greater Good, cornerstone of t'au philosophy

TIO'VE : Contingent

TSUA'M : Middle

UA'SHO : All forces of a given caste in one location (lit. 'command')

UI : Second lowest t'au rank

VASH'YA : Focused on more than one thing (lit. 'between spheres')

VES'RON : Robotic being

VIOR'LA : Hot-blooded

V'RAL : Undercut

VRE : Middle t'au rank

Y'ELDI : Gifted pilot (lit. 'winged one')

Y'HE : Tyranid (lit. 'ever-devouring')

A NOTE ON T'AU UNITS OF TIME

A **tau'cyr** is an annual cycle on the core sept planet **T'au** (each is approximately 300 Terran days).

A tau'cyr is comprised of 6 **kai'rotaa** (each is approximately 50 Terran days).

A kai'rotaa is comprised of 80 **rotaa** (each is

approximately 15 Terran hours).

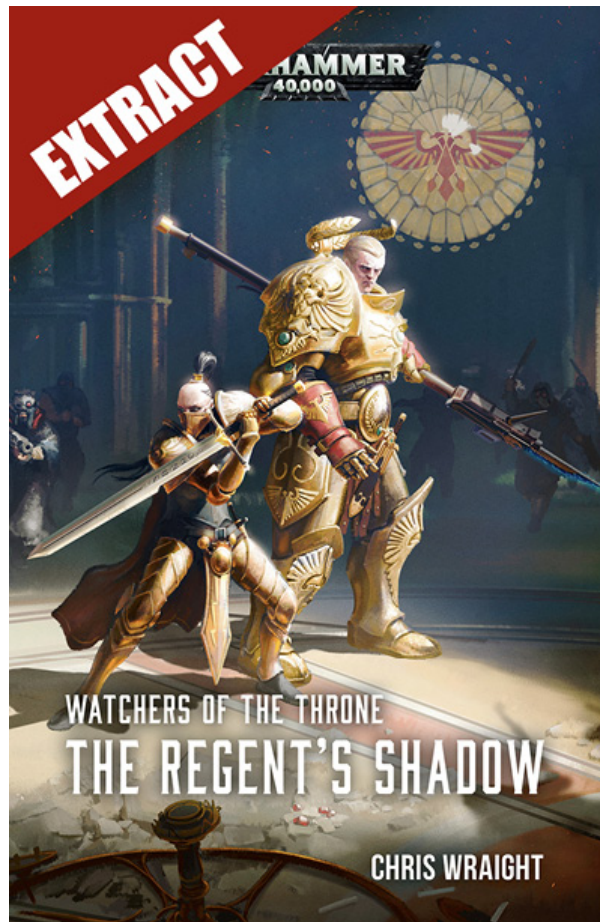
Each rottaa is broken down into 10 **decs**. Decs are either light-time or dark-time.

Most t'au need only 1-2 decs of sleep per rottaa (each is approximately 1.5 Terran hours).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Kelly is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Farsight: Crisis of Faith*, the Space Marine Conquests novel *War of Secrets*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Blades of Damocles* and the novellas *Farsight* and *Blood Oath*. For Warhammer he has written the titles *Sigmar's Blood* and *Dreadfleet*. He has also written 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 *Watchers of the Throne: The Regent's Shadow*.



He was gone. He had disappeared back into the void almost as soon as he'd arrived, and yet everything was still, one way or another, all about him.

Some souls leave an indelible trace. I believe he was incapable of moving through the universe without profoundly changing it. In a sense, he was not even part of it – he had a body, he could be wounded, he breathed air and drank water, and yet you could not look into those eyes for long without seeing the overwhelming strangeness there, the quality of another place, bound up for a time in flesh and blood but surely beyond it.

I had seen him only a handful of times, mostly from a distance. The first occasion was when I travelled with my then master, Tieron, to Luna, and witnessed the aftermath of the battle he and his warriors fought under hard starlight. I was not brave enough to accompany my master into Guilliman's presence, and so only observed that first meeting from afar. After that, we were separated, and Tieron and I did not speak again until we were both back on Terra. And after that, the daemons came, and it is difficult to recall anything without flinching.

I was sick for a long time, then. We all were, I think. The air was polluted with stronger poisons than we had ever known, and we were used to poisons on Terra. The stone beneath our feet felt fragile. When you put a finger out to touch something – a cup, a scroll – electricity would snap across the gap, a flicker of bloody energy that had no place

on this or any other world.

Amid it all, though, he was there. His energy was infinite. He fought the creatures that dared charge our walls, casting down the greatest of them. Even as the spires still burned, he spearheaded the assault that freed the Vorlese Gate and reforged the Throneworld's access to the Imperium. Warriors flocked to his side, given renewed purpose by the smallest of his actions, or even the rumours of them. When he returned to the Palace, the pace of his reordering was frenetic. We had been used to torpor for so long, and now we had one among us who would tolerate no hesitation. None of us could look him in the eye and say no, save perhaps Valoris himself. Reforms were put in place that I had not expected to see enacted in my children's lifetimes, let alone mine.

I never worked harder. Tieron was gone by then, exhausted by his long service and the rigours of the cataclysm, leaving me to take his place. We were a study in contrasts, I suppose. He was old, indulgent, a product of insecurity. I was a relatively young woman, and in other times might have expected to serve for several decades more before taking the chain of office. I had always had my eye on the position, and knew that I deserved it, but now the prize had been handed over into hands that felt, in truth, not quite ready.

I had been a part of the Palace machine for many years, of course, but even so it was hard to grapple with everything that had to be done. The orders came in flurries, brought to my chamber by panicked attendants, and I had to somehow make sense of them and see them dealt with.

