

IN THE GRIM DARKNESS OF THE FAR FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR!

# EXECUTION HOUR

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL BY GORDON RENNIE



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IT IS TO our eternal regret that, whilst many previous - and, dare I say, less academically rigorous - chroniclers of the Gothic Sector Wars have preferred to concentrate their limited scope on the already well-detailed, if admittedly grandiose, events that occurred during the latter stages of that most tumultuous of struggles, there are many notable actions from the earliest stages of the conflict that have not yet received their due and proper examination. Certainly, I do not speak of those justifiably celebrated actions such as Compel Bast's heroic defence of Orar, or Admiral Varus's defiant last stand at Platea, for, Emperor knows, these events have been examined many times already, with seemingly each new chronicler finding something both less interesting and original to say concerning them than the one previous to him. (Although, esteemed and studious reader, pray hope that I do not flatter myself unduly when I tell you now that I intend to defy and reverse this sorry fashion when I come to examine these events myself, in those relevant later chapters.) No, I speak now of several of the many smaller actions which took place in those earliest and darkest days of the war, as the carrion fleets of the Despoiler fell upon the lax and unprepared forces of Battlefleet Gothic. While it may seem perverse to examine actions involving duels between single opposing ships when set against the background of a stellar conflict that would later involve fleet-sized battles on a scale not witnessed since the age of the Horus Heresy, the serious student of the Gothic Sector War will, I pray, come to realise my interest in but one of these smaller actions when I reveal now that it involves two names that would later feature significantly not merely in the history of Battlefleet Gothic, but also in the annals of Battlefleet Segmentum Obscuras itself. I speak, of course, of Leoten Semper and his vessel, the Lord Solar Macharius...

**- Scribe Emeritus Rodrigo Konniger,**

***Into the Jaws of Death, Into the Mouth of Hell: Notable Actions of the Gothic Sector War, 143-149.M41***

## PART ONE

# BAPTISM OF FIRE

'GOOD HUNTING, *MACHARIUS*'.

They were the first words that anyone had heard spoken aloud on the bridge of His Divine Majesty's Ship, the *Lord Solar Macharius* for hours. There was no such thing as silence on an Imperial Navy warship, where the decks shook with the ever-present rumble of the massive plasma engines and every corridor, work-bay and compartment echoed with the sounds of the more than ten thousand specimens of toiling, sweating humanity that made up its crew. Still, the mood aboard the Dictator class cruiser was eerily quiet, and even here on the bridge the command crew spoke only in muted whispers as they relayed orders and status checks between themselves and over the internal comm-net to hundreds of other points throughout the ship.

Standing at the nave point of the bridge, Captain Leoten Semper heard a polite cough and the shuffle of booted feet behind him, followed by the clipped accent of his flag-lieutenant, the young officer maintaining a carefully neutral tone to his voice.

'Signal from the *Indefatigable*, captain. Do you wish us to acknowledge?'

Semper turned to face the young officer, studying his second-in-command's refined features.

Hito Ulanti, he thought. A Necromundan aristocrat's name. Strange to find one of his sort serving aboard a navy ship. And aristocrats are always ambitious. This one may bear watching, Semper noted, wryly remembering that assassination had once been a viable means of advancement for ambitious young navy officers during the dark days of the Age of Apostasy.

Semper snapped back to the situation at hand, remembering that as captain of one of the Emperor's warships, he now had little time for such moments of quiet musing.

'Acknowledge the signal from the *Indefatigable*, Mr. Ulanti. Our compliments to its captain and officers, and our sincere hopes to see her again when we return home once again to Stranivar.'

The flag-lieutenant clicked his heels in the approved navy style and nodded for the standard acknowledgement to be returned to the escort vessel.

Semper turned to look out of the command deck viewing bay, seeing his own reflection staring back at him. It was an image almost identical to any one of the dozens of ancestral portraits displayed in the family manor house back home on Cypra Mundi - the same severe and hawk-like features of the elite Cypra Mundian officer class, the same proudly-worn battle scars (the one which marked his face was the result of a boarding action assault he once led on an ork ship as a young junior lieutenant), the same resplendent uniform of a senior officer of the Imperial Navy of the Segmentum Obscurus - but it was to the gleaming captain's stars on the collar of that uniform that his eye was most drawn. There had been Sempers in the Imperial Navy since before the Age of Apostasy. The very latest in the line wondered if, unlike most of his illustrious ancestors, he would ever live long enough to return to Cypra Mundi to see the portrait of himself now hanging there along with all those others. He shook his head, focusing his vision on the starfield beyond, his experienced eyes picking out the tiny moving dot of light that was the *Indefatigable*. As he watched, the light flared brighter as the Sword class frigate fired up its engines and veered away from the *Macharius* to rejoin the picket line of scout ships and defence monitor vessels now patrolling the fringes of the Stranivar system. He cursed, asking himself yet again where such precautions had been when the Chaos ships had swept out of warp space and caught most of Battlesquadron Stranivar helpless in space-dock. The attack had been devastating - two-thirds of the squadron crippled or destroyed - but it was only in the aftermath that the full extent of the disaster became clear, as reports of similar sudden attacks come flooding in from all over the Gothic sector. This was no isolated event. The Eye of Terror had opened to unleash an invasion armada and all of Battlefleet Gothic was now at war. If they were not to lose *the* whole of the Gothic sector, it was essential that the Imperial Navy counterattacked in force as soon as possible, and Lord Admiral Ravensburg had ordered every spaceworthy ship under his command to assemble for immediate deployment. As the only ship in the squadron to survive unscathed, the *Macharius* was the first to put out of space-dock, on orders to rendezvous with a squadron of Cobra destroyers in the uninhabited Dolorosa system before travelling on to join the battlegroup currently gathering in the Bhein Morr system. It would be there also that the ship would take on its new complement of Fury and Starhawk deep space attack craft to replace its aged Interceptors and Marauders. Slipping its moorings, the *Macharius* had seemed like a thief in the night as it glided past the drifting hulks of those ships destroyed in the attack and leaving behind the crippled remnants of the rest of the squadron. His was a troubled ship, Semper knew. There was anger and a desire for revenge, but there was something else too: *fear*. Fear of what was waiting for them out there in the warp, and of their new captain's ability to deal with it. This was Semper's first command, and the onset of war on a scale not seen since the Horus Heresy ten thousand years earlier would scarcely ease the traditional problems encountered by all new captains straggling to master an unfamiliar crew and vessel. This war would be a baptism of fire which would see them either forged together in the heat of battle - or swept away in the firestorm of conflict now raging through the Gothic sector.

Semper turned, seeing the dozens of faces staring at him expectantly. 'Astrogation!' he barked, in the same tone of command that had first been drilled in to him decades ago at the cadet training colleges on Cypra Mundi. 'Estimated time to the beacon?'

'One-point-three hours, flag-captain,' came the reply, the officer at the astrogation lectern checking the flickering symbols on the rune screen in front of him.

'Very good,' Semper nodded, gesturing for the nearest signals officer to open up a comm-net channel. 'Captain Semper to Magos Castaboras. Warp jump in one-point-three hours. Commence preparations immediately. 'Acknowledge.'

A pause, and then the reply from the ship's most senior Adeptus Mechanicus tech-priest, his voice distorted either by the hiss of comm-net static or one of the cybernetic implants with which all acolytes of the Machine God equipped themselves.

Acknowledged.'

Heads looked up at Semper's next words. 'One more thing, venerable Castaboras. I don't know what my predecessor's feelings were on the matter, but as captain of this vessel, I expect the presence of either its Technis Majoris or one of his most senior adepts on the bridge at all times. You and your brethren are part of this ship's crew, and will act accordingly. Do I make myself clear?'

There was a longer pause, and then the tech-priest's reply, the terseness in his voice detectable even over the crackle of the commnet. 'As you wish, my lord. I will join you on the bridge shortly.'

Semper noticed the silent nods of approval from many of the officers on the bridge. The navy depended on the knowledge of the Adeptus Mechanicus to operate its vessels, but the relationship between fleet officers and Mechanicus adepts was never an easy one.

*A warship has several would-be masters, but only one captain,* Semper remembered his mentor, Admiral Haasen, once saying. *To be in true command of your vessel you must show your crew that you are the only master that matters.*

Semper's eyes swept the bridge, his gaze passing over the rows of silent servitors manning the console stations in the recessed choirs that lined the raised nave of the command deck. The captain's pulpit lay in the centre of the nave where it met with the bridge's transept wings, and from where he could consult with his senior officers and oversee the vital gunnery, astrogration, ordnance control and surveyor sections of the command deck. Looking up, he saw tier upon tier of busy servitor drones and tech-priests attending to the operation and adoration of the ship's ancient logic engines, each subsection of a dozen or more servitors and their tech-priest overseer responsible for the monitoring of just one small part of the mighty machine-mind which inhabited and animated the battlecruiser's systems.

The monitor galleries stretched almost up to the bridge's vaulted ceiling some twenty metres above, but Semper found the figure he was looking for on one of the lower levels, standing on a walkway which spanned the breadth of the central nave and from where the command deck activity could be closely watched. The light from the nearby screens picked out the gleaming silver skulls on the figure's black uniform, and Semper noticed that few of the other crew members approached that area of the bridge. Having already asserted his authority over the Magos Technicus, it was time to deal with a far more intractable challenge to any captain's command.

'Commissar Kyogen!' Semper called up to the figure in the shadows above. 'It is my intention to conduct an inspection of the ship and crew prior to warp jump. Would you care to join me? Mister Ulanti, the bridge is yours.'

THE OMINOUS ARROWHEAD shape of the *Contagion* floated in space near the still-burning wreck of the Cobra class destroyer. Of the other three vessels from the squadron, all that remained were three fading clouds of super-heated gas and dust several thousand kilometres distant. It was dark on the command deck of the *Contagion* - its captain found normal lighting levels uncomfortable after his eyelids and much of his skin had atrophied - but many of the command no longer had need of their eyes anyway. That same captain - Hendrik Morrau, once one of the most famous names in the history of Battlefleet Gothic - passed one withered hand over the rune screen in front of him, his eyes reading the battle report statistics which flickered across it. He grunted in pleasure, satisfied that he could not have fought the battle any better. Closing in on the burning destroyer, its air supply venting out into the vacuum of space in bright plumes of fire, it had been his intention to use the vessel for simple target practice, but then close-range surveyor scans had offered the possibility of a far more diverting pleasure for his crew: prisoners. The remnants of the Cobra's crew were trapped in airtight compartments aboard the doomed ship.

Morrau had immediately despatched boarding parties: chattering daemon-things specially bred for this purpose and usually kept confined in the *Contagion's* festering hold. Ship-bound by his mutations, Morrau envied the creatures their sport as they searched through the wreck for pockets of life, and he had eagerly listened to the screams and pleading human voices as each group of survivors was found and slaughtered in turn.

Morrau would not deny his crew their spoils of victory, but he gave strict orders that some of the humans be taken alive and brought back for interrogation. The commander smiled at the thought, knowing that those taken alive and delivered into the eager hands of the ship's surgeon-interrogator would soon wish that they had been butchered aboard their vessel with the rest of their comrades.

As if on cue, Morrau heard the distinctive shuffling footsteps behind him. Ever since his body had started fusing with his captain's chair, bony spires and wire-like tendrils growing out of him and connecting him to the daemonic mind of his equally transformed ship, it had become impossible for Morrau to leave his chair. However, he didn't need to be able to turn round to recognise the approach of his surgeon-interrogator, Adolphus Torque. Torque stopped behind his captain, his heavy foetid breath only adding to the miasmic foulness that passed for a breathable atmosphere aboard the *Contagion*. Morrau was secretly glad that he was unable to turn to face his old crewmate; the nature of some of Torque's mutations were unpleasant in the extreme, even to the captain of one of the Plague Lord's best warships.

'The prisoners were to your satisfaction?' Morrau asked.

'Most satisfactory,' Torque slurred, his writhing worm-tongues finding difficulty in forming the normal sounds of human speech. 'And one of them revealed something most interesting, lord. The ships we ambushed were not recharging their warp drives as we imagined. They were waiting to rendezvous with an Imperial capital ship.'

Morrau's nostrils flared with excitement, savouring the myriad stench that circulated through his ship. In the aftermath of battle, when the ship released the waste products of its own spent power emissions into the air systems, the atmosphere aboard the *Contagion* took on its own distinctive and highly charged aroma. To Morrau, veteran of hundreds of space battles, it smelled of nothing less than victory.

'The name of this ship?'

'The *Lord Solar Mac... Macharius*, captain,' Torque replied, his Chaos-altered speech patterns stumbling over the name of one of

the Imperium's greatest heroes.

'The *Macharius*...' Morrau breathed, resting back in his chair and searching his long memory. He dimly remembered fighting alongside a ship of that name in a fleet action against a force of Fra'al raiders in the Osiris cluster. The *Contagion* had still been called *Vengis* then, and the name of the captain of the *Macharius* had been Rutgen Jago, but that had been over six hundred years ago as the humans of the Imperium reckon time, and so much - oh yes, so very much indeed! - had changed since then. Whoever the master of the *Macharius* was now, he could never match the ability and experience of the *Contagion's* captain.

'And the record of the prisoners' interrogation?'

'Preserved for your entertainment, captain,' rasped Torque, a taloned hand snaking out to offer his captain the data crystal, still slick with human blood. Morrau fed the crystal into one of the weeping blister ports on his command console, which opened to accept it with a wet sucking noise. He would review and enjoy the scenes recorded on it while he planned the ambush and destruction of the *Macharius*.

LEOTEN SEMPER COULD feel the sharp beginnings of a headache, always a sure sign of an approaching warp jump as the vessel's ancient warp field generators powered up and sent out unpredictable psychic vibrations into the minds of its crew. All around him, preparations were underway for the jump into the immaterium. In their engine section sanctum the tech-priests would be striking runes upon the workings of the ship's mighty warp drives, while Semper could smell the sickly-sweet scent of burning incense that told him the Adeptus Ministorum confessors were at their work, moving through the ship and bestowing protective blessings upon the crew in anticipation of their journey into the daemon-haunted realm of the immaterium. From their position on the gantry platform overlooking the metal cavern of the forward starboard gun-bay, Semper and Commissar Kyogen could see work teams of hundreds of sweating ratings hauling the massive gun batteries back along the tracks to their standby positions or turning the huge gear wheels to close thick blast shields over the bay's viewing ports.

Semper looked at the brooding shape of Koba Kyogen standing beside him. The commissar was a giant of a man, well over two metres tall. Semper knew that the uniform of a fleet commissar - gleaming black leather jackboots and pistol holster, thick black felt overcoat with polished silver skull buttons and laurel wreath insignia and high peaked cap with burnished Imperial eagle emblem - was designed to intimidate and inspire, but even without it the commissar would still have struck an imposing figure. Semper glanced at the row of decorations on Kyogen's chest, noting the distinctive bright starburst cluster of the Order of the Gothic Star, identical to that pinned to the breast of Semper's own tunic. The skin of the commissar's face was disfigured with the tell-tale marks of white-hot plasma splash, and one half of it was twisted into a permanent snarl by a crude skin-graft which Semper recognised as a typically makeshift piece of battlefield surgery.

Medals and battle scars worn proudly, Semper thought to himself. He's no coward, this commissar, but how far can I depend on him?

Semper gestured at the activity below. 'Your opinion, commissar? Your assessment of the ship and its crew?'

'We have a good cadre of command crew and petty officers familiar with the ship and its operations, but too many gaps have been filled amongst the lower rankings by untried recruits who haven't even made their first warp jump yet. Too many press-ganged convict scum as well, although they'll soon be wishing they were back in the work camps on Lubyanka once they get their first taste of space combat.'

Semper nodded, already impressed with Kyogen's straightforward way of talking. Maybe, he thought, I might actually have a useful officer here and not just another Schola Progenium-created automaton.

'And your assessment of the ship's captain?'

Kyogen looked Semper straight in the eye as he answered. 'Your service record shows you to be a highly capable officer, and it is difficult to argue with Admiral Haasen's decision to promote you to your first full captaincy.' There was a scream from the deck below, abruptly cut off, as one of the gun crew stumbled and was instantly crushed beneath the weapon carriage's huge rolling wheels. If Kyogen noticed, he gave no indication. Deaths amongst the lower ranks were so common on an Imperial warship that they passed unnoticed. 'You acquitted yourself well in the attack on Stranivar, but in view of your basic inexperience and the threat now facing the Gothic sector fleet, there must remain some doubts about your ability to captain a vessel of this size during the present crisis.'

A loud warning chime sounded over the comm-net - fifteen minutes to warp jump - and Kyogen shifted impatiently, obviously keen to be attending to his duties elsewhere.

'One last thing, commissar,' Semper said, sensing the other man's impatience. 'In the event of my death or injury, who would you choose to replace me as captain?' It went unsaid that one cause of Semper's death might be Kyogen himself, since any fleet commissar could summarily execute a captain for anything they judged to be a serious dereliction of duty.

'Flag-lieutenant Ulanti is next in the chain of command,' replied the commissar, the fixed snarl carved into his face deepening at the mention of Semper's second-in-command. 'But, noble title or not, he's still nothing more than Necromundan hive-trash. Hive-trash have their place on a warship, but only as press-gang conscripts. No senior officer would take orders from such a captain, no matter how high-born they claimed to be.'

Semper took all this in without reaction. 'I see. Then who would you nominate instead?'

'Myself, captain. In the event of your death, I would consider it my proper duty to appoint myself in your place. Now, if that is all, I have to oversee the final security arrangements for the transition to the warp.'

And with that, Commissar Kyogen saluted smartly and turned and walked away, leaving the captain of the *Macharius* to wonder about the man who held the power of life and death over even him.

ON THE GUN-DECK below, Maxim Borusa glanced up at the two officers on the walkway above before a vicious kick from Gogol brought him sharply back to the business at hand.

'Back to work, Borusa, before I finish that piece of handiwork I started back on Lubyanka!' spat the crewboss, giving the new conscript another swift kick for good measure. Maxim fell into step once more with the other members of the work gang as they hauled one of the huge gun carriages along the track. He winced, remembering the scars all over his back from the time Gogol and his gang had caught him, and the boss had gone to work on him with a fire-heated blade. He had escaped, and once again Maxim cursed the fates which had brought them together again years later: Maxim press-ganged into service aboard the *Macharius*, only to find the gloating Gogol waiting for him.

Maxim had been born into the lawless underworld of the hive cities of Stranivar and had survived the gulag hell of the Lubyanka prison moon, but even he had few illusions left about his survival chances aboard an Imperial warship. Not with Gogol here too.

'SPIRITUS MACHINA,' intoned the metal-masked figure of Magos Castaboras, resplendent in his glittering robes of woven silicon. 'Prepare to engage warp drives on my mark.' The vital task of taking a ship into warp space could only be done by the most senior tech-priest aboard, for only he could conduct the proper rituals or knew the correct Tetragrammaton code - the true secret name of that aspect of the Machine God which inhabited the *Macharius's* systems - which allowed access to the ship's warp drives. Standing on the bridge and surrounded by a phalanx of adepts, the tech-priest waited for the silent nod of assent from Leoten Semper before completing the ritual.

'Quinque...'

'Quattuor...'

'Tres...'

'Due...'

'Unus...'

'Engagus!'

At the magos's command, the truly stellar levels of energy contained within the ship's plasma reactors were released into the warp engines, ripping a hole in the fabric of space and pushing the cruiser forward into the immaterium. The Geller Field - the teardrop-shaped bubble of reality which protected the ship and its crew from the full fury of the maelstrom - crackled with power as waves of warp energy lashed against it, rocking the *Macharius* from prow to stern. Inside the ship, the new recruits cringed in terror, their screams and cries almost drowning out the traditional litanies of protection chanted by their more experienced crewmates. Confessors, junior commissars and shotgun-armed petty officers walked every deck, encouraging the crew to keep good faith in the divine protection of the Emperor, but meanwhile keeping a close vigil for any sign of daemoniac intrusion into the minds and bodies of their shipmates.

ON THE BRIDGE, the magos stepped away from his control lectern and bowed silently to the captain, signalling that his task was over. As of now the fate of the entire ship was now in the hands of another.

Sealed off in his pilaster dome and guarded by fanatically loyal Navis Nobilite retainers who would not even allow the ship's captain himself to enter without their master's permission, Principal Navigator Solon Cassander closed his eyes and removed the warding band from around his head, allowing him to open up the mystic third eye centred in the middle of his forehead.

Looking out on the true face of the maelstrom with his mystic warpsight, he could see most of the length of the ship extended out before him. Aft lay the engine section, comprising fully one third of the ship's three kilometre length, but below him was the main body of the *Macharius*, bristling with crenellated gun turrets, observation domes and spires, antenna arrays and other baroque features of the vessel's superstructure. On each side of the hull were the heavy weapon batteries and the tiered ramparts of the cruiser's launch bays, each bay capable of unleashing wave upon wave of fast attack fighters and bombers. Ahead of him was the fearsome armoured beak of the prow, its metres-thick solid adamantine armour designed to smash through the hulls of enemy vessels in a full head-on ramming attack. There, too, was the ship's main frontal armament: six missile tube tunnels, each firing a thirty-metre-long plasma torpedo.

The firepower of the *Macharius* was formidable, but Solon Cassander knew that it was insignificant in comparison to the power contained in the merest flicker of warp energy in the maelstrom raging around them. The navigator paused, clearing all thoughts from his conscious mind and extended his gaze into the higher realms of the warp, using the psychic signal of the astronomican as a beacon to plot a safe course through the currents and tempests of the immaterium. Course changes and navigation instructions would be relayed down to the command deck for immediate implementation, but for the next few days, while the ship was in transit through the warp, Navigator Cassander would be the true master of the *Macharius*.

STANDING IMMOBILE ON the bridge, Semper stared in fascination at the complex and ever-changing energy patterns of the warp as they were electronically interpreted on one of the command deck's opticon screens. Navigators claimed to be able to sometimes see glimpses of the future in the swirling patterns of the warp. Watching the images of the ebb and flow of the currents, Semper wondered what the future held for the men and ships of Battlefleet Gothic.

'Good hunting.' It was the traditional greeting hail between ships of the fleet as they left on patrol or encountered each other in the warp, but now, with the warfleets of Abaddon the Despoiler pouring out of the Eye of Terror and a dozen navy bases already fallen to the sudden onslaught of the Chaos attack, Leoten Semper was left to wonder exactly who would be the hunter and who the hunted in this war.

THE *CONTAGION* DRIFTED inert and seemingly lifeless on the solar tides, its power systems reduced to such a low output as to make it to all intents invisible to the electronic senses of another vessel. His own reactions deadened by the low power levels trickling through the ship's systems, it took Morrau some seconds to realise that the ship's navigator-seer was standing before him. The flesh of the navigator's face bubbled and suppurated as he spoke.

'Your pardon, flag-captain, but—'

'I know,' Morrau said, cutting off the sibilant hiss of the voice of his daemon-possessed navigator. 'I have sensed it too. The powers of the warp warn us of the approach of our prey.' Morrau settled back into his chair, contemplating with pleasure the prospect of the coming battle.

ON THE FRINGES of the Dolorosa system, a miniature second sun suddenly blossomed in the vacuum of space, its light outshining that of the real star at the far distant centre of the planetary system. Waves of energy cascaded out of the extra-dimensional breach as a three-kilometre-long metal leviathan ripped its way back into the normal universe, its shields straining at near-overload point to withstand the terrible energies surging around it. His Divine Majesty's ship the *Lord Solar Macharius* had completed a successful exit from the warp.

Leaving the tech-priests and confessors to their prayers of thanks, Leoten Semper took up position in his captain's pulpit. A ship was at its most vulnerable in the moments immediately after re-entering normal space, when its power levels were still in flux and the energy burst of its warp exit broadcast its existence and position to any other vessel in the system.

'Astrogation!' Semper barked. 'Determine our course and position. Surveyors! Locate the position of Destroyer Squadron Mako and check for presence of any other unknown vessels. Captain to all decks! Raise blast shields and make ready all weapons.'

There was a pause while the crew moved to carry out his orders, and then the responses started coming back.

'Astrogation reporting. Position confirmed as the Dolorosa system. Estimate we are within 89.7% accuracy of intended exit point.' Semper made a mental note to commend his navigator. Any jump that hit its intended exit point with more than a 70% level of accuracy was considered the mark of a master.

'Surveyors reporting. Heavy interference from warp energy residue. Unable to locate Squadron Mako at the rendezvous coordinates.'

'Communications reporting. No response to our coded hailing signals. Dead air on all standard fleet frequencies.'

Semper turned to look at the empty starfield revealed beyond the viewing bay's now-raised blast shields. Never mind longdistance surveyor reports, with the bridge's enhanced viewing devices they should actually be able to see the waiting escort squadron. Emperor's throne, where were they?

SEVERAL HUNDRED THOUSAND kilometres directly behind the *Macharius*, the *Contagion* closed in on its prey. Power flowed through the Chaos vessel as its energy levels were gradually brought up, and Hendrik Morrau fought to keep the growing excitement out of his voice as he stared at the bright target blip on the surveyor screen.

'Maintain course and increase speed by mark point two. Stay in his warp trail. Bring the prow batteries and dorsal lances up to half power. Void shields to remain down until I give the order.'

Morrau watched the target blip grow brighter on the screen in front of him. It was an ambush tactic he had long ago honed to perfection - using the energy trail of a craft recently emerged from the warp to mask his own approach from directly behind it.

Before the time the enemy even knew he was there, the *Contagion* would already be in position to deliver a crippling strike to its power systems. The defenceless Imperium ship would then be boarded and seized, and Morrau looked forward to the prospect of more prisoners, particularly if the *Macharius's* captain was amongst them. The Chaos captain had already given Surgeon-Interrogator Torque careful and highly specific instructions on what he wanted done, should his opposing number be foolish enough to allow himself to be taken alive.

'POSSIBLE SURVEYOR SCAN anomaly detected.' The toneless voice of one of the servitors rang out, followed by Semper's urgent reply.

'Identify!'

Officers converged on the drone's position, knowing that their captain wanted the crucial information from a human rather than one of the soulless man-machine things that operated many of the command deck's monitor systems. Hito Ulanti leaned over the console, quickly interpreting the surveyor scan symbols which flashed across the screen. 'Still a lot of warp energy interference, but possible target blip fifteen to twenty thousand kilometres immediately behind us and closing... Could be another ship!'

Semper didn't hesitate. 'Helm control - hard to port! Engineering - open port vent valves and engage plasma reactor emergency release systems!'

'TARGET VEERING TO port. Energy surge in his power systems,' croaked the *Contagion's* toad-bodied helmsman.

'He's detected us!' Morrau snarled with a curse. 'Full power to forward weapons. Fire when ready!'

'Flag-captain! The void shields! We should—' bleated a heretic tech-priest, before one of Morrau's Plague Marine bodyguards savagely cut him down in response to the curt gesture from their master.

'No time!' bellowed Morrau in fury. 'Lock on with forward weapons and open fire!'

THE *MACHARIUS* SWUNG round in space, gargoyle-faced vents opening up along its port side to bleed gaseous clouds of broiling plasma out into space. The expelled energy cloud appeared as a hazy after-image on the *Contagion's* surveyor screens, confusing the Chaos ship's targeting systems and sending its opening weapons fire blazing harmlessly past the Imperial cruiser.

'Engage void shields!' Morrau bellowed, already knowing that the *Macharius's* manoeuvre would bring its port batteries into firing alignment before enough energy could be diverted to the *Contagion's* void shield generators. At this range, the damage would not be critical, but the Chaos cruiser sustained several hull-deep hits as it passed through the sights of the *Macharius's* weapons batteries, before its void shields finally powered up sufficiently to absorb the energy blasts and macro-shell impacts.

The moment of danger over, Hendrik Morrau sat back in his chair, grudgingly impressed by his enemy's unexpected

resourcefulness. Perhaps this engagement might be even more enjoyable than he anticipated.

SEMPER WATCHED THE target blip on the scanner screen move out of weapons range for the time being. The initial exchange of fire over, both ships would now withdraw to manoeuvre for the best possible advantage in their next attack runs. They would also use this moment to learn as much about their enemy as possible.

'Surveyors: identify enemy vessel by class and name, if you can.'

The Officer of Surveyors consulted the readings on his lectern, calling up centuries-old data from the vast repositories of information held in the ship's logic engines. 'Vessel is a Hades class heavy cruiser. It's broadcasting a modified form of an old Segmentum Obscurus fleet identification code, but we should be able to— Vandire's oath, it's the *Vengis*!'

A murmur of shocked disbelief rippled round the command deck, cut short by the urgent words of a junior signals officer. 'The enemy vessel is hailing us, flag-captain. The enemy captain wishes to speak with you!'

'On audio,' Semper ordered, warily noting *the* way Kyogen unsnapped the fastenings on his holstered bolt pistol. 'Have faith, comrade commissar,' the captain remarked, smiling grimly. 'Perhaps he merely wishes to discuss the terms of his surrender.' Even over the interference of the ship-to-ship link, the inhuman nature of the voice that suddenly filled the interior of the *Macharius*'s command deck was all too apparent. It was a voice thick with decay, each word bubbling obscenely up from a body bloated full of its own poisons. 'My congratulations, captain,' gloated the voice. 'It has been some time - several centuries, in fact - since I last saw an immerman Manoeuvre implemented so well.'

'This is Flag-captain Leoten Semper of his Divine Majesty's Ship the *Lord Solar Macharius*,' Semper said. 'Identify yourself!'

The voice on the link gave a sick wet laugh. 'I regret we cannot see one another, captain, but I imagine that you would find my appearance much changed from whatever portraits and statues of me still exist on Port Maw. I am Flag-captain Hendrik Morrau, master of the vessel once known to you as the *Vengis*!'

'Impossible!' snapped Semper. 'Morrau and his crew were lost to the warp after the defeat of the Bligh Mutiny renegades six hundred years ago!'

'Lost?' choked the voice of Morrau. 'Perhaps it might have seemed, when we were marooned in the immaterium, and madness and disease took so many of us, but how could we be lost when our suffering led us to find salvation in a power far greater than the withered thing which sits even now upon the Golden Throne? This ship is called *Contagion* now, captain, and we gladly serve the glory of the Great One who found us there in the warp and remade us in his own pestilent image.'

On board the *Contagion*, Morrau contemplated the glowing icon marking the *Macharius*'s position on the opticon screen and savoured the hiss of dead static over the now silent comm-link. 'They have closed communications, lord,' reported one of his nearby crew-things. 'Enemy vessel now changing course and breaking away from engagement zone.'

'Let them try and run. They won't get far,' said the rotting figure in the captain's chair. 'Power up the engines. When they try to escape into the immaterium we'll be ready to take up the chase.'

'OPINIONS?' ASKED FLAG-CAPIAIN Semper, looking at the senior bridge officers assembled before him and aware that some of them might take this unorthodox command tactic to be a sign of weakness in their new captain. It was Remus Nyder, the ship's stolid veteran Master of Ordnance and the longest-serving officer aboard the *Macharius*, who was first to speak.

'Without our payload of attack craft our offensive capabilities are limited. Even if we already had our new Starhawk squadrons aboard, we would still be outgunned against a Hades class ship. I am satisfied that your decision to disengage from contact with a more powerful enemy vessel is the best course of action under the circumstances.'

There was a murmur of assent from many of the other officers present, although Semper noticed no such sign of agreement from his second-in-command.

'You have a different opinion, Mister Ulanti?' Semper asked.

'Forgive me, captain, but if the enemy vessel truly is the renegade *Vengis* and its captain exactly whom he says he is, then we are not out of danger yet.' The young lieutenant paused, gathering his thoughts, before continuing under the steely gaze of his captain. 'Morrau's treatise on tactics is still required reading for all collegium cadets, and he was known to be a most determined and tenacious opponent. Indeed, his relentless pursuit and harrying of the eldar cruiser *Changeling* is now part of fleet legend. It seems unlikely that Morrau - if that is who he truly is - will give up the chase so easily, and may even be willing to take the battle against us into the warp itself. After all, we have long known that the daemon-things which helm such renegade vessels have warp-senses superior even to those of our own Navis Nobilite. There can be no guarantee that we would be able to evade them in the warp as we would any other normal vessel.'

All those present waited on the captain's response, but if their new captain had an answer to his second-in-command's points, he chose to keep it to himself.

'Enemy contact detected. Vandire's oath, he's found us again! All decks, brace for impact!'

IT HAD BEEN three days since their initial encounter with the *Contagion* in the Dolorosa system. Three days of emergency warp jumps and constant skirmishing with the Chaos vessel, the *Macharius* unable to shake off its pursuer. Unable to match its opponent's firepower, the Imperial vessel had retreated into the warp where, as Flag-lieutenant Ulanti had predicted, it had still been impossible to evade the daemon-piloted Chaos ship amongst the storms and tides of the immaterium. Time and again the Chaos ship had emerged, weapons firing, from one of the swirling energy storms, forcing the *Macharius* to crash-jump back out of the warp to emerge in the empty interstellar void between star systems. Morrau's ship would either follow them, not allowing them sufficient time to properly recharge their warp drives, or would wait in ambush for them to re-enter the warp again, the *Contagion* holding position on the ever-changing warp currents in a show of skill that no human navigator could ever match. It had become a battle of energy levels and crew stamina instead of firepower and ordnance attacks, Leoten Semper grimly

realised - and one which his ship was losing, its power systems and human crew overloaded to the point of exhaustion by the effort of so many emergency jumps.

Now the *Contagion* was coming at them once more, its now-familiar energy signature emerging from out of the random chaos of the warp currents which it had up until this moment been using to mask its presence. Even though the viewing bay blast shields were down, Semper could almost imagine the scene outside: the sinister delta shape of the Chaos cruiser gliding towards them through the warp, its tall and distinctively narrow-shaped command tower cutting through the stuff of the immaterium like a shark's fin, its massive lance battery turrets crackling with energy as they swung around to bear on their target. The *Macharius* rocked violently as the Chaos ship raked it with a primed volley of massed energy weapons fire and for a moment the Imperial ship's command deck, its blast shields lowered for warp travel and many of its opticon screens switched off for maximum energy conservation, seemed more like a besieged underground bunker than the bridge of a warship as it shook under the impact of the enemy broadside.

'Void shields penetrated, starboard side,' judged Master of Ordnance Nyder impassively, drawing on the experience of a long and battle-scarred naval career. 'No critical damage, but probably at least one of the starboard gun-bays knocked out of action.' It would be at least another minute before the official damage report confirmed the veteran officer's opinion, neither dry-toned damage appraisal containing any hint of the awful devastation inflicted on the hundreds of crewmen in those gun-bays as the barrage of lance beams, mass-reactive explosive shells and white-hot plasma streams ripped through the *Macharius's* metres-thick armoured hull.

At Semper's command, the *Macharius* locked on with its remaining starboard weapons, both ships firing simultaneous broadsides as they came abeam of each other. Combat in warp space was up-close and deadly, the range of scanners and weapon targeters so limited here that engagements took place at distances measured in hundreds rather than tens of thousands of kilometres. The area between the two ships was saturated with energy as enough firepower to level a city was unleashed across it. Void shield strikes registered as bright blossoms on surveyor screens, and both ships shuddered under the impact of on-target hits.

'Warning! Power systems failure!' a tech-priest adept signalled as alarms went off on the bridge. Semper swore, realising that they had either overloaded their dwindling energy levels or had taken reactor damage in the last broadside. Either way, his short captaincy of the *Macharius* was about to come to an ignominious end. The ship's ancient auto-systems would maintain the Geller Field's own emergency generators, but before they exhausted themselves the *Contagion* would long ago have come about to blow his defenceless ship into drifting warp debris.

Everyone aboard the *Macharius* was already dead - and Semper suddenly realised that dead men have nothing left to lose.

'Lower Geller Field to 60% of normal safety level!' he yelled. 'Channel excess power into manoeuvring systems and hold it there in reserve!'

'No!' It was the voice of Magos Castaboras, the tech-priest reacting in shock to Semper's order. 'Commissar Kyogen, stop him! Without the protection of the Geller Field we will be torn apart by the forces of the maelstrom!'

Semper looked up to see the commissar bearing down on him, sidearm already drawn, when the figure of Hito Ulanti interposed itself in front of the commissar, the flag-lieutenant calmly staring down the barrel of the bolt pistol now levelled at his face. 'As second-in-command I concur with the captain's order, commissar. Shoot us both if you must, but our deaths will only precede your own by a matter of minutes. At least this way the captain is giving us a fighting chance.'

Kyogen's aim never wavered as he called out to the nearby tech-priest. 'Magos Castaboras: is such a stratagem possible?'

'Yes, perhaps... If the enemy can be lured close enough. But the greater chances are that—'

'Thank you, magos. That is all I need to know,' said the commissar, stepping aside and lowering his pistol. 'You may proceed, flag-captain.'

Semper watched the image readings on the main surveyor screen. The *Contagion* had come around and was now standing off their port bow, from where it could safely finish them off with its long range batteries.

Come on, you arrogant bastard, thought Semper. This is what you really want. This is what you've been fighting so hard for these last few days. Come in close and gloat on your moment of victory.

'ENEMY VESSEL'S POWER systems failing. Warp field now at less than two-thirds integrity,' reported the slithering voice of one of the *Contagion's* heretic tech-priests.

Morrau leaned forward in his chair, staring through the command deck's main viewing port at the distant shape of the stricken Imperial warship. The servants of the Powers of Chaos had no fear of the true face of the warp. He tried to read his enemy's intentions in the flickering patterns of the maelstrom, sensing a possible trap. But surely only a madman would risk the eternal damnation of his soul to the hungry forces of the immaterium with such a desperate gambit? The Chaos commander had witnessed the spectacle of total warp field failure several times in his centuries-long career, and it was a sight never to be forgotten: the very structure of a ship being unravelled as the daemon-things of the warp coalesced into physical form to feed on the souls of its doomed crew.

Morrau smiled at the memory and passed a fleshless hand over the activation rune on his lectern screen, looking to find the truth in the surveyor symbols displayed there.

HE'S NOT *TAKING the bait. We must raise the stakes higher!*

'Lower Geller Field level to 40%,' Semper ordered, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. There was a deep groan from all around them - the ship's hull starting to buckle inwards as the forces of the warp pressed in all around the weakened Geller Field - and many of the Adeptus Mechanicus adepts on the bridge cried out in fear, believing it to be the angry voice of the Machine God spirit inhabiting the *Macharius*. Magos Castaboras led his adepts in fevered prayer, knowing that the warp field could not maintain its integrity for more than one or two minutes at such a low energy level.

Semper stared at the image of the *Contagion* on the flickering green screen, willing it to move closer. Hendrik Morrau was a tenacious and determined opponent, yes, but Semper remembered reading of another side to this Battlefleet Gothic legend. Morrau had been a cruel and capricious martinet who had once ordered over three thousand mutineers to be fed out of an open airlock. This was a man who had enjoyed the suffering of others, even before throwing in his lot with the Emperor's enemies. How could he resist the lure of the spectacle now being offered to him?

'Enemy vessel closing!'

As the surveyor finished speaking, Semper was already issuing orders: 'Engage reserve power systems and reinstate Geller Field integrity. Helm control - engage starboard manoeuvring thrusters and bring us about hard to port! Mister Nyder—'

'Torpedoes, flag-captain?'

Semper's savage smile of triumph matched that of his officer. 'Oh yes, Mister Nyder. Torpedoes.'

'TARGET COMING TO new heading!' Hendrik Morrau didn't need the helmsman's warning to understand the trap he had fallen into. With sickening realisation he saw the Imperial ship's armoured prow swing round to face the oncoming Chaos vessel. To the veteran captain, it was like staring down the barrel of a loaded boltgun. Or six loaded boltguns, as the *Macharius's* six torpedo ports gaped open, exhaust gases streaming out of them as the missiles within fired up their launch engines. The Dictator class cruiser had used its torpedo ordnance before in the previous few days' engagements against the *Contagion*, but every shot fired had lost itself in the currents of the maelstrom before it could reach its intended target.

These could not be lost. Not at this range.

Launched in close spread, all six found their target, hitting the *Contagion* amidships on its underside, the combined explosion all but wrenching the renegade cruiser in half. One unexploded warhead continued on and up through a dozen deck levels, detonating several seconds later inside the *Contagion's* field generators.

Hendrik Morrau was ripped out of his chair by the impact of the first salvo of explosions. He had just enough time to feel the agony from his severed bio-link tendrils before the last torpedo destroyed the warp shields and all the daemons of hell, it seemed, rushed in to claim the soul that he had unknowingly promised to them so long ago.

'VESSEL DESTROYED!' confirmed the surveyor officer. Leoten Semper looked at the tell-tale readings which indicated the destruction of the *Contagion* and tried to imagine the incredible scene happening right now on the other side of the *Macharius's* sealed viewing ports - the renegade cruiser being wrenched apart by the fury of the warp as hungry things fought over the souls of its crew.

He deactivated the lectern screen and turned to see Ulanti, his second-in-command, standing expectantly before him. Semper hadn't slept in days, a fact he suddenly became acutely aware of. Suddenly he felt tired, very tired.

'Orders, flag-captain?'

'Assess battle damage and use whatever power we have left to exit the warp. We'll recharge our generators and make any necessary repairs before continuing on to Bhein Morr. You have the bridge, Mister Ulanti.'

MAXIM BORUSA PICKED his way carefully through the still-burning metal and human wreckage of the gun-bay. The bay adjacent to this one had taken a direct hit in the battle, and the blast doors hadn't sealed fast enough to stop the wave of fire that came roaring along the gun deck. Maxim had acted fast, pulling two of his fellow press-gang conscripts down on top of him to act as human shields as the wave of fire rolled over them.

Crawling out from under their heat-blasted bodies, he'd thought he was the only one left alive in the entire bay. And then he found Gogol.

The crewboss was pinned beneath a collapsed gantry beam, his legs crushed. The beam had sheltered him from the worst of the firestorm that had swept through the bay, but the heat flash had left him blind. Gogol stared up at him with sightless eyes, sensing that someone else was close to him. 'Who's there?' he cried. 'Don't just stand there. Help me. Go fetch the ship's surgeon!'

'Wait here,' Maxim told him, thickening his voice in disguise, and went off to sift in the nearby wreckage. He came back with something that suited his purposes exactly. A metre and a half of engineer's wrench used to make repairs to the gun track.

Gogol never knew what hit him.

Three swift blows followed by a final satisfying crunch of bone, and Maxim's chances of surviving life in Battlefleet Gothic had just increased immeasurably. Happy with the way things had worked out, he sat down and waited for the rescue crews to arrive.

SIX DAYS LATER, His Divine Majesty's Ship *Lord Solar Macharius* emerged from the warp on the edge of the Bhein Morr system, its comm-net systems instantly picking up the reassuring sounds of dozens of different Imperial coded channels of busy radio traffic. A squadron of defence monitor ships were on patrol nearby, one of them breaking off to escort the cruiser through the minefields recently sown around the warp jump beacon and on towards the battlegroup armada now assembling in-system.

'Good hunting, *Macharius*,' signalled the defence ship captain, noticing the recent battle damage scarring the hull of the Dictator cruiser.

'Good enough,' replied the captain of the *Macharius*. 'Good enough.'

Again, and at the risk of infuriating those critics who seek pleasure in taking me to task for my many personal academic preferences and peccadilloes, I return once more to the subject of the cruiser *Macharius* and its commander, *Leoten Semper*. Those readers less well-versed in the details of the later events of the Gothic Sector War may wonder why I have involved myself to such an extent in the events surrounding one vessel - which was, to be sure, just one of hundreds such warships amongst *Battlefleet Gothic* - and its so far unknown captain. To those readers, I ask that they indulge me for a time yet, although the next action which I intend to examine is remarkable (and so far unmentioned and overlooked by previous chroniclers) in that it serves as prologue to the unimaginable events that were soon about to change the nature of the Gothic Sector War. *Leoten Semper*, serving in the front line of the conflict, could not be aware of the true meaning behind the mutiny and desertion of the crew of the scouting cruiser *Bellerophon* or of the stolen prize they were taking with them over to the enemy - but others serving in *Battlefleet Command* could and perhaps should have seen the events surrounding the *Bellerophon* for what they truly were: the final piece of a puzzle trail that began some four years earlier, before the start of the Gothic War proper, with the devastation of the Imperial outpost guarding the *Arx Gap* in 139.M41. Had this and other events been recognised for what they were, the *Despoiler's* intentions - and the reasons behind his incursion into the Gothic sector - could have been divined earlier, saving the lives of untold billions of the Emperor's subjects and averting a terrible danger that still threatens the *Imperium of Mankind* to this very day.

- **Scribe Emeritus Rodrigo Konniger,**

*Into the Jaws of Death, Into the Mouth of Hell: Notable Actions of the Gothic Sector War, 143-149.M41*

## PART TWO

# MATTERS OF HONOUR

ALL OVER THE ship, the clamour of combat was dying away. The sounds of gunshots and the clash of steel on steel were now being replaced by cheers and screams. Cheers, as the victors hunted the last few enemy survivors through the labyrinth of the ship's decks and passageways; screams, as they found each of them in turn.

Flag-lieutenant Pava Magell walked the length of the main chancel leading to the ship's arsenal, accepting the salutes of the weary but victorious fighters and stopping to offer praise and words of comfort to the injured and dying. It was here that their enemies had made their final stand, barricading themselves inside the main arsenal hold and attempting to detonate the munitions stored there in a last desperate act of defiance - and it had been Magell himself who had led the assault to clear out this last pocket of resistance and prevent the enemy destroying the entire ship.

A new wave of cheering, louder than any of the others he could hear, rang out from along the broad passage. Magell saw an excited scrum of his men running towards him. They were tossing something ragged and bloody up into the air and catching it on the ends of their cutlasses and bayonets. Magell watched as something smaller but just as bloody was kicked along the deck towards him. It landed at his feet with a sick wet sound. He looked down in curiosity. It was lumpen and misshapen - kicked to a bloody pulp by the heavy work boots of the gunnery crew gangs - and with one eye gone, but Magell still recognised it as the head of Ship's Commissar Brandt.

'Sir?'

Magell turned. Acting Officer of the Watch Kelto was standing to attention before him. Kelto was young and inexperienced for such a veteran position, but Magell judged that the ambitious young officer had earned the post when he executed the previous holder of the rank during their initial violent take-over of the command deck. Kelto's uniform was torn and bloodstained from the fighting, but Magell noticed with approval that this keen youngblood had already ripped off the silver Imperium eagle crest and epaulettes from his stained tunic.

'All decks report victory, sir,' grinned the young officer. 'There'll still be a few stragglers hiding out in the remotest sections or even in our own ranks, but we'll find them all soon enough.'

'Abaddon be praised, captain, the ship is ours.'

THE CLASH OF steel on steel rang through the metal cavern of the flight deck. The deck, the largest open space aboard the *Macharius*, would normally be full of noise and activity: the scream of revving engines, the shouts of officers barking out orders to sweating ground crew, the rumble of missile-laden loading bay elevators arriving from the arsenal section deep within the ship's hull, the chanting of choirs of tech-priests as they blessed the rows of attack craft suspended in their launch cradles before the start of a combat mission. But today all normal activity on the flight deck had been brought to a halt. Flight officers and ground crew mingled together around the space cleared amongst the deck's maintenance bays. Of the hundreds of crewmen crowded around or watching from the gantry walkways above, only the machine-like servitor drones had not paused from their pre-programmed duties to watch the spectacle now taking place in the centre of the deck.

Lieutenant Hito Ulanti danced back out of reach of his opponent's blade, mindful of the patches of spilled fuel and lube-fluid that covered the floor of the flight deck. Back home in the towering cities of Necromunda, duelling had been elevated to almost an art form amongst the ruling clans of the upper hives, a worthy pastime for every ambitious young blade keen to prove himself in the harsh and unforgiving world of Spire politics, where assassination and violent inter-clan rivalry were as much a part of life as the suffocating layers of aristocratic ritual and etiquette. But in the Imperial Navy things were different. Here, when one faced an opponent in close combat, it was not in the rarefied atmosphere of the duelling chamber, where well-executed moves and flourishes were greeted by a polite chorus of appreciative hisses from the assembled onlookers. In the navy, close combat came as the result of vicious and bloodily-fought boarding actions, hundreds of participants slaughtering each other within the close confines of a ship's passageways and holds, fighting with whatever weapon or heavy tool came to hand.

Ulanti hefted the sabre in his hand, its blade cutting the air in a series of precisely practised parry moves which caused his opponent to pull back from his intended counterattack. Heavier than the Necromundan duelling foil he was used to, Ulanti's sabre was a concession to the different combat style demanded by the facts of space warfare. Hand-crafted to his own specifications, it was a weapon fit for both a Necromundan aristocrat and an officer in His Divine Majesty's Navy, and this was the first time that Ulanti had used it in combat. A weapon's first blooding was an important ritual for any warrior and the fact that it was to be conducted here at the expense of the blood of a fellow officer rather than an enemy of the Emperor was not a problem that much troubled the young nobleman.

'Hive-trash! Convict press-gang fodder!' sneered his opponent, prowling around the edge of the other side of the circle. 'Why don't you come over here within reach of my blade and I'll give you a much-needed lesson in how a real fleet officer fights!'

Ulanti feinted forward, the expression of exaggerated anger on his face not matching the coolly calculated manner in which he made his attack. Spotting a pool of spilled lube-fluid on the deck in front of him, he pretended to slip, stumbling awkwardly into the path of his opponent, who quickly took the bait, moving forward to finish the duel. Ulanti closed the trap, easily side-stepping his opponent's lunge, bringing his own blade up to bear, its point punching through the heavy material of his opponent's flight suit and through into his body. Ulanti slipped the blade with practised ease through the ribcage and into his opponent's heart. He stepped back, withdrawing the blade contemptuously and allowing his opponent's body to slump to the ground, its blood pooling out to mix with the other fluids staining the floor of the flight deck.

Ulanti turned, raising his bloody sabre in salute to the stolid figure of Broton Styre, the ship's Officer of the Watch, acting here as the captain's representative supervising the proper conduct of the duel. Styre mutely nodded his assent and Ulanti turned and walked away, followed by the young junior officer whom he had selected as his second. The only sound in the entire flight bay was that of the two officers' jackboot heels echoing loudly on the metal decking, and Ulanti could feel the simmering resentment of the hundreds of crewmen around him as they stared silently at the retreating figure of the slayer of one of their own. Behind him, acting on a tech-priest's gestured command two servitors paced forward to remove the dead squadron commander's body, their lobotomised machine-minds uncaring of the details of the human drama that had just taken place.

'YOU DISAPPROVE OF my duel with Squadron Commander Luccian, captain?'

'I disapprove of the loss of an able and experienced Starhawk squadron leader, lieutenant. I expect the killing of the Emperor's loyal servants to be the task of our enemies, not my own second-in-command.'

Ulanti was standing to attention before the seated figure of his captain, Leoten Semper. It was dark in the captain's private quarters, but Ulanti's experienced hive-born eyes could pick out the details of the place. What he saw was a room decorated in a strict spartan style, far less luxurious than Ulanti's own quarters. Even the bed was little more than a simple pallet of *the* kind given to the lowliest Schola Progenium cadet. Tellingly, there were none of the small but important details to suggest that the captain enjoyed any female company in his quarters. No ornamentation or frivolous pieces of decor.

Nothing to relieve the starkness of grey bulkhead walls and bare metal decking. It was permitted for officers of Battlefleet Gothic to keep concubines aboard ship; indeed, it was rumoured that Lord Admiral Ravensburg kept a harem of fifty or more in his staterooms aboard the fleet flagship, *Divine Right*. Ulanti himself had kept a particularly energetic example of fiery Stranivar womanhood with him in his quarters, until tiring of her recently and deliberately losing her in a game of dice with one of Remus Nyder's junior ordnance officers. Ulanti couldn't imagine Semper allowing himself to be distracted by base pleasures, and the look of Semper's private quarters only confirmed the flag-lieutenant's opinion of his commanding officer.

A career officer, he lives and breathes only for the Imperial Navy, Ulanti thought. Every minute wasted relaxing in his quarters is a minute not spent overseeing the running of his ship.

Ulanti's gaze fell on the large and ornate desk before him, the only object of any real note in the entire room, its surface cluttered with star maps and report files. Ulanti recognised the captain's characteristic High Gothic scribbled handwriting. With an effort, he looked away from the pile of sealed holo-script scrolls marked with the sigil indicating they were for the captain's eyes only, until he noticed an object very much out of place amongst all the other detritus of the captain's burden of leadership. It was a skull, larger than any human's, its heavy jutting jawbone crowned with two savage-looking upturned tusks. The eye sockets were small, sunk deep beneath the thick bony plate of the sloping forehead, and Ulanti saw that the top of the skull's inches-thick dome had been smashed open long ago by what must have been a blow of some considerable force.

Semper followed his second-in-command's gaze, reaching out to touch the grisly object with what seemed to Ulanti a certain amount of fond regard.

'A souvenir of the first boarding action I ever led,' he said by way of explanation, picking up the skull and weighing it in his hands. 'A disabled ork raider, part of a pack operating out of the fringes of the Cyclops cluster. I was terrified, but more afraid of failing in my duty than in dying gloriously in battle. At the height of the battle, I found myself face to face with this brute, one of the creatures' leader breeds. He gave me this—'

With his other hand, Semper touched the long jagged scar that cut down one side of his gaunt face and smiled grimly to himself.

'As you can see, I gave him something even more memorable in return. We took the ship and I was awarded my first combat honours. It was only the Medallion Crimson, but to me then it felt as if I had won the Obscuras Honorifica itself.'

Semper laid down the trophy and looked sharply at his second-in-command. 'You see, Mr. Ulanti, I do still remember something of what it is to be an ambitious and hot-blooded young officer. But understand this: while this sector is still at war, there will be no more death duels amongst my officers. Both the Emperor and I would prefer if you killed the enemy instead of each other.'

'I was defending my honour as an officer in His Divine Majesty's Navy,' Ulanti answered stiffly. 'As second-in-command of this vessel, my authority is derived directly from your own, captain. If any member of the crew does not respect that authority, then they are challenging not only my position but yours also. I did what I had to in accordance with Lord Admiral Ravensburg's own edicts on duelling to defend my honour and maintain respect for this vessel's chain of command.'

Semper sat back in his chair, pausing before answering the flag-lieutenant. Like Ulanti, the commander of Battlefleet Gothic was a highborn aristocrat, but while Lord Admiral Ravensburg came from the finest blueblood stock of Cypra Mundi's naval cadre elite, Ulanti came from one of the noble clans of one of the most notorious hive worlds in the Imperium. According to the ancient and hidebound traditions of the Imperial Navy, all hive worlders were scum, trash, a source of mass conscript labour suitable only for use as Imperial Guard cannon fodder or to fill the most lowly and menial positions amongst the vast expendable scrum of press-ganged ratings and indentured workers that made up the bulk of any navy vessel's crew. Officers originating from any of the hundreds of hive worlds within the Imperium were rare within the ranks of Battlefleet Gothic, and almost unheard of at anything approaching the senior rank now held by Hito Ulanti. His second-in-command's battle was not with his individual brother officers, Semper knew, but with the millennia-old traditions and prejudices of the Imperial Navy itself.

Semper leaned forward to regard his second-in-command, deliberately hardening his voice as he spoke. 'I do not know how things are done on Necromunda, but here in the Segmentum Obscurus, here in the ranks of Battlefleet Gothic, respect from one's brother officers is something to be earned, not won as a duelling arena blood-prize. It is earned by loyalty. Loyalty to the Emperor, to the fleet, to one's own comrades. It is earned in action against the enemies of the Emperor. It is earned by leadership and sacrifice; by the often hard decisions we must make in the course of our duty to the Imperium of Mankind. Ravensburg's edicts be damned! He may be lord admiral of Battlefleet Gothic, but I am captain of this ship, and I say there will be no more duels fought aboard the *Macharius*. I have consulted with Commissar Kyogen on this matter, and he concurs with my judgement. Brawling and fighting

are punishable offences amongst the lower ranks and now so shall it be amongst officers too, no matter what form it may take.' Semper leaned back again, seeing something cold and hard come into his flag-lieutenant's eyes. I've insulted him, Semper realised. On his world, any comparison between the conduct of a noble and that of the teeming billions living below him in the hive must be an insult of the gravest sort. Well, so be it. I've read him the page from the Book of Judgement, so maybe now I should offer him something from the Litanies of Contrition and Compassion.

'If it is blood and glory you seek, lieutenant, if it is a chance to prove yourself to your brother officers, then it is fortunate indeed that you are standing before me now. A short time before I sent for you, Chief Astropath Rapavna arrived bearing an urgent astropath-sent message from Battlefleet Command at Port Maw. The message was sent for my ears only, but I would like you to hear it too. Adeptus Rapavna?'

Semper suppressed a smile as Ulanti visibly stiffened with shock at the sound of soft footsteps behind him and the green-cloaked figure of the astropath shuffled forward out of the darkness behind him. Ulanti had not known that the astropath had been in the room with them all along, Semper realised. Technically, it might be thought of as poor protocol to have another present at what had essentially been a private reprimand of a senior officer, but Semper did not consider that such niceties applied in the case of Adeptus Rapavna. Astropaths were a vital part of the Imperium, found by the side of every fleet commander, every Space Marine Chapter Master, every planetary overlord. They stood in the shadows at gatherings of the mighty Council of the High Lords of Terra, waiting silently as their masters debated on issues which would affect the fates of untold billions. There were few secrets in the Imperium that had not first passed through the mind of an astropath; Semper judged that the dressing-down of one impetuous young flag officer would be of little interest to one of these eternally silent keepers of the Imperium's deepest secrets.

The astropath took his place before the captain's desk, nodding briefly in acknowledgement of Ulanti. The lieutenant shifted slightly, clearly uncomfortable to be in such close proximity to the psyker. The very existence of the Imperium depended on psykers such as astropaths and the mutant Navigators, but on a million inhabited worlds within its far-spread borders, the citizens of the Imperium were taught from birth to hate and fear the mutant and the psyker. The higher one rose in Imperial service, Semper noted, the more one was forced to consort with the likes of astropaths and other such officially-sanctioned abominations. Rapavna's already mask-like features settled into a fixed waxen image as he entered a trance state, his enhanced mental senses reaching down into his subconscious to find the psychically-transmitted message hidden there. The dark skin of his face was covered in an intricate webwork of tattoos: psychic wards favoured by many of his kind to protect themselves from warp daemons. His eyes were sewn shut - his sight long ago destroyed as a side-effect of the agonising ritual of soul-binding with the Emperor - but two painted eyes were tattooed onto his closed eyelids, these false eyes staring blindly ahead as the astropath opened his mouth and delivered the message. The voice which emerged was not solely Rapavna's and in its eerie whispering tones Semper knew he could also hear, not only the voice of the other astropaths in the chain that had psychically relayed the message from Port Maw to the *Macharius*, but also the distant echo of the voice of the senior command officer who had originally given the message to the very first astropath in the chain.

'Imperial Standard 0274143.M41. Ship of the line *Bellerophon*, Dauntless class light cruiser assigned Battlegroup Fularis, Bhein Morr subsector, has attacked and destroyed Adeptus Mechanicus way station, Oreicha system. Assumed *Bellerophon* crew forsaken the Emperor's light and gone over to side of enemy. Believed important technical information stolen from Oreicha way station. His Divine Majesty's Ship *Lord Solar Macharius* to intercept and destroy *Bellerophon*. Mission priority highest. Ave Imperator.'

Rapavna paused, a look of slight confusion on his face. Then his features shifted subtly again as he came out of the fugue state, before he bowed to Semper and glided away from the two officers. Semper glanced at Ulanti, the two of them sharing the same look of sharp anticipation. The *Macharius* had been assigned to escort duty on the Bhein Morr Run for the last few months since the onset of the Gothic Sector War. It was a vital task, they knew, keeping the supply routes open to the front line systems and protecting the desperately-needed convoys from the pirate raiders of the wolf pack fleets, but both officers yearned for a chance to engage directly with their main enemy.

'It would seem that our victory over the *Contagion* has not been forgotten after all,' said Semper, unrolling a large chart across the expanse of his desk. 'We have finally been given a mission worthy of our devotion to the Emperor. The recovery of the stolen technical data is a vital task, certainly - but to allow a mutinied crew to escape unpunished or one of His Divine Majesty's ships to join the ranks of the enemy would be to bring dishonour on the entire battlefleet. Make no mistake about it, the successful completion of this mission is matter of honour for all of Battlefleet Gothic.'

'Of course,' he added, indicating the spread-out starchart, 'to bring vengeance to the enemies of the Emperor, we must first find them. Your opinion, Mister Ulanti?'

The captain indicated the map and Ulanti leaned forward, inspecting the complex network of star system positions, interlinking warp passages, tide patterns and time-dilation estimate equations that made up any normal Imperium starchart. The ability to read such charts, to absorb and understand the multi-layered levels of information contained within them, was just one of the many skills required of a senior officer in His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy.

Ulanti ran his fingers across the surface of the chart, tracing out the *Bellerophon's* most likeliest course headings. 'They're probably without any navigator capability,' he suggested, looking up to see Semper nodding in agreement. The *Navis Nobilitate* was one of the oldest and most crucial cornerstones of the Imperium, and a ship's navigator traditionally chose death rather than giving himself up to the Emperor's enemies.

'That means they can only make short blind warp jumps of no more than a few light years at a time,' continued Ulanti, one finger marking out a cluster of star systems in the upper corner of the chart. 'Their last reported position was in the Oreicha system, but the nearest enemy-occupied territory is here in the Killian-Ator group. That's where they're probably making for. But to get there they have to make six or seven separate warp jumps, avoiding Imperium-controlled systems and standard fleet patrol routes on the way.'

Ulanti looked up at his captain, who silently nodded for him to continue. 'Given our current position and the renegades' most likely course towards the enemy lines, I believe we will still be able to intercept them—' Ulanti's finger moved across the rough surface of the chart. The finest and oldest starchart parchments were supposed to be made from human skin, but this felt like some lesser substitute; animal hide, perhaps.

'Here.' His finger stabbed down on a remote single star well off the normal warp travel routes. The accompanying chart icons identified it as a dying red dwarf star orbited by four barren and uninhabited planetoids. 'Delphi. We can intercept them in the Delphi system.'

Semper leaned back in his chair, smiling. 'I concur, and so did Navigator Cassander when I consulted him earlier. To your station, Mister Ulanti. We make the ascent into the immaterium in forty minutes.'

'HALF SPEED, MISTER Kelto. Keep our power emissions down and maintain full outward surveyor scanning,' Pava Magell ordered. The *Bellerophon* was moving forward cautiously into the star system, its long-range surveyors probing for the tell-tale energy signatures of any other ships in the area. Delphi was a barren wilderness system, just one of the hundreds of such groups within the vast area of space encompassed within the Gothic sector, but the new captain of the *Bellerophon* was not in the habit of taking unnecessary risks. Those few short but intensely bloody hours of mutiny which had swept through the ship had taken long and careful planning by him and the small circle of other like-minded officers aboard the *Bellerophon*. The Imperium was losing the Gothic Sector War, Magell had realised, and it had been surprisingly easy to find other young officers who had come to the same conclusion and who were equally frustrated with the stultified thinking and hidebound traditions of the Imperial Navy. Anyone with true insight could see that the power of Warmaster Abaddon and his followers was in the ascendancy. The living corpse imprisoned on the Golden Throne would be powerless to stop the forces now sweeping out of the Eye of Terror. First the Gothic sector, soon the whole rotting body politic of the Imperium itself, Magell thought with a smile - and the Imperium's new masters would remember and reward those who had been first to realise in which direction the tides of fate were moving throughout the galaxy.

Magell remembered his own moment of such realisation, recalling the dank stench of the *Bellerophon's* ship's brig and the whispering voice of the captured enemy prisoner who, out of what had then seemed a feeling of morbid curiosity, Magell had gone down to the brig to interrogate. He had made a point of personally executing the prisoner afterwards, mostly to allay the suspicions of the ever-watchful Commissar Brandt, but by then the seeds of insurrection had already been planted in the ambitious young flag-lieutenant's mind. The prisoner - one of the sorcerer-navigators of Abaddon's fleets - had cunningly seen the doubts already there and had revealed to him something of the ways and secret recognition signs used amongst the covert groups of followers of the powers of the warp, and it was on a regular stopover on an Imperium mining world that Magell had first made contact with a coven of Chaos worshippers. Again Magell smiled to himself, remembering how shockingly easy it had been to find the servants of the Ruinous Powers, and wondering what Lord Admiral Ravensburg would say if he knew just how many Chaos covens flourished on every inhabited world in the Gothic sector and even in the furthest reaches of the holds and crew decks of many Imperial Navy vessels.

After that, Magell and his fellow conspirators had set about secretly encouraging and nurturing discontent amongst the crew; not a difficult feat to achieve, considering master of the *Bellerophon* Captain Aagen Blothe's harsh and zealous attitude to all matters relating to discipline aboard his vessel. Magell had bided his time, waiting for word from his new-found masters within the Eye of Terror. At last it had arrived, telling him what they required him to do before he would be welcomed into the ranks of the reaver fleets of Warmaster Abaddon.

Magell settled back into his captain's chair, his hand touching the control lectern in front of him and the patina of dried blood - belonging to the chair's former occupant, presumably - which still stained the rune icons there. That old fool Blothe had still been alive when Magell handed him over to the crew, and Magell idly wondered if they had been able to make good on their promise to keep their former commanding officer alive but begging for death for days to come. Magell ran his hand across the pattern of glowing rune icons, thinking of the stolen tech-priest secrets now safely stored within the memory banks of the ship's logic engines. He had done as his masters had bidden, and when the *Bellerophon* reached the safety of Chaos-controlled space he would present the information in person to Warmaster Abaddon. Of course, the majority of his crew knew nothing of the true nature of their new allies, but Magell cared little about their fate after—

'Rearward surveyors detecting an unknown vessel approaching on an intercept course: distance 840,000 kilometres.' The blank emotionless voice of the servitor drone rang out in the quiet of the undermanned command deck, instantly snapping the *Bellerophon's* new captain out of his reverie.

'Officer of the Watch, confirm and identify!' barked Magell, not trusting the word of one of the machine-men slaves. Lieutenant Kelto bent over the lectern screen in front of him, the light from the rows of rune-signs scrolling across the screen casting a sickly glow over his nervous young features.

'Energy output shows it's a capital vessel. It's jamming its own vessel recognition codes, but from the reactor signature, I'd say it was an Imperial ship, almost certainly cruiser level or better.'

Despite the obvious danger, Magell allowed himself to relax somewhat. As a light scouting cruiser, the *Bellerophon* would be heavily outgunned by any of the standard Imperial cruiser types, but even with the internal damage and heavy crew casualties caused during the mutiny Magell was confident that his faster and more manoeuvrable vessel could still outrun its larger lumbering cousin. In fact, the only way that the other Imperial ship could successfully cut off their escape would be if—

'Change in the enemy vessel's energy signature!' Kelto said, panic clear in his voice. 'Multiple smaller energy signatures breaking away from it. It's an attack craft carrier! It's sending bomber squadrons after us!'

SQUADRON COMMANDER MILOS Caparan surveyed the instrumentation panel in front of him, intoning a silent prayer of thanks as

the status runes representing each of the ten Starhawk bombers under his command glowed a healthy green. Glancing out of the cockpit window, he could see his wingmen taking up position to his port and starboard, each of them tens of kilometres distant but with the bright flares of their multiple mass-reactive engines starkly marking their position against the blackness of space. To his rear the seven other Starhawks of his squadron would also be manoeuvring into attack formation, he knew, and somewhere beyond them the Starhawks of *Firedrake*, *Harbinger* and *Mantis* squadrons would be doing the same, joining up with his own squadron and forming up one large attack wing as they closed the distance on their target. Forty Starhawks.

Ave Imperator, he thought to himself as he keyed open a comm-link channel. Let the enemies of the Emperor beware.

'*Nemesis One* to *Macharius*. All systems are green. Distance to target: 200,000 kilometres, and closing.'

+Understood, *Nemesis*+ came back the reply.

Caparan recognising the craggy-toned voice of Remus Nyder, the *Macharius's* formidable master of ordnance.

+*Macharius* bids you good hunting+

TAKING HIS ACCUSTOMED place in the central nave of the command deck, Leoten Semper watched with his usual hawk-like intensity as the pattern of glowing icon markers on the main scanner screen displayed the Starhawk attack wave's progress towards their target.

'Squadrons within attack range of target,' reported Remus Nyder, his ordnance control area of the bridge now buzzing with activity as teams of junior officers and grey-cloaked tech-priests monitored the streams of data being fed back from the Starhawks.

'They're reporting incoming defensive fire from the target.'

Semper looked over to where his flag-lieutenant stood. 'Mister Ulanti?'

The Necromundan activated a rune on his lectern console, glancing over the information now displayed there. 'They may be firing at us, sir, but they've not as yet hit anything. We're His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy, not the groundpounder rabble of the Imperial Guard, and we don't panic at the first sign of danger. Recommend that attack wave proceeds on to close strike distance from target, and deploys missiles from there for optimum effect.'

Semper nodded in agreement at his flag-lieutenant's forthright response, and gestured to the waiting master of ordnance.

'Signal all squadrons to proceed as ordered. Mister Ulanti will give the launch order at his discretion.'

'VANDIRE'S TEETH!' Milos Caparan cursed, triggering his starboard thrusters and jinking the two hundred tonne attack bomber out of the path of a kilometre-wide explosive starburst which filled the view out of the cockpit's main viewing port. All around the lead Starhawk, the hard vacuum of space was filled with similar explosions and energy bursts. At this range - still almost one thousand kilometres away from the target - a direct hit was almost impossible, but each energy blast emitted a burst of widespread and high-intensity radiation lethal to both a bomber's crew and control systems, while each exploding anti-ordnance missile warhead or mass-reactive shell threw out a hail of shrapnel that could cover a volume of space tens of kilometres across.

Caparan activated one of the runes on his comm-link console, sending out an automated status request to the rest of his squadron.

Elsewhere, he knew, the other squadron commanders in the attack wave would be doing likewise. The cockpit's open-channel comm-link squawked to life as the responses came flooding back.

'*Nemesis Three* to *Nemesis Leader*. Surveyor systems taken offline by that last radiation burst. Missile targeting systems also gone. Tech-Adept Eliphaz is attempting to effect repairs now+

+*Nemesis Five* reporting. Heavy energy bleed from our power plant. Shrapnel hit must have severed a feed line somewhere.

Unable to effect repair. We'll make it to the target, *Nemesis One*, but it'll be a slow and scary ride back to the *Macharius*+

+*Nemesis Nine*... heavy damage... starboard engine gone... reserve air supply... -ty percent crew casualties... luck, *Nemesis One*... kkkkkkkkkkkkk+

Caparan stabbed a rune on his console, switching comm-link channels. '*Nemesis Leader* to *Macharius*,' he snarled, unable to keep the anger out of his voice. 'I'm losing bombers here. Request permission to launch missiles!'

+*Macharius* to *Nemesis*+ came back the irritatingly calm-voiced reply. '+Proceed to target. Launch order will be given as and when *Macharius* deems necessary+

Caparan shared a look with his co-pilot, both men recognising the voice on the comm-link.

'It's Ulanti,' nodded his co-pilot, Madik Torr, a solid and dependable veteran with more than sixty combat missions to his credit.

'That hive-trash killed Luccian, and now it seems he's determined to wipe out the rest of us as well.'

Both men grimly turned their attention to the task before them, trying to second-guess the gunners aboard the *Bellerophon* as they piloted the powerful gull-winged deep space bomber through the crop of starburst explosions that blossomed in the void between them and their target.

Eight hundred kilometres. A flare of blinding energy off their port wing. Caparan checked his console readout, seeing the icon representing *Nemesis Two* stutter and fade out.

Seven hundred kilometres. A piercing scream rang out over the open comm-channel, a terrified and nameless voice gibbering out a hurried prayer commending his soul to the Emperor before being finally cut off in a scream of static followed by the telling static hiss of dead air.

Six hundred kilometres. Caparan's craft was rocked by the concussive blast of an explosion somewhere off its starboard wing. He fought to bring the bomber under control, his mind only barely registering the flashing red icons lighting up all over his instrumentation panels and the ugly klaxon alarm sounding over the craft's internal comm-net.

'Hull breach,' warned the eerily calm voice of Tech-Adept Shanyin Ko, sounding barely more human than the four onboard servitor drones under his control. 'Recommend you switch to flight suit emergency oxygen supplies until breach has been sealed.'

Five hundred kilometres. In space combat terms, this was considered near suicidal, a point-blank range. Down in the nose cone section housing the navigator and bombardier, the whine of the payload's locked-on targeting systems rose to an insistent scream

audible over the bomber's comm-net.

+*Macharius* to attack wing. You are granted permission to launch missiles+

Thirty-five remaining Starhawks launched half their full pay-load at once from a distance of just over four hundred and eighty kilometres. Three of them suffered missile launch failure due to damage sustained in flight, one of them transforming into a cloud of vaporised gas when its activated missiles detonated whilst still fixed in their wing mounts.

The guns aboard the *Bellerophon* suddenly fell silent, the ship's surveyor systems requiring a scanning field free of the radioactive static of explosions and energy bursts as the information they gathered was fed back to the ship's logic engines. All over the ship, non-vital technical systems slowed to a crawl or temporarily blacked out entirely while the logic engines devoted the greater part of their processing capacity to calculating speeds, trajectories and interception points as the oncoming wave of missiles rushed towards their target at a speed of tens of kilometres a second.

As the energy levels fluctuated all through the ship, the crew could only cower in the semi-darkness and pray to whatever powers they now followed as they blindly consigned their fate to ancient and barely-understood technology from an era millennia before their own birth. With the missile cluster now only a hundred kilometres and scant seconds away, the *Bellerophon* activated its final anti-ordnance defences, the logic engines feeding targeting co-ordinates and firing solutions through to these last-ditch automated defences. A gridwork of multilaser turrets, autocannon batteries, plasma throwers and flechette launchers studded the outer hull of the *Bellerophon* and these activated now, throwing out a short-lived but concentrated curtain of firepower between the vessel and the missile wave.

Each Starhawk had launched half its full payload of ten plasma warhead missiles apiece. Of these, over thirty per cent had, even at such close range, malfunctioned or failed to acquire their target. Another twenty per cent would be destroyed by the *Bellerophon*'s anti-ordnance systems. Of the one hundred and sixty launched in the bomber wave, less than eighty would reach their target - and only a fraction of these would penetrate the ancient vessel's metres-thick armoured hull and do any damage that really mattered. It would still be more than enough to achieve the desired effect.

'STARHAWK ATTACK WING reports target well struck,' announced Master of Ordnance Nyder with more than a hint of pride in his voice. 'Surveyor scans confirm this - the enemy's reactor output is fluctuating wildly and its void shield power levels are as naught. Target is crippled and drifting powerless in space. Starhawk wing requests permission to make a return sweep and expend all remaining payload.'

Nyder looked expectantly at his captain. By long-standing fleet tradition, the honour of the final kill should go to his Starhawk crews, but such a decision was the captain's privilege alone. It would not be unusual for a captain to choose to finish off a crippled enemy ship with torpedoes or massed weapon fire from the ship's main batteries, a diplomatic decision which would allow a navy vessel's bitterly competitive flight and gunnery crews to share equal honours in the victory. If Nyder was at all taken back by what his captain said next, it never showed on the veteran officer's impassive face.

'Mr. Ulanti, you have tactical command in this engagement. What is your decision?'

If Hito Ulanti was at all surprised by the captain's choice, he showed no sign of it in his immediate and unhesitant response.

'Signal Starhawk squadrons to return to the *Macharius*, captain. At present Battlefleet Gothic is still seriously under-strength, and the loss of one ship to the side of the enemy hardly helps the matter. But why compound the damage, when instead we can do something to redress the balance in our favour again?'

'Explain yourself, Mister Ulanti!' Semper barked. 'What exactly are you suggesting?'

Ulanti looked up at his captain, a distinct gleam of excitement evident in his eyes. 'A boarding assault, captain, which I volunteer to personally lead in the first assault wave. We board the *Bellerophon*, reclaim it for the service of the Emperor and retrieve the stolen technical information!'

'BOARDING ACTION! Look lively, you scum! Find yourselves weapons and form up into boarding parties!' Bull-necked petty officers stormed up the narrow aisles of the crew decks, savagely kicking or clubbing anyone not moving fast enough for their liking. Maxim Borusa roused himself from his meagre pallet, scratching at the fresh bitemarks from the parasites that infested his bedding, and spat out a well-aimed stream of brown-stained mixture of saliva and tajii juice that narrowly missed the polished boots of his latest nemesis, Petty Officer Dobryzn.