I remarked on the difficulties to Mordecai, my adjutant. We were in my personal chambers, speaking in private conference. My inner room was a small space, sparsely furnished. I had only just got rid of Tieron's clutter, replacing it with the things I valued more greatly than vases and paintings – cogitator terminals, advanced sensor arrays, secure comm-links to the various agents we had in

the field. The result was a strange mix of the ornate and the functional – it was in a state of improvised change, as were all things at that time.

Mordecai did not offer an opinion. He was by then nearly two hundred years old, and steeped in the ancient rituals of the only place he had ever known. I also think he was in a state of shock, and had taken to shuffling through the gilt corridors with his eyes half-closed, shutting out the evidence that it was all ending. So many of my servants were like that, still rocked by all they had seen and experienced. Terra is a world built on tradition, much of it thousands of years old. We had come to depend on that, to make it a kind of religion to go alongside the official one, and having that foundation shaken had hurt us, I think, more than any of the physical damage that had been done.

But just then, some weeks after the victory at Vorlese, while those we had recovered from the void were still confined to their medical stations, the summons came. I remember looking at the parchment docket in my hand, seeing the seal of office at the top of it, and the thin line of gold around the edge. A holo-ident glimmered faintly across the left-hand margin, which gave surety of its origin, though that felt superfluous, for none would have dared to forge a document with his name on it.

I was daunted, I will admit it. I had grown up with the powerful, and did not scare easily, but *he* was different.

I went straightaway. I left Mordecai hunched in front of all the stacked pict-feeds, and hurried to my personal living quarters. Much against habit, I checked my appearance carefully. Would I look ludicrous to him, being so new in position, largely untried, a possible weak link in the new chain of command he was building? It was possible that he had summoned me only in order to dismiss me, as he had done with so many of the high-ranking Palace officials already. To be cast out of office that quickly would, I concede, have dented my pride, and I found myself rehearsing arguments as I went, hoping I would be

sufficiently self-assured in his presence to deliver them.

He had taken up residence in one of the older sectors of the Senatorum. These quarters were sufficiently close that I was able to walk to meet him, passing through a tangle of internal corridors, none of which had external windows. As I went, I passed that same mix of ancient and modern – priceless gold statues leaning next to coils of Mechanicus cabling, fine carpets rolled up to reveal glittering machine-pits beneath. Adepts and magi bustled around, prodding and fixing, restoring and meddling. We were all having to be seen to be busy, to be committed to the great restoration, knowing that the eye of the Regent was on all things, and that even the smallest detail might be brought to his attention.

Such were the dimensions of the Inner Palace buildings that, despite making use of several self-propelled walkways and privileged cut-throughs, it took me some time to reach his location. The chambers he had co-opted must have been more or less as they were when he had first dwelt here, aeons ago. The lack of change may have been reassuring to him. He had brought his Space Marines to guard him, which again was something that would not have happened here before.

As I finally reached the great vaulted antechamber, replete with mosaic depictions of the Nine Primarchs fighting the old wars of myth, I found it uncomfortable to see them standing before the marble doors, perfectly still, perfectly silent, their faces hidden behind gold-winged masks. They had, I knew, travelled across the length of the entire galaxy to be here. Their armour, fine as it was, still bore the chips and scores of combat. I wondered what they thought of this place, now they were here, but of course did not ask them. As far as I was concerned, they were like golems, capable of being summoned to life through blood or spells, but in the meantime only made of inert matter. Nothing they did as I passed them by challenged that mental image.

He did not only surround himself with soldiers. The

chambers beyond were thronged with civilian servants, most in the blue-lined robes of Ultramar, some in Terran regalia. A number of those were either under my command or were otherwise known to me, but they did not attempt to catch my eye as I walked through their midst. Above them all, crystal chandeliers glistened. Below their slippered feet, the rugs were finely woven and of intricate design. The impassive faces of heroes gazed out across the throngs from oil paintings and frescoes. The murmur of conversation was just as it had always been in such places – low, urgent, conspiratorial.

I caught the eye of his duty officer, who immediately worked her way to my side. She was of Ultramar, as were so many of those he trusted to be close to him.

‘Chancellor,’ she said, bowing. ‘Thank you for coming so quickly. He awaits within.’

Click here to buy *Watchers of the Throne: The Regent's Shadow*.

THE BLACK LIBRARY NEWSLETTER



**Sign up today for updates on the
latest Black Library news and releases**

SIGN UP NOW



**GAMES
WORKSHOP**

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT
WARHAMMER
40,000?

Visit our Games Workshop or Warhammer stores,
or **games-workshop.com** to find out more!

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2020.
This eBook edition published in 2020 by Black Library,
Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7
2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Marc Lee.
T'au icons by John Michelbach.

Farsight: Empire of Lies © Copyright Games Workshop
Limited 2020. Farsight: Empire of Lies, GW, Games
Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus
Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer,
Warhammer 40,000, the 'Aquila' Double-headed Eagle
logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images,
names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons,
characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are
either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited,
variably registered around the world.
All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British
Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78999-330-1

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events
portrayed in this book are fictional, and any
resemblance to real people or incidents is purely
coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at
blacklibrary.com

Find out more about Games Workshop's world of
Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at
games-workshop.com

To Emily. Two down, one to go...

eBook license

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom ("Black Library"); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website ("You/you/Your/your")

(jointly, "the parties")

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book ("e-book") from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

- o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

- o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of

it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:

- o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

- o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in 'seeding' or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

- o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

- o 3.4 you attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by

English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.