'On your feet, Borusa,' Dobryzn grinned down at him. 'Time to do your duty for the Emperor and put that magical invulnerability of yours to the test!'

Maxim sat up, force of habit causing him to rub at the scars on his wrists. It had been months since his status as the sole survivor of a direct hit that had wiped out the two hundred other convict slave ratings in the gun-bay where he had been assigned had turned him into almost a talismanic good-luck figure amongst his fellow crewmen, but Maxim swore he could still feel those metal cuffs cutting into his flesh.

He spat again, clearing the vile aftertaste of the intoxicating tajii root juice out of his mouth. Let those prayer-babbling idiots think what they want, Maxim decided. He knew that the only luck that counted for anything was the kind you made yourself.

He stood up, reaching under his pallet to bring out his own good luck talisman, a metre and a half of solid metal engineer's wrench. Petty officers and crewbosses were issuing weapons - axes, gaffs, cutlasses - to everyone assigned to the boarding assault, but for his own personal reasons Maxim preferred to use this. He smiled to himself as he took hold of the heavy tool, remembering the satisfying crunch of bone as it stove in the skull of the last man who had underestimated Maxim Borusa.

THE FIRST RULE of space combat is to always know the exact position of the enemy but Pava Magell didn't have to check any of the surveyor screens around him to check whereabouts the *Macharius* was in relation to his own stricken vessel. Looking out of the command deck viewing port, he could see the shape of the Imperial cruiser - vast and imposing at such close range - blotting

out the starfield as it slid into position port side of the crippled *Bellerophon*. The batteries on that flank of the *Bellerophon* were gone, obliterated by the hail of missiles that had punctured the warship's armoured skin, but Magell could see the *Macharius's* own gun batteries trained on his ship - just as he could see the tiered openings of the attack carrier's launch bays, ready to unleash another wave of bombers at their helpless target. Magell knew that the *Macharius* could destroy the *Bellerophon* at will, but he also knew that by moving in this close, the captain of the *Macharius* had already signalled his real intent.

'They're launching a boarding assault!' Kelto said, his voice ragged with panic and fear. 'We don't stand a chance. We should signal our surrender now. The punishment for mutiny is death, I know, but with the rate of casualties the fleet is suffering, Ravensburg can't afford to throw away an entire crew. Perhaps we could—'

Magell reholstered his laspistol and stepped contemptuously over the body of his former officer of the watch. With so many other corpses littering the decks of the *Bellerophon*, one more shouldn't make any difference. He drew his sabre and strode towards the doors of the command deck, signalling for the other remaining officers to join him. He didn't have to turn round to look out the viewing bay to know about the swarm of shuttles and assault pods now exiting the *Macharius* as they swiftly bridged the void between the two ships. Soon they would be attaching themselves to the outer hull of the *Bellerophon*, breaching airlocks and entry ports and unleashing their battle-hardened occupants into the interior of the ship.

Magell knew that his short-lived command of the *Bellerophon* was over. He had gambled, and he had lost everything. Now all he had left was his honour.

FOR THE SECOND time within a few scant days, the decks and sections of the *Bellerophon* rang with the sounds of combat as its crew battled with the boarding parties from the *Macharius* for control of the stricken ship.

Hito Ulant sidestepped the chainsword blade which buzzed through the air in front of him. A dangerous weapon, he knew, but a clumsy one as well, with many of those who wielded it depending too much on the weapon's fearsome destructive capabilities rather than their own fighting prowess. Ulant knocked the blade aside on its return swing with a casual flick of his weapon and then thrust the point of his sabre into his opponent's throat. The enemy - some kind of ship's engineer, judging by the armoured suit he wore - collapsed to the ground, gurgling. Ulant moved swiftly on, grinding one booted heel into the face of his still-twitching opponent for good measure.

In front of him, he saw another wave of the *Bellerophon's* defenders charging down the corridor towards him. He drew his laspistol, sending volley after volley of searing laser fire into their packed ranks, only stopping when the weapon's power-pack critically overheated, scorching the flesh of his hand. Ulant threw the pistol away with a curse, taking up his sabre again and urging forward the remains of his boarding party who filled the corridor behind him. A stray shotgun blast took off the head of the man next to him, adding another corpse to the carpet of bodies that lined the passageway. A hand scrabbled at his legs from down amongst this litter of dead and wounded and Ulant stabbed his sabre down in a short killing thrust, not even glancing down to check whether his victim had been from the crew of the *Macharius* or the *Bellerophon*. Blood flowed down the young officer's face from a head wound he didn't remember receiving and the creeping numbness in his hand told him that the burn wounds there would require treatment after the battle.

Ulant had heard of the tactics perfected by the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes for such boarding actions: small well-armed squads of Space Marines penetrating deep into the interior of enemy craft via teleport assault or manned boarding torpedoes and waging a rigorously-coordinated battle plan with each squad seizing control of a specific vital part of the ship.

This was nothing like that; this was simple brute slaughter, a bloody scrum in which the only victors would be the side which succeeded in putting all of the enemy to the sword. There were other senior command officers from the *Macharius* aboard the *Bellerophon* - Ulant knew that Commissar Kyogen had taken command of the second assault wave from the *Macharius* - but he had no idea where they were or how they were faring in their own separate battles.

The blast doors at the end of the corridor rumbled open, disgorging another wave of the *Bellerophon's* crew. Defenders and boarding party attackers met in a savage clash of arms. Ulant rushed forward, catching a glimpse of a familiar crimson braiding on a uniform worn by the figure at the head of the enemy counter-attack. It was the uniform of a flag-lieutenant, identical to Ulant's own, and so far it was the most senior rank Ulant had seen amongst the defending crew. Ulant lashed out with his sabre with a newfound vigour, cutting a path through the press of bodies towards his enemy counterpart from the *Bellerophon*.

MAXIM BORUSA SPAT into his opponent's face, the rebel screaming as the stinging tajii juice came into contact with his eyes. He followed up with a brutal headbutt, breaking the bones of the rebel's face. The crewman reeled back, giving the Stranivar underhiver space in which to use to use his wrench. One blow and the rebel's head opened up in a red gush.

'*Macharius!* To me, *Macharius* crew!'

Maxim looked round to see Petty Officer Dobrzyn struggling against a trio of attackers. Maxim didn't hesitate, shoulder-charging into the back of the nearest one and smashing him against a thick iron bulkhead. He stumbled, his feet becoming entangled amongst the limbs of the downed man and he was a split-second late in blocking the attack from the next enemy in line. He hissed in pain as the rebel's sword blade sliced into the muscles of his upper arm, retaliating with a short punch into the rebel crewman's neck.

The man staggered back, trying vainly to staunch the blood fountaining from the hole that Maxim had opened in his jugular with the narrow-bladed stiletto secreted in his fist. The third rebel came at him with a hooked boarding gaff. Maxim took it off him with dismissive ease, snapped the man's arm and gave him his weapon back by carving it through his stomach.

Maxim bent over the prone form of Dobrzyn, checking him for signs of life and finding a weak pulse. Good, he thought, hoisting up the petty officer and carrying him towards the nearest knot of *Macharius* crewmen.

'Help me!' he yelled at the top of his voice. 'Help Petty Officer Dobrzyn!'

Hands reached out to take the weight of the injured petty officer. In the confusion Maxim deftly withdrew the stiletto blade from

between Dobrzyn's ribs and slipped away before anyone noticed that the injured man was already dead. Looking down, he noticed that Dobrzyn's dark blue rank sash had come away in his hand. Distractedly he tied it round his arm wound as a makeshift field dressing, then headed back into the thick of battle.

FEINT. BLOCK. CUT. Parry. Riposte. His opponent's fencing style had elements to it that were dangerously unfamiliar to Magell, but in its basics it differed little from the thousands of other styles of swordsmanship as practised on countless violent warrior culture worlds throughout the Imperium. He and his opposite number from the *Macharius* were well-matched. The enemy flag-lieutenant was probably the better swordsman, Magell realised, but he still had an advantage over the Imperial officer. He had nothing left to lose, and a man who has already accepted the fact of his own imminent death was a dangerous opponent indeed. All around them, men were fighting and dying, and it was impossible to tell which way the battle was going, but Magell knew that victory would eventually go to the *Macharius*. The *Bellerophon's* standard crew complement was several thousand less than the larger Dictator class vessel, and Magell knew that over a third of the rebel cruiser's crew had died in the mutiny, and probably a thousand or so more in the bomber attack. They were doomed, but he was determined to acquit himself well before the end. One of his own crew rushed forward, wild-eyed with blood-lust as he bore down on the Imperial officer. Magell ran him through without a moment's thought, not willing to be robbed of the honour of the enemy flag officer's death. But the delicate balance of the duel had been broken. His opponent was the first to take advantage of the moment with a lightning-fast thrust. Magell twisted his body, deliberately not parrying the blow, and he felt hot bright pain as the blade slid deep into his side. Magell fought down the wave of pain. He knew that, with his blade impaled inside Magell's own body, the enemy officer was effectively disarmed. Magell brought his own sabre down on the shoulder of the Imperial officer's sword arm, the heavy blade cleaving into flesh and bone. The Imperial officer cried out, falling back and leaving himself defenceless against Magell's follow-up killing blow.

Magell swayed on his feet, the sabre still piercing his side, and raised his arm to strike. A grip as implacable as the massive docking clamps used to hold a vessel in orbital dry dock descended on his wrist, crushing the bones and causing his sword to slip from suddenly nerveless fingers. He felt something sharp and cold punch him in the lower back, the coldness penetrating deep into his body. Once, twice, three times, in rapid succession. His legs gave way beneath him but Magell remaining standing, dangling like a puppet in the grip of that vice-like pressure on the wrist of his still upraised-arm. Then the pressure went away and Magell collapsed to the deck, his vision dimming.

THROUGH A HAZE of pain and shock, Hito Ulanti looked up to see the stoop-shouldered giant standing over him. The giant leaned down over him, rough hands lifting him up. Ulanti's eyes saw but didn't register the hive world gang ritual scar patterns and prison world tattoos and brands which covered the giant's arms and face.

'Maxim Borusa, sir,' growled a voice in an accent that could only have come from the depths of the Stranivar underhive. 'Crew of the Mach, sir. You're in safe hands now.'

'I... I owe you my thanks,' Ulanti mumbled, his eyes fixing on the bloodstained rank sash. 'I owe you... my thanks, Petty Officer Borusa.'

Maxim Borusa grinned. He didn't recognise the officer whose life he'd just saved, but he knew what all that fancy braiding and uniform ornamentation meant. Command deck brass, and his ticket away from the miseries of life on the lower decks.

'If you say so, sir. If you say so.'

+*BELLEROPHON TO MACHARIUS*. Prize crew aboard and in position. We have restored engine and warp jump capability. Ready to move out on your mark+

The squadron of Chaos scout ships, three Idolator class raiders, drifted inert on the fringes of the Delphi system, listening to the intercepted radio chatter between the Imperial vessel and its captured prize. They had arrived too late to rendezvous with the renegade Imperial ship and escort it safely back to enemy space, and they could only watch from hiding as the Warmaster's prize was snatched away from them. The commander of the raider squadron knew that his ships would have stood no chance against an Imperial cruiser and its accursed bomber squadrons, but he doubted that the Warmaster would see it in such terms. Standing on his vessel's command deck, the dark shrouded captain watched as the target icons of the two Imperial cruisers moved away towards the outer edge of surveyor range. He turned towards the cultist astropath standing nearby.

'Send the signal to the Warmaster. Inform him that the technical information the rebel vessel was bringing to us remains in the hands of our enemies.'

The daemon-thing living inside the flesh of the possessed Chaos cultist hissed in displeasure, its body warping into twisted new shapes as an almost physical foretaste of the Warmaster's own anger at the news he would soon be receiving.

All over the bridge, the command crew busied themselves with their appointed tasks, none of them daring to look their doomed captain in the eye.

'MY THANKS, MAGOS Castaboras. Please continue with your work.' The haughty tech-priest nodded in acknowledgement, his expression hidden behind the mask he wore, and turned to join his entourage of servants waiting outside, leaving Semper alone in his quarters.

Captain Semper leaned forward on his desk, one hand rubbing the jagged ork-blade scar that marked one side of his face. It was force of habit, he knew, one that he was particularly prone to whenever he was troubled. He cleared his mind, thinking through what he had just learned.

The stolen technical information had been removed from the *Bellerophon's* logic engines and transferred to the jealous guard of the Adeptus Mechanicus tech-priests aboard the *Macharius*. An astropath message had been sent acknowledging the safe retrieval

of the data, together with his recommendation that his injured flag-lieutenant receive an official commendation for his actions in the battle, but Battlefleet Command were anxious to know the exact nature of the stolen information. As the vessel's most senior tech-priest, Castaboras had already completed a partial analysis of the coded data and had presented his findings to Semper. The two men were the only people aboard the starship who knew what the stolen data files contained, but what they had learned posed more questions than it answered.

The files were a technical overview of the mighty Blackstone Fortresses, the six massive and ancient alien constructs which formed the backbone of *the* Imperial Navy's strength in the Gothic sector. Each Blackstone was base to its own battlegroup fleet - and each possessed more than enough firepower of its own to fend off an attack by any of the Warmaster's current reaver fleets. The information in the files was highly sensitive, yes, but never in *the* history of Battlefleet Gothic had a Blackstone Fortress fallen to the enemy and Semper found it hard to believe that the Warmaster would consider wasting his strength in such a foolhardy move.

'Emperor's oath!' he swore to himself as he studied the marked-out positions of the Blackstone systems on the star-chart in front of him. What did it all mean?

SOMEWHERE WITHIN THE Eye of Terror, where space and warp space merged together as one, Warmaster Abaddon, Despoiler of Worlds and Dread Vessel of the Legacy of Horus, stared out at the eternally shifting patterns of the maelstrom. What he saw there, what mysteries and secrets of the powers of the warp revealed to him, only the Warmaster alone knew.

He turned back to the scene before him in the audience chamber, dismissing the mutated messenger thing with a curt gesture. It scuttled away gratefully, all too aware that a subtly different gesture would have caused any of the dozen terrifying figures in Terminator armour standing around the room to cut it down in an instant. The sword in the scabbard at the Warmaster's side made a low keening sound, sensing its master's dark mood. Abaddon laid a hand on its hilt, murmuring a few words of blasphemous reassurance to quiet the daemon-spirit bound into the weapon.

In truth, the Warmaster's anger would soon be assuaged. Orders had been despatched, and the commanders and crews of the escort squadron would soon know the price of their failure. Abaddon knew that the loss of the Blackstone data was only of temporary significance and would not affect his carefully-laid plans.

He turned back to the viewing bay, staring out the wide daemon-mouthed portal in the flank of his temporary flagship and into the maelstrom beyond. He could see shapes moving out there in the warp, innumerable small vessels and construction platforms.

Through the moving warp patterns he could see the spires and pinnacles of the object of their labours, a vast and threatening shape hanging motionless amidst the tides of warp space. It was almost complete now, he knew. His new flagship. His new terror weapon. His "planet killer", thought the Warmaster, enjoying the crudeness of the name - so simple, but so apt - that many of his lesser followers had already bestowed upon the device.

His thoughts returned to the six secret prizes that were the only objectives in the entire war that truly mattered. Soon this new weapon, this planet killer, would be unleashed on his enemies. The followers of that withered corpse on the Golden Throne would tremble in terror at the destruction it would cause.

Let them be afraid, gloated the Despoiler. Let them think this will be the worst they have to face. When the time is right, when all the pieces are in place, they will soon know there is far worse to come.

Planet killer! Even now, these many long years after the resolution of the Gothic Sector Wars, when the details of even that most notable of struggles has passed from living memory and become perhaps, in the minds of many, just another terrible and glorious chapter of Imperium history, the name still evokes a shudder of fear and horror whenever it is uttered. I have heard tales that on worlds far outside the borders of the Segmentum Obscuras, worlds where the events of the Gothic Sector War have little or no impact or meaning, the very mention of that name fills the inhabitants with an almost superstitious dread. I once met a wise and worthy member of the Missionarus Galaxia who told me of his travels and adventures amongst some of the many savage and barbarous worlds within the vast and scattered Diaspora of this mighty Imperium of Mankind, and of how the primitive inhabitants of one such world still kept careful vigil of the star-filled night skies above their tribal dwellings, praying to the All-Father (which, my learned brother-adept told me was their term for the Divine Emperor, blessed forever be his holy name) to protect them from a particular terror which they called "the Sword of Abaddon". How these backwards peoples, unaware of even the most elementary truths concerning the Imperium and their insignificant place within it, came to know of such things is a puzzle which we can only conjecture at, but my friend assured me that he had little doubt that it was the Despoiler's terrible weapon to which they were referring.

In coming to this, one of the darkest chapters of the history of the Gothic Sector Wars, when the true extent of the destructive power of the Despoiler's terrible new secret weapon first became apparent to the beleaguered forces of Battlefleet Gothic, I am reminded of the missionary-brother's story, and in particular of a fragment he recalled from one of the myth-cycles that the inhabitants of that feral world had constructed around this cosmic terror. Their fear of it is evident, and I find the following couplet strangely evocative when considering the similar dreadful fear that must have filled the hearts and minds of untold billions of the Emperor's subjects at that time as the spectre of the Planet Killer stalked the worlds of the Gothic sector. 'I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds!'

- Scribe Emeritus Rodrigo Konniger,

*Into the Jaws of Death, Into the Mouth of Hell: Notable Actions of the Gothic Sector War, 143-149.M41*

## PART THREE

# OPENING SALVOES

### ONE

MESMERISED, THE DESPOILER watched as the planet below entered its final death throes.

Its oceans had boiled off into space hours ago, laying bare the broken and dried expanses of once hidden sea-beds. Everywhere bright lines of fire criss-crossed the planet's surface: rivers, lakes, entire oceans of molten magma flowing up through gaping, bleeding rents in the planetary crust as the planet itself began to break apart. The whole southern hemisphere was ablaze, covered in magma as the planet's molten heart bled out of the continent-sized open wound that the Despoiler's Planet Killer weapon had burned into it. Giant earthquakes shook the planet from pole to pole, forming and then reforming its burning topography into an ever-changing series of different, fiery visions of hell. The planet's biosphere was gone - its oxygen-rich atmosphere had ignited at the first firing of the Planet Killer's awesome weapons systems - and Abaddon assumed that all life on the world was now extinct. Perhaps a few had survived the initial firestorms that had scoured clean the surface, hiding in shelters deep below the ground, but nothing could have survived the resultant seismic catastrophe as the Planet Killer's coruscating energy beams tore apart the planetary crust and ripped deep into the underlying rock strata, finally cutting through into the planet's molten core.

Abaddon smiled, remembering other such moments of triumph, other such spectacles of destruction. He remembered standing by the side of Horus on the bridge of the Warmaster's battle barge, watching as wave after fiery wave of bioweapon missiles were unleashed at the surface of the world below them. Twelve billion people died in moments during the Scouring of Istvaan III, and the echoes of their mental death-screams had drowned out even the constant warp pulse of the astronomer, but it was only a prelude to the devastation to come.

'Let the galaxy burn,' had ordered the Warmaster, and Abaddon and the other commanders of the Space Marine legions who flocked to the Warmaster's cause had done as commanded. Abaddon remembered worlds in flames, planetary systems choked with the drifting wreckage left in the wake of cataclysmic space battles, battle fronts thousands of miles long as Space Marines and the towering war machines of the Collegia Titanica clashed with their one-time brethren on a thousand different worlds, under the light of a thousand different suns. He remembered the howl of triumph from a million Chaos-altered throats as he, Abaddon, First Chosen of the Warmaster, led the sweeping charge over the crumbled ruins of the outer walls of the impostor Emperor's refuge on Terra and into the sanctum of the Inner Palace itself.

A tremor ran through the metre-thick ceramite decking beneath Abaddon's feet, reverberating with a dull boom throughout the armoured hull of the massive vessel and interrupting the Despoiler's reverie.

'Warmaster,' bleated a hunchbacked heretic tech-priest thing, shuffling forward to bow before the Despoiler. 'The planet's core is beginning to break up, causing unpredictable and powerful fluctuations in its magnetic field.' It paused, twin worm-tongues nervously flicking out to lick at canker-eaten lips. 'Perhaps it would be wiser to order the vessel back to a point beyond the area of danger.'

The Despoiler hissed in irritation, his thoughts disturbed by the intrusion of the minion-thing now cowering at his feet.

Sensing its master's mood, his sword shivered in its scabbard, eager to be unleashed and fed. Abaddon laid a reassuring hand on the skull-carved pommel of the sheathed weapon, soothing the mood of the daemon-thing bound into the warp-forged metal of the blade. Also sensitive to their master's mood, one of the hulking, armoured figures of Abaddon's Terminator bodyguard stepped forward, crackling lightning claws sliding out with a low, buzzing sound from its armoured fists as it prepared to remove the source of its master's irritation.

Another tremor ran through the deck, underlining the tech-priest's words, and through the viewing port Abaddon saw a gout of fiery magma hundreds of miles long spurting up from the burning surface and exploding high in orbit above the dying world. At a curt gesture from Abaddon, the bodyguard stepped back to rejoin the circle of silent warriors standing round the edge of the chamber. Whimpering in terror, the tech-priest thing scampered gratefully away back into the safe anonymity of the surrounding shadows.

Turning his back on the viewing port behind him, Abaddon strode into the centre of the chamber, his bodyguard effortlessly moving to reform in a protective circle around him. Tech-priests, acolyte attendants and mewling Chaos spawn abominations scuttled out of the crushing path of the armoured giants.

At another gesture from the Despoiler, the central section of the floor of the viewing chamber began to descend down through the lower decks of the vessel. Abaddon's unspoken command was already spreading through the length of the massive Planet Killer vessel, and as the open elevator platform rumbled downwards, those upon it could see the frenzied activity as the ship's crew hastened to act on those orders. Beyond, Abaddon knew, the crews of the ships making up his Planet Killer's escort fleet would be doing likewise, their relieved captains no doubt offering up quiet prayers of thanks to the powers of the warp as they manoeuvred to move their vessels away from the violent and unpredictable death throes of the doomed planet.

It was forbidden on pain of death for any of the vessel's thousands of slave workers to look upon the face of the Despoiler, and, as the platform descended through the main crew decks, snarling overseers rushed to assure immediate obedience amongst the work-crews of prisoners under their command. Already recognising the tell-tale sound of the descending elevator, many of the slaves cowered in terror, gaze fixed at their manacled feet and their endless slave work momentarily abandoned, as the platform and the dread figure standing upon it moved past them. Others continued working, raising faces in silent question at the sound of the

platform's passing, showing dark empty holes where eyes should be. Assigned to tasks where eyes were deemed unnecessary, these poor wretches had had their sight brutally taken from them by the hands of their overseers.

One chain-gang member, his still intact Imperial Navy officer's uniform showing him to have been only recently captured and enslaved into the Warmaster's service, either ignored or did not understand his overseer's barked warnings. Risking a glance towards the platform as it rumbled past, he was quickly smashed to the ground by the figure of a slavemaster wearing the dripping sigil-daubed power armour of a World Eaters Chaos Marine. Snarling in rage, the World Eater brought its chain-axe up and in one swift blow summarily decapitated the screaming slave. With solemn ceremony, it reached down to pick up the severed head, holding it up in salute to the passing figure of the Despoiler, the slave's dead eyes now permitted to gaze upon the sight that had been forbidden to them in life.

Thus did Abaddon the Despoiler, Warmaster of the Legions of Horus, commander of the so-called "traitor legions" as the servants of the false Emperor called them, pass through the midst of his followers. Not caring whether they lived or died, not caring whether they served him through devotion, just as long as they served him first through fear.

THE PLATFORM DESCENDED through the roof of the final deck, entering a large dome-like chamber, its floor and walls hidden in darkness. With a grinding clank the platform came to rest as the centrepiece of a larger platform that hung suspended on thick chains in the centre of the darkness. Abaddon stepped off, a phalanx of waiting tech-priests greeting him with deep bows and impassioned genuflections.

'Show me,' said the Despoiler, in a voice as cold and harshly unforgiving as the vacuum of space.

One of the tech-priests ran fingers centuries ago transformed into writhing leech-mouthed tendrils over the crystal controls of a low console column. There was a dull roar of released power from somewhere within the walls of the chamber and suddenly the chamber itself was gone, the darkness around them filled with a brilliant slowly-revolving patina of stars, planets, constellations, supernova dust clouds, meteor fields and a myriad of other celestial phenomena.

After long hours spent alone in this chamber brooding on the shifting star patterns, Abaddon knew this hologram-projected scene well enough by now. It was the Gothic sector, perfect in every detail, reproduced not merely in three dimensions but also in the fourth, with the arcane logic-engine programs that sustained the projection able to take into account the unpredictable time-dilation effects of the patterns of warp space. Certainly pre-Imperium, and probably non-human - Abaddon neither knew nor cared - the entire chamber had been looted from a drifting space hulk and reinstalled into the structure of his Planet Killer command vessel.

Abaddon gazed out into the depths of the projection, noting the latest received information on the status and positions of both his own warfleets and those of the enemy. Port Maw was a blaze of blue-marked Imperium-controlled worlds and fleet markers, although the Warmaster noted with satisfaction that the clustered ring of red markers surrounding it showed that the home base of Battlefleet Gothic was still under intense and crushing blockade.

Constellations of red and blue warfleet markers faced off against each other throughout the Gothic sector, giving little hint of the devastation each such confrontation represented as the rival warfleets laid waste to each other in bitterly-fought battles that would decide the fate of so many strategically vital planetary systems. Abaddon's gaze found and traced the emerald route patterns of enemy transport convoys making the dangerous runs between the supply worlds and the front-line battle systems. The markers of the elite Chaos hunter-killer vessels which shadowed them through the warp appeared as burning crimson points of light, while the ghostly indigo markers of the wolf pack pirate fleets allied to the Despoiler's cause lay in wait at points all along the convoys' routes.

Elsewhere, Abaddon noted with displeasure the riot of blue markers spilling out of the Orar subsector, pushing back the tide of red in that portion of the map. Bhein Morr also stood out as a bright and growing point of enemy resistance, while most of the Cyclops cluster appeared as a haze of dark shadow standing out in stark contrast against the rest of the projection's fine detail. A lone marker denoted that part of the Gothic sector to be ork-infested, and so far the unexpectedly high levels of savage resistance shown by the creatures to Imperium and Chaos forces alike had thwarted the Despoiler's attempts to even properly map the region. And then there were the six glowing gold markers spread more or less evenly throughout the Gothic sector. Abaddon's eager gaze returned to these six points again and again, repeating their names inside his mind like a guilty secret, like a hidden mantra, the meaning of which only he could fully understand.

*Fularis.*

*Anvil 206.*

*Fier.*

*Rebo.*

*Schindlegeist.*

*Brigia.*

'We await your orders, Warmaster. What is our next target? We have prepared a list of the nearest strategically important worlds still under enemy control—'

Abaddon's urgent hiss of displeasure instantly silenced the upstart, who quickly retreated back into the milling ranks of his fellow acolyte officers. The glowing weapon sensor beams of the Despoiler's bodyguards tracked him as he went, marking him out for later punishment.

Fools, thought Abaddon, closing his eyes and clearing his mind of all distractions. This vessel is a powerful weapon, yes, but fear is the greatest weapon at our command. With this vessel we shall sow fear and confusion without measure amongst the enemy, for with it we shall strike at random and without seeming purpose. They shall not know where the next blow will fall, and in their fear and confusion they will not see the greater hidden purpose behind all that we have done. Let there be no lists, no predictable strategic choices. Let only the random whims of the powers of the warp guide us in our actions.

Abaddon opened his eyes, gazing out at the shifting star patterns as they slowly revolved around him. He raised his arm, pointing with one cruel metal talon into a bright mass of stars. At the gesture, the projection slowed and finally stopped, one star amongst the constellation suddenly glowing brighter than its companions. The tech-priest hurriedly made adjustments to the crystalline controls, and the projection's focus narrowed and zoomed in on a single star. Suddenly, the image of a planetary system filled the void of the viewing chamber, the focus shifting further to find and close in on one planet in particular orbiting within the system's primary biosphere zone. Abaddon's lips curled back in a cruel smile of expectation as he saw blue oceans, lush greenery and the obvious signs of a breathable oxygen atmosphere. Half the world was in shadow as the planet's rotation carried one hemisphere away from the sun's light and into the hours of night, and Abaddon could see the tell-tale twinkle of lights - each one an entire city - scattered across the face of the darkened globe. Looking closer, he saw patterns of smaller lights - orbiting space docks and weapon platforms - drifting in the void between the world and its one barren satellite moon.

An inhabited world. An Imperial world. And one far from both the nearest warzone and the Planet Killer's most recent choice of target. Once again, the guidance of the powers of the warp had served him well.

Tech-priests bowed in silent acquiescence, realising their master's unspoken wishes. Already the name and location of their next destination were being relayed to rest of the fleet. The inhabitants of the now-doomed world could not possibly realise or understand it yet, but the hour of their appointed execution had just been set.

Abaddon watched eagerly as the tech-priests returned the projection to its original sector-wide settings. To his Chaos-altered eyes, those six small points of gold light stood out like blazing supernovas amongst the other beacons and markers of the Gothic sector. *Fularis. Anvil 206. Fier. Rebo. Schindlegeist. Brigia.* Again he repeated their names to himself, a silent promise to a future only he could yet see.

*Let the galaxy burn,* the Warmaster Horus had said, and now at last, after ten thousand years, Abaddon the Despoiler would soon have the means to fulfil his master's command.

## TWO

'CLEAR!'

The shouts echoed up the streets and alleyways, accompanied by the sounds of splintering plasti-wood as heavy booted feet kicked down doors and smashed through makeshift barricades. The wretches that inhabited these warrens cowered in fear as the intimidating, armoured figures of the Adeptus Arbites troopers forced their way into their homes. Curses and complaints were met with bone-crushing blows from shotgun butts or fists encased in heavy, armoured gauntlets, while centre points of any stronger shows of resistance were pacified with choke gas grenades hurled through doorways and windows.

Marshal Primus Jamahl Byzantane watched as another group of choking, coughing figures emerged from their gas-filled den, to be met by an impassive line of rebreather-wearing Arbites troopers armed with crackling power mauls and suppression shields. The survivors would be herded into a manacled procession for transportation back to the Arbitrators' local precinct fortress. What happened to them there was of no immediate concern to Byzantane. Each of the fortress's cavern-like detention levels was crowded with thousands of heretics, criminals, malcontents and troublemakers taken from the regular sweeps of the crime-infested rat warrens of this world, and a suspect could spend the rest of his life in such captivity, living and dying amongst the brutal convict gangs that invariably formed under such conditions, before his case was ever called before the court of judgement. It was of no consequence that the great wheels of Imperial justice moved so slowly, just as the lives of those crushed beneath them were also of little consequence in the grand scheme of things. All that mattered, the senior Arbitrator knew, was that in the end justice was seen to be done.

He raised a hand to his face, running his fingers over the patterns of tribal scarring that marked the dark skin of his cheeks, feeling the sheen of sweat that covered his face. He reached up with both hands, removing his visored helmet and shaking free the beaded locks of his sweat-matted hair. The members of the Adeptus Arbites must always appear to the Emperor's subjects as the stern and faceless guardians of the Emperor's Law, the Articles of Justice commanded, but it was the middle of the day during this world's hot, dry season, and Byzantane had no wish for the Emperor's subjects to see their world's senior law-keeper collapse from heat exhaustion.

'Another grand victory for the rule of the Emperor's Law,' grunted his deputy, Korte, beside him, handing his commander a water flask as he watched the troops under his supervision brutally and mercilessly subdue the prisoners. Byzantane said nothing - if any other man under his command had voiced such an opinion, he would not have hesitated to have had him disciplined at once. Korte was a fine Arbiter and a loyal servant of the Emperor, and should have attained the rank of marshal primus himself by now, but sometimes Byzantane was glad that the big hiveworlder's habit of speaking his mind too freely ensured that he could always count on having such an able and dependable second-in-command at his side.

'Have faith, Marshal Secundus Korte,' said Byzantane, in tones of mock reassurance. 'Remember that it is the duty of the mighty Adeptus Astartes Chapters and the glorious Imperial Guard to wage the Emperor's wars and the duty of the fearless Imperial Navy to guard the Emperor's spaceways, but it is to his loyal servants the Adeptus Arbites that His Divine Majesty in His infinite wisdom entrusts the most sacred duty of all—'

'Keeping in check the lawless heretic rabble that passes itself off as the Emperor's worthy subjects,' smiled Korte, completing the familiar old precinct-house joke.

It was a welcome moment of levity in what had so far been a long and arduous operation. All day the Arbitrator squads had been methodically searching through the maze of beggar district hovels and workhouses that festered in the shadow of the rock of the regent's palace. The planet, Belatis, and its capital city, Madina, were far from the battle-lines, but even here the effects of the cataclysmic war raging throughout the rest of the Gothic sector were keenly felt. Like the rest of the rear echelon Imperium

worlds, Belatis had been bled dry to provide manpower and materials for the war, and Byzantane knew that many of those captured in the round-up today would end up as press-gang recruits in the warships of Battlefleet Gothic or fighting in the new penal regiment detachments that the Adeptus Munitorium was forming to replace the horrific losses amongst its Imperial Guard armies. He knew also that there was no chance that any of those arrested today would ever see their homeworld again. From the command Rhino transport nearby came crackling bursts of vox-caster traffic as the other Arbiter squads deployed throughout the area reported in their progress so far. It was wearying, thankless work, Byzantane knew, conducting a street-by-street, building-by-building search of this worst of Old Madina's many crumbling and crime-infested hab-districts, where every kicked-in doorway or uncovered hide-hole could reveal Emperor-only knew what kind of threat or trap. They had swooped down on the area in force, columns of Arbiter vehicles rumbling out of their precinct-fortress to surround and seal off the beggar quarter in the hours before dawn. It was a show of Imperial strength of the kind that Belatis had not seen in generations: almost the world's entire Arbites force mobilised to throw a ring of steel around a whole section of the planet's capital. It was a swift and brutal reminder of the presence of the Imperium here on Belatis; not just for those caught like rats in a trap within the Arbites circle, but also for a select few outside it also.

Byzantane glanced up at the sheer face of the towering rock escarpment that hung over the rest of the city, wondering just how many pairs of eyes were now staring down at him and his men from behind the latticed windows and terraces of the palace citadel built atop it. If Byzantane had wanted to stage a show of Imperial strength, he could hardly have picked a better place than here, right under the noses of the local planetary overlords.

As if on cue, the Arbitrator manning the command Rhino's vox-caster equipment signalled to him.

'For you, commander. First Security Minister Kale.'

Byzantane nodded reluctantly and took the offered vox-cast handset, sharing a look with Korte. For his part, Korte noisily cleared his throat and spat its contents onto the ground at the mention of name the governor-regent's security advisor.

'Emperor's greetings, Minister Kale,' said Byzantane, barely attempting to keep the disdain out of his voice. 'My men and I are busy administering the rule of the Emperor's law, so you'll understand that I have little time for interruptions.'

'Emperor's greetings to you too, marshal.' The voice on the other end of the vox-cast was smooth and unperturbed, and Byzantane could imagine the *eminence grise* figure of First Security Minister Jarra Kale sitting in his high-vaulted office in the palace, possibly watching the image of Byzantane on the vista-plate on the desk in front of him as it was beamed to him from any of the so-far undetected spy drones that Kale had undoubtedly deployed to monitor the Arbitrators' search.

'I have just spoken with his majesty the governor-regent, and he too shares my concern regarding your decision to go ahead with this operation without informing this office of your plans.'

'I answer to the Divine Emperor, Minister Kale,' said the Arbites marshal, 'not to the governor-regent of this world or his security minister. However, in this instance I did not see it as necessary to inform you of my decision. You are aware of the recent increase in the Munitorium's demands for manpower for the valiant forces of Battlefleet Gothic. As senior Imperium official on this world, it falls to me to decide how these demands are best met. A mass press-ganging of the criminal rabble of the Rook district would seem to be in the interests of both Gothic Sector command and the Emperor's loyal and law-abiding subjects here on Belatis.'

Yes, and if your security force of local inbreds had done its job properly, Byzantane added with his own unspoken thoughts, then criminal refuge ghettos such as this would not have been allowed to fester unchecked right here in the heart of your capital. A pause, and then the first minister's voice sounded over the vox-link, its tone unchanged by the Arbitrator's criticisms, either those spoken aloud or merely implied.

'None have a greater wish to serve the Emperor or his appointed servants more than I or the governor-regent, Marshal Byzantane. No, our only concern is that we were not informed of the press-gang operation early enough to allow our own security troops to also take part in it, should you require them.'

Emperor knows I wouldn't want to call your planetary security force away from their normal duties of racketeering, collecting bribes and intimidating the governor-regent's political opponents, Byzantane thought sourly to himself as he keyed open the vox-cast handset to respond.

'My thanks for your generous and loyal offer, First Minister Kale. The next time such an operation becomes necessary, I shall be sure to advise you in advance so that we may properly pool our respective forces.'

Byzantane abruptly cut off the link, looking up to see the knowing half-smirk on the face of his deputy. 'You think he believed you?' asked Korte.

'I don't care,' growled Byzantane, 'just as long as we keep him and his hired thugs out of here until we've accomplished what we came here to do.'

THE MARSHAL PRIMUS turned to survey the scene around him, seeing only the low-level mudbrick dwellings and buildings that made up the vast extent of the Rook. Each building merged into the next, built without plan or purpose and interconnected by a twisting, intestinal labyrinth of passages and blind alleys. Byzantane knew that the maze system extended inside the buildings too, with holes knocked through the walls between many of the dwellings, so that it was possible to travel under cover through the entire area, entering a building at one edge of the Rook and exiting another again on the far side of the place.

The Rook was not unique - areas such as this festered on every even halfway-civilised world within the Imperium - and as one of the Emperor's appointed lawkeepers, Jamahl Byzantane knew such areas all too well. Breeding grounds for criminals and troublemakers. Refuges for outcasts and fugitives. Bolt-holes for renegades and heretics.

The operation to clear out the Rook and round up press-gang recruits for the Imperial Navy was real enough, Byzantane knew, but it was also a convenient cover for the real purpose of the Adeptus Arbites' presence here today. The Gothic sector was under attack, not just from the warfleets of Abaddon the Despoiler, but also, and more insidiously, from their allies within the many heretic cults that secretly thrived on almost every Imperium world within the sector. When the conflict was over, the cruel

attentions of the Inquisition would descend in force on the Gothic sector, for it was now horribly apparent that the enemy had spent years laying their plans before launching their sector-wide assault, and that agents of the Dark Powers had infiltrated far into the governments and planetary defence forces of many Imperium-controlled worlds.

At the outbreak of the war, as the Despoiler's warfleets burst out of the Arx Gap to fall without warning upon the forces of Battlefleet Gothic, Abaddon's allies and followers within the secret covens of Chaos worshippers had also come out of hiding at their master's bidding. Chaos-inspired uprisings and rebellions had occurred on more than two dozen worlds, drawing away vital forces and resources from the main war. More than one coven-controlled world had fallen to the enemy without a shot being fired, and, if their populations considered that they might merely be exchanging one set of oppressive masters for another, they would have realised their terrible error as soon the dark shapes of the first Chaos drop-ships fell out of the skies from the orbiting warships and they saw the faces of the things that were to be their new overlords. On other Imperium worlds, these cults remained in hiding. Waging guerrilla war against the Imperial forces of the Gothic sector. Sowing fear and dissent amongst the population. Sabotaging military and industrial installations. Infiltrating all available Imperial forces and giving secret aid and information to the enemy.

And spreading. Always spreading. Once the Chaos contagion took root amongst a world's population, it all too often presaged the loss of that entire world to the light of the Emperor.

Yes, thought the marshal primus, the merciless judgement of the Inquisition would cut like a scythe through the ranks of the local planetary governors, Ecclesiarchy invigilators and Administratum officials of the Gothic sector once this war was over, for it was their laxity and failure that had allowed such heretic cults to first exist undetected and then thrive and spread unchecked.

But not here. Not on Belatis. Not on Jamahl Byzantane's watch.

Although it was not one of the front-line systems, Belatis was abundant with natural resources and supplies vital to the war effort. Adamantium ore for the diamond-hard armoured prows of the mighty warships of Battlefleet Gothic. Unprocessed promethium fuel for the war machines of the Imperial Guard, and plentiful grain and meat exports for the Guard's legions of hungry troops. It was not the greatest, nor the most populous or strategically important world within the Gothic sector, Byzantane knew, but, like every other of the million worlds within the vast, galaxy-spanning Imperium, it belonged to the Master of Mankind, and for that reason alone was worth defending. Or dying over, the grim-faced Arbiter thought, remembering the oaths he had sworn thirty years ago as a cadet in the Adeptus Arbites training collegium on Anderton's World.

*To serve the Emperor. To protect His domains. To judge and stand guard over His subjects. To carry the Emperor's law to all worlds under His blessed protection. To pursue and punish those who trespassed against His word.*

To enforce the rule of Pax Imperialis.

Byzantane had only recently begun to suspect the presence of agents of the Dark Powers here on Belatis. There had been no reported acts of sabotage, no discoveries of secret heresies, no attempts to undermine the authority of the Imperium, but, still, he felt the presence of... *something* lurking here. Close, but unseen. Hidden, but waiting. His Truthseeker psykers too felt it, reporting strange new fluxes in the warp, disturbing patterns that hinted of some vast and calamitous event that was yet to unfold. 'Like the calm before the storm,' was how one troubled senior Primaris adept had attempted to describe the phenomenon to Byzantane.

Like the calm before the storm, thought the marshal primus, surveying the scene as his Arbitrator squads continued their sweep search of the area. The psyker seers of the Adeptus Arbites could provide him with no more information about this potential looming threat, but Byzantane had other sources of information available to him; sources that, as one of the stern-faced guardians of the Emperor's Law, he trusted and understood far more than the visions and prophecies of any witch-psyker. He had a network of spies and informers within the dregs of Belatis's criminal underworld, and it was not long before he heard the first whispers of secret gatherings somewhere within the confines of the Rook. If there was a coven of Chaos worshippers here, he was confident that his men would find it.

Byzantane looked to Korte, who had been monitoring the incoming vox-cast reports. Korte shook his head in response, already knowing what his commander would ask.

'Nothing yet. Just the usual rabble of lawbreakers and malcontents, most of them hardly fit enough to make the grade as the poorest quality press-gang fodder. Vandire's teeth, we could spend a week razing this stinking sump pit to the ground, and still not find what we're looking for!'

'Perhaps not such a bad idea, Arbiter Korte,' said Byzantane, sharing his deputy commander's grim humour. 'But let us hope it will not come to that. At least, not yet,' he added, after a considered pause.

Byzantane turned towards the open hatch of the command Rhino, directing his next comment to the figure sheltering there in the cool shadows inside the armoured vehicle.

'Truthseeker Shaulo. What help can you give us?'

The Adeptus Arbites psyker reluctantly emerged into the harsh glare of the Belatis midday sun, taking care to properly adjust the protective goggles covering his weak, pink-hued eyes. Psykers were mutants, Byzantane knew, and even those few tolerated by the Imperium and judged strong enough to withstand the lure of the powers of the warp without undergoing the agonising soul-binding ritual with the mind of the Emperor carried with them some physical mark of their difference from the rest of humanity. Shaulo was an albino, a fact that would have undoubtedly have assured him to have been killed at birth back on Byzantane's own savage and unforgiving homeworld of Skyre. Skyre was now half a lifetime and several thousand light years away, but Byzantane still felt uneasy in the presence of psykers, even if this one was a brother Arbiter.

'Nothing so far, marshal primus. It is possible that they could be using a null-shield or some other trickery to hide themselves from my senses...'

Shaulo abruptly broke off, looking up in confusion and flinching as he saw two Arbitrators just about to break down another doorway further up the street. Byzantane was already moving, the finely-honed instincts that were part of his barbarian warrior

ancestry picking up on the feelings of fear and alarm now emanating from the psyker. Even before he knew why he was reacting, Byzantane was already halfway across the street, drawing his bolt pistol and calling out in a warning that he already knew would come too late.

The doorway exploded apart as the one of the Arbitrator's heavy, reinforced boots came into contact with it. The explosion was not as large as Byzantane had feared, but the screaming Arbitrators were instantly enveloped in a spreading cloud of sickly ochre mist.

'Tox-bomb! Rebreathers on!' bellowed Byzantane, as the faint, dry season breeze carried the first trails of the deadly mist out into the street, revealing the bubbling remains of what only seconds ago had been two human beings.

Caught on the edge of the spreading cloud, one man - one of Marian's junior troopers from Precinct Tertius, Byzantane recognised - screamed, coughing up bloody matter as he fumbled with the release catches of his rebreather mask. The man caught in the booby-trapped doorway had died almost instantly from the catastrophic effects of such close and concentrated exposure to the tox-bomb's virulent contents, but the virus weakened as it dispersed, and at this range it would take the trooper minutes - long, agonised minutes - to die as the virus spores multiplied like wildfire within his body, causing his body to rot apart around him. Byzantane didn't hesitate, shooting the dying man through the heart, silently intoning a few words of the Second Litany of the Emperor's Mercy as he pulled the trigger of his bolt pistol.

He was suddenly aware that there was gunfire all around him. His helmet's vox-link crackled with shouts of alarm and the broadcast echoes of the same sounds of gunfire. He cursed to himself in the guttural tongue of his homeworld. An ambush, with the detonation of the tox-bomb as the signal for it to be sprung. They had come seeking the hiding place of a suspected coven of Chaos worshippers and instead they had been lured into an ambush.

He heard the drumming boom of an autocannon opening fire, saw a burst of its high-calibre shells scythe down the length of the street behind him, catching one of his Arbitrators and scattering him in bloody pieces against the mud-brick walls of the surrounding buildings.

'On the roofs! They're firing down on us from up on the roofs!' shouted an unidentified voice in warning from over the vox-net. Byzantane looked up, seeing a dark figure on the low rooftop above him, perfectly silhouetted against the bright Belatis sky. Byzantane raised his bolt pistol, firing instinctively. The figure folded sharply, dropping heavily to the ground in front of the Arbites marshal. Byzantane glanced in revulsion at the dead thing that lay in the dust before him. He saw the fingers fused into curled claws, the glowing tattoo-shapes that writhed with a life of their own beneath the thing's greasy, translucent skin. Here was all the proof he needed to know that the foul taint of Chaos had indeed touched this world, and in far greater strength than any would ever have dared fear, if mutations as severe as this could have remained undiscovered and unchecked for any length of time.

The sound of gunfire continued - the stuttering chatter of crude heavy stubbers and autorifles built in local crime-den workshops, the high-pitched crack of lasgun fire - but interspersed amongst it Byzantane heard the welcome and distinctive blast roar of Arbites shotguns as his troopers rallied from the initial shock of the ambush and began to return fire.

But again came the heavy drumming of the autocannon as it blasted a deadly accurate burst of fire into the pinned-down Arbitrators sheltering in cover at the end of the street, adamantium-tipped shells cutting indiscriminately through flesh and mud-brick cover alike.

There was a fiery blast as a lucky or well-aimed shell found the engine of one of the Arbites Rhino transports, quickly followed by voices screaming in terror and pain as the vehicle's fuel cells exploded, immolating the Arbites squad sheltering inside. From the lee of the building wall where he was sheltering, Byzantane could see the autocannon firing from an open doorway beside the one where the tox-bomb booby trap had been planted. From this well-protected position it had a clear field of fire right down the street. Byzantane ripped off his rebreather mask, cursing in fury as he activated his vox-cast link.

'Korte, we're being massacred! Bring up your grenade launcher teams to deal with that autocannon.'

'A difficult target, marshal. They're well dug in, and you're too close. There's as much chance we'll hit you as destroy them.'

'Then cover me instead,' Byzantane spat, getting to his feet and reaching for one of the heavy frag grenades held in one of the pouches of his harness belt.

'Understood, marshal. Stand by,' came his deputy's calm-voiced reply over the vox-cast.

Byzantane launched himself forward on cue, hearing the reassuring blast-roar of Arbites' shotguns from behind him as Korte and his squad opened fire at the rooftop snipers. Byzantane ran through the hail of sniper fire, spotting a flurry of movement at the periphery of his vision, and looked to see dark-cloaked figures moving around inside the cover of a nearby alley mouth. He ducked, just as a volley of gunfire erupted from the alley, stitching the mudbrick wall behind him with bullet holes and smoking las-blast marks. He fired back, keeping his finger on the trigger of the stuttering pistol and sending a burst of lethal bolter shells into the darkness of the alleyway. Two of the figures crouching there vanished in a sudden red spray.

He kept running towards the coven-guarded doorway, seeing one of the Chaos cultists manning the autocannon point to him in sudden alarm. The barrel of the autocannon swung round towards him as its operator started to draw a bead on him. A hidden sniper's las-shot scored a burn line across the plasti-steel of one of his armoured shoulder pads, cutting through the layers of woven poly-silicate, impact-resistant material of his uniform to sear the flesh underneath.

Ignoring the pain, aware only of the deadly threat of the autocannon barrel now gaping straight at him, Byzantane hurled the grenade through the mouth of the doorway, where it detonated scant seconds later, killing the Chaos cultists clustered inside.

BYZANTANE JUMPED PAST the wreckage of the autocannon and its crew, unsure whether the twisted limbs and gruesome, bloody redesigns of human flesh that he glimpsed there were a result of Chaos mutation or merely the work of heat blast and razor-sharp shrapnel burst. Warily, the Arbites commander stepped into the darkened room beyond the doorway, bolt pistol in one hand and power maul in the other. His fingers touched the sequence of activation runes on the haft of the maul, and the energy weapon

crackled into life as he brought it up to near full strength setting, its energy aura bathing the abattoir scene inside the room with a flickering blue light and revealing vile-looking sigils and runes daubed on the walls of the place. The painted marks seemed to actually writhe and retreat along the rough surface of the walls as the light touched them, and with a lurch of revulsion Byzantane understood them to be blasphemous symbols in praise of the dark gods of Chaos.

A number of doorways opened off from the room, one of them leading to a crude, downwards-sloping passage. A faint current, shockingly cold compared to the heat outside, drifted up from the darkness there, carrying with it the scent of something rotten and foul. Byzantane instinctively notched the crackling power maul up to a higher energy setting, just as a crowd of black-cloaked figures exploded out at him from the other doorways, screaming sounds of animal hatred at the Arbiter as they attacked.

The bolt pistol in his right hand sounded loud in the confined space of the room. Bolter shells shredded open the chest of one cultist, tore off another one's legs at a point just above the knees. They fell to the ground, still screaming as they died. The bolt pistol clicked empty and, with a feral curse, he threw it into the snarling face of the next Chaos cultist.

At the same time he swung the power maul in his left hand, its energy-haloed mace head cutting a fiery arc through the air. At its lower, normal settings, the weapon's energy field could knock out an opponent with one blow; at the higher settings, it pulverized flesh and bone into bloody jelly. Byzantane's first blow struck one of the Chaos cultists across the head, shattering it in a spray of bone and brain matter. His second blow came down on the next opponent's shoulder, cleaving down through his ribcage and destroying his chest cavity. Byzantane hauled on the weapon, pulling it free of the dead cultist's body just as another screaming maniac threw himself at the Arbiter. This one's mouth gaped horribly open, his mutant jaws distending wide to reveal a mouthful of needle-fanged teeth even more deadly than the serrated knife blade in his hand.

Byzantane smashed the fist of his now empty right hand into the cultist's mouth, feeling the mutant thing's fangs break under the impact. Unable to bring his power maul to bear, he swung out clumsily with his other arm, partially blocking his enemy's knife thrust, deflecting the lightning-quick attack away from his exposed throat and into the armoured gorget collar round his neck. The creature bucked wildly on top of him, its strength inhuman. It gnashed its broken-toothed, blood-foamed jaws, trying to chew through the tough material of the gauntlet and into the meat of Byzantane's hand. At the same time its other hand locked round Byzantane's throat and it pressed forward, using its body weight to pin him down as it began to saw its knife blade through the armoured collar and into the flesh of his neck.

A heavy booted foot crashed into the creature's face, sending it sprawling. A shotgun blast lifted the thing up from where it fell, two more dumping it in the corner in a ragged, bleeding heap.

'Help the marshal primus,' commanded Korte, his combat shotgun spitting scatter shell shots with deadly accuracy into the remainder of the Chaos things as they retreated back into the darkness and away from the Arbitrator squad now crowding through the doorway from the street outside.

Byzantane shrugged off the gauntleted hands that helped him to his feet, and bent to retrieve and reload his bolt pistol. He looked questioningly at his deputy.

'Twelve dead so far. The worst of it was in the street outside,' said Korte, looking round the chamber and glancing with distaste at the sigils daubed on the walls. 'They caught us by surprise at first, but after that we soon got the measure of them. Nothing but heretic rabble and scum. Mahan, Scheer, Bartolemeo and their squads are chasing down what's left of them now.'

Korte kicked with disgust at one of the dead mutant things lying at his feet. 'It would seem that the marshal primus has found what he was looking for.'

'A whole nest of them,' Byzantane nodded grimly, indicating the entrance to the subterranean passage. 'Bring up lux-lamps, flammers and power shields. Grenades too, as many as each man can carry. And find Truthseeker Shaulo. We'll need his help if we are going to flush out the rest of these abominations.'

## THREE

CORNERED AND WITH nowhere to run, the servants of Chaos made the Arbitrator squad fight for every step of their long and bloody descent into the dark. Heedless of their own survival, they threw themselves forward into the face of the Arbites' guns. Flechette scatter rounds and solid shot shells from the Arbites' shotguns ripped them apart as they charged forward, but those that followed on behind clambered over the bodies of the dead and dying to get at their enemies. At other times, they held back, firing incessantly up the passageway at Byzantane and his squad as the Arbites troops crept forward behind hand-held power shields, the Imperium troops depending on the shields' humming energy fields to protect them from the withering hail of fire coming at them from out of the darkness.

Five times they came to junctions or sudden turnings in the passage. Forewarned by Truthseeker Shaulo's psychic senses, they were able to avoid the ambushes waiting for them at these dangerous juncture points. Flamer bursts and hurled handfuls of frag and choke grenades cleared out side passages, flushing burning and asphyxiating figures out of hiding and into the gun-sights of the waiting Arbites. Shotgun-launched salvos of the special heat-seeking shells - called "executioners" amongst the Adeptus Arbites - were fired whenever they came to a corner, the tiny Adeptus Mechanicus devices buzzing off into the darkness in search of their targets, followed split seconds later by screams of pain and the sound of multiple detonations into human tissue. Quickly advancing round the corner, Byzantane and his men soon finished off any who had survived the executioner shells' deadly bite. The Arbites' own progress down into the depths was not without loss. Arbitrator of the Second Rank Corna, who had served by Byzantane's side since the marshal's quelling of the inmates' rebellion aboard the prison-hulk Charon, had his throat torn out by an autogun bullet that had pierced an overloaded and failing power shield. Minutes later, during the clearing of a side passage, a mutated female cultist, ablaze with flamer-ignited promethium, had ran straight into their midst through a hail of bullets, her burning and bullet-riddled body propelled onwards by hatred and insane devotion to her daemon-lord masters. She threw herself

at Proctor-Sergeant Tylen, enfolding herself around him in a deadly embrace and wrapping him in the blanket of flames that covered her own body. Nothing could break her furious hold on the screaming, burning Arbiter, and so the two of them had died together in another hail of shotgun fire as Tylen's comrades sought to spare him a slow, agonising death amongst the flames. It was another fifteen brutal and bloody minutes - minutes filled with the roar of Arbiters shotguns and the shrieking screams of the Chaos cultists - before the Imperium law-keepers fought their way down to the passageway's terminus. Byzantane kicked aside the corpse of the last Chaos cultist - some kind of priest-leader, judging by his robes and the horribly intricate tattoo markings on the diseased and rotting skin of his face - who only seconds ago had tried to eviscerate him with a wild chainsword swing, and stepped forward to enter the chamber beyond.

'Beware, marshal,' warned Shaulo, the albino truthseeker's face looking haggard and eerily ghost-like in the flickering light of the lux-lamps. 'I sense the presence of the powers of the warp in this place.'

Byzantane motioned to the Arbiters flanking him, indicating for them to spread out and cover the entire chamber with shotguns and flamers. He repressed a shiver of superstitious dread that rose up from the depths of his barbarian soul. He feared no enemy of the Emperor, but the warp-born horrors of Chaos made him feel like one of his primitive feral world ancestors, crouching together for mutual protection round their cave-mouth fires and listening in fear to the cries and screams of unknown beasts prowling the darkness beyond.

Powerful lux-beams scanned the walls of the chamber, revealing more of the blasphemous daubings on the rough stone walls; walls that had been carved out of the living rock long ago. The place was perhaps some kind of ancient smugglers' hideaway or outlaw bolt-hole, thought Byzantane, not wanting to dwell on the alternative possibility that Chaos cults may have been thriving here on Belatis since the time when this place was secretly excavated centuries ago.

'Throne of Earth!' exclaimed Arbitrator of the Third Rank Mainz as the beam from his lux-lamp revealed the thing hanging in chains on the far wall.

It was human, Byzantane realized, although it was only through his understanding of the savage and terrible new shapes that combat in all its forms could reduce the human body to, that he was able to recognise it as such. Byzantane had taken part in his share of interrogations, but torture at the hands of the Adeptus Arbiters was a simple and brutal affair, designed to break the body and will of the prisoner as quickly and efficiently as possible. In contrast, Byzantane knew that the Inquisition employed specialists who had been versed from childhood in the countless methods of inflicting pain and suffering, and who considered torture to be almost an art form. Perhaps these madmen, in their wildest fantasies, could have imagined the thing that now hung before the Arbiters squad.

It was the human form re-sculpted: a body turned inside out but still somehow following a semblance of its original shape.

Reformed flesh flowed over reshaped bones; sinews, veins and musculature twisted in complex new patterns over the skin that had once covered them. It was an abomination in flesh, no doubt left hanging here by the cult either as a sacrificial leftover or as some kind of gruesome altarpiece before which they performed the obscene rites and ceremonies demanded by their daemonic masters.

Shaulo suddenly staggered back. Byzantane caught the truthseeker just as he started to collapse, seeing the blood - shockingly red against his chalk-white skin - pouring from the albino's nose, sensing the sudden oppressive change in the atmosphere within the chamber, feeling the first droplets of blood drip down his own face and onto his lips.

'Marshal...' choked the psyker, his face contorted in pain.

'*Marshal, beware,*' echoed a voice from nearby, its tone thick with mocking irony.

Byzantane heard a clink of chains, and when he looked up the thing on the wall raised its twisted head to grin back at him with malicious pleasure.

'*Yes, beware,*' it said, from a mouth that should form no words, from a body that could hold no life. '*Beware, little lackey. Faithful little servant of the false weakling emperor. The gaze of the Despoiler has fallen upon this world and all it contains. Pray to your weakling emperor for salvation. Seek protection behind your fleets of warships. It will do you no good. Better to kill yourselves now, better to kill each other, than face the fate that descends on you from out of the warp!*'

The Chaos oracle-thing's voice was rising to a gleeful shriek, ectoplasmic slime spraying from its malformed lips. Byzantane found he could not move, could only stand and stare at it in horrified fascination as it thrashed wildly against the confines of the chains pinning it to the wall.

'*Kill yourselves! Kill your comrades! Kill your children! Better to die now than wait for the shadow of the executioner to fall upon you all!*'

Korte was the first to act, raising and firing his combat shotgun. The weapon's harsh roar was a catalyst to the others, breaking the spell the daemon-thing's presence had cast over everyone within the chamber, and they too raised and fired their weapons. The thing hanging from the wall shrieked in perverse pleasure as its body was torn apart by the volley of shotgun blasts, thrashing madly and cackling in daemonic joy even as Byzantane took hold of one of the flamers and enveloped it in an all-consuming wave of fire. He continued to play the jet of flame over the oracle-thing's body long after its flesh had melted from its bones and the last echoes of its insane laughter had faded away.

The remains of the thing lay smouldering on the ground, fused and unrecognisable. Despite its destruction, none of the Arbiters dared go near it. Korte looked to his commander.

'Marshal, what orders?'

Byzantane handed the flamer to one of the Arbitrator troopers, seeing another one reach down to attend to the unconscious figure of Shaulo. 'Burn it,' he ordered. 'Burn it all. Use melta-charges. We'll collapse the passageway behind us when we leave. Nothing must remain of this place when we are gone.'

'And after that?' asked Korte, the big hiveworlder trying to subdue the note of uncertainty in his voice. Byzantane laid a reassuring hand on his second-in-command's shoulder.

'After that, old friend, we prepare to face whatever it was that thing was speaking of.'

## FOUR

ADEPT VENERATUS PARCELUS Sobek awoke from his meditative trance, greatly troubled by the changes he sensed in the shifting currents of the great empyrean. It was dark within the small, windowless chamber he occupied in the southern wing of Madina's main Ecclesiarchy citadel-cathedral, but he had been blind for almost eighty years, ever since he had willingly sacrificed his sight during the ritual of binding his soul with that of the Divine Emperor, and, as an astropath psyker, he now had little need of anything as crude as mere visual sight.

He had served the Emperor well, linking his mind in the warp with those of his brother astropaths as they communicated with each other over the vast interstellar distances, but in recent years he had started to realise that his abilities were now slowly changing. All astropaths were occasionally gifted and cursed with fleeting images of the future, but the elusive talent of true precognition lay not only in understanding the meaning of such shadowy images as they flickered across the face of the warp, but also in being able to distinguish those that were real from those that were the misleading work of the deceitful daemon-things that inhabited the furthest reaches of the immaterium.

Sobek reached out, unerringly finding and picking up the small box that he already knew to be there. In his mind's eye, his psychic senses saw him performing each action just before he did it, enabling him to move and operate in the physical world with far greater care and precision than any normal sighted human. He ran his index finger down the seal on top of the box, the container recognising the genetic signature of its owner and opening itself to allow him to remove its precious contents. A series of thinly-cut cards made from a substance that felt like, but was not, delicate bone, slid out into his hand.

The Imperial tarot.

Sobek laid the first of the blank-faced cards out before him on the prayer mat he was kneeling on. His lips silently intoned the words of the Invocation of Blessed Prophecy. He concentrated, focussing his inner sight, as he reached out with his mind into the warp again, searching through its dark depths for the bright, pure radiance that was the overpowering psychic presence of the Master of Mankind. It would be through this mystic commune with the Emperor that Sobek would know the meaning of the troubling thoughts that had disturbed his meditations.

He reached out, his hand hovering inches above the face of the card, as the priceless psychoactive material from which the ancient cards were constructed reacted to the warp-born power he was channelling through himself. Slowly, an image formed on the surface of the card. A single, baleful, staring eye. The Eye of Horus.

*The Traitor*, thought Sobek, gasping in shock. The card occurred frequently for all those consulting the Imperial tarot here within the Gothic sector, where the Imperium was at full-scale war with the followers of the Heretic Warmaster, but never before had he seen it come up as the first card drawn. It was a cursed card, auguring nothing but failure and disaster. Quickly, he drew the rest of the cards, the face of each newly-revealed card coming like a stab wound to the heart.

*The Falling Star*, reversed. Ill-fortune, descending from the heavens.

*The Warp*, ascendant. Change and flux, beneficial if preceded by any of the blessed Emperor arcana cards; malign and daemonic if preceded by any of the cursed arcana.

*The Angel Primarch*. Sorrow and sacrifice. Great loss foretold.

A sob of fear escaped from the astropath's lips, and he allowed the rest of the cards to fall unread from his hands, reaching for the bell-rope that would bring running the young novice initiate granted to him as his personal servant. He would send the boy to alert the Master of the Chapel, who in turn would send urgent word to both the governor-regent's palace and the office of the Cardinal Astral here on Belatis.

Sobek did not know it, but the terrible secret that had been revealed to him was already known to a small number of Adeptus Arbites. Soon, however, the dreadful burden of knowledge that they all shared would be known to millions.

## FIVE

'OPEN MISSILE TUBES.'

The five Imperial warships cruised through the void in a wide spearhead formation, aimed dead centre at the heart of the enemy fleet. On cue, metres-thick blast hatches ground open along the beaks of their heavily-armoured prows, revealing the mouths of a series of ominous silo openings, burning gases flaring from each one as the missiles within powered up their launch thrusters.

*'Launch torpedoes!'*

Simultaneous flame bursts erupted from each opening as powerful engines, assisted by the launch tubes' own gravitic motors, roared into life, firing the hundred metre-long missiles out of their silo tubes and into the vacuum of space. The torpedo missiles sped away at incredible velocity, their fast-burn plasma engines leaving a trail of burning, blinding-white plasma energy in their wake.

The aftershock of the torpedo launch rang through the hulls of the Imperial ships: a deep, rumbling shudder that ran through the length of the massive vessels, causing the sweating work crews of ratings to pause for a second in their tasks, many of them whispering oaths in both praise and fear to the awesome destructive power of the ship's machine-spirit.

'Torpedoes launched and running,' confirmed the calm, authoritative voice of Master of Ordnance Remus Nyder as the same rumbling tremor ran through the command deck of His Divine Majesty's Ship the *Lord Solar Macharius*.

Leoten Semper stood in his captain's pulpit, watching the torpedoes' progress on the data-slate screen of his command lectern, imagining the missiles roaring through space towards their targets. On the other four capital ships within the formation - *Drachenfels*, *Tonnet*, *Scipion* and *Graf Orlok* - he knew that his fellow captains would all be doing the same, watching as their vessels' deadly payload sped towards the enemy. Five ships, launching six missiles apiece. Thirty torpedoes, closing on the enemy pack at a speed of tens of kilometres a second. Semper smiled, imagining the panic amongst his counterparts aboard the enemy ships as they watched the wave of torpedo icons sweep across their surveyor screens towards them. Glancing at his command deck's own surveyor screens, he could already see the tell-tale energy spike readings that signified vessels powering up their main drives and engaging emergency manoeuvring thrusters as they attempted to get out of the path of the torpedo wave. So far the Imperial fleet's battle plan had gone as hoped, but now its ultimate success or failure depended on the next few moments.

'Missiles running true,' spoke an ordnance servitor, communing with the simple machine-minds of the torpedoes' logic engines and reading and interpreting the data relayed back from the missiles' guidance and surveyor systems. 'Enemy vessels are commencing evasive manoeuvres. Enemy carrier vessel *Lord Seth* launching attack craft.'

'A defence screen of fighters to intercept the torpedo wave,' commented Semper's second-in-command, Flag-lieutenant Hito Ulanti.

'Standard anti-ordnance tactics, Mister Ulanti,' Semper agreed. 'Nothing out of the ordinary. But let us see if they're expecting our next move also.' He nodded to Nyder, who stood expectantly waiting on his captain's next orders.

'Mister Nyder, what is our launch status?'

'Reloading torpedoes now,' answered Nyder, with typical dry efficiency.

'Our attack craft squadrons?'

'*Nemesis*, *Firedrake*, *Harbinger* and *Mantis* are at full launch readiness,' replied the craggy-faced Nyder, not needing to consult the data-slate presented to him by one of his junior ordnance officers. '*Storm* and *Hornet* are in standby positions awaiting orders, and the remainder of our bomber and fighter squadrons are being prepped for second wave launch as we speak. I can give you forty Starhawks with fighter escort launched and burning hard vacuum within thirty seconds, and another three patchwork squadrons ready to go twenty minutes after that.'

Semper nodded in approval, unsurprised by his ordnance commander's efficiency. In the long and hard-fought months since the start of the Gothic War, the crew of the *Macharius* had undergone their bloody baptism of fire and were, their captain truly believed, a match for any other Imperial Navy crew throughout the whole of Battlefleet Gothic. Still, he thought, up until now their experience with the enemy had come as convoy escort battles against the so-called "wolf pack" pirate marauders or long-range patrol encounters with single vessels or small squadron groups. This was the first time the *Macharius* had taken part in a fleet-sized action of this magnitude.

Semper looked at his lectern, watching in fascination as the ship recognition codex symbols of the approaching enemy fleet crowded across the screen there. Thirty-four enemy vessels, the surveyor scanners confirmed. Sixteen Capital class vessels and escorts protecting an invasion armada of eighteen troop carrier transports. A formidable force, and one that even the most experienced warship commander might hesitate to engage head on.

'Helm - continue on course,' he ordered. 'Mister Nyder, launch bomber squadrons and signal *Storm* and *Hornet* to stand by to engage the enemy's fighter strength. They must ensure that the torpedo wave reaches the enemy fleet.' He paused, looking at the expectant faces of his assembled command deck officers, seeing in them the same keen intensity and rising sense of excitement that he himself felt.

'Make ready, gentlemen. Now we go to war.'

A HEAVY TREMOR ran through the fuselage of the Starhawk bomber as the first magno-clamps began to disengage, separating it from its launch cradle. Milos Caparan cast a cautious glance at the status runes on his console. The reassuring rows of green symbols told him that his craft had so far survived the often rigorous traumas of the pre-launch delivery system. Over the bomber's internal comm-net, he could hear his crew go through the usual pre-launch system checks as well as their own personal rituals. There was the murmuring, machine-tone voices of Tech-Adept Shanyin Ko and the four onboard servitors under his command as they communed with each other in ways only the servants of the Machine God could explain or understand. From the top gun turret came the barbaric-sounding chanting of Gunner First Class Daksha as he prayed to his ancestral gods in the incomprehensible native tongue of his homeworld.

Caparan neither knew nor cared whether Daksha's ancestor worship was in accordance with the strict orthodox edicts of the Imperial Faith; he was the best turret gunner that Caparan had ever had, with sixteen enemy fighter kills to his credit, and if the spirits of Daksha's ancestors were indeed watching over him and guiding his aim as he believed, then Caparan was glad to have them aboard. Meanwhile, a stream of loud and impressive cursing sounded over the comm-link, signalling that Bombardier Georgi Kustrin was also going through his customary pre-mission preparations. A native of the *Macharius's* original home-port world of Stranivar, Kustrin was a particularly skilled exponent of the well-known Stranivarite ability to be able to curse in a long and increasingly virulent string of imaginative and highly-detailed expletives without ever once repeating himself.

Warning icons flashed red as the Starhawk suddenly dropped, released from the crane cradle that had lifted it up into the launch bay. For a few brief but truly sickening moments, the three hundred tonne bomber was in freefall and then its fall was abruptly halted, powerful suspensor fields catching it and holding it in place mid-air within the launch bay.

'Suspensor fields operating. Preparing to disengage from launch cradle,' confirmed Madik Torr from the cockpit seat beside Caparan, his warning, as usual, coming seconds too late.

Despite himself, no matter how many times he had done it before, Caparan had still never fully resigned himself to that one moment when he had to put his faith in the launch bay's powerful but ancient suspensor field generators - Caparan still managed a weak smile at his co-pilot's customary joke, which was as much a part of their pre-launch preparations as any of the systems

checks and tech rites.

Together, Caparan and Torr carefully powered up the bomber's four wing-mounted engines, knowing that the slightest drop in the suspensor field's integrity at this most crucial and dangerous part of the launch process would mean the bomber's complete destruction. The engines were soon operating at near full power, but the bomber was stationary within the launch bay, held immobile in the invisible but inexorable grip of the suspensor fields as the laws of physics fought against the launch bay's equally powerful inertial dampener fields.

The bomber's entire fuselage shook under the strain, the bomber threatening to tear itself apart any second under the effects of the contradictory forces pulling and pushing at it. Brief seconds stretched out into an eternity as Caparan heard the countdown chimes broadcast over the cockpit's comm-net link. And then finally the last chime sounded and suddenly - shockingly - the bomber was released from its suspensor field and was surging forward with incredible speed, its engines screaming in relief at being set free from the invisible forces that had held them in check.

Caparan fought with the controls, aware of the wall of the launch bay streaming past only a few narrow metres from his starboard wingtip; aware of the second craft following at an identical velocity close behind his own; aware of the launch exit opening ahead; aware of the fact that eighteen other Starhawks would be fired out of surrounding launch bays at the same time; aware that the same thing was happening with twenty more Starhawks from the launch bays on the other side of the ship; aware that all of them were exiting at high speed from a carrier ship that was itself travelling at high velocity through space.

Aware of all this, and the fact that the smallest mistake or miscalculation on the part of any one of the pilots would mean disaster. And then there was only the blackness of space around them, followed by the tell-tale pulling sensation and - a split second later - a rumbling shudder as the Imperial bomber passed through in sequence its carrier ship's gravity field and protective void shields. Glancing at an auspex screen, Caparan saw the view from the rear tail-mounted turret of the vast shape of the *Macharius* already falling away into the distance behind them, and he felt the customary dual emotions familiar to any attack craft pilot. Relief at the completion of a successful launch, but also apprehension and awareness of the fact that he was now alone in the void and separated from the protection and safety of the giant carrier ship.

A row of green icons lit up one by one on his command console. Eight... Nine... Ten. All bombers under his command had safely cleared the *Macharius* and were reporting all systems clear. Caparan activated a rune, opening up a comm-net channel. 'Nemesis Leader to Nemesis Squadron. Form up into attack formation.'

THE THREATENING, SICKLE-WINGED shape of the Swiftdeath fighter cruised through the void, starlight glinting off its black, diamond-hard, armoured hull. The sole occupant of its cockpit scanned the surrounding void, wire cables plugging into the empty sockets where his eyes had once been, feeding him tactical information direct from his fighter's onboard surveyor systems.

Around him, he sensed the rest of his squadron flying in a loose, crescent-shaped intercept pattern. Ahead of them was their mission objective, the bright target shapes of the oncoming enemy torpedo wave and, beyond that, the far more tempting series of secondary target shapes: the distinctive flying pattern and energy signals of an enemy bomber wave approaching in attack formation and with fighter escorts. Encased in ancient flight suit armour that had fused itself to his skin, and enmeshed in cables and wiring that made his body just another component of his fighter craft, Pilot-Champion Vohten Kroll cursed in barely restrained anger. Intercepting the torpedo wave was, he knew, vital in protecting the Chaos fleet from the enemy's initial attack, but there was little honour and challenge in the all-too-simple destruction of such lumbering and - crucially, for Kroll - crewless targets. There would be greater challenge amongst the bomber formation, Kroll knew: pitting his skill against those of the Starhawks' pilots and gunners, dog-fighting with their deadly Fury Interceptor escorts. And, after that, when the torpedo and bomber attacks had been annihilated and the Imperium and Chaos fleets met in direct battle, there would even finer sport after the Chaos fleet's inevitable victory.

He could see it now: his Swiftdeath fighter swooping through the tangle of drifting wreckage and burning hulks that was all that remained of the Imperium fleet, his finely-honed surveyor senses extended to their maximum limit, seeking and finding life-pod vessels floating amongst the debris. Inside would be survivors from the destroyed enemy warships, and Kroll relished the thought of their helpless terror as his fighter bore down on their doomed and unarmed escape craft. A target was only worth the taking, the Chaos pilot champion believed, if you could imagine the terrified death screams of the human cargo inside it.

Through his surveyor-enhanced senses, he could see the strong signal patterns of the torpedoes as they sped towards him through the void. He smiled, noticing the surprisingly high energy fluctuations thrown off by the torpedoes' imperfectly balanced power systems, a fact which would make the missiles all the more easy to lock on to and target with his fighter's weapons systems. Intercepting and destroying the torpedo wave would now even simpler than ever now, and, after that, his squadron would be free to seek out far more rewarding targets.

'ENEMY ESCORT VESSELS are moving to protect their flanks. Capital ships are powering up void shields and weapons systems.'

'Secondary bomber wave being loaded into launch bays. Countdown to launch in ten minutes.'

'Enemy troop transports are commencing drop-pod planetary assault. Estimate two hundred plus drop-pods deployed in the last five minutes.'

Semper listened in silence to the ongoing litany of reports from his junior officers as he studied the pattern of icon markers on the main surveyor screen, the screen's luminescence casting an eerie glow over his hawk-like features under the dim lighting on the *Macharius's* command deck. It took years to be able to decipher the ever-changing patterns and symbols as the command deck's servitor drones received and interpreted the streams of data from the ship's surveyor systems, but to an officer of Leoten Semper's experience the complex array of machine-code markings flashing across the surveyor screen was as clear and understandable as simple Low Gothic script.

Here he saw the icons representing the torpedo and enemy fighter waves move close towards each other, changing colour to an

angry crimson in warning of their imminent and conflicting convergence. There he saw the threatening shapes of the enemy warships manoeuvre round to face the Imperial capital ship formation as it sped towards them. And, beyond the line of enemy warship icons, lay the Imperial fleet's true objective: the bright cluster of troop transports, blinking alert symbols beside them indicating that they had already commenced their drop-ship invasion of the Imperial world which the *Macharius* and its sister ships had been sent to protect.

Again Semper watched the twin converging icons of the torpedo and fighter waves, diminishing rows of tiny rune symbols counting down the rapidly shrinking distance between them.

Soon, he thought to himself. Soon they would know whether their opening gambit would succeed.

## SIX

ELSEWHERE, ANOTHER CAPTAIN stood studying the tactical display on his command deck's surveyor screen, his attention fixed on one enemy vessel marker in particular. For half a day now, his vessel's gun batteries had been ceaselessly bombarding the surface of the world below. Now the providence of the warp had provided a target far greater than underground missile silos and cities full of cowering, terrified civilians.

'At last, the *Macharius*...' breathed Bulus Sirl, plague-champion captain of the *Virulent*, shuffling the tumour-swollen bulk of his body through the rich, foetid stew of the atmosphere of his vessel's command deck to closer inspect the image on the long-range augur screen.

'Yes. The vessel that destroyed our sister ship *Contagion*, if the propaganda lies of the enemy are to be believed,' confirmed his second-in-command, taking care not to tread on any of the litter of pet Nurgle-spawn that swarmed in his captain's wake.

Sirl studied the magnified image of the loyalist craft, seeing its launch bays open to disgorge a swarm of gull-winged bomber craft; seeing the cruiser move forward in battle formation along with the rest of the loyalist fleet. For four days the Chaos fleet had advanced through the Helia system, finding little evidence of the presence of the forces of the hated false Emperor other than a few brief but bloody skirmishes with lone scout vessels and marauding attack craft squadrons. In those four days, most of the system had been ruthlessly subdued.

The defence monitor station at the system's outer edge had been the first to fall, overwhelmed and destroyed as the first of the Chaos warships emerged out of the warp jump point that the station was supposed to be guarding. Mining and industrial colonies on the system's two gas giant planets were next to succumb, bombarded into submission as the Chaos fleet swept onwards past them, heading into the system's core. Their target was Helia IV, an Imperium resource world with a population of more than three billion. Perhaps those three billion supposed that their world merely was to be plundered, mused Sirl, the survivors emerging from hiding afterwards and praying to their weakling emperor in thanks as they watched the Chaos reaver fleet leave orbit and head out of system towards its next target destination. If that is what they thought, he smiled to himself, then how much anguished despair must they have felt as their astropath psykers and long range surveyors detected the warp burst signatures of many more Chaos vessels - troop transports and their protecting escorts - emerging out of the warp and following in the wake of the main warfleet? It was only then that the Despoiler's intentions for Helia became clear to its terrified inhabitants.

*Invasion.* The ruthless subjugation of their world by the powers of Chaos.

Inside the transports were the Legions of Chaos: Chaos Marines and daemon-things, confined for centuries within the Eye of Terror and now impatient to be unleashed upon the servants of the false Emperor. There were savage beastmen and degenerate human followers of the Dark Gods, eager only for the slaughter of their masters' enemies; slave-troops and monstrous mutant spawn creatures, fit only to be used as cannon-fodder in the armies of Chaos. Any who resisted would be mercilessly put to the sword, while the remainder of the world's population would be enslaved, put to work constructing fleets of more warships and troop transports for the Despoiler's battlefleets. The strongest amongst them - those who could actually survive the brutal realities of life on what would soon be one of the Despoiler's prison-factory worlds - would be formed into slave-troop regiments and herded aboard the newly-constructed transports, ready to be taken on to the next doomed world to lie in the path of the Chaos reaver fleets, leaving behind them the bone-scattered ruins of their dead world.

Fear, thought Sirl. Fear was the Despoiler's main weapon in this war, and its tendrils spread deep into the minds of the inhabitants of very Imperium world within the Gothic sector; fear that their world would be next to fall under the gaze of the Despoiler, and fear of what fate the Chaos Warmaster had already decreed for them when he sent his fleets to darken the skies above their world. Helia IV was the third such world to fall before this warfleet - the holds of many of the transports were crammed with the slave-troop remnants of the populations of the two preceding conquests - but this was the first time that the Imperial Navy had appeared in any force to oppose them. Sirl and his fellow captains had resigned themselves to another simple but unsatisfying slaughter of the local in-system defence forces - its orbital defence platforms and slow, poorly-armed system vessel gunship squadrons - and so it was with a thrill of anticipation that they greeted the sight of the Imperial Navy battlegroup that emerged from the warp to challenge the Chaos fleet as it made its final approach on the otherwise defenceless world.

Despite his four centuries of service to the God of Decay, there was enough of the Imperium fleet officer still remaining in Sirl to recognise the feeling now growing within him. It was an old, familiar feeling, one that the bosun-instructors of the fleet naval academies tried hard to instil in the officer cadets in their charge. It was the thrill of anticipation, the relish of the challenge to come that every navy officer feels before battle.

And also, sometimes, the satisfying knowledge that old scores and debts of honour were about to be settled, he thought, still studying the image of the *Macharius*.

'Morrau was a fine captain, and a loyal servant of Grandfather Nurgle,' slurred Sirl, mucus-bile bubbling in his pustule-swollen throat.

'His death and the destruction of one of the Grandfather's vessels shall not go unavenged.'

'Anomaly detected within the enemy torpedo wave,' came the urgent warning from one of the tech-priest surveyor seers, calling Sirl's attention back to the immediate realities of battle. 'There are additional ordnance-class targets masked within the torpedo wave energy reading!'

AMIC KAETHER POWERED his Fury Interceptor forward, residue plasma energy splashing against his forward shields as he piloted the fighter craft through the kilometre-long backwash of the torpedo missile. Around him, the rest of *Storm* squadron followed him into the attack, emerging out of the energy wake of the torpedo wave that had so successfully concealed their approach from the enemy. Kaether's command flight - Zane, Vale, Altomare and Cipolla - took up position around their leader, the squadron's other two flights completing the three-pronged attack formation.

Fifteen fighter craft - a full strength squadron - and, nearby, another fifteen belonging to *Hornet* squadron. Thirty Imperial interceptors, attacking in overwhelming force against an unprepared enemy.

Kaether locked onto the first enemy target, his fingers closing on the firing triggers of his Fury's formidable armament array. A stream of super-charged energy instantly spat out from the nose-mounted lascannons. The battle of Helia IV had begun in earnest.

KROLL'S WINGMAN EXPLODED, transformed in the blink of an eye into an incandescent fireball that flickered briefly in the void and then was gone forever.

Too late, Kroll's craft-joined senses saw the swarm of enemy fighters emerging out of cover from amongst the torpedo wave; too late, he tried to evade the sharp daggers of las-energy stabbing at him from out of the darkness. They struck against his fighter's armour, smashing it into broken shards and ripping through his starboard engine, one stray shot blinding him as it burnt through his forward surveyor systems.

Unseeing and out of control, Kroll's crippled Swiftdeath tumbled through space and into the path of the oncoming torpedo wave. His soundless scream of rage was lost as, seconds later, both he and his fighter were obliterated, smashed apart against the thick armoured nosecone of one of the juggernaut missiles.

'SEMPER WATCHED AS the enemy fighter formation icon faded off the surface of the surveyor screen. The Imperial attack wave closed on the Chaos fleet, and now nothing lay between it and its target. Semper's attention was caught by the urgent flashing of the torpedo wave marker. He looked to his Master of Ordnance.

'Targets acquired on all missiles,' confirmed Nyder. 'Impact imminent.'

TENS OF THOUSANDS of kilometres ahead of the *Macharius*, the wave of torpedo missiles entered their final lifecycle stage, logic engines reaching out to find their targets. Crude but effective guidance systems engaged, short-life manoeuvring jets firing as the missiles' machine-minds made any necessary course changes towards their selected targets. The main drives flared into fiery life for the last time, expending all remaining energy as they boosted the missile warheads towards their targets at increased velocity. Fear and panic spread like wildfire through the Chaos fleet as they witnessed their fighter screen's failure to intercept and destroy the torpedo wave. Parked in closely-ranked and stationary orbit above Helia, the invasion fleet was the very model of the Imperial Navy tacticians' definition of a target-rich environment. For every target a torpedo's logic engines failed to lock onto, there were another half-dozen to choose from. On the Chaos warships, gunnery officers who had already been zeroing their weapons batteries in on the approaching Imperial fleet frantically redialled new target co-ordinates into their gunnery cogitators, knowing that it was already too late to retrain their lumbering gunsights on targets as small and fast-moving as torpedo missiles, especially at such close range.

Turret gun crews fared better; already alerted and manning weapons systems designed to fend off ordnance attacks, they stood ready to project a curtain of defensive fire into space around their vessels. Of the thirty torpedoes launched by the Imperium ships, twelve were to be destroyed by the Chaos vessels' anti-ordnance defences before they could strike their targets. Most fortunate of all was the Murder class cruiser *Violator*, whose turret crews destroyed all three of the torpedoes that had targeted their vessel. There was particular panic aboard the Chaos fleet's carrier vessels. Bomber and fighter squadrons already committed to supporting the drop-ship assault on Helia were being hurriedly recalled back to the defence of the orbiting fleet, while the few squadrons still aboard the carrier ships were being rushed into action, many of them launching without being fully prepared for combat. There was a special note of urgency aboard the Styx class heavy cruiser *Lord Seth* which had been targeted by five torpedoes, the missiles' surveyor systems homing in on the strong energy and comm-net signals emanating from the Chaos fleet flagship. Scramble-launched into action and given only a hurried pre-launch maintenance check, two of its Doomfire bombers collided in the launch tubes, the explosion from their full payloads roaring back into the flight decks and sweeping over the attack craft still lined up there and awaiting rearming and refuelling. Promethium fuel reserves and ammunition stacks lying on the flight deck detonated in a growing chain reaction, destroying the ship's entire wing of starboard launch bays and dealing the Chaos flagship a crippling blow even before battle proper had been joined. Seeing their flagship stricken, many aboard the surrounding Chaos vessels mistakenly assumed that it had been the target of a close-range torpedo attack from an undetected Imperium ship, and panic spread further into the Chaos ranks at the thought that small but deadly torpedo ships such as the Cobra class destroyer might already have infiltrated the fleet defences and be hunting, undetected, amongst them.

The first actual torpedo strike occurred on the outer fringes of the fleet perimeter, two of the *Macharius's* torpedoes streaking towards a Chaos ship that had foolishly or bravely moved forward away from the main body of the fleet group, instantly singling itself out as a target for the missiles' questing surveyor senses. Whether it was trying to escape or sacrificing itself to protect the troop transports behind it was something those intently watching from aboard the *Macharius's* command deck would never know. 'Target is an enemy escort vessel, probably one of their Iconoclast class of destroyers,' Nyder told his captain, reading the

information from the complex array of machine-code icons flashing across the surveyor screens. 'They're opening fire with their defence turrets. A hit! One torpedo gone. The other torpedo still closing. Its warhead has just achieved critical mass...' A bright energy flare blossomed on Semper's lectern screen, temporarily overwhelming and dispelling the other data scrolling across the vid-display. Semper looked up, looking through the command deck's viewing bays to see a matching explosion burst light up the vacuum of space ahead of them as the torpedo warhead smashed through the Chaos ship's hull and detonated amongst its engine systems, breaching the walls of the generarium plasma reactors and setting off a chain reaction explosion that completely vaporised the enemy vessel. The explosion and expanding cloud of super-heated burning plasma energy briefly flared like a second sun against the blackness of space, but all around Semper saw glittering constellations of other explosions and energy bursts, evidence of the fleet-sized space battle now taking place all around them. In rapid succession, the rest of the torpedoes lashed into the ranks of the Chaos fleet, with devastating results.

The anti-ordnance gunners aboard the *Lord Seth* succeeded in destroying the warhead of one of the torpedoes targeted at it. However, their success was to be short-lived. Driven onwards by its powerful thrust engines, the intact main body of the torpedo still struck the ship, shearing away one of the massive lance turrets that studded the heavy cruiser's spine. The power conduits to the turret's weapons systems failed to close, and a fountain of burning plasma pumped up direct from the ship's generarium core erupted geyser-like from the ship's upper hull, diverting vital energy away from other weapons systems. The anti-ordnance turrets suddenly fell silent, and their gunnery crews were helpless to stop two more torpedoes slamming into the *Lord Seth* seconds later. On the remaining port side launch decks, frantic pilots and ground crews raced against time to ready their Swiftdeaths and Doomfires for launch as a series of explosions ripped through the stricken ship's interior.

Three of the troop transports, crudely constructed by unskilled slave labour and little more than glorified cattle trucks fitted with warp engines, took a torpedo hit apiece and were vaporised, killing the thousands of Chaos troops still aboard them. Down on the surface of Helia, the odds shifted that much slightly back in favour of the hard-pressed Helia defence forces as they grimly fought against the seemingly never-ending tide of Chaos troops now dropping out of the skies to attack their world.

The Iconoclast escort destroyer *Foresworn* was struck aft by a torpedo, the explosion destroying its air recycling plant and igniting an oxygen fire that swept through the ship's interior compartments. Those that survived the fire were doomed to a slow death by asphyxiation, sealed inside airtight compartments and praying for a rescue that would never come.

The Murder class cruiser *Pagan Voyager* suffered a direct hit to its command tower, the blast ripping upwards through deck after deck within the armoured blockhouse and killing everyone present on the bridge, including the captain and flag-lieutenant. Suddenly robbed of almost its entire senior officer cadre and with its internal comm-net also disabled by the loss of the command deck, the *Pagan Voyager* would take little further part in the Battle of Helia IV as its junior officers strove to bring order to the various out-of-contact sections of the ship, eventually choosing discretion over valour and retreating from the conflict altogether. Throughout the Chaos armada, wounded ships burned and bled their atmosphere and energy lifeblood out into the cold vacuum, but, despite the damage caused by the Imperial torpedo attack, the battle's final outcome was by no means assured. Chaos warships manoeuvred for position, swinging round to bring lance turrets and weapons batteries to bear on the oncoming Imperium fleet. The Imperial ships were closing rapidly, but the enemy fleet was still out of range of their own forward-firing batteries. Knowing that the enemy's firepower had a longer reach than their own guns, the Imperial line braced itself for the Chaos fleet's reply.

The void between the two fleets was filled with bright rainbow displays of las-fire, roaring plasma comet trails and the thick, iridescent streams of lance-beam energy. An Imperial Cobra destroyer escort, caught too far out of position ahead of the main body of the fleet, exploded apart as an arcing beam of lance fire passed over it, cutting through it in one lethal sweep. Las-beams, energy blasts and missile volleys impacted against overloading void shields, penetrating through to strike at the pitted and dented skins of ancient and battle-scarred armoured hulls. The prow of the *Torment* burst apart as probing las-beams found a weak spot in its adamantium shell, drilling through it to find and detonate a newly-loaded torpedo missile sitting in its launch silo. The back-blast blew the sealed, seventeen tonne silo door off its mountings, a wave of fire sweeping out into the eight-deck-high loading chamber and back further along the wide rail-tracked tunnel from where the torpedo missiles were brought up from the ship's magazine.

Stricken, the Lunar class cruiser fell out of line, its sister ships leaving it behind to fend for itself as its officers and crew desperately fought to contain the conflagration burning through the ship and prevent a catastrophic magazine explosion. On the bridge of the *Macharius*, Semper stood his ground, feeling the ship sway under him as it was buffeted by the blasts impacting against its void shields and armour. The *Macharius* was equipped as standard with heavy blast shields which closed over its viewing bays during combat, but Semper had ordered his vessel into battle with blast shields open, reasoning that a few extra feet of titanium steel armour would make little difference to their chances of survival if the command deck took a direct hit, preferring instead to see something of the enemy and the current disposition of the battle with his own eyes rather than merely as an array of icons and symbols on a surveyor screen. Looking out, he saw a vision of hellish beauty: explosions and fire-bursts blooming against the black void; warships, vast and powerful, moving forward with ponderous majesty. Over the open, fleet-wide comm-net came the voices from those ships, sounding weak and insignificant in comparison to the grand scale of events happening around them.

'The *Lord Seth*... Its defence turrets are dead. Vandire's oath, if you've got any torpedoes loaded, use them now!'

'*Nemesis Leader* to *Macharius*. We're through the enemy's forward picket line, or what's left of it. Commencing attack run on the troop transports. Enemy fighter activity disorganised but still fairly intense... Be good to see some friendly Furies up here with us, *Macharius*'.

'Vanguard destroyer squadron to main group. That Murder class protecting their far flank is drifting out of position, looks like it's taken a hit to the command tower. There's a path opened up for us clear through to those damned transports. Requesting supporting fire from any available capital ships.'

'*Graf Orlok* to battlegroup... *Torment's* gone. We're out here alone on the port flank and taking heavy fire. Requesting permission to withdraw and recharge void shield generators.'

'Von Blucher, you yellow bastard! I don't care how high your blueblood family connections in Battlefleet Command go,' replied an angry voice over the comm-net channel, momentarily drowning out all the other radio traffic. 'You withdraw from action now and I'll personally take great pleasure in hunting down and destroying both you and that junker heap you call a warship!'

Semper recognised the voice of Erwin Ramas, captain of the Gothic class cruiser *Drachenfels*. Even over the comm-net static, the mechanical rasp in Ramas's voice was still clearly detectable. Ramas was a Battlefleet Gothic legend, the sole survivor of an eldar pirate torpedo attack that wiped out his entire command deck crew. His crippled body maintained by Adeptus Mechanicus cyber-devices, what was left of Ramas was confined within an armoured strategium shell somewhere deep within his ship. However, despite the damage to his body, the wily old veteran's command abilities and taste for the thrill of battle clearly remained undiminished.

Semper suppressed an inappropriate smile, not wishing to be seen to laugh openly at a brother captain in front of the *Macharius's* bridge crew. That said, Titus von Blucher was a notoriously vainglorious fool who owed his captaincy of the *Graf Orlok* solely to the fact that he belonged to one of the lesser branches of the Ravensburg family line and was hence a distant but acknowledged relative of Lord Admiral Cornelius Ravensburg, commander of Battlefleet Gothic. Only Ramas, a battlefleet legend with forty years experience in the captain's chair, could speak like that to one of the Lord Admiral's relatives and hope to escape free from any kind of censure afterwards.

'*Drachenfels* to *Macharius*' called Ramas. 'What do you say, Semper? Shall we show this faint-hearted blueblood how a true captain in His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy behaves?'

'Lead the way, *Drachenfels*. *Macharius* will join you,' replied Semper, looking expectantly towards his helm crew, catching the nervous and apprehensive glances that passed between many of his junior officers. Hito Ulanti stepped forward, adding his voice to that of his captain's, and daring any of the doubters on the command deck to challenge their dual authority. After all, if a vessel's rightful, Emperor-chosen captain gave an order, and his second-in-command concurred with that order, then what reason would any loyal servant of the Emperor have to argue otherwise, no matter how near-suicidal that order might seem? Ulanti's hand rested on the hilt of his sheathed sabre, and, nearby, the giant, thuggish-looking petty officer that Ulanti seemed to have adopted as his personal bodyguard stiffened to attention, alert to any potential threat against his patron officer.

'Helm - continue full ahead. Match and meet the current speed and course of the *Drachenfels*,' ordered Ulanti in his characteristic clipped hiveworld aristocracy accent. 'Generarium-channel all available power to the forward void shields. Gunnery control - prepare to fire twin broadsides as soon as we are in range of any available enemy target. Ordnance - the captain wants a full torpedo spread loaded and ready to launch, and he wants them now.'

The young flag-lieutenant stepped back, watching alertly as he ensured that his captain's orders were being correctly carried out. Semper studied the sharp-minded and keenly ambitious Necromundan noble, becoming increasingly aware of just how able an officer Ulanti was. He knew that Ulanti would go far, and was willing to stake the Order of the Gothic Star cluster pinned to the breast of his own tunic front that Ulanti would finish this war with a captaincy of his own.

Assuming he or any of us survive that long, he reminded himself, thinking of the grim news of the latest tallies of losses, defeats and hard-fought and narrowly-won holding actions that arrived almost daily from all points throughout the sector.

Assuming any of us even live through the next hour or so, he thought further, looking out the viewing bay at the scene beyond, as the awkward but impressive bulk of the *Drachenfels* thundered ahead towards the enemy battle line. A second later, Semper felt the increased vibration of his own vessel's engines as they pushed the *Macharius* forward to join its sister ship.

Together, the two cruisers rumbled forwards into the face of the enemy's guns, renewing the impetus of the faltering Imperial attack and leading the formation straight towards the centre of the Chaos fleet.

KAETHER CUT THE power flow to his Interceptor's engines, depending on instinct and manoeuvring thrusters as he cruised through the midst of the Chaos fleet, making the small and nimble fighter craft an even more difficult target for the enemy weapon targeters to lock on to. Something flickered on the edge of his vision and he hit his starboard thrusters, rolling the fighter to port and triggering his lascannons as he did so. The Swiftdeath that had passed momentarily across his cockpit's vision field was instantly transfixed in a stream of azure energy lines, las-bolts hammering into it, ripping through black glass armour plating. One wing-mounted engine thruster exploded, and Kaether saw fused melt-holes punctured along the length of its fuselage. The Swiftdeath tumbled out of control, seconds later exploding apart as a second, deadly accurate stream of lascannon fire found and vaporised it, Kaether's port wingman Altomare finishing the task begun by his squadron commander.

'Fine shooting, Storm Three,' Kaether signalled over the squadron comm-net. 'We'll dice for who claims the kill back aboard the *Macharius*.'

'That's if we make it back aboard,' sounded the quiet voice of Vale, flying on Kaether's starboard wing. 'And that's if the *Macharius* itself is still there, even if we do make it out of here in one piece.' It was only a few minutes since Cippola's Fury had been destroyed - ripped apart by a flechette burst of millions of monofilament micro-shards - by a random, unexpected strike from a nearby enemy vessel's anti-ordnance defences, but none of the other pilots would have considered Vale's joking words inappropriate. For the Fury pilots, death, shocking and violent, was a constant and ever-present possibility. 'My wingman on my port side, the Emperor on my starboard and Death on my tail, breathing in my engine wash,' as the old navy pilot phrase put it. Death could come for them at any time in space combat, and always it would be sudden and instantaneous. They joked about it now, here in the heat of battle even as friends and comrades died around them, but later, back aboard the safety of the *Macharius*, they would grieve together in their own solemn and private ways.

Four craft left in his wing; nine more in the two other wings, which he had assigned to escorting the first bomber wave following on close behind. Their firepower, combined with that of the Starhawks' own turret guns, proving more than enough to fight off any

marauding enemy fighters. Kaether's wing flew pathfinder through the Chaos fleet, dodging in and out amongst the strange, warp-altered shapes of the enemy vessels. Deadly to other attack craft, the Fury's banks of lascannon and wing-mounted missiles would be less than pinpricks against the thick, armoured hulls of the massive Chaos warships, but the Furies could still bring harm to them in other ways. From the cramped cockpit space behind him came a low-voiced litany of telemetry data and gunnery target co-ordinates as Manetho, Kaether's Adeptus Mechanicus navigator and rear gunner, relayed detailed and close-range observation intelligence on the enemy fleet back to his tech-priest brethren aboard the *Macharius*. Much to Kaether's satisfaction, Manetho had directed the Imperial gunners in on the enemy ship that had destroyed the *Cippola*, and moments later the gunsights of the mighty *Drachenfels* had zeroed in on the enemy destroyer, cutting it in half with one sweep of its port-side lance batteries. Kaether's wing had swept a path through for the bomber wave, encountering and destroying six more Swiftdeaths along the way. With the *Lord Seth* no longer a threat - Kaether had seen it take three more torpedo hits in the last few minutes - the only enemy carrier ship still in operation was the *Pluton*, and most of its attack craft strength seemed to be bomber squadrons. What few enemy fighters they had encountered were lone stragglers recalled from the invasion beachhead, their power reserves depleted by extended operation in a planetary atmosphere and the long, hard climb up from Helia's gravity well to rejoin the new orbital battle. Those not returning to the *Pluton* for rearming and refuelling fell easy victim to the veteran pilots of *Storm* squadron's elite command wing.

Ahead, Kaether could see the squat, ugly shapes of the troop transports, their launch bay doors open to reveal the cavernous interiors of their holds. Inside, row upon row of drop-pods were stacked in tiered launch cradles, swarms of them dropping in sequence from the underbellies of each transport. Kaether scanned his surveyor screen, satisfying himself one last time that there were no enemy fighters protecting the transports. He keyed a series of rune signs into his comm-net panel, sending a pre-arranged code signal back to the *Macharius* and the bomber wave close behind his pathfinder flight. Seconds later, the answering series of code-marks appeared across his data-screen.

'*Storm Leader* to squadron. Bombers have their targets. Break off and stand by.'

'What targets now, commander?'

Throne of Earth, I've known servitors that sounded more human than that, thought Kaether, recognising the familiar, blank-toned voice that sounded over the comm-net.

It was Zane - Zealot Zane, as the other members of the squadron called him, even though none of them would ever question the misfit pilot's reputation as the best fighter ace aboard the *Macharius*, with the highest kill tally to prove it.

'Commander?' asked Zane again, his tone patient but expectant.

Kaether paused, considering. His orders were to circle in search of any remaining fighter targets and then escort the Starhawk wave back to the *Macharius* after the completion of their bombing mission. On his long-range scope, he could see the *Pluton* launching bomber craft, and there were reports of more Swiftdeaths on their way back up from the planet's surface to rejoin the fray.

Kaether glanced again at the spread formation of troop transports, seeing the continuing rain of invasion force drop-pods falling from their open underbellies. Fifty to a hundred enemy troops packed like so much cattle into each drop-pod; several hundred drop-pods to each transport, dozens more of them being released from orbit with every passing every minute. Even with several transports already destroyed, the Chaos armada was still in the process of deploying a considerable invasion force on Helia. Kaether knew that every drop-pod destroyed increased the odds in favour of the Imperial forces now fighting on the planet's surface, and the point of the entire battle was to defy the enemy's attack on Helia, wasn't it? Swiftly, he came to a decision, knowing he might have to answer for it later.

That's if any of us survive that long, he reminded himself, thinking of Vale's traditional pessimistic fighter pilot riposte to any mention of the future.

'*Storm Leader* to squadron. We'll leave the nursemaid duties to those greenhorns in *Hornet* squadron. New target priority - form up into wingman teams and target those drop-pods. They won't add anything to your kill tallies, but you'll be giving those ground-pounders on Helia a better fighting chance. And Emperor knows they need it, especially since they're unfortunate enough not be part of His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy!'

A loyal chorus of laughs at the traditional and well-worn naval joke sounded over the comm-net as, one by one, the pilots of *Storm* squadron sent their fighters rolling off into deep attack dives targeted at the lines of falling drop-pods.

THE STARHAWKS LAUNCHED their payload from near point-blank range, sending a wave of high-explosive warhead missiles streaming into the open, vulnerable underbelly bays of their troop transport targets. Fire from the transports' anti-ordnance defences was sporadic and desultory - the vessels were under-armed and their turret crews under-trained - damaging only one Starhawk and destroying virtually none of the incoming missile wave. Multiple explosions tore through the bellies of each of the three target transports, destroying row upon row of drop-pods as they sat stacked in their launch cradles. Others, ripped from their moorings by the force of the blasts, fell free, tumbling down towards the planet below, their crude flight systems unable to bring them under control and dooming those inside them to a terrible, fiery death as the pods burned up in the upper atmosphere of Helia.

One of the transports blew up entirely, the explosions that had gutted its belly hold spreading into its reactor system, enveloping the vessel in a sudden and spectacular fireball, throwing out wreckage to smash into other surrounding transports and their closely-packed launch lines of falling drop-pods. Peeling away at the end of its attack run, one of the Starhawks - Goschen's craft, Caparan saw, the same one that had been damaged by turret fire - was caught and consumed by the fringes of the blast. One bomber was a small price to pay for the destruction of three enemy transports and the thousands of troops and vehicles aboard them, Caparan knew, but, such cold strategic equations did not make the loss of any of those under his command any easier to bear.

'*Nemesis* to *Macharius*,' he signalled. 'Payload expended, targets well struck. Awaiting further orders.'

'Fine hunting, Milos,' came the reply, the familiar voice of Remus Nyder crackling over the long-range comm-net frequency.

'Rendezvous with fighter escorts and return home, *Nemesis*. *Macharius* looks forward to welcoming you back aboard her once more.'

'EMPEROR'S OATH, ZANE. Pull up! Your outer hull is starting to burn!'

Reth Zane flicked a switch on his comm-net panel, cutting off the warning voice of his wingman. Altomare was a good pilot, he knew, but his brother Fury pilot had little in the way of faith. And, faith, Zane knew, was the greatest weapon of all. Alarm chimes sounded from his instrumentation panel, warning him of the mounting temperature of his craft's outer skin. Zane ignored them, reciting the words of the 58th Incantation of Inner Peace to himself, looping his own voice through his helmet speakers, so that all he heard were the calming words of the holy text.

*The Emperor is my Guardian, my Shield and my Protector.*

*While he watches over me, I shall fear no enemy.*

*The Heretic, the Daemon, the Abomination have no hold over me.*

He recited the words to himself as his fighter fell headlong down the gravity well, ghostly flames dancing around its wing tips as it cut a fiery trail through the upper strata of the planet's atmosphere. His fingers connected with the control stick's firing triggers, releasing short, stabbing bursts of las-energy from his nose cannons.

Once. Twice. Three times.

His lascannon power cells were almost depleted, but he had already realized just how vulnerable and poorly-armoured the drop-pod targets were. The first lascannon volley caught the nearest drop-pod on its underside, blowing off pieces of its glowing heat shield and destroying its retro-thrusters. Even if the drop-pod somehow survived atmospheric entry with a damaged heat shield, it would still be unable to slow down its speed of descent, and would plough into the ground of its intended landing site with meteoric force.

Zane's next volley ripped away the side of the second drop-pod, causing catastrophic decompression and sucking the pod's screaming occupants out into the void.

His third burst missed the last pod in the chain. Zane paused and recited the lines of the incantation to himself again, his face glowing in the reflected light from his instrumentation panel as series after series of crimson flashing runes lit up in urgent warning. The sound of alert chimes filled the cockpit, and from somewhere came the faint but distinct smell of burning wiring and plastics. Even the ever-silent servitor drone manning the fighter's cockpit rear turret gun seemed agitated.

Zane opened his eyes, fixed on his target and fired. The last drop-pod exploded apart as the line of las-blasts tore through it.

Zane took tight hold of the control stick, pulling back hard and feeding power through to the thrusters. The Fury shook violently, its engines whining in protest as they struggled against the seemingly irresistible pull of Helia's gravity. And then the Fury was rising again, pulling out of the high orbital dive, its scorched underbelly riding a cushion of fire as it skimmed across the top of the upper atmospheric envelope. Most of the status runes on his instrumentation panel returned to a reassuring green or at least a non-urgent amber again, but several remained crimson. Zane ignored them, already seeking out the next line of targets as he rose to rejoin his wingman. He and Altomare had followed that last line of drop-pods down together, jointly destroying the first six of them before Altomare gave up the chase, turning back to avoid burning up in Helia's atmosphere. Zane had gone on to destroy the remaining five drop-pods in the chain, pushing his Fury Interceptor to levels beyond its supposed tolerance limits, although Zane knew that he would come to no harm. Not with the Emperor watching over him and guiding him in his holy work.

'I am his Sword of Retribution, I am his Vessel of Wrath. Though I am but weak and mortal flesh, the spirit of his Divine Will fills and strengthens me,' Zane murmured to himself, reciting the 13th Canticle of Divine Retribution, remembering the first time he had seen those words, carved, along with thousands of other sacred text lines, into the floor of the great Ecclesiarch cathedral on the shrine-world of Sacra Evangelista. Remembering kneeling as a young novice just recently taken Holy Orders and running his fingers in wonder over the ancient, time-worn letters painstakingly etched into the stonework of the floor.

Remembering how, that very night, the visions of the blessed Sororitas warrior angel had come to him as he knelt praying in his cell, telling him that his destiny in the service of the Master of Mankind lay elsewhere: that he was to become an Avenging Fury, the scourge of the Emperor's enemies.

Remembering how he had gone to the father-confessor with the news of his visions, and remembering too the subsequent agonies and ordeals as the truth of his visions was examined by an Ecclesiarchy court of inquiry and he himself was rigorously tested physically and mentally for evidence of heretical falsehood. His visions finally verified by the court, he was released from his vows as a Ministorum adept and allowed to pursue his service to the Emperor elsewhere within the mighty Imperium of Mankind. Zane levelled out of the power climb, searching for and finding the next string of falling drop-pods, and guiding his prophetically-named Fury Interceptor towards them. More of the Emperor's enemies still lived, and his holy work was not yet done.

BULUS SIRL WATCHED as another of the troop transports exploded. Even with his cataract-clouded vision, he could see the firefly specks of enemy bombers dancing round the wreck of the burning ship. They were losing this battle, he realized, and losing it badly. The invasion of Helia was over. Forget the transports and the slave-stock scum inside them, he told himself. All that matters was that warships such as the *Virulent* survived to fight another day. With warships, another world could be subjugated, another army of slave troops could be raised, another fleet of transports could be constructed.

Yes, the invasion of Helia was over, he told himself. At least for the time being.

'Break off,' he ordered. 'Bring us about and take us out of orbit.'

'Our orders are to stand in orbit and offer close support to the drop-pod assault on the planetary surface,' warned his second-in-command, a mere stripling with less than half a century's service to the pestilent glories of the Creator of Corruption.

Sirl hissed in irritation, the gill-like slits on the sides of his neck opening in reaction and releasing a stinking spray of mist redolent with drifting viral spores. He lashed out with his tumour-tentacles, picking up the upstart and smashing him against a nearby bulkhead wall. A swarm of chittering Nurgle-spawn fell on the corpse, eagerly lapping up the mess leaking from its smashed skull. Sirl reached out again, appointing another officer as his new second-in-command, and with one touch of his tentacles he bestowed the blessings of the plague-kiss upon the chosen recipient.

'Our first loyalty is to the Plague Lord. Our first duty is to avenge the death of his servant. Set a course and prepare for battle. Our target is the *Macharius*'.

THE *MACHARIUS* SHUDDERED under the impact of another blast against its void shields. A dull boom reverberated through the command deck, indicating an internal explosion somewhere below decks. Semper cast an anxious glance at his vessel's Technis Majoris.

'Magos Castaboras, damage report!'

The gold-masked figure of the *Macharius*'s most senior tech-priest paused for several seconds, mind-impulse implants allowing him to commune with other Adeptus Mechanicus servants of the Machine God aboard the ship, and with the arcane workings of the machine-spirit mind of the *Macharius* itself. In seconds, he was able to receive and interpret detailed information from all over the ship.

'There has been an explosive hull breach on the starboard underside, penetrating several lower decks. The affected sections have been sealed off and the oxygen fires in those sections allowed to burn themselves out. There has been some interruption to the atmosphere systems of lower decks four through eight.'

*Interruption*, thought Semper, knowing that conditions on the lower decks could confidently be described as approaching hellish at the best of times: an endless warren of cramped and ill-lit passageways and compartments, the air thick with toxic fumes and burning vapours spilling out from the ship's churning, mechanical guts. What must it be like down there now, he wondered, with whole sections in flames or exposed to the vacuum, and what little circulating air supply there was now cut off.

'How will this atmospheric "interruption" affect the crew on those levels?'

The magos hesitated, seemingly caught by surprise by his captain's question. Semper often had the impression that, to the haughty servants of the Machine God, the presence of a human crew aboard the vessels under their charge was viewed as merely a necessary inconvenience.

'Casualties will be medium to heavy, captain, but almost all of them from amongst the lowest class of crew ratings, and hence easily replaced by non-skilled conscripts from other decks.'

Semper nodded in acknowledgement. Battle raged all around the *Macharius*, and his ship, together with the *Drachenfels*, had been first to feel the full fury of the enemy guns, and had now taken several damaging hits. Two of its portside launch bays and one on the starboard side were out of action; one of its forward portside gun decks had been gutted by a direct hit from a deadly vortex missile; its long-range surveyors had been disrupted by a series of damaging radiation bursts against the void shields, and the Generarium tech-priests were now reporting damage to the coolant systems of two of the ship's five massive plasma-core reactors. None of this damage was critical yet, Semper knew, and every hit the *Macharius* took was instantly sent back to the enemy by the Imperial ship's own gun batteries. Surging forward into the midst of the disordered enemy fleet, surrounded by enemy targets, the *Macharius*'s guns spoke without interruption, carefully combining their fire patterns with those of the *Drachenfels*; the *Macharius*'s massed salvos stripping bare an enemy vessel's void shields and leaving it vulnerable to follow-on blasts from the Gothic class cruiser's fearsome batteries of lance turrets. Two enemy destroyers had been obliterated in this way, and the infamous renegade vessel *Heathen Promise* had been driven off after a pounding from the two Imperial cruisers, retiring from the battle with one entire flank of its hull laid open and trailing a cloud of debris and energy vapour.

Elsewhere, the battle was slowly turning in the Imperial fleet's favour. The *Tonnet* was a burning wreck, but so too was the enemy flagship *Lord Seth*, succumbing at last after receiving a total of eleven torpedo hits. Bombers from the *Pluton* had mercilessly pounced upon Vanguard squadron, but not before the Imperial Cobra destroyers ships had claimed two more troop transports with a close-range torpedo strike. The second wave of *Macharius*-launched Starhawks was even now attacking and destroying more of the transports, but reports were coming in that the first attack wave of Starhawks en route back to the *Macharius* had ran into trouble, coming under heavy attack from enemy fighters returning to orbit from the surface of Helia. The fighters were from the *Lord Seth*, and, with their home vessel destroyed and no space for them aboard the *Pluton*, they threw themselves at the Imperial bombers with suicidal frenzy, displaying an unmatched savagery remarkable even for the insane followers of the malignant powers of the warp.

Still, the current tally stood at nine of the enemy troop transports crippled or destroyed, with the second Imperial bomber wave likely to further add to that score. Of the enemy warships, the cruisers *Pagan Voyager* and *Heathen Promise* had already withdrawn from battle, and there were signs that others - including, significantly, *Pluton* - were also preparing to withdraw. Without their warship protectors, the remaining troop ships were doomed, and the invasion of Helia would be almost totally defeated.

Suddenly, the command deck was rocked by a heavy blast, knocking Semper to the ground. Alarms sounded, and an object - the body of a servitor drone - fell from one of the bridge's high upper galleries, smashing into main deck and lying on the ground, its broken, mechanical limb-attachments still twitching with mindless cybernetic life.

'Slaughter class cruiser! It came in on us fast, using those wrecks for cover!' said Ulanti, helping the captain to his feet and pointing in warning towards the main viewing bay port. The blast shutters were sliding down in automatic response to the surprise attack, but Semper could still clearly see the distinctive viper-head prow shape of a renegade cruiser bearing down hard on his ship.

'Brace for impact!' bellowed Ulanti. 'They're coming in close to give us a full broadside!'

'No,' said Semper, countermanding his lieutenant's order. The enemy Slaughter class ships were notoriously fast for capital vessels and, at first, Semper thought that the enemy cruiser meant to ram them. Then he saw it turn away a few degrees, rolling over to port to present its armoured underbelly to the *Macharius*. The surface of the warp-altered vessel's underside was sickeningly organic-looking, and was pitted with blisterlike pustules. Even as Semper watched, he saw these pustules swell and open, revealing the metal prows of the craft inside them.

'Boarding action! Armsmen to their stations,' ordered Semper. 'Prepare to repel boarding assault.'

SPAT OUT OF the underbelly of the *Virulent*, the wave of boarding craft spanned the narrow distance between the two ships in less than a minute. Many were picked off by the *Macharius's* anti-ordnance defences before they could attach themselves to the Imperial ship's hull, exploding apart amongst the hail of las-cannon bursts and shellfire. Others misjudged their course trajectory or failed to fire braking motors in time, dashing themselves against the metal cliffs of the cruiser's armoured flanks. Those that survived attached themselves limpet-like to the surface of the *Macharius's* hull, using melta-charges to blow open airlock seals; powerful metal jaws to chew through thick armour plating; even ancient phase field generators to open up entryways through otherwise impenetrable bulkheads.

All over the starboard side of the *Macharius*, on deck after deck, strange, warp-altered figures emerged through raw-edged holes in bulkhead walls, howling in triumph at being here amongst their enemies and instantly falling upon the first of the Imperial vessel's human defenders.

MAXIM BORUSA CURSED, swinging his chainsword and shearing away the face of the beast-headed warp spawn that blocked his way. Another Chaos thing charged towards him, trying to impale him on the point of its pike weapon. Maxim cut it off at the knees with his return swing, pressing the barrel of his shotgun into its neck and pulling the trigger as it fell squealing to the ground.

He continued moving forward, cutting and blasting a path through the scram of bodies, following in the wake of the figure in the navy blue uniform with the gold epaulettes. Maxim enjoyed life on the command deck of the *Macharius*, away from the filth and squalor of the ship's lower decks, where he had begun his erstwhile career aboard the carrier ship, slaving away on a gunnery deck work crew as just another piece of convict-conscript hivetrash. He enjoyed the feel of his crisp clean new uniform, and his private berth in the petty officers' quarters, and the many luxuries and indulgences that often came his way now. He enjoyed all this, and he realized that his continued enjoyment of all these pleasures depended totally on the continued well-being of Flag-lieutenant Hito Ulanti.

Something that smelled of open charnel pits and spat out a stream of acidic bile rose up in front of him, barking incoherently. Maxim fed it the pommel of his chainsword, feeling the studded ridges of the hand-guard smash through gangrenous flesh, rotted teeth and bone. The thing staggered back, mewling loudly, and Maxim shot it three times in the face and throat with an autopistol that he did not remember picking up from one of the many corpses lying at his feet on the floor of the passageway. He pushed on, stomping his heavy boots down on the face of something on the ground that tried to stab up at him with the bone-skewers that grew out of its hands. Disembowelling a renegade who still wore the remnants of the uniform of the Imperial Guard regiment he had deserted from to join the cause of Chaos. Tearing the rebreather mask from the face of a carapace-armoured warrior and watching the disease-bloated features of the once-human thing underneath as it asphyxiated on the relatively clean and unpolluted air of the *Macharius*.

This was the third such battle that he had followed his patron officer into since Ulanti had volunteered to personally lead the defence against the enemy boarding assault, and Maxim soundly cursed all ambitious and over-keen young flag officers. Ulanti would go far, Maxim suspected, and hopefully his faithful petty officer companion and protector Maxim Borusa would go far along with him, but only if he managed to keep his meal-ticket alive in the meantime.

Maxim saw the aristocratic officer artfully gut an enemy boarder with his sabre, but another renegade crewman nearby raised his boltgun towards Ulanti. The big hiveworld ganger lunged ahead, savagely kicking an Imperial armsman forward into the renegade's line of fire. The armsman was torn apart in the burst of bolt shells intended for Ulanti and Maxim emptied the rest of the autopistol clip into the renegade before he could fire again.

Ulanti turned, nodding in silent thanks to his bodyguard protector. Gunshots rang out along the passageway as a second wave of enemy boarders advanced towards them. Maxim pulled Ulanti back into the cover of a recessed maintenance conduit, snatching up the dead renegade's bolter as he did so. Ulanti drew a master-crafted laspistol from his side holster and began firing off a series of carefully-aimed las-shots. Maxim, born and raised in the tunnels of the Stranivar underhive, knew that what counted in situations like this was heavy firepower, and plenty of it. He hefted the bolter, its feel and weight familiar to him from a thousand bloody ganger battles in those same tunnels, and checked its ammo load, pleased to see that he still had almost a full clip of shells. He raised the weapon and began firing, methodically panning it back and forth and pumping shell after shell across the full width of the passageway, whining ricochets zigzagging off metal bulkhead walls and further increasing the chances of any one shot finding a target.

The boltgun's heavy chatter was soon joined by the dull roar of shotguns, a squad of naval armsmen advancing down the passageway to support Maxim and Ulanti. The bodies of enemy boarders began to pile up on the decking but any possibility of retreat was cut off by a second group of *Macharius* defenders seizing and holding the passageway junction to the enemy's rear. The renegade troops were quickly cut down in a withering crossfire, their dying screams of devotion to their Plague Lord master lost in the roaring chorus of shotgun blasts.

The midshipman commander of the armsman squad stood to attention before Ulanti, saluting smartly at the sight of his flag officer rank insignia. 'More of them, sir. Perhaps another three dozen or so, down on the next level. Commissar Kyogen's got them pretty well boxed in, but there's a chance they could try and storm through towards the central magazine.'

'Show me,' said Ulanti, drawing his sabre again and moving off at the head of the squad. Behind him, Maxim spat in disgust, scrabbling about in search of fresh bolter clips amongst the already putrefying bodies of the enemy dead before hurrying off in pursuit of his patron.

THE MASTER OF the *Virulent* turned away from the auspex screen, pleased to see the distant shapes of the Imperial fleet falling away to the rear of his vessel. Accompanying the *Virulent* were the *Pluton*, the *Pagan Voyager* and a handful of surviving escort vessels. The *Heathen Promise* limped off on a different course heading, offering itself - Sirl was delighted to see - as an obvious, alternative target for the wrath of any pursuing enemy ships. Ahead of the fleeing Chaos ships was open space, and the promise of escape into the warp.

It had been Sirl's intention to launch a second wave of boarding craft at the *Macharius*, but, before he could do so, he was beaten off by the marauding beams of the *Drachenfels's* deadly accurate lance turrets. Sirl was a loyal servant of the true powers of the warp, but he was no rage-possessed Khornate madman. He had served Grandfather Nurgle for centuries, and fully intended to serve him for centuries more yet. The ways of the Grandfather were slow and methodical, differing from those of the other Chaos powers, but in the end, all things fell to decay and corruption. The *Macharius* and the *Virulent* would cross paths again, he knew, and, when they did so, he would have his revenge.

After all, he mused to himself, had he not already taken steps to ensure that it would be so?

THE CHAOS THING shuffled through the darkness, leaving the lights and shouts of the enemy search parties behind it. There had been others like it amongst the boarding assault, it knew, others bearing the captain-champion's plague gifts, but somehow it sensed that it was the only one to survive this far.

The cold, metal vaults and passageways of the enemy ship were unfamiliar to it, not at all like those of its own vessel, where the rich, humid atmosphere was thick with the stench of rot and decay, and the decks and walls marked with bright patterns of rust corrosion and weirdly beautiful sprays of poisonous algae and fungi. Still, it knew enough to head downwards into the bowels of the enemy vessel in search of what it needed. Or, rather, in search of what the thing stirring to life inside it needed.

Heat and darkness. Solitude and security. To grow. To thrive.

To fester.

## SEVEN

TIREDDNESS AND EXHAUSTION filled every particle of Leoten Semper's being. He had been on his feet for over thirty hours now, the last ten of those overseeing the aftermath of victory. The Battle of Helia IV was won. The boarding assault on his own vessel had been repulsed, and the honour of the final shots to be fired in anger had gone to *Scipion* as it put four torpedoes into the engine reactors of the retreating *Violator*, bringing the Chaos ship's ran of luck throughout the battle to a sudden and spectacularly explosive end.

Yes, the battle was over, but there was still much to be done. Without their warship protectors, the Chaos troop transports fell easy prey to the Imperial gun batteries and torpedoes, but there was a considerable enemy invasion force already on the planet's surface and digging in hard. The ground war would continue for months yet, and Imperial Guard reinforcements would have to be brought in from elsewhere within the Gothic sector to finally dislodge the enemy presence on Helia IV.

Amongst the surviving Imperial ships, both the *Macharius* and the *Drachenfels* had taken damaging - but not debilitating-hits, while *Scipion* had taken a crippling hit to its warp drive and would remain in orbit above Helia for weeks to come while it underwent vital repairs, in the meantime putting its firepower to use against the Chaos positions on the planet's surface. Of all the Imperium capital ships, only von Blucher's *Graf Orlok* had survived more or less undamaged, and Semper would well imagine what Erwin Ramas's scathing opinion on that particular subject would be.

Rescue shuttles were still bringing in life-pod survivors from the *Tonnant* and the other destroyed Imperium ships, although the diligent search for these survivors was less a mission of mercy and more an act of necessity: *Macharius* and its sister ships all needed fresh blood to replace their own crew casualties suffered during the battle. Meanwhile, repairs to all vessels were already underway, while the Firestorm class frigate *Vengeful* had been despatched in high-speed pursuit of the retreating Chaos fleet, tracking them to the edge of the Helia system where it was hoped that its on-board psyker navigators and astropaths would be able to pick up prophetic hints of the Chaos fleet's eventual destination as it made the jump into warp space.

'We've won a fine victory today, captain, but it's plain to see that you're almost dead on your feet. You should retire to your quarters. Emperor knows you have earned your rest.'

Semper turned, unaware until now that Koba Kyogen was even present on the bridge; he had thought that the ship's commissar was still touring the ship, checking that crew morale was at sufficiently high levels after the recent victory, gathering information and making notes for the inevitable commissar's report that he would later secretly transmit via astropath to Battlefleet Command. Along with Ulanti, Kyogen had led the battle against the enemy boarding assault, and Semper was fairly sure that the stem-faced giant had been on duty for even longer than he had. Sometimes Semper wondered if his vessel's enigmatic chief commissar wasn't some kind of ingeniously-crafted automaton creation of the servants of the Machine God rather than an ordinary flesh-and-blood human.

'You are of course right, comrade commissar,' said Semper agreeably, only too aware that Kyogen's casually-expressed words were probably less of a suggestion and more of a direct command. In all matters relating to security and order aboard an Imperial Navy vessel - including even the well-being of its captain, it seemed - the word of a ship's commissar was law. Semper looked around the bridge, searching for and finding the next most senior present officer in the chain of command.

'Mister Maeler, the bridge is yours. Gentlemen...'

Senior Gunnery Officer Werner Maeler clicked his heels together in understanding in the approved Battlefleet Gothic manner, the other command deck officers saluting in response to their captain's farewell. Semper walked towards the bridge elevator, the waiting trio of veteran armsmen bodyguards falling into step beside him. The elevator doors opened ahead of them, and Semper saw the familiar dark grey robes of the group of figures who stepped out onto the command deck. They were the acolyte servants of the members of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, and amongst them was the tall and hooded figure of their master. His sightless gaze swept the command deck, settling on Semper.

'Adeptus Rapavna,' murmured Semper, nodding his head in deference to the adept. 'What brings my exalted senior astropath here to the command deck?' If Rapavna detected any hint of disapproving censure in his captain's words, he gave no indication.

Amongst the notoriously superstitious crews of the Imperial Navy, it was often considered bad luck to allow psykers onto a vessel's command deck.

'An urgent communication from Battlefleet Command,' came the reply, intoned in an astropath's customary eerie, empty-toned whisper. 'We have new orders, captain. The *Macharius* is to make haste at once to Belatis, where we are ordered to safeguard the evacuation of the Divine Emperor's most loyal and valued servants from that world before the moment of its appointed destruction at the hands of the enemy.'

## INTERLUDE

THE PLANET KILLER moved through the warp with ponderous majesty, like a triumphant Imperial potentate marching at the head of his all-conquering army. Escort vessels swept ahead of it like heralds bearing the news of their master's approach. A phalanx of cruisers and battlecraisers travelled alongside it, flanking it in protective formation. Two battleships and an awesomely ancient and venerable Adeptus Astartes battle barge followed in its wake.

Once known as the *Magna Tyrannis*, the battle barge was older than the Imperium of Mankind and had served throughout the Horus Heresy as the flagship of the Despoiler. Fully five companies of Black Legion Chaos Marines were carried within it, serving as Abaddon's personal praetorian guard. Now re-christened *Harbinger of Doom* by Imperial historians since its fall to Chaos, the battle barge - twin to the one aboard which the final confrontation between the Emperor and Horus had taken place as Abaddon and the Chaos Warmaster's other lieutenants led the assault on the Imperial Palace - was a symbol of the Despoiler's personal power and continuation of the dread legacy of the Warmaster, and the mercifully rare sightings of it beyond the boundaries of the Eye of Terror almost without fail heralded the advent of another major Chaos incursion into Imperium space. Larger than any vessel ever constructed by human hands, the Planet Killer moved implacably forward towards its still distant target. Its crew went about their duties, ever aware that the eye of the Despoiler was upon them, even though it was by no means certain if he was aboard the vessel. Ever cunning and mindful of the danger of a surprise enemy attack or even the possibility of an assassination plot amongst his many ambitious and ruthless underlings, the heir of Horus randomly transferred his command flag between vessels, and at any one time could be aboard the Planet Killer, the *Harbinger of Doom* or either of the two formidably-armed battleships. Only his most trusted inner cadre of servants and acolytes knew his exact location, and there were whispered rumours amongst his fleet admirals and legion commanders that the Despoiler had secretly created a series of homunculus duplicates of himself to further confuse his enemies. The truth of this last legend was so far unknown, but Imperium and Chaos forces alike had been confused on more than one occasion by apparently confirmed reports on the Warmaster's whereabouts, only to then receive conflicting reports of simultaneous sightings of him aboard a different flagship vessel in other warzones many days' warp travel from his previous reported position.

Cunning and resourceful, it was not for nothing that Abaddon the Despoiler had endured for these last ten millennia within the Eye of Terror as the commander of the Traitor Legions and the chosen champion supreme of Chaos Undivided.

Inside the observation blister atop the spike-crowned spire of the Planet Killer's central command tower, its triumvirate of Chaos sorcerer navigators cast their otherworldly gaze out into the warp, mystically divining a path through the shifting currents of the immaterium. The mysteries of the warp held no terrors for them as they did for the human navigators guiding the vessels of the Imperium. They could sense other presences out there in the warp: other navigator-minds belonging to other vessels, and, moving unseen and predatory amongst them, the disembodied daemon-things of the warp. The mindless, bloody thoughts of these entities burned bright in the empyrean as they hungrily and impatiently scratched at the protective warp shields that separated them from the frail and mortal creatures that dared trespass within their realm.

Nearby, the sorcerer-navigators detected the lurking presence of an enemy scout vessel shadowing the Planet Killer fleet on its journey through the warp. It would be a simple thing to issue orders and despatch escort vessels to hunt down and destroy the enemy spy, but the Despoiler had already forbidden such action. It suited him at present to allow the enemy to be aware of the Planet Killer's position. He knew that, hard-pressed on so many different fronts, they could not currently hope to rally a sufficiently large force to try and attack it, and so the knowledge of their own powerlessness must seem all the more terrible to them as they watched the awesomely destructive power of the massive weapon device moving slowly, implacably towards its target.

And, from somewhere out there in the distant reaches of the immaterium, the Planet Killer's sorcerer-navigators could dimly sense the warp of that target. It flickered there on the edges of their mystic warp-sight perception, but growing brighter and more distinct as they closed towards it. The navigators of the Imperium used the guiding call of their weakling Emperor's astronomican to find their way within the warp, but the pilots of the Despoiler's Planet Killer vessel used a different kind of beacon to guide them to their destination.

Fear.

The terror of billions of human minds. The blind panic of an entire world's population, imprinting itself on the psychically-sensitive stuff of the immaterium and manifesting itself as a bright, dense dwarf star of bitter fear shining in the void.

The minds of the people of Belatis called out into the warp in uncomprehending fear against the injustice of their imminent destruction, and it was that same fear which guided the instrument of their destruction to them.

## PART FOUR

# EYE OF DESTRUCTION

### ONE

THE MORTAR SHELLS fell out of the grey, cloud-shrouded Belatis skies, impacting into the muddy earth of the Arbites' precinct-house courtyard and exploding amongst a crew of labourers.

'Blessed Helena's holy teats!' cursed Vannan Korte, taking the name of one of the Adepta Sororitas's greatest heroine-saints in vain and ducking for cover behind the tracks of a Rhino transport as the shower of mud, filth, shrapnel and body parts rained down around him.

He ran from cover, knowing from the experience of the last few frantic, chaos-filled days that he had about twenty seconds' grace to reach other cover before the next round of mortar shells blasted into the precinct compound.

'Mahan,' he called into his helmet vox-caster as he ran, 'what are your men doing up in those wall turrets? Comparing their favourite passages from the Books of Judgement? Take your boot to your spotters' arses and get a targeting fix on the location of those mortar units!'

'We're trying, Marshal Secundus, but they're hiding out in the hab-zones to the east, amongst those bombed-out ruins, and they're moving their mortars every few rounds, before our spotters can zero in on them,' came back the crackling reply on the helmet's vox-unit, strain and tiredness sounding clear in the voice of the Arbites squad commander. Mahan was the youngest and least experienced of the marshal's lieutenants, and Korte had originally opposed his promotion, arguing privately with Byzantane that, promising as he was, the young agri-worlder Arbitrator wasn't yet ready for squad command. Grudgingly, he had to admit that, as in so many things, the marshal's judgement had been right. In the last few weeks, Mahan's performance had been outstanding, often surpassing that of other, more senior squad commanders. He had taken command of the precinct house wall defences, repulsing several full-scale mob attacks on the fortress battlements and offering an umbrella of effective covering fire to the evacuation airlifts that arrived daily from the other Imperium outposts across the planet.

Not, of course, that he was about to tell any of this to Mahan himself. As second-in-command, it was his duty to be the holy terror of the marshal's junior commanders. And besides, he smiled to himself, recognising the familiar biases of a born hiveworlder, he'd be Emperor-damned if he was going to be putting any compliments the way of some dumb hick of an agri-worlder cattle-worrier. 'Then keep at them. Duty to the Emperor demands results, not excuses,' growled Korte into the vox-unit microphone.

A warning shout from a nearby trooper alerted him to the whistling whine of the next round of approaching mortar shells. Korte threw himself forward, joining a group of Arbitrators crouching behind a sandbagged lee-wall just as the mortar shells struck, exploding against the solid, reinforced rockcrete walls of the precinct fortress's inner blockhouse or churning up the mud of the outer courtyard. Almost instantly, the macro-cannon turrets of the wall defences spoke in reply, hurling adamantium-tipped high-explosive shells back at the mortar battery's estimated position. A few seconds later, and there came the roaring blast of their impact somewhere amongst the ruins to the east, followed by a series of smaller explosions.

Korte and one of the other Arbitrators - Dolan, who had been with the marshal since the pacification of the genestealer infestation of Tannen's World - exchanged glances, nodding in unspoken agreement.

Secondary explosions, thought Korte. We hit something, alright. Definitely at least some of those mortars. Maybe even an ammo dump into the bargain. Not bad, Arbitrator Mahan. At least for a dumb agri-worlder cattle-worrier.

'Fine work, Mahan,' he spoke into the vox-unit, 'but keep looking. Find and destroy whatever's left of those mortars. There's a flight of grav-hoppers on their way to us from the evacuation of Precinct Tertius, and I don't want to spend the rest of an afternoon clearing the landing zones of wreckage and body parts again.'

'Understood, marshal secundus,' came the gunnery commander's calm-voiced reply.

With the mortars at least temporarily silenced, Korte stood up, taking in the scene around the precinct house's outer courtyard. Baton-wielding proctor-sergeants bawled in unison, directing convict work labourers to clear the courtyard of bodies and wreckage. The chaingang work-crews crept nervously out of whatever cover they had been able to find, terrified that at any second the skies would again drop another deadly hail of razor-edged shrapnel down upon them. One of the crews fought the blaze from a burning, open-topped Rhino transport variant that had taken a direct hit from a stray incendiary round, and the smouldering wreckage of one of the local planetary defence force grav-hoppers still lay where it had crashed nose-first into the western quadrant of the courtyard, shot down by ground fire after almost completing its third strafing run of the Arbites' compound. From somewhere above the low ceiling of rain clouds came the thin, threatening drone of high altitude flyer engines. Korte and Dolan exchanged glances, both of them vainly searching the grey, formless skies above Madina for clues to the flyers' location and identity. 'One of ours, or one of theirs?' asked Dolan.

'These days, does it make any difference?' shrugged Korte, with dismissive contempt. Three hours ago, they had watched a flyer formation make a textbook and apparently devastating low-altitude air-strike on ground targets amongst the industrial suburbs to the north of the capital. Who the flyers were, and what their targets had been, was still a mystery to the defenders of the Arbites fortress.

Korte looked out past the walls of the fortress, seeing the dark shape of the rock of the regent's palace visible through the curtain of rainfall, the rain lighting up the enormous, looming edifice as it sparked off the crackling defence shield that surrounded the seat of power of the planetary governor of Belatis. Even from this distance, and even through the sound-blanketing barrier of rain,

he could hear the sounds of artillery fire. He raised his binoculars, wiping the lenses free of dripping rainwater. The range-finder device zoomed in on the regent's palace, allowing Korte to see the spattering of artillery fire impacting harmlessly against the barrier of the defence shield.

As long as they keep firing at their beloved governor-regent then at least that means they won't be firing at us, Korte consoled himself as he thought again of just how sickeningly quickly events here on Belatis had overtaken them all. It was scarcely two months since the unexpectedly premature end of the dry season and the beginnings of this, the harsh and unforgiving monsoon months; scarcely two months since the fearful discovery in that now thankfully-obliterated underground chamber beneath the Rook, but in that time the whole of Belatis had slid into anarchy and civil war with a speed and viciousness that had been truly terrible to behold.

Korte watched another round of artillery fire strike against the palace defence shield. Several shells overshot their target - Emperor alone knows how the gunners could miss a target that massive, thought Korte - and landed with disastrous effect amongst the thousands of refugees sheltering in futile hope amongst the surrounding ruins, under the falsely protective shadow of the palace rock.

The whole place is going to the warp and the warp's welcome to it, thought Korte sourly, with a bitterness that he knew came from helplessness and his own angry reaction against what was now the inevitability of total defeat. The sooner the marshal gets us out of here, the better. Emperor knows we've done everything here we could for these poor wretches.

## TWO

MUFFLED BY THE defence shield and the invisible nullfields that screened off the otherwise open balconies from the outside world, the sounds of the civil war tearing Belatis apart hardly penetrated the throne room of the regent's palace. Indeed, thought Byzantane, you wouldn't know that their world was only days away from extinction, the way these fools pratted on, still vying for petty privileges and personal advantage as their world died around them.

'What you must understand, honoured marshal, is that his majesty the governor-regent is not yet ready to take leave of his beloved homeworld. A world which, I hasten to add, the Emperor in his divine wisdom has entrusted to the stewardship of the governor-regent and his family for these last four hundred years.'

What you really mean, thought Byzantane, staring impassively at the tall and patrician figure of First Security Minister Judda Kale, is that you've persuaded the fat fool that it's his noble duty to remain here until the very end, because you and your kind still haven't finished plundering your beloved homeworld for every piece of booty that you need to set yourselves up for the rest of your parasitic and well-pampered lives on another world. Preferably one far from any warzones and any troubling memories of Belatis and the ghosts of its inhabitants.

So far, the first security minister had almost filled the holds of one orbiting transport with property of the household of the governor-regent; property which included not only the contents of the now-emptied vaults of the regent's treasury, but whatever other loot and valuables that Kale's security thugs could plunder from elsewhere amongst Belatis's museums, shrines and treasure houses. The question of how many of their fellow doomed Belatisites could have been carried to safety inside those cargo holds was apparently not one that occurred to either the security minister or his accomplices.

'I understand the governor-regent's desire to remain here with his people for as long as possible,' said Byzantane, pointedly addressing the occupant of the governor-regent's throne rather than figure of Judda Kale standing before the throne dais. 'Still, as a servant of the Emperor it is also his duty to survive, since the Emperor in his mercy has commanded all his most valued servants here on Belatis be spared from the power of this new enemy weapon. As the most senior agent of the Emperor's law here on Belatis, it falls to me to ensure that the evacuation of the Emperor's faithful subjects proceeds without delay. I am here today to warn the governor-regent that he cannot delay his departure any longer. The Imperial Guard forces of the 48th Valetta and the 123rd Tyre-Minos regiments are already embarking aboard their transports. My Adeptus Arbites garrison is the only Imperium force remaining on Belatis, and I have just received word that we too have been ordered to pull out.'

Byzantane paused, looking directly at the portly figure of the governor-regent sitting on his throne. 'If the governor-regent wishes to remain here along with the rest of his subjects to face the arrival of the Despoiler's terror weapon, or to hold out to the last against the renegades currently laying waste to his capital, then I commend his majesty's loyalty to his planet and people, but I tell him now that he shall do so alone and without the protection of the Adeptus Arbites and the Imperial Navy.'

Almost on cue, a heavy salvo impacted against the palace defence shield, sending tremors running through the stonework of the ancient building and causing many of those present - courtiers and the anonymous faces of Belatis minor-ranking nobility, clustering to the presence of the governor-regent in the knowledge that he was their sole chance of escape - to cast nervous glances around them. Clearly, few amongst this aristocratic elite shared their governor's apparent desire to see their world's death agonies out to the bitter end, and most if not all of them already wished they were aboard one of those orbiting transports. The dank and confined holds and compartments of an Imperial transport were a poor substitute for the grand and spacious fineries of the governor-regent's palace, but at least they were safely out of reach of the cultist artillery barrage.

'We thank the marshal for his warning, but we remind him that we too hold adeptus rank equal to his own, and that as His Divine Majesty's governor of this world, the final order to leave it and abandon it to the enemy must come from this palace and not from the Arbites' courthouse.' The governor-regent's strangely thin and reedy voice rang through the high-ceiling throne room, and he glanced nervously around him as he spoke, seeking encouragement from those around him.

Byzantane fought down an outburst of angry frustration. Even now, with his world just days away from destruction, this fat fool wanted to play politics, to put on a show for the assembled nobles that he would not be so easily dictated to by the Imperium.

Before Byzantane could react, however, a dark blue-habited figure stepped forward from the ranks of courtiers near the throne. In instinctive recognition of the simple yet distinctive robes of a member of the Adepta Sororitas, the nobles and guards stepped aside to let her pass.

'The governor-regent is of course correct, but his adept rank is that of the order of Adeptus Civitas. As a member of the Adeptus Arbitres, the marshal is of the order of the Adeptus Militaris. In all situations pertaining to war against the enemies of the Imperium of Mankind, it is the Emperor's holy will and the command of the High Council of Terra that the word of the members of the Adeptus Militaris take precedence over that of all others.'

The silver-haired member of the Sisterhood of the Adepta Sororitas bowed to the planetary governor and stepped back, casting a brief glance over at Byzantane. The Arbitres marshal nodded to her in silent thanks, glad of the presence here of at least one other agent of the Imperium. Sister Apponia belonged to the Order Famulous of the Adepta Sororitas, assigned by the Ministorum to organise and maintain the governor-regent's household, serving as an advisor to the lord of Belatis and, should he require it, a constant reminder of his subservience to the higher authority of the Imperium.

Vittas Sarro was not a bad man, Byzantane thought: he was in his own way a loyal enough servant of the Emperor, but he was a weak and foolish one, subject to petty vanities and too dependent on the opinions and manipulations of others. Others such as First Minister Judda Kale. Or the stolid, glowering figure of General Brod, commander of what was left of Belatis's planetary defence forces, who glared in open hostility at Byzantane from across the floor of the throne room. Or, if the word of agents that Byzantane had amongst the palace staff was to be believed, the figure sitting on the lesser throne beside that of the governor-regent's. Even as Byzantane watched, Sarro leaned over, accepting both a goblet of wine and a few whispered words from his beloved sister, the alluring Lady Malissa.

Installed in the place of the ruthlessly expunged clan of the rebel Lord Tarsus, the Sarros had been the rulers of Belatis for the past four hundred years, each Sarro planetary governor carefully adding the word "regent" to his title in acknowledgement to the Emperor, the true lord of Belatis and in whose name they continued to rule with the approval and protection of the Imperium. The House of Sarro had served the Emperor well in those four hundred years, their loyalty recorded in the frescoes of the dubiously over-heroic battle deeds of previous governor-regents which decorated the walls of the throne room. All around were epic battle scenes of the Sarros' ancestors routing the Tarsus rebels or defending Belatis from foul alien attackers, but the bloodline had clearly degenerated over the four centuries, and statues and noble portraits of Sarro's honoured ancestors gazed down on the governor's throne in what might have been stern disapproval of its present incumbent.

Sarro gulped nervously at the wine goblet proffered by his sister, and Byzantane added likely intemperance to the governor-regent's many failings. Studying the Lady Malissa - her graceful patrician features, her obvious shrewd intelligence necessarily masked by the dictates of court protocol - as she stroked her brother's face comfortingly, Byzantane again cursed the local hereditary customs, wondering again if Belatis's slide into anarchy and civil war would have been so steeply rapid had it been the Lady Malissa and not her younger, weaker brother who had ascended to the governor-regent's throne after the death of their father eight years ago.

'Can the situation really be so bad?' stammered Sarro, draining the last of the wine. 'We can still call in more troops to maintain order and defend the palace. As governor-regent, the people will look to me for leadership in this dark hour. It is my duty to remain here with them for as long as possible. They will want to know that, though our world may soon be gone, its memory and spirit will live on, for as long as the House of Sarro itself endures.'

No, not a bad man, thought Byzantane. Just weak and foolish. And completely deluded.

'More troops?' asked Byzantane, struggling to temper the scathing tone of his voice. 'From where, my lord? Your barracks are empty. Your entire troop reserves are either deployed in the field or have abandoned their posts. Many of them, whole regiments, even, have gone over to the side of the enemy.'

Byzantane broke off here, sparing a withering glance to General Brod and his adjutants; it was now apparent that the ranks of the planetary defence force had been successfully infiltrated months or even years ago by Chaos cultists and sympathisers. As word of the impending disaster leaked out amongst the people of Belatis, more and more Chaos cults had emerged from hiding in almost every major population centre across the planet's surface, spreading fear and dissent amongst a populace already terrified by the first whispered, horrified rumours of their world's imminent destruction. Many of the first local defence force units despatched to quell the cult-inspired uprisings had in fact sided with the enemies that they had been sent to destroy, their officers and NCOs now known to have been the corrupted followers of the powers of the warp. In other units it had been the rank and file troops who rebelled, executing their officers and opening their armouries to the ever-swelling ranks of the followers of Chaos. The cult leaders preached that only those that swore themselves to the Dark Powers would be spared when the Planet Killer hung in orbit over their heads and the wrath of the Despoiler descended upon their doomed world. The terrified inhabitants of Belatis had flocked to the cause of Chaos in their millions, desperate to grasp at any chance of survival, when faith in the Emperor apparently now offered none. The wave of defections and conversions to the side of Chaos spread at a terrifying rate amongst the population, starting primarily amongst the planetary defence force.

At Byzantane's order, Korte had carried out an investigation amongst the higher echelon ranks of the governor-regent's armies, identifying sixteen officers on Brod's command staff, including the general's own second-in-command, whose incompetence and laxity had contributed to the army's failure to contain the situation. Justice for those sixteen had been swift and summary, but the investigation had been necessarily hurried, and Byzantane was troubled by a worrying suspicion that there might still be Chaos agents hiding amongst the planetary defence force command staff.

And perhaps higher than that, whispered a voice inside him, giving rise to a second even greater and more worrying suspicion as he looked round the throne room and studied the faces of the assembled ranks of the great and the good of Belatis's aristocracy and government. Here was not the time and place to act on those suspicions, he knew. Later, when they were underway in the warp and he had them all isolated aboard an Adeptus Arbitres strike cruiser, would be the time to start asking questions about how

Belatis had descended into anarchy so easily and so quickly; how much was due to laxity and incompetence, which, as those sixteen executed PDF command officers could testify were themselves considered crimes against the Emperor in the eyes of the stern guardians of his Law, and how much was due to a crime far more heinous.

Treason. Betrayal. Heresy and connivance with the powers of the warp. Crimes for which there could never be a great enough punishment.

But first Byzantane knew he had to get everyone here off this world. First must come the evacuation, and, only after that, possible judgement and punishment. Stifling his natural anger and frustration, he adopted a more conciliatory tone, remembering an expression used by the hunters of his homeworld as they patiently lay in wait, sometimes for days on end, watching over the traps and snares they laid by the game-trails and watering holes of the dense forests that covered the face of Skyre.

*First the bait, then the blade.*

Byzantane looked at the figure occupying the throne chair. 'All here know you to be a true and faithful servant of the Emperor, honoured Governor-Regent Sarro. Be assured that that you will be accorded all the honours and tribute due to you as this world's Emperor-appointed guardian. Tell me what you wish, honoured governor-regent, and I will make it so.'

### THREE

'I TELL YOU, I swear it sounded like Kerner.'

The other two planetary defence force troopers peered cautiously through the bunker's forward observation slit, scanning the shifting mists that covered the rain-soaked mud in front of their position and listening to the eerie silence that enveloped the scene. Bodies, dressed in the now familiar black-cloaked garb of the Chaos cultists and splattered with mud and blood, lay scattered around everywhere outside. The three PDF troopers had held out for four days so far. They still had food and water, and ammunition supplies for the bunker's heavy bolter turrets were still plentiful, but after days of probing enemy attacks, their nerves were shredded, and resolve and determination were at a premium. The bunker was part of the ring of fortifications guarding the powerful defence laser batteries and missile silos based here in the hills above Madina, protecting the capital from orbital attack, but their communications had been cut two days ago, and they had no other means of communicating with their central command point or even the nearest neighbouring bunker that was probably no more than two hundred metres away. Occasionally, they heard chattering bursts of heavy bolter fire sounding through the mists - proof that they were not the only defenders still left - but they had not heard even that in the last few hours.

Maron, the eldest and most experienced of them, scanned the mists one more time before drawing back into cover again, looking at the young look-out in clear irritation. 'I don't hear anything. Whatever you heard - if you even heard anything, mind - it wasn't Kerner. Forget about Kerner. Kerner's dead. Or deserted. Either way, he's not coming back to help us.'

'Kerner wouldn't abandon us!' protested his younger comrade. 'He promised us he would come back with reinforcements!'

'Aye, and perhaps he even meant it at the time,' said Maron, 'But maybe it was a different story if he actually did make it past those black-cloaked bastards. Kerner's got a wife and two kids down in Madina, and he probably figured he'd rather face the end with them than with me or either of you two fools. Hell, I don't even blame him. I've got family too, back home in the outskirts of Rabas. That's another continent away from here, but if I thought that I even had half a chance of getting back there in time, you think I'd still be sitting here with you?'

Maron shook his head in disgust, and then checked himself. The young trooper had fought well over the last few days, but he was barely older than Maron's own lad back home. He was frightened, and tired. All three of them in this bunker were going to die, if not now at the hands of the Chaos cultists hiding somewhere out there in the mists, then in a few days' time when the enemy fleet and its terrible world-destroying weapon arrived in the Belatis system. Perhaps, thought Maron, he should be easier on the lad.

Perhaps—

'Out there! There's someone in the mists! It's Kerner! Emperor's oath, it's really him!'

Alerted by the other young recruit's excited shout, Maron snatched up his lasgun, using its infra-red sighting scope to pierce the veil of mist. He saw a figure emerging out of the distant tree-line, staggering towards the bunker. It was wearing the bloodstained blue serge uniform of the Belatis planetary defence force, and seemed to be limping from a leg-wound. Maron retrained the scope settings, zooming in on the blood-smearred features of the figure's face. It was Corporal Kerner, alright - through the scope, Maron could see Kerner's mouth moving, and from inside the bunker he could hear his comrade's cries for help, pleading with them not to fire upon him - but still, something about the scene made the veteran trooper hesitate. Something, a sense of disquieting doubt, called out in warning to him.

Then, suddenly, there was the sound of crackling bursts of gunfire, bullets and las-bursts throwing up small gouts of muddy earth in the area around Kerner. Maron saw dark figures moving amongst the cover of the tree-line, and the soldier in him reacted instantly and instinctively.

'Covering fire! Give him covering fire!'

One of the other troopers manned the bolters, sending a stream of heavy calibre death into the cultists' hiding place, expertly panning the twin-mounted weapons back and forth along the tree-line for maximum effect. Maron watched, nodding in approval. At the start of the dry season this one had been a raw recruit, but the last two months of fighting, as Belatis tore itself apart around them, had turned the young trooper into something close to a seasoned veteran.

Maron took aim with his lasgun, sending precise and carefully judged shots into any black-robed shape foolish enough to show itself to his gunsights. An urgent hammering sounded from the thick, armoured door at the end of the cramped bunker space. Kerner, pleading to be let in. One of the youngsters moved to disarm the booby-trapped door systems and let him in. Maron readied his lasgun, expecting the cultists to make a suicidal charge across the open ground and towards the bunker door as it

opened, but instead he saw them falling back into the sheltering shadows of the surrounding forest.

Again, that mental voice of disquieting doubt called out to him in warning. Too late, he turned seeing the youngster already opening the door.

Seeing Kerner in the doorway.

Seeing the bloody marks of the eight-pointed Chaos sigil that had been carved into the flesh of his face.

Seeing the laspistol in his hand; seeing as he raised and fired it at point-blank range into the chest of the youngster who had opened the door for him.

Seeing the rows of explosive charges strapped to Kerner's chest; seeing the trigger device gripped in Kerner's other hand.

Maron reached for his lasgun, knowing that he would never be able to aim and fire in time; praying that, when the end came in a few days' time for his wife and children, it would be just as sudden and painless as this.

KHOISAN THE FACELESS, champion of Chaos Undivided, watched in grim satisfaction as the aftermath of the explosion swept across the clearing, mud and debris raining down in its wake. Around him, the line of black-cloaked cultists crept out of cover. Khoisan barely spared them a glance. They were mere rabble, barely fit to serve amongst the lowest dregs of the Despoiler's armies, but here on this world they were adequate for the purpose, just as the captured prisoner had in the end adequately carried out his purpose.

The fool had willingly carried out his task, believing in doing so that his death would ensure that his family would be spared in the coming catastrophe. Khoisan almost laughed at the thinking behind such folly, knowing that all around him were other fools who believed the same: who believed that in serving the cause of Chaos they would be saved when the Planet Killer arrived. It was the will of the Despoiler that all on this world be annihilated, and that was the purpose of the mission Khoisan was now on.

He raised a hand, signalling to a cultist nearby armed with a grenade launcher. Seconds later, a bright starburst shell exploded high overhead, summoning the main body of cultist troops gathered on the lower slopes of the hillside.

The last bunker in this section of the defence chain was gone. The way ahead to the laser batteries and silos was clear.

## FOUR

FOR THE THIRD time in as many hours, the wave of black-cloaked cultists charged across the square. And, for the third time in as many hours, they were met with a withering hail of fire from the defenders behind the makeshift barricades.

From his position atop the shattered stump of what had once been a tall statue of the blessed Sebastian Thor, Confessor Johann Devane directed his flock's volleys of gunfire, heedless of enemy snipers. "Holy Terrors" the commanders of the Imperial Guard disparagingly called the Frateris Militia, believing the religious-inspired armed laity of the Imperial Faith to be as much a danger to themselves and any other Imperial forces they were serving alongside as they were to the enemy. Still, right now, Devane would be glad to match and compare his flock's resolve and fighting spirit with that of any regiment in the entire Imperial Guard. 'Keep at them!' he exhorted. 'Let them draw close and fire only when you're sure of your target! If you run out of ammunition, take up the nearest weapon at hand and join your brethren amongst the second line of defence!'

A stub gun round whined off the arm of the overturned statue behind Devane. The Imperial confessor looked around, seeing a planetary defence force trooper in a uniform dyed black with smeared mud and engine oil kneeling on a pile of shattered masonry and readjusting his aim for the follow-up shot. Devane raised his own autogun and fired. The deserter screamed and fell off the pile, clutching at his face. With no shortage of targets to choose from, Devane kept firing, sending short, precise bursts of bullets into the body of heretic after heretic.

Devane saw a hail of Molotov cocktails sail up from the cultist attack wave, the missiles breaking in fiery explosions amongst the ranks of the defenders. Fearful screams and the smell of burning flesh rose up from behind the barricades. Devane sighted on one of the firebomb-throwing cultists, a burst of devastatingly accurate autogun fire exploding the missile just a moment after it left the thrower's hand. A blanket of burning promethium drenched the cultist and those around him, setting alight their robes and transforming them in seconds into living, screaming fire manikins. In their terror and pain, they ran blindly amongst their own ranks, setting others alight and spreading the fear and confusion even further into the cultists' attack.

'See? The fires of the Emperor's wrath consume them!' called Devane, knowing all too well how positively the zealots of the Frateris Militia responded to such fire-and-brimstone rhetoric. 'Shine the burning radiance of the Emperor's glory upon them! Cast them back into the darkness of the warp!'

Slight of figure and clean-shaven, Devane knew he little resembled the fiery, wild-eyed and bearded figures of the confessor of the Imperial Faith familiar from so many stirring Ecclesiarchy myths and histories. Yet in the eyes of his flock, he stood taller and more awesome than the fifty-metre tall statue that still guarded the main archway entrance to the cathedral square. A month ago, when he was still a lowly and anonymous preacher in one of the rural parishes far to the south of the capital, he had gathered his flock together and told them that if they were doomed to die, then it would be better to wait for the end in the sanctuary of the great Ecclesiarchy cathedral in Madina, where they could spend their final days in prayer and contemplation before finally commending their souls to the Emperor. This pilgrimage to the capital had been long and danger-fraught. Many had fallen along the way, killed in the violent chaos that had enveloped all of Belatis, but many more had joined them, drawn by this unknown country preacher's quiet intensity and the promise of a safe and holy refuge in which to wait out their final days, and when Devane finally arrived in Madina five days ago, it was at the head of something by then resembling a small army of pilgrim followers. If they had expected to find the planetary capital, the very seat of Imperial authority here on Belatis, exempt from the disorder that ruled elsewhere, they were soon disappointed.

Armed gangs of looters and bandits roamed the city, preying on anyone who crossed their path. Much of the city was in flames,

with loyalist and renegade PDF forces conducting artillery duels over the ruins. The governor-regent's palace was still intact, protected by an impenetrable defence shield and guarded by the elite troops of the palace guard, but the rule of the Emperor's law on Belatis now extended no further than the main Arbites citadel-courthouse and the Administratum buildings and dormitories clustered close within its protective shadow. When he and his followers reached the cathedral, they found it under the fragile protection of a makeshift, defence force mainly composed of aged, non-combatant Ministorum priests, keen but disorganized Frateris Militia laity and nervous young acolyte adepts who barely knew which way up to hold a lasgun. There had also been a small force of Adeptus Arbites, but they had orders to pull out and rejoin the main courthouse garrison on the far side of the city prior to final evacuation. There were reports that heretic cultists were descending on the capital from all directions, and the necessary decision had been made to concentrate all remaining Imperial forces on the defence of the Arbites courthouse and the governor-regent's palace.

The Ecclesiarch cathedral, isolated from the other two remaining pillars of Imperial authority on the far side of the river that divided Madina, would have to fend for itself in these final few days of the planet's life. As would the tens of thousands of pilgrim refugees who had flocked to the cathedral in search of sanctuary.

Devane, who had answered the calling of the Ministorum priesthood after almost twenty years service as an officer in the Divine Emperor's armies, the 415th Mordian Iron Guard, no less - the famous "Old Indefatigables" who had forged themselves a legendary reputation during the months of the bloody climax of the Karnak Crusade - now found himself, thirteen years after being released from service in the Imperial Guard, once again called upon to take up arms against the enemies of the Emperor. Immediately, he had begun putting his military experience to use. The huge cathedral square, with so many entrances and approaches leading into it was, he quickly realised, indefensible given the quality and quantity of troops and weapons that he had. He had ordered a barricade circle to be built round the towering cathedral edifice, giving the defenders sheltering behind it a clear field of fire across the open expanse of the surrounding square. Statues and monolithic plinths honouring some of the Imperial Faith's greatest heroes and martyrs were ruthlessly pulled down and dragged into position; vehicles were overturned and employed as barricade building blocks, the contents of their fuel tanks carefully drained and stored away as part of an arsenal of hundreds of guerrilla warfare firebombs. Even the pews, pulpits and choir transepts inside the cathedral great hall had been ripped out and used to build the barricade.

The Arbitrators had left what weapons and ammunition they could, and the cathedral had its own hidden weapons stores, but neither were enough to completely arm his rag-tag army of defenders or fend off their attackers. And so Devane had had to improvise.

Every third defender was armed with some kind of gun, typically a lasgun or autogun, although the Arbitrators had blessedly left them with a few precious autocannons and heavy bolters to supplement the Frateris Militia cache of flamers and heavy stubbers. When one of the gun-armed defenders fell in battle, one of his unarmed brethren took up his weapon and assumed the dead man's place on the barricades. So far, this strategy was working, and Devane knew that there were men on the barricades whose weapons had been in the hands of four or five previous owners in just the last two days. Meanwhile, those defenders without guns were armed with any kind of close-combat weapon that came to hand, and it was their duty to form the secondary line of defence, engaging in bloody bouts of hand-to-hand combat with any cultist attackers who made it through the hail of fire and attempted to break through the barricades.

And, behind them, was a third and final line of defenders. Women and children, the wounded and the elderly, armed with firebombs or even cobblestones torn up from the surface of the paved square, hurled a rain of missiles over the barricades and onto the heads of their attackers.

These people - his new-found flock - would fight to the death, Devane realised. When they were overwhelmed on the barricades, as they surely soon must be, they would fall back and try to hold the gateway entrances to the cathedral building itself, and when the heretics broke through those, then they would defend the cathedral corridor by corridor, chapel by chapel, crypt by crypt, laying down their lives in defence of the House of the Emperor Divine and in defiance of his heretic enemies. They understood their lives were forfeit, Devane knew; now they wished only for their deaths to have meaning, for by sacrificing their lives in the service of the Emperor they would be assured an honoured place in the afterlife, seated by the Emperor's right hand.

Devane saw the remains of the heretic attack wave break against the barricades, the second rank of defenders sheltering behind the barricades rushing forward to meet them. The battle descended into a series of vicious hand-to-hand struggles along the tops of the barricades. Devane saw a cultist with a brace of frag and Krak grenades strapped to his body climb the barricade and throw himself down upon the defenders on the other side, detonating in their midst in an explosion that killed or injured more than a dozen and blew a clear breach in that section of the barricade ring.

A human bomb, he grimly realised. They had been seeing more and more of these devastating living weapons in the last few days as the planet's end approached and the suicidal mania grew in the minds of all those still trapped upon it. There were those amongst his own laity who would gladly accept such a death in the name of the Emperor, Devane knew, but as a former Imperial Guard officer his every instinct was repelled at the thought. In the Emperor's armies, only the worst kind of penal regiment scum - criminals, deserters, cowards and heretics - were used in this way, and Devane could not countenance employing such a tactic using the Emperor's faithful and devout servants.

Elsewhere, he saw a young boy wearing the robes of a novice acolyte of the Ministorum - the lad was barely old enough to have started shaving, Devane judged - expertly bayoneting a tattoo-faced cultist, spearing the heretic madman through the heart with one well-judged thrust. The cultist's lifeless body tumbled away down the barricade slope to join the growing mound of black-garbed corpses heaped there.

Another cultist, roaring in defiance, his giant body streaming with blood from half a dozen near-mortal wounds, scaled the barricade, swinging a razor-edged, machine-tooled hand-axe and decapitating the Frateris Militia defender that rose up to meet him. Then, at the top of the barricade, a hurled cobblestone smashed into his head. His skull crashed, he fell amongst the waiting

defenders on the other side of the barricade. Bellowing in pain, he was immediately set upon by a pack of women and children who savagely beat him to death with clubs and bloodied rocks.

Devane drew his old Imperial Guard chainsword and threw himself into the fray, hacking and slashing into the press of black-cloaked bodies and shouting whatever stirring exhortations that he could remember from the more bloodthirsty passages of the Approved Litanies of Devotion.

'Father confessor, beware!' shouted one of the frateris in warning, suddenly throwing himself in front of Devane and taking a heretic sword thrust intended for the Imperial preacher. Devane swung his chainsword in fury, severing the heretic's sword arm with his first blow and laying open their chest with the return sweep. The heretic - a woman, Devane saw, with a shock - fell away with a gurgling death-scream.

Devane knelt down over the dying frateris brother, recognising the man as one of the group of sharecropper farmers who had joined the pilgrimage at the end of the first week of their journey. Devane realised with regret that he had never learned the man's name.

'Father... My wife and children, my sister's family too,' choked the dying man, reaching with a wavering hand to grasp the burnished silver medallion image of the Emperor Ascendant that Devane wore round his neck. 'They are sheltering inside the cathedral, father...'

'The Emperor will watch over them,' Devane assured him, recognising the helpless fear in the dying man's eyes, pressing his hands to the medallion image. 'As will I,' he added, seeing the man's features relax in contentment just seconds before the moment of death.

'Walk in the light of the Emperor Divine, brother,' he intoned quietly, touching the medallion image to the dead man's lips and forehead in the traditional Blessing of the Fallen.

The Imperial preacher took up his chainsword again, keen to take out his rising rage on the Emperor's enemies, but all around him he saw that this latest phase of the siege of the Ecclesiarchy cathedral was coming to an end. What was left of the cultist attack wave was fleeing back in retreat across the cathedral square. Gunfire from the barricade defenders chased them on their way.

Devane understood the gunners' sense of bloody-handed triumph and desire to punish their enemies further, but there were other more tactically vital considerations to be made.

'Cease fire!' he bellowed. 'Conserve ammunition! Don't waste your shots. Save them for the next time they come at us!'

Other voices took up the cry all along the barricade lines, and the ragged volleys of gunfire quickly died away; silence suddenly and shockingly descending on the open expanse of the corpse-strewn square.

Quickly, while the surrounding cultists were still reeling from the failure of the latest attack, packs of small, nimble figures scurried up over the tops of the barricades and began foraging amongst the carpet of dead and dying heretics. They began collecting weapons and ammunition from amongst the enemy dead, despatching any wounded and still-living heretics they came across with quick thrusts of the sharp-bladed knives they carried.

They moved fast, trying to keep one step ahead of the enemy snipers who were now beginning to open fire at them from the far side of the square. They were women, children, the walking wounded and any other non-combatants who had volunteered for this perilous but very necessary task; better to risk their lives to a sniper's bullet, ran the cold-blooded tactical doctrine, than that of an able-bodied fighting man. Devane knew the tactic was a good one, but still it sickened him to have to put it into practice.

Children, he thought to himself, wondering how much further the planet-wide madness would go as Belatis's final extinction loomed ever closer. Now we are using children to wage our wars.

Suddenly a chattering stream of heavy stubber fire ripped across the square, shattering cobblestones, making corpses jump and dance under the impact of high-speed bullets into flesh and cutting across the path of one of the small running figures. The child screamed and fell, and kept screaming as it writhed in agony amongst the corpses, in clear view of the enemy snipers. A second burst from the same weapon would have mercifully finished the victim off, but Devane knew that mercy was not something the enemy was capable of.

It was a trap, he knew. The injured child was bait designed to lure others out into the snipers' sights, and, even as Devane watched, two frateris brethren scrambled over the barricades and ran to the child's aid. Devane cursed aloud their foolishness and at the same time offered a silent prayer for their protection. Neither man was truly a fool, Devane saw. They ran in crazy zigzag patterns, defying the snipers an easy shot at a linear-moving target, and made sure to keep their distance from each other, forcing the snipers to choose between them. It was a brave and bold action, well thought-out and properly executed.

It almost worked.

The first man went down five metres short of the child's position. A las-bolt caught him high in the left shoulder and spun him. He staggered, fell to the ground and attempted to rise again, but by that time the other snipers too had found him. Seen from the barricades, he looked like a puppet being jerked on its strings as the volleys of bullets and las-blasts plucked and pulled at his flesh.

The second man took advantage of the gruesome display his comrade was performing for the enemy's entertainment. He ran to the child, scooping him up into his arms and turned to run back towards the barricades, taking only a few steps before the snipers tired of their sport with their other victim and turned on him instead.

Bullets and las-blasts ricocheted off the cobbles around him. He tried zigzagging again to evade the snipers' aim, but this time he was moving more slowly, weighed down by the body of the child, and now the snipers had only one target to concentrate on.

The first shot caught him in the small of the back. He staggered, but did not fall. Still carrying the now still form of the child, he abandoned the zigzagging run and instead made straight for the safety of the barricades, sniper fire snapping at his heels. From the barricades, men shouted praise and encouragement, every defender there willing their brother on. Seeing the man's plight, the Ecclesiarch protector in Devane won out over the military tactician.

'Open fire!' he ordered, telling himself that the expenditure of their precious ammunition reserves would be worth it in terms of the

morale boost if by some Emperor-ordained miracle the man actually made it back with the child to the cover of the barricades. 'Cover him. Lay down suppressing fire on those sniper positions!'

A wave of gunfire crashed across the square, peppering the ancient stonework facades of the public buildings and rich mercantile townhouses that lined the fringes of the square where the main body of the heretic forces was sheltering. Devane doubted that this noisy and profligate expenditure of their limited ammunition supply would result in many enemy casualties - the range was too great for accurate shooting, and the accuracy of the frateris gunners was variable, at best - but it would hopefully force some of the snipers to keep their heads down, giving the man all that more chance to make it to safety.

Devane could not hear the snipers' fire over the sounds of the defenders' volleys, but he knew that at least some of them were still shooting. He saw the man stumble twice more on his journey back to the barricade, assuming with a sinking heart that each stumble came from another bullet hit. When, at last, he somehow made it to the foot of the barricades, half a dozen defenders scrambled down to help him, a sea of hands reached out to lift him and the child up over the top of the barricade.

Frateris defenders crowded round the man, then parted to let Devane through. The man was dying, the preacher saw instantly, the quilted flak jacket that he wore and which had partially protected him from the snipers' fury was soaked dark with blood. Devane knelt over him, bestowing the Blessing of the Fallen upon him as gentle hands took hold of the body of the child cradled in the dying man's arms. The boy moaned in pain as he was lifted away.

'He lives,' breathed one of the frateris in wonder, sending a thrilled ripple of surprise out into the ranks of the brethren crowded close around.

'Take him to the infirmary,' ordered Devane. 'See to it that the blessed sisters tend to him as best they can.'

'It is a sign,' called one of the frateris elders, his red-and-gold fringed robes and mortified skin-markings identifying him as a follower of the zealot-minded Redemptionist sub-cult of the Imperial Faith. 'First the Emperor sends the father confessor to lead us in the defence of this holy place, and now he sends us this sign that he is watching over us still!'

Others took up the cry, and soon the barricades rang with the joyous shouts and devotional chants of the faithful. Devane moved amongst his flock, outwardly sharing in their excitement. He offered words of encouragement and pious fortitude. He politely but firmly refused the small but precious gifts of food and drink that many tried to press upon him, knowing that food supplies were already at a premium, and that many of these people had not eaten properly in days. He bestowed blessings on men and weapons, and sat praying with an injured frateris brother who had remained on duty on the barricades for the last two days, refusing to give up firing control of the heavy stubber he had manned since the beginning of the siege. The man was obviously dying - Devane could smell the tell-tale sickly odour of gangrene-rotted flesh from beneath the man's bandaged wounds - but he was amongst the best gunners they had, and Devane quietly acceded to the man's clear but unspoken wish to die fighting the Emperor's enemies rather than amongst the sick and injured that already crowded the cathedral's infirmary.

Devane did all this devoutly and faithfully as an Imperial preacher and servant of the God-Emperor, but all the while from inside him the voice of the military commander he had once been told him that it was ultimately all in vain.

A sign or miracle, he thought to himself, momentarily allowing that doubting, questioning voice free rein. Two brave and able-bodied fighting men dead, and for what? The life of an injured child who, if he does not die from his wounds in the next few hours, will die along with the rest of us in a few days time anyway? Tell me, preacher, where is the Emperor-ordained miracle in any of this? Where is the sign that these good and faithful people have not been betrayed and abandoned by the mighty Imperium which they were always told was there to protect them?

Devane shook his head in a physical effort to dispel such blasphemous doubts from his mind. If he truly believed that, he told himself in reply, then why did he not climb over the barricades now and run across the square to join those other heretics massed there? This was the poisoned reasoning that had caused so many of this world's population to turn away from the Emperor's divine light and instead go towards the darkness of the malignant and false powers of the warp, he realised.

'Father confessor?'

In gratitude, the preacher drew his mind away from such thoughts and turned towards the speaker now addressing him. It was a young Ecclesiarch scribe-acolyte, clearly nervous and overawed in the presence of the great and mighty warrior-priest confessor. Devane was still unable to come to terms with this new image of himself as some towering and inspirational presence in the minds of the cathedral defenders. Father confessor, they called him, yet Devane was not even certain that he was properly entitled to his newly-ordained rank. It had been bestowed upon him by the impressive and imposing figure of the Arbiters commander - Byzantane, he had been called - when he had arrived to supervise the Arbiters' final withdrawal from the Ecclesiarch cathedral. It had been Byzantane who had authorized for the frateris to be given whatever weapons and supplies the Arbiters had to spare, and it had been Byzantane who had shrewdly realised the Imperial preacher's worth.

'A Guard officer turned holy man,' the Arbiters had said, looking speculatively at Devane. 'We could use a man of your abilities defending the Imperium compound across the river. You'll be doing your duty to the Emperor just as you are here, but there'll be a place on an evacuation shuttle in it for you as well.'

'My place is here, with my flock,' Devane had answered. 'I have led them this far. I cannot abandon them now. If they must remain here, then I must remain with them.'

Byzantane had nodded in silent understanding, approving of the preacher's devotion but regretting the loss of such a clearly capable and courageous servant of the Emperor, and had turned to go. Suddenly he had hesitated, turning back towards Devane. 'A mere preacher is an unworthy leader for the Frateris Militia. The Articles Faith of the Church Militant tell us that only an Ministorum adept of the rank of confessor or higher may command the armies of the faithful. Your cardinal is already aboard one of the orbiting transports, which leaves me as the ranking Imperial servant left on this world.'

The big Arbiters had paused, reaching forward and solemnly laying a heavy armour-gauntleted hand on the shoulder of the diminutive preacher.

'Walk with the Emperor, Father Confessor Devane. My thoughts and prayers go with you.'

Devane had stood stunned as the Arbites commander saluted him, and strode off towards the waiting grav-lifter shut-tie. At the bottom of the landing ramp he had again turned to back to Devane, his final words to him still somehow audible over the rising scream of the shuttle's engines as it prepared to take off.

'You have your duty, and I have mine, and those duties take us to our separate destinies, but I swear to you that one day my duty will be to avenge the loss of this world and the sacrifice of these children of the Emperor.'

'Father confessor?' asked the scribe again, his voice cowed in tones of nervous reverence and again calling Devane's attention back to the situation at hand.

'Tell the brother arch-deacon that the enemy assault is over, at least for the present. It is safe for him and the other brethren to continue with the evacuation.'

The young acolyte bowed and gratefully retreated, eager to be away from the dangerous barricades area and keen to rejoin the rest of his brethren in the safety of the cathedral's inner courtyard, where they had gathered to await the arrival of the final series of evacuation shuttles scheduled to depart from the cathedral. Over a hundred Ministorum adepts yet remained within the cathedral, overseeing the final inventory and packaging of the precious Ecclesiarchy relics and records housed in the miles of crypts beneath the ancient building. There were countless documents and scroll-records stored down there, maintained and guarded by an army of scribe-adepts. Taken together, they formed a comprehensive record of the presence and power of the Imperial Faith here on Belatis, and thus were also a history of the thousands of years of Imperium rule of the world, the oldest and most precious of them dating back more than ten millennia to the time when the world was first reclaimed in the name of the Emperor. The planet and its people would soon vanish, but through the Ministorum's painstakingly-maintained histories, some vestigial memory of it would continue to live on as part of the everlasting Imperium of Mankind, if only in the form of meticulously catalogued scrolls and data-slate recordings stored deep in the bowels of a Ministorum librarium on some far-distant Ecclesiarchy shrine-world.

Accompanying the records and relics on the flight from the doomed world would be hundreds of Ecclesiarchy adepts, ranging from the Cardinal Astral himself to the lowliest scribe-adepts and relinquendus keepers. Many of the cathedral adepts had opted to remain here to defend the Emperor's house against the heretic horde, but many more had not. If Johann Devane the man was tempted to feel any bitterness towards those who sought to escape the destruction of this world and its people, then preacher - now confessor - Devane the adept did not, remembering again the final words of the Arbites commander.

*They have their duty and I have mine. In the end, it is our destiny to serve the Emperor in the ways He has commanded for each of us.*

## FIVE

'MASTER, YOU MUST come! The last of the shuttles is about to leave. The arch-deacon himself has commanded you to board it!' The frightened voice of the novice initiate roused Sobek from the light trance that he had placed himself in, although his astropath's senses had warned him of the boy's scurrying approach through the now eerily empty and abandoned corridors and chambers of this section of the Ecclesiarchy cathedral. From outside the cathedral walls, the astropath's finely attuned ears picked out the now familiar sounds of combat, while his psychic senses dimly told him of the even greater chaos in the city beyond; dimly, only because he had deliberately closed off those levels of his inner vision with powerful mental blocks, fearing that the psychic Shockwaves generated by the confusion and terror of the doomed planet's population would overwhelm his own mind. 'I have already spoken with the arch-deacon, Lito. I have told him that it is my wish to remain here on Belatis.' Sobek turned his blind face towards the frightened boy, favouring him with a rare smile. 'I have been on this world for sixty-eight years. Before that, I saw the faces of many other of the Emperor's worlds with these blind eyes, but after so long I can scarcely recall which of them was the face of my own birth-world. This world is really all I have ever known. I have served the Emperor well, but I am old and tired, and I know that soon the Emperor will call me to him. Leave me be, Lito. I do not wish to see the faces of any new worlds.'

The boy lingered in the doorway, afraid to return without him; clearly, thought Sobek, the arch-deacon's proclamation that any adept-brothers who wished to remain to defend the Emperor's sacred house was not meant to extend to brethren as unique and valuable as an astropath of Veneratus rank.

From far below in the cathedral square came the sounds of renewed gunfire, and, from closer in the inner courtyard, the roar of powerful thruster engines firing up.

'You should go now, Lito,' warned Sobek. 'They will not wait for you, whether I am with you or not. Go now. We both have our separate destinies to follow,' he added, wondering from where those last words had sprung unbidden.

The boy hesitated, took one last despairing look at his master, and then vanished, running pell-mell along the high-vaulted corridor and towards the sound of the shuttle engines. He had been genuinely fond of the boy, Sobek thought, even if he had been clumsy and inattentive, with all the signs of becoming yet another dull-witted catechism-mumbler, a breed of which the Ministorum had more than enough of already in Sobek's despairing opinion. But, all the same, he had been fond of the boy, and thought it a pity that he had even less time to live than Sobek himself.

The astropath again consulted the mystically-charged cards of the Imperial tarot, using them as a tool to unlock the prescient images that his psychic senses had plucked from the face of the warp.

He drew two cards, laying them out in concordance and seeing dual images forming simultaneously upon their faces. On one, the image of a fortress with its towers struck by a falling star tumbling from the heavens. *The Fallen Citadel*. On the other, the highly-stylised representation of a space vessel, the occupants within it kneeling in prayer as they sought protection against the daemons of the warp that hovered in the air above them. *The Starship*, here appearing in its rarer sub-form, *The Pilgrim Vessel*. Sobek focussed his inner sight, again seeing the same warp-dream images of the future.

Fire-death tendrils spreading through the rusting passageways and compartments of a space vessel, reaching deep into the vessel's innards and closing around its beating plasma heart. The screaming faces of Lito, the arch-deacon, the cardinal himself even, and those of many other adept-brothers, all of them obliterated in an instant in a white-hot gush of blinding light.

Sobek heard the roar of the shuttles taking off, all too aware that he had just seen the deaths of all those now aboard. His own death was only days away, he knew, but theirs would come even sooner than that. How or why, he could not divine, but their deaths had already been ordained and somehow he sensed it was not in his power to try to warn them or interfere in their destiny. As his own end approached - as the shadow of the Planet Killer loomed ever closer through the warp - he found that his powers of prophecy, always at best vague and indistinct, were becoming more accurate and finely-detailed. How this should be, he did not know, but he felt certain that it was the Emperor's will that he be kept the fate that would befall the rest of the cathedral brethren. He had a growing feeling that he had been spared or forewarned because the Emperor still required one more task of him. He turned back to the tarot cards again, looking to find in their shifting patterns and faces some clue of what that task might be.

## SIX

LIKE MOURNERS ATTENDING a deathbed vigil, the vessels of the many branches of the Imperium hovered in waiting above the doomed world. Like greedy heirs apparent gathering in anticipation of its imminent death, they plundered the world of its choicest riches while it yet lived.

Bulky troop transports took aboard the fighting men of two full Imperial Guard regiments, together with their vehicles and equipment. Garrisoned on Belatis, these troops would be spared the same fate as the rest of the planet's population, although their evacuation had probably only postponed their destruction rather than averted it. The sector-wide war against the forces of the Despoiler was consuming Guard regiments at a truly ferocious rate, and even now some Imperial Guard war-marshal or Departamento Munitorium official was assigning these two regiments to one of the dozens of planetary war-zones spread throughout the Gothic sector.

A seemingly unending series of freighter transports had arrived and departed in the last few weeks, each of them carrying off whatever part they could of Belatis's abundant industrial or mineral resources. Tanker vessels had taken aboard hundreds of thousands of tonnes of processed promethium from the planet's many fuel refineries, all of it laboriously hauled up into orbit by a fleet of grimy haulage shuttles. Cargo transports filled their cavernous holds with similar quantities of mined adamantium, ferrotitanium, trikali crystal and other materials vital for the Imperium war effort.

A week ago, a massive and ancient transporter vessel belonging to the Adeptus Mechanicus had arrived in Belatis orbit, despatched by the tech-priests of Mars to rescue not only their brethren from the condemned world, but also the technology and arcane devices held sacred by the servants of the Machine God. For days now, their agile lifter shuttles had been flitting back and forth between the vessel and the planet's surface, carrying back not merely the products of Belatis's tech-priest-maintained industrial factories but also the some of those very factories themselves, disassembled by armies of servitor work-drones. These factories and assembly lines, churning out weapons and war machines for the Imperium armies, incorporated precious and irreplaceable technological knowledge held sacred by the members of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The rescued knowledge inherent in these automated factories, once reassembled and transplanted to the soil of a Mechanicus forgeworld, would once again be used in the service of the Machine God.

Not all the branches of the Imperium operated on such a massive scale as the Adeptus Mechanicus, nor were their motivations for participating in the evacuation of Belatis so easy to speculate on.

Three days ago, a sleek, black-hulled corvette vessel had arrived to join the Imperium flotilla. Although obviously a vessel of the Imperium, identifying itself as the *Bernardo Gui* and broadcasting approved Imperial ship recognition codes, the craft was of a design unfamiliar to most navy eyes, and officers crowded the *Macharius's* command deck viewing bays to watch as it glided into Belatis orbit.

'Inquisition,' they whispered in fearful tones amongst themselves, afraid even to say aloud the name of the most secret and powerful arm of Imperium authority.

The *Bernardo Gui* had remained in orbit, blanketed in radio silence and unresponsive to hails from other vessels, save for the three occasions when it had sent a single shuttle down to the planet's surface, each time demanding and receiving an escort of fighters from the *Macharius's* attack craft squadrons to accompany the shuttle on its journey to the surface and back. Each time the shuttle had returned to the parent ship after only a few hours. What it had done in that time - who or what it had picked up or even delivered to the surface to the doomed world - was a matter of much private, whispered conjecture amongst the crew of the *Macharius*. On two occasions after such planetary expeditions, the Inquisition craft had sent terse, firmly-worded commands to several of the navy vessels protecting the evacuation flotilla that they were to carry out an immediate and intense orbital bombardment of two precise points on the planet's surface, one of which was a small but densely populated city in the southern part of Belatis's largest continent.

Whatever the Inquisition had been doing on Belatis, it clearly wanted no trace of itself left behind for the enemy to find.

Two days ago, another, different Imperial vessel had arrived to join the growing armada. Looking through the command deck's port viewing bay, Hito Ulanti could see it now, circling in watchful high orbit above Belatis. It was the *Inviolable Retribution*, a Punisher class Arbites strike cruiser, constructed in much the same way as the Adeptus Astartes variant and intended for much the same purpose: rapid response planetary assault force deployment and orbital offensive support. Ulanti studied its lean, brutal lines and fearsome armaments with an admiring eye, while the naval officer in him couldn't help assessing the lawkeeper ship's likely capabilities and comparing them to those of his own vessel. The Arbites cruiser was smaller and faster than the navy warship, more heavily armoured and packed more of an offensive punch, but the *Macharius* was a long-range patrol vessel, designed for

extended, independent operation and had a wider variety of offensive and defensive capabilities.

'Your opinion, Mister Ulanti?'

Ulanti did not turn at the sound of his captain's voice, but continued to study the Arbites cruiser as it drifted past the *Macharius's* port side.

'A fine vessel, captain. Its main bombardment cannon armament makes it dangerous to ships and planetary targets alike, while its unorthodox main engine array suggests it that it will always have the advantage of speed and manoeuvrability. I almost pity those amongst the enemies of the Emperor who must face such a vessel in battle.'

'But?' There was a tone to his captain's voice which a stranger might mistake for angry sharpness. Ulanti, however, knew better. He turned, smiling, knowing what was expected of him next.

'But I believe that the *Macharius* would still be the victor in any one-to-one confrontation with it.' Catching Semper's expectant look, he continued: 'Although a fine vessel, it's still primarily a blockade runner and rock-pounder, designed for dealing with orbital defence platforms and putting the fear of the Emperor into planet-based ground forces, not going up against a cruiser-class warship. I doubt that we could manoeuvre it into a position for a close-range torpedo strike, but its comparative lack of anti-ordnance defences for a vessel of its size would leave it highly vulnerable to attack from our bomber squadrons. Also, our greater reactor output, ability to absorb high crew casualties and superior weapon accuracy at longer ranges would be the telling factors in any extended battle.'

Semper nodded in approval, pleased with his second-in-command's shrewd assessment of the theoretical outcome of a battle between the two vessels. As always, Leoten Semper liked to keep his officers on their toes, if sometimes he made even veteran officers feel as if they were Schola Progenium cadets standing before a particularly demanding and exacting Preacher Tutorius taskmaster.

And, as always, Ulanti noted, the captain had ended his private rest period and reported for duty on the bridge long before he had been scheduled to, this time by some three hours. Frequently restless, the captain had been even more so since the conclusion of the battle of Helia IV and their subsequent reassignment to the evacuation of Belatis. Ulanti knew that something had clearly been troubling the master of the *Macharius*. He was glad, then, to see his captain apparently in a lighter mood now.

Semper stepped up to his customary informal command position, midway on the bridge's central nave, from where he could oversee the operations of the command deck crew. A junior watch officer handed him a data-slate, saluting smartly as he did so, but Semper merely cleared his throat and looked to his second-in-command. 'Your report, flag-lieutenant?'

'The situation is much as it was, captain. The final stage of the evacuation is proceeding, and transport vessels *Albemarle*, *Barham*, *Brennus*, *Haruna*, *Mikasa*, *Orlando* and *Tsarevitch* have all signalled that they have completed cargo uploading and are ready to be underway. We expect the other transports to be at a similar state of readiness before the end of the current day-cycle.'

'In-system enemy activity?'

'*Drachenfels* and our own attack craft patrols have reported two long-range contacts with enemy Raider class vessels' answered Ulanti. 'Both contacts were in the vicinity of the gas giant belt. Both retreated from any further challenge, although elements of our *Firedrake* squadron are currently chasing down a third possible enemy contact.'

Semper grunted in a lack of surprise. They knew this game of old - the *Macharius* had spent an earlier part of the war protecting transport convoys from the wolf pack pirate fleets that preyed on the main Imperium shipping lanes. Like these enemy vessels, the pirate raider ships specialised in hit-and-run attacks, probing the convoy defences for signs of weakness but retreating at the first sign of challenge from the vastly larger and more heavily armed Imperium warships. At present, it was reckoned that two - possibly even three - Chaos scout vessels had infiltrated the Belatis system, advance heralds for the approaching Planet Killer fleet. Mindful of this, the Imperial Navy ships had spread their strength out accordingly.

The *Graf Orlok* and a sister Lunar class cruiser, the *Borodino*, were parked in close orbit above Belatis, the transport fleet sheltering in the cover of their formidable combined firepower. The *Drachenfels* and a squadron of Sword class frigates restlessly prowled the system's outer reaches searching for those elusive enemy scout ships while the *Macharius* circulated in a wide concentric orbit between the two Imperial detachments, launching bomber patrols in support of the *Drachenfels's* vigil and then looping back in-system to offer fighter escort cover for the fleet of shuttles and cargo lifters travelling endlessly back and forth between the planet's surface and the Imperial transports. So far the operation was proceeding as planned, although the strain of offering near-constant attack craft support was starting to tell on the crews of the *Macharius's* Starhawk and Fury Interceptor squadrons.

'Our current on-board status?' asked Semper.

'Satisfactory,' replied his second-in-command. 'Magos Castaboras reports that the temporary battle damage repairs have been completed and tested to his satisfaction, pending full repair next time we make space dock.' Ulanti paused, Semper instantly picking up on his lieutenant's hesitation.

'But there is a potential problem elsewhere, is there not, Mister Ulanti? Tell me what it is.'

'Ship's Surgeon Littorio reports an outbreak of disease amongst several crew detachments. So far the outbreak has been exclusively confined to three of the lower decks.'

Semper frowned in displeasure. Outbreaks of disease and plague were far from uncommon aboard the vessels of the Imperial Navy, especially amongst the squalor and filth of a ship's lower decks, but he prided himself on running a clean and adequately disease-free ship. 'Does the ship's surgeon know the cause of the outbreak? Was it brought aboard by any of the replacement crew we picked up from the *Tonnent*?'

'That's possible, sir. Most of the survivors from the *Tonnent* were assigned to replace our crew casualties suffered on those decks now affected by the outbreak,' answered Ulanti. 'What action do you wish to be taken?'

'Quarantine the decks in question and send in armsmen squads to find and destroy any identified carriers of the disease,' ordered Semper. 'Tell Littorio I expect a full report on the causes and symptoms of this outbreak as soon as possible.'

Ulantı nodded in acknowledgement, just as a communications officer called out, signalling for the two flag officers' attention. 'Captain, the *Graf Orlok* has just put out a shuttle carrying Adept Hyuga of the Departamento Munitorium. They're requesting permission to dock with us, and Adept Hyuga instructs that he requires an immediate meeting with you. What orders?' Ulantı glanced at Semper, seeing no trace now of the captain's earlier, lighter mood, and imagining the orders that Semper would probably dearly wish to issue, if he could. Something along the lines of "*Arm defence turrets and open fire at will*" would probably be close to the mark, mused Ulantı, knowing his captain's strong dislike of rear echelon bureaucracy in general and Adept Primus Ferdinand Hyuga, the Departamento Munitorium official responsible for overseeing the evacuation, in particular. 'Permission to dock granted,' sighed Semper. 'Send out a fighter escort to bring our distinguished visitor safely to us. Mister Ulantı, form up an honour guard to meet him at the shuttle bay and see to it that he is greeted with all the pomp and ceremony he expects. Find Commissar Kyogen and tell him to join us for a meeting in my private quarters. We look forward to hearing what the honourable adept has to tell us.'

THE LEAD STARHAWK in the bomber formation probed ahead with its surveyor senses, searching for traces of the target pattern of the retreating Chaos raider craft. When last reported, it had been moving at speed, turning away to escape the threat of the marauding lance batteries of the *Drachenfels* and running for the cover of a nearby gas giant. Since that last contact, the enemy ship had vanished off their target screens, probably cutting its power emissions down to a minimum and drifting into the obscuring shelter of the planet's massive surveyor sensor shadow or the cover offered amongst the debris of its orbital rings. The seven-strong *Firedrake* squadron - there had not yet been time to replace their losses suffered during the recent battle of Helia IV - were coming in on a widespread search-and-acquire formation, forward surveyors boosted to maximum intensity, but they were now dangerously close to their full operational limit away from the *Macharius*. They must either find their target soon, the squadron leader knew, or turn back now if they hoped to make it back to the *Macharius* on their remaining fuel and oxygen reserves.

Inside six other bomber cockpits, the pilots of *Firedrake* squadron patiently maintained their current course and speed, one eye on their surveyor screens, the other on their fuel and oxygen supply indicators. And then, finally, the order came over the comm-net channel.

'*Firedrake Leader* to squadron. Mission is null and void. Break off and return to carrier.'

In sequence, each Starhawk fired in turn first its braking jets and then its manoeuvring thrusters, following the lead of the squadron commander's craft and bringing them all on a tight, sweeping turn away from the deep space edge of the Belatis system and back towards their far-distant mother vessel.

On board the *Starhawks*, navigator crewmen swiftly switched off or powered down their search surveyors, decreasing their crafts' tell-tale energy signal outputs and increasing their chances of survival for the long and often danger-fraught journey back to the safety of the *Macharius*.

BEHIND THEM, HIS vessel drifting inert amongst the rock and frozen ice flotsam of the orbital rings, the commander of the Chaos Infidel class raider watched in only partial relief as the enemy bomber squadron turned away from its search and headed back in-system towards their carrier vessel. He had been reasonably certain that his vessel's gun batteries and defence turret gunners could have destroyed the bombers had they come any closer. However, it was likely that the bombers would have been able to send back a warning to their mother ship before they were destroyed, and the Chaos commander was under strict orders to avoid detection by the enemy for as long as possible.

For there were not just Chaos scout vessels at large in the Belatis system. Hanging on the fringes of the upper atmosphere of the looming gas giant behind the escort ship, masked by the thick, drifting clouds of methane and hydrogen and the massive electromagnetic storms that pulsed through them was not just a full squadron of five more raiders, but also a capital vessel warship: the Murder class cruiser *Charybdis*.

All of them had arrived in the Belatis system weeks ago. All of them emerging from the warp at a point far beyond the usual system's edge warp jump beacons and drifting slowly into the system on low power to evading detection by Imperium patrols. All of them awaiting the arrival of the Planet Killer. All of them watching patiently as the followers of the false, weakling Emperor tried to defy the will of the Despoiler by rescuing what pitiful numbers of their own kind that they could from the doomed world. All upon Belatis would die. None would escape. The Despoiler had so commanded, and soon the lurking Chaos flotilla would see to it that the Warmaster's wishes were fulfilled.

## SEVEN

HEAT. DARKNESS. SAFETY. FOOD.

These things the entity craved; these things it found in abundance in this, its new home. Its previous home - the living vessel in which it had been transported into these metal bowels of its fine new home - lay discarded somewhere in the darkness behind it. Now barely recognisable as anything once living, the rotting, desiccated remains of its host body had provided it with much needed nourishment in the first few days after its birth.

It remembered those days only indistinctly now. The host had found a good birthing place, a dark and seldom-visited blind alley amongst the maze of pipes and low-ceilinged metal maintenance passageways. Hiding itself behind a cluster of hissing steam pipes, the host had entered the final stages of its glorious gestation-transformation, deliberately chewing through its own tongue early in the process to stifle its cries of pain. Afterwards, when it had finally died, the heat and moisture from the steam pipes had quickly brought its body to bloated fruition, making it all the easier for the entity which had grown inside it to rip its way out

through malleable and rot-ripened flesh.

The entity had begun absorbing the remains of its host into itself, clothing itself in the suitably reformed flesh of its parent. It was then, as it delicately picked its way through the memory morsels contained within its host's decaying brain matter, seeking out useful knowledge of its new home, that it discovered its own name.

*Plaguebearer.*

The entity liked the name. It gave it an identity. And it told it what the purpose of its existence was. Thus enlightened, it set about enacting that purpose.

Although it had lived all of its short life to date alone in the darkness, it knew that it was surrounded by other fleshy vessels similar to the one that had birthed it. As well as its name, it had inherited from the mind of its dead host an overwhelming awareness of the need to hide itself, and so it went about its work cautiously and carefully, taking pains never to be discovered or reveal itself. It laid its spoor in the cramped spaces of air ducts, knowing that the currents would circulate the stuff to areas far distant from where it had been planted. It left traces of itself at passage junctions and other places where many of its prey often passed by. It knew the places where the prey kept their food and water supplies, and it knew that if it could get into these places, then it could spread its plague-seed at a far greater rate. However, it knew also that such places were guarded, and that to reveal itself to its prey at this early stage would mean disaster.

Still, the time would come for such a move, but it would first have to multiply. And, to do that, it would need more nourishment. More food.

Light and noise from along the passageway alerted it to the presence of danger. It moved fast, jumping upwards and oozing between two power conduit pipes that ran along the ceiling of the passage. It watched, trembling with a fear inherited from its weakling parent-host, as two of the prey creatures came along the passage towards it. They were armed with weapons; the bright lights in their hands were lux-lamps and the strange coverings on their faces were rebreather masks, the memory-morsels absorbed from its host's brain told it. They scanned their light beams ahead of them along the passageway and into every nook and recess as they came to them. A thrill of fear ran through the entity. It had been cautious in everything it did, but it knew that some of the prey had already been successfully infected by its plague-seed. Had its existence been discovered? Were they now actively hunting it?

They passed beneath it, one of them by chance swinging its light beam up to peer into the maze of overhead pipes. The entity hiding there reacted with an instinct inherited not from its host-parent but from something far greater and more terrible.

It lashed down with one dripping claw-hand, catching the prey under the jaw and sinking bony talons deep into the flesh of its throat. One jerk of its arm, and the prey's jaw and much of its face came away in the entity's hand. The prey fell backwards, its death-throe spasms discharging the weapon still gripped in its hand. It was the first gunshot that the entity had ever heard, shocking its delicate and still nascent senses.

Taking fright, it oozed quickly down out of its hiding place, dropping the body of its first kill. The other prey was making muffled screaming noises from within the mask it wore over its face, but still took the entity by surprise by bringing its own weapon up to bear and firing it at point-blank range into the entity's body.

The entity felt a scattering of hot metal rip through the flesh of its body, and then felt that same flesh reform and reknit over the bloodless wounds. There was none of the sensation that its host's dead mind would have identified as pain. The entity surged forward, choking off the prey's screams with a tentacle-transformed hand that wormed its way down the creature's throat. With its other hand, it punched through the prey's chest and pulled out its heart. The entity seemed with anger at the false instincts that it had inherited from its host: if it had known that the prey creatures were so easy to kill, it would never have been so afraid of them in the first place.

Working quickly, it gathered up the remains of its prey and dragged them off into the darkness. Now it had the fresh nourishment it needed.

To grow.

To thrive.

To multiply.

RETH ZANE, AWOKE suddenly from a troubled sleep. For a few seconds, he did not know where he was, mistaking the night-cycle-dimmed gloom of the quarters he shared with four Fury Interceptor pilots and navigators for his old novice cell back on Sacra Evangelista. He shook his head in an effort to dispel the momentary confusion cast over his mind by lack of sleep and too many extended flight missions in the last few days.

He slipped out of his bunk, going to the small devotional shrine that he maintained beside his personal locker. From nearby, one of the others - Zane thought it sounded like Lutjens, Altomare's irritatingly over-garrulous navigator - thrashed in his bunk and mumbled incoherently to himself before lying still again. They sense it too, Zane thought to himself. Even under the effects of the narco-seeds taken by most off-duty attack craft pilots to counter the effects of the stimms pumped into their bodies during flight missions, the other sleepers in the room also sensed whatever it was that had awakened Zane from his sleep.

He knelt before the shrine, studying the small icon images that he had placed there. The three holy faces of the Emperor: Mortal, Ascendant and Divine. The Blessed Helena of the Adepta Sororitas, martyred and defiled by heretic unbelievers but now revered as one of the greatest and most holy Defenders of the Imperial Faith. Zane prayed to her most of all, seeking answers to the growing disquiet within him.

Something was wrong, he realised. There was danger close at hand. Perhaps it was out there in the void, or down on the surface of the planet. Or perhaps even closer than that, perhaps even on the *Macharius* itself.

Something was definitely wrong.

## EIGHT

THE SHUTTLE FLEW away from the carrier ship, the waiting trio of Fury fighters breaking off from their holding pattern and peeling away to take up protective positions around the shuttle. Together, the formation of Imperial craft descended from orbit to the surface of planet below.

Inside the titanium shell of the passenger capsule, through one of the capsule's small, armoured-glasteel windows, Semper looked back to see the familiar hull-shape of the *Macharius* as it slowly receded from view.

It had been months since he had left his ship - months more, even, since he made planetfall anywhere - and he took this rare opportunity to study the lines and shape of the vessel he commanded. At its front the familiar armoured beak common to most Imperial cruisers, many metres thick and composed of strengthened adamantium, the toughest material known to human science. At its rear were the massive array of plasma drive engines, which, together with the generarium reactors and arcane technology of the vessel's warp drive made up over a third of the *Macharius's* mass. In between these two points was the main body of the ship: dozens of decks of gun batteries and magazine arsenals, flight bays and workshops, cargo holds and quartermaster stores, dormitories and infirmaries, chapel shrines and prison brig.

Semper's eye roamed over the sheer sides of the ship's hull, seeing the often ancient scars of battle that pitted its armoured flanks, evidence of the venerable warship's long and honourable record of service to the Emperor. No two Imperium vessels - even those of the same class - were identical. Centuries, sometimes even millennia, of modifications and repairs using whatever local construction methods and materials were available in any of the countless different orbital repair yards and forge-world dry-docks maintained throughout the Imperium saw to that, but all followed broadly similar classic lines of design and purpose. Still, Semper was certain that even if the entire armed might of Battlefleet Obscuras itself were lined up before him, he would be able to invariably and instantly pick out his own vessel at a glance, so well did he know its individual lines and signature details.

More than ten thousand souls, from Semper himself to the lowliest convict rating or servitor drone, lived within its armoured hull. More than ten thousand, a figure greater than the fighting complement of the largest Imperial Guard regiment, and many of that ten thousand-plus doubled as fighting troops, trained to take part in the bloody close-quarters boarding assaults that were a frequent part of space warfare. Indeed, the captain of an Imperial Navy warship commanded destructive capabilities undreamt of by any mere Imperial Guard commander. Its hull-side batteries could raze whole cities with sustained orbital bombardments. Its attack craft - it carried more than a hundred of them - could reach across star systems to strike at enemy targets, while its warp engines carried it across the vast interstellar gulfs to wherever the Emperor's enemies might be. There was even space within its cargo holds and crew compartments to carry thousands of extra troops - as much as a full Imperial Guard infantry regiment, if need be - from one warzone to another, and with greater speed and safety than any slow and vulnerable troop transport vessel. No other Imperial commander had such power at their disposal; no other Imperial commander was entrusted with such a singular instrument of awesome destruction than the master of an Imperial warship. 'Like having one foot on the Golden Throne,' were the traditional, only half-joking words that the captains of the Imperial Navy murmured in private and strictly only amongst themselves to describe the awesome power and authority at their direct command.

Which, Leoten Semper ruefully told himself, made his own current situation of impotent anger all the more galling and difficult to bear.

He remembered the words of Hyuga when the Departamento Munitorium official arrived aboard the *Macharius*. 'I have been in communication with the governor-regent of Belatis. As an Adept Civitas of planetary overlord rank, he is accorded the right to be given personal safe escort by the ranking member of the naval evacuation force. The governor-regent has so informed me that he wishes to claim this right. Captain Ramas of the *Drachenfels* is the highest ranking ship's captain belonging to the evacuation escort force. However, for practical reasons involving Captain Ramas's battle-wound disabilities, as well as other factors...' Hyuga had paused here, flushing slightly, and Semper had almost smiled as he imagined the idea of the highly irascible and plain-speaking master of the *Drachenfels* being called upon to carry out any kind of delicate diplomatic duty.

'As I said, there are factors which regrettably make Captain Ramas unable to carry out this task, therefore the duty falls to the next ranking officer in the chain of command. Which would be you, Captain Semper.'

There had been an uncomfortable silence in the captain's private quarters as all three senior officers present - Semper, Ulanti and Commissar Kyogen - stared in angry and unapologetic disbelief at the Munitorium official. Semper, not trusting himself to speak, glanced expectantly at Ulanti. The young aristocratic officer, raised amongst the great noble houses inhabiting the Spire peaks of the Necromundan hives and more familiar with the rituals of diplomatic speaking, took his cue.

'Honoured Adept Hyuga,' he had said. 'We remain at full alert, and will do so until we are safely underway in the warp and with this Emperor-forsaken world far behind us. We are running round-the-clock attack craft missions and we are currently overseeing the final preparations for the evacuation fleet's imminent departure. There are already several enemy scout vessels probably in hiding within this system, and at any moment a full enemy fleet together with their new and supposedly invincible weapons platform may emerge from the warp to attack us.'

Ulanti paused, looking directly at Hyuga, his voice taking on a harder and more scathing tone. 'And now, in the midst of all this, you come to tell us that Captain Semper must abandon his command responsibilities and instead take part in some needless, trivial etiquette merely to pander to the whims of some local planetary dignitary?'

Hyuga had glared at Ulanti, drawing himself up to his full, if, unimpressive height. A small, balding and vainglorious man, Hyuga's responsibilities as an official of the Departamento Munitorium were the organisation and equipping of the Imperium's armed forces. Members of this powerful wing of the Adeptus Administratum usually either wore adept's robes or, since many of most senior officials belonged to the great Imperium noble houses, garb appropriate to their high-born social rank. Hyuga,

however, was dressed in a gaudy, custom-tailored military uniform which all three naval officers had suspected he had probably designed himself. Rank pips on the over-braided collar and shoulder epaulettes signified that the bureaucrat adept's position carried with it the honorary rank of a lieutenant-colonel within the Imperial Guard, while his uniform breast was ablaze with ribbons and decorations, none of which any of the naval men recognised, all of them probably awarded for deeds performed far from any battlefield.

'The House of Sarro has served the Emperor well for centuries,' Hyuga had said. 'It is only fitting that they receive their due salute in accordance with Imperial custom as they prepare to give up their faithful custodianship of one of the Emperor's subject possessions. I have consulted with the Arbites commander on Belatis, and it is his opinion too that we carry out this duty in the interests of proper Imperial protocol.'

'Very well,' Semper had said, already calculating how much time this pointless and unnecessarily risky diversion from his real duties would take. 'Mister Ulanti, you have the bridge, at least until the honoured adept and I return from our trip to the planet's surface.'

'You misunderstand, captain,' Hyuga had smiled apologetically. 'My own duties take me back to the *Graf Orlok* as soon as I have finished here. I still have many details to attend to before the evacuation can be counted as completed.'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible.' This time it had been Semper's turn to smile, if only in feigned apology. 'This vessel is currently under quarantine, and I cannot allow you to leave it to return to another Imperial Navy ship. I am sure that a vessel commander as prudent and cautious as Captain von Blucher would not wish to risk the danger of bringing any contagion aboard his ship.'

'Quarantine? Contagion?' Hyuga had stammered, too taken by surprise to pick up on Semper's subtly scathing reference to von Blucher's well-known reputation for an over-caution which, in the opinion of some of his brother captains, verged on outright cowardice.

'An outbreak of plague below decks. Mister Ulanti was just informing me of the problem as you came aboard.'

'Indeed,' Ulanti had said, smoothly picking up his captain's intent. 'A somewhat virulent strain, one that has so far defied our ship's surgeon's efforts to fully contain it. While the risk of infection to you so far is small, the longer you stay aboard the *Macharius*, the greater the risk must become. And since navy quarantine regulations forbid you returning to the *Graf Orlok*...'

'...then it would be to your advantage to accompany me to the surface of Belatis,' Semper had finished. 'Not only would I have the honour of accompanying the governor-regent back to orbit, but I would have the privilege and pleasure of knowing that I was also safeguarding your own personal well-being into the bargain.'

The colour visibly drained from the bureaucrat's face at the thought of setting foot on the surface of the doomed and Chaos-engulfed world below. Looking round, his panicked gaze fixed on the imposing and so far silent figure of Kyogen.

'Commissar,' he had bleated, 'this is outrageous. I demand at once that you see to it that I am given safe escort off this ship and back to the *Graf Orlok*!'

Kyogen, towering over the smaller man, looked down in contempt at the bureaucrat, casting a glance over Hyuga's rows of Administratum decorations. The Order of the Gothic Star, Battlefleet Gothic's highest award for valour, hung from his uniform breast, and Semper too wore the same decoration. Neither man wore the medal for reasons of vain pride, merely as simple statements of the personal authority by which they expected their commands to be carried out by other, lesser servants of the Emperor.

'There is an outbreak of disease, and naval regulations are quite explicit on such matters. It is my duty to see that those regulations are kept to, by force if necessary.' Kyogen stepped forward, leaning down into Hyuga's face. 'Better to take your chances with the captain, honoured adept. Who knows, perhaps you may be able to award yourself a real battle decoration when you return?'

SEMPER GLANCED UP, seeing the still white-faced bureaucrat sitting strapped into an acceleration harness across on the other side of the spacious passenger capsule. Hyuga's two scribe-adept assistants sat beside him, both of them looking just as nervous as their master. The temperature inside the cabin was increasing noticeably and the entire shuttle bucked and shuddered violently on its high-speed descent down the gravity well and into Belatis's atmosphere. All three Administratum officials looked as if they thought that the shuttle would tear apart around them any second.

Probably more used to slow, cruising descents aboard luxury Administratum craft than a high-speed navy shuttle drop into a warzone, thought Semper.

Aside from Semper and the Departamento Munitorium officials, there were four other occupants of the passenger cabin, all of them dressed in dark grey blue uniforms featuring the blue rank sashes of a navy petty officer. Three of them were petty officer class armsmen, Semper's familiar bodyguard retinue who accompanied the captain wherever he went on the *Macharius*. Semper often wondered which of these dependable but dull-witted watchdogs was Kyogen's secret informer, reporting back to the ship's commissar on the captain's every move and utterance. Probably Rahn, the least dull-witted of them, Semper thought - or possibly even all three.

Whichever it was, all three were united in purpose now, staring in sullen and hostile suspicion at the fourth figure slouched in the row of seats across from them. His muscle-bound form squeezed into a petty officer's uniform, Stranivar underhiver and Lubyanka prison-gang tattoo markings clearly visible on the exposed parts of his skin at his wrists and neck and with the faint but unmistakable aroma of chewed tajii root permeating the air around him, Maxim Borasa cut a strange and distinct figure from the other occupants of the shuttle.

Semper was still unsure why at the last moment he had relented to his second-in-command's urgings and decided to take the flag-lieutenant's personal bodyguard with him in addition to his own usual armsmen protectors. The man was a savage thug, little better than the scum of the convict work-gangs that carried out many of the more brutal and menial labour tasks aboard the *Macharius*. Emperor alone knew how he ever made the rank of petty officer, but there was a predatory danger and intelligence about him that made Semper suspect that Borasa was, as Ulanti had suggested, a good man to have on your side. One of those rare

breed of born survivors who always seemed to find a way out of even the most extreme situations, and, if you were lucky and stayed close by him, perhaps might even take you with him while he was about it.

Semper turned his attention to the view out of the small cabin port-hole. They were deep within the planetary atmosphere now, passing through the thick cloud layer that covered much of Belatis's equator regions during the planet's apparently frequent monsoon seasons. Little to nothing was visible for the next few minutes and then, suddenly, they dropped through the bottom of the cloud ceiling and the panoply of Belatis's capital city of Madina was spread out beneath them.

Semper saw neatly laid-out hab-zones and commerce districts built in a radial pattern spreading out from the central rocky spire of what must be the planetary governor's palace. Wide avenues bisected and divided each civic district, but Semper could clearly see the columns of refugees which choked those central thoroughfares, and the barricades and makeshift defence walls that had been placed across many of them to stem the human tide flocking into the stricken city. Even from this height, Semper could discern the tell-tale, swirling patterns of human melee signifying large-scale combat around those barricades. Elsewhere, the scars of anarchy and civil war were evident across the face of the city. Fires burned out of control everywhere, several districts were bombed-out ruins, most of the bridges across the wide river dividing the city had been destroyed and to the north a large industrial area was ablaze, casting a pall of poisonous black vapour across that entire quarter of the city and the suburbs and countryside beyond.

Looking at the evident chaos and destruction that had engulfed not only Madina but this entire world, Semper felt secret despair rising up within him once more. Despair at the course of the war, at the odds against them and - most secretly of all - at the way it was being conducted by the Imperium forces. After the victory at the Helia system, when the *Macharius* and its sister ships had repulsed the invasion of Helia IV, he had dared to hope that the Imperium was at last going on the offensive, striking back at the Chaos forces rather than merely holding the line against them. It had been Semper's recommendation that the remnants of the retreating Chaos warfleet be pursued into the warp and ruthlessly hunted down and destroyed before they could regroup to form the nucleus of another invasion armada. Instead, the *Macharius* and several of the other ships had been ordered to take part in the evacuation of Belatis, and now, rather than even merely trying to hold the line against the enemy advance, it seemed to be Battlefleet Command's intention to abandon entire worlds to the wrath of the Despoiler.

Semper and several of his fellow captains had, in private, railed against this policy, arguing that rather than protecting a planet-wide evacuation effort they should be forming up into battle lines to meet the arrival of the Planet Killer fleet. With whatever support could be spared from other battle-groups, they could mount an effective defence of the Belatis system, if not defeating and destroying the Planet Killer fleet, then at least driving it back into the warp. The important thing, they argued, was to capitalize on the impetus of the victory at Helia and show the enemy that the forces of His Divine Majesty's Navy stood ready to meet them wherever and whenever necessary. All Gothic sector lived in fear that one day the shadow of the Planet Killer would fall upon their world. The effects on Imperial morale would be incalculable, Semper and a few brave others argued, if it could be shown that the Despoiler's terror weapon was not invincible, that the duty and purpose of the ships of Battlefleet Gothic to protect every Imperial world within the Gothic sector still counted for something.

In all respects, their every argument had been over-ruled.

There were not sufficient ships to spare to mount a concentrated counter-attack effort against the heavily-armed Planet Killer fleet, they were told. In time, they were told, the Planet Killer would be dealt with, but that time was not yet ready.

And, in the meantime, Semper thought bitterly to himself, the worlds of the Gothic sector would have to endure taking part in some sick lottery, the rules of which only the strategy planners of Battlefleet Command in Port Maw seemed to understand. Some, like Helia, would be spared, while others such as Belatis would be sacrificed wholesale, vital fleet resources that could be used to defend them instead expended on a cowardly and selective evacuation that, in Semper's eyes, was tantamount to betrayal of the Emperor's subjects and surrender to their enemies. How many more worlds do we sacrifice, he asked himself. How many more millions or billions do we betray before we turn and fight?

The shuttle suddenly lurched violently, banking steeply in the midst of its continued descent over the city. Semper saw bright shards of laser fire and tracer trails streak past the shuttle's wingtip, realising that they were coming under fire from ground-based anti-aircraft batteries. The shuttle lurched again, rolling ninety degrees to port and causing one of the scribe-adepts to cry out in fear as the pilot took extreme evasive manoeuvres to keep his craft out of the ground gunners' sights.

The pilot was Milos Caparan, Semper knew. Ulanti had instructed Remus Nyder to assign his best flight crew to man the shuttle craft that would carry their captain to the planet's surface and back, and the *Macharius*'s chief ordnance officer had obliged with the commander and crew of the lead bomber from the best of his Starhawk squadrons. Between Ulanti's personal thug and the commander of Nemesis squadron, Semper thought, his second-in-command could hardly be accused of not taking adequate precautions to protect the life of his captain.

From beyond the shuttle cabin came the roar of thruster jets as one of the Fury escorts peeled away, darting down towards the source of the ground fire. A variant of the normal deep space fighter Fury design and specially adapted for planetary atmosphere operation, it glided in across the rooftops of the burning city, zeroing in on its target. Small-arms fire, near useless at this range and unable to penetrate the fighter's armour, crackled up from the hidden infantry positions on the ground. The Fury suddenly pulled up, its pilot hitting his lifter jets as he seeded the rains below with high-explosive incendiary death released from the dual bomb racks slung beneath its wings. The Fury surged back upwards, pursued by a column of phospherant fire that expanded rapidly to devour over two square kilometres of buildings and ruins, scouring them clean of all human life.

After that, there was no more ground fire directed at the shuttle and its escorts as they made their final approach on the governor-regent's palace.

In the shuttle's cockpit, Caparan cut their speed as they approached the shimmering energy barrier of the structure's defence shield. The three Furies passed close by, rolling over and dipping their wingtips in a traditional navy pilot's farewell, before arcing upwards on full engine boosters as they commenced their long, arduous climb back up into space orbit.

There was a slight shudder of impact as the shuttle passed through the field of the energy barrier, sending crackling ribbons of electromagnetic lightning dancing along the craft's hull and wing surfaces, and then it was through. Caparan brought it in on manoeuvring jets, guiding it towards and then through a beckoning open cave mouth set into the mountainous palace rock and then settled it gently down on the metal-decked landing bay within. Blast suit-protected ground crew and servitor slaves ran forward to secure coolant feeds to its overcharged power systems, heedless of fiery backwash from the shuttle's landing dirasters. There was a minute's pause as Caparan and his crew shut down the craft's flight systems, while enormous extractor fans within the bay dispersed the heat and vapours expelled by the shuttle's now silent engines, and then the main landing ramp opened and lowered itself to the deck. Semper's bodyguards were first to descend, stamping their boots noisily on the ramp's metal surface and glancing suspiciously around them. Semper came next, Maxim instinctively falling into step behind, and Hyuga and his two adepts following.

Semper paused at the foot of the ramp, aware after so long aboard the *Macharius* of the scent of air not filtered a thousand times through a ship's atmosphere recycling plant and sensing that traditional feeling of physical strangeness as his body adjusted to the subtly different and slightly higher gravity force of this world rather than that of the *Macharius*'s own artificial gravity systems. In time, he knew, would come the momentary sensations of agoraphobic fear when, after being used for so long to being enclosed by grey bulkhead walls and metal decking and ceiling, he stood for the first time in many months beneath open sky.

Not that he planned on being on this world long enough for that to happen, he reminded himself.

Semper stood to attention as an authoritative and daunting figure in black carapace armour and visored helm strode forward to meet him. Semper saluted formally, clicking his booted heels together, navy style, as he did so.

'Leoten Semper, His Divine Majesty's Ship *Lord Solar Macharius*.'

'Byzantane, Marshal Primus, Adeptus Arbitres,' the figure answered, returning the salute and then taking the navy man by surprise by offering a gauntleted hand in welcome.

'My apologies, Captain Semper,' said the big Arbitrator, 'but it is because of me that you were summoned here on this fool's errand. What do you say we get this charade over with as quickly and painlessly as we can?'

## NINE

KHOISAN KICKED ASIDE the corpse of a Belatis planetary defence force trooper as he stepped through the blasted-open doors of the underground missile silo. The defenders of this silo and the others hidden amongst the slopes and valleys of these hills had fought hard, but Khoisan had been unstinting in his attack, throwing forward wave after wave of cultist attackers. He had personally led the principal attack, PDF deserters leading him and his troops on secret back-routes through the labyrinth of defence tunnels that honeycombed the area to mount a surprise assault on the main command bunker. The bunker had fallen quickly - the slaughter inside its rockcrete passages and chambers had been appalling. Khoisan remembered with a smile how the hand-picked force of his most fanatical followers had fallen with wild abandon on the unprepared defenders, and the other satellite silos and bunkers had succumbed in quick succession. Seizing control of the defence network's central wirenet communications systems and piping through to the other bunkers the screams and shrieks of those unfortunate enough to be taken alive during the attack on the command bunker had, thought the Chaos champion, been a masterstroke in demoralising cunning.

Khoisan had arrived on Belatis over a year ago, coming to the world via secret and hidden routes known only to the most arcane followers of the gods of Chaos. At first, he did not know what his purpose was, only that the currents of the warp and the will of the dark things that dwelled within it had drawn him here, but he had immediately set to work. He had formed the world's scattered groups of Chaos followers into an organized network of underground cells, terror groups ready to strike at the heart of the enemy's resources. He had reached out and found the weak and corruptible within the ranks of the great and good of Belatis, turning a few of the most vital-placed and easily malleable to the cause of Chaos. Under his direction, they had spread the secret gospel of the powers of the warp amongst those beneath them.

In short, he had prepared the way, and now the forces of the warp had made manifest their divine intent for this world, and for their servant Khoisan the Faceless.

The Planet Killer was on its way. All upon Belatis would die, but their deaths would provide the motivating psychic energy to elevate Khoisan to his final reward. He would ride on the wings of the psychic death scream of this world's inhabitants, allowing it to carry him up into the far reaches of the warp where he would be gloriously reborn as one of the greatest and most powerful servants of the gods of Chaos. As a daemon prince of Chaos.

Khoisan staggered, feeling the flesh beneath his rune-inscribed power armour split and convulse, feeling his Chaos-changed innards flex and twist into even stranger new forms and purposes. With an effort, he concentrated, trying to bring his rebellious physical form back under control. The caul of featureless skin that covered the portion of his skull where his face should have been writhed and heaved, creating semi-formed flashes of a myriad other, often horrific flesh-masks that the champion had worn over his millennia of service to the cause of Chaos. Khoisan could pass for a normal human when it suited him - the ability to control his shifting flesh-forms was a boon granted by his devotions to Lord Tzeentch, the Changer of the Ways - but most of the time it suited him to maintain this faceless facade.

'Master!' called out one of his cultist bodyguards, moving forward to help him and then retreating back in terror as that aspect of the Blood God which the Chaos champion had taken into himself momentarily manifested itself, Khoisan's missing features changing into the snarling, bestial mask of a daemon servant of Khorne. Khoisan leant against the walkway's rail as he struggled to regain control of himself, his servants standing back in wary caution. The final physical changes heralding his ascension to the rank of daemon prince were coming, and his body was already starting to react in anticipation of its imminent rebirth and transformation. There would be pain, Khoisan knew, as there had been on those other occasions when his body had changed to

manifest those marks of Chaos that were signs of his masters' favours, but it would be as nothing in comparison to the almost limitless power that would soon be his.

Khoisan beckoned one of his cultist lieutenants forward. In his previous life just two months ago, the man had been a prosperous merchant from one of the industrial combines that dominated Belatis's most northerly continent. Now he was a devoted follower of Chaos who had used his position to smuggle thousands of cultists posing as migrant workers into Madina, arming them with weapons manufactured in his combine's workshops, stockpiled in its commercial warehouses throughout the city.

Another faithful servant, thought Khoisan. Another fool who thinks I will save him from the Despoiler's weapon, another sacrifice to aid my elevation to daemonhood.

'Are the preparations complete?' growled Khoisan, his voice still thick with the last few lingering traces of the Khornate daemon that had briefly surfaced from inside him.

'Almost, master. The defence laser batteries are secured under our control and ready to fire.'

'And the missiles?' asked the Chaos champion.

'The arming codes provided by our agents in the governor's palace have proved to be most satisfactory. Six of them here, another ten in the other silos. More than enough for our purposes. They are being refuelled and will be ready to launch in less than an hour.'

'See to it,' ordered Khoisan.

The cultist adept bowed, and retired to carry out his master's instructions. Khoisan moved to the edge of the walkway, looking down at the activity in the gallery below. On each side of the walkway stood the black metal towers of three giant orbital missiles, of a similar type to the torpedo missiles used by the accursed vessels of the Imperial Navy. Cultists and tech-adept deserters from the planetary defence force worked on them from the floors of the launch shaft bays, refuelling them and prepping them for launch. Other cultists swarmed up the gantry scaffolding that held the missiles in their launch cradles, carrying out the no less vital task of daubing them with Chaos runes and sigils, re-consecrating these weapons of the Imperium to the service of the powers of the warp.

More than enough for our purpose, thought Khoisan, knowing that within the hour these powerful weapons, intended to defend Belatis from orbital attack by the enemy vessels, would be thundering their way towards a very different kind of target. By that time, of course, he would be far from here. After the initial shock of the attack, the wrath of the orbiting Imperial warships would be swift and summary, and the reinforced rockcrete walls of these underground silos and the hundred metres of rock and soil above their heads would offer little protection from sustained bombardment from the gun batteries of a Capital class warship.

Khoisan turned away, signalling to his bodyguards that it was time to return to the grav-hopper waiting to take him to Madina. He took one last look at the scurrying activity around the giant, deadly missiles, seeing no difference between the still-living cultists working there and the corpses strewn at his feet. To the Faceless One, they were all the same.

All sacrifices. All additions to the pyre of corpses which he must scale on his ascent to daemonhood.

## TEN

DUST FELL FROM the ceiling of the underground cell, leaving a fine scattering over the broken figure strapped onto the interrogation slab. Korte couldn't tell whether the vibrations came from the impact of shells falling into the Arbites compound overhead or from the answering shots fired back by the defending macro-cannon turrets. After this long, the sounds of the artillery duel that had reduced much of the outer compound to smoking rubble now merged into one continuous ramble.

Korte looked down dispassionately at the body strapped down on the slab in front of him, seeing the signs of imminent death written on the man's broken and bloody features. 'We're losing him again. Give him another stimm-shot,' he ordered the Arbites surgeon.

'This is probably the last time I'll be able to revive him. His heart won't hold out much longer,' warned the surgeon.

'He's not ready to die,' growled Korte. 'He hasn't told me everything he wants to yet.'

The surgeon shrugged, adjusting the controls of the med-array and sending a carefully-measured amount of stimm-chem surging through the tubes leading into the man's skin. The patient convulsed as the artificial stimulants kick-started his body into life again. Gasping, he coughed up blood and tissue matter, which the surgeon automatically wiped away with a cloth. The man's torn lips opened and closed, forming silent words. Korte leaned in closer to hear what the dying man was straggling to say. It was not unknown for captured heretics to bite down on poison capsules hidden in their teeth, hoping to take their interrogators with them with their last toxin-filled breath. Korte was not worried: even if the prisoner's mouth had not already been checked, the man had no remaining unbroken teeth left in which to hide such a capsule.

Korte knew this man - he had been a captain in the PDF palace guard - and he knew too the phenomenon he was now witnessing. Captured in the latest and barely-repulsed ground attack on the courthouse's defences, the dying heretic was recanting his treachery against the Emperor. Those weak and foolish dupes lured into the service of the Dark Powers often made such confessions, realising too late the true nature of the powers they had aligned themselves with.

Yes, Korte had done this many times before, just as he had heard the words - desperate pleas for forgiveness, pathetic rationales for the heretic's treachery, terrible and hate-filled retellings of the crimes they had committed in the name of their new masters - now issuing in a babbling, gurgling rush from the mouth of the dying man. He listened patiently, knowing he had to, and then silenced the prisoner with an upraised hand.

'Give me the name. Tell me the name of the one who commanded you to do all this.'

The man stared at him with death-glazed eyes, soundlessly mouthing one word over and over again. Korte leant in close to hear it. One word. One name. One utterance that genuinely shocked the veteran Arbitrator, making him sick with realisation at just how

far the taint of Chaos corruption had reached on this world.

All the way into the governor-regent's palace. All the way into the throne room itself.

Korte stared into the prisoner's eyes, searching for some last sign of Chaos-inspired falsehood but finding instead only a dying man's desperate need to be believed. A desperate need to be able to say one last truth after so many falsehoods and betrayals.

'The charge is heresy. The sentence is execution, granted with merciful absolution.'

Korte drew his bolt pistol, firing one shot through the prisoner's heart. Swift and summary, this was the merciful absolution that the recanting heretic had craved. Unabsolved, the Arbitrators could have kept him alive and in agony for days on their specialist execution racks.

Korte left the interrogation cell, the other Arbitrators following in his wake. The underground detention levels were now eerily quiet. The constant, terrified drumming on the thick metal doors sealing shut the areas where the general prisoners were held had ceased hours ago. As per standard Arbites procedure in the event of the courthouse fortress being captured or evacuated, poison gas had been flushed through the air vents into the detention caverns, killing the thousands held within them. It was a bloody, unpleasant business, Korte knew, but a necessary one. The prisoners would have been slaughtered anyway by the Chaos cultists, and many of them would have eagerly joined the heretic ranks.

An Arbitrator of provost marshal rank awaited them at the entrance to the surface levels. 'A communication from the marshal. He sends word that we are to proceed without delay with the evacuation here. He will rendezvous with us in orbit aboard the *Retribution*.'

'Are we still in contact with him?' Korte asked.

The Arbitrator shook his head. 'Communications with the governor-regent's palace are poor, at best. The enemy could be trying to jam our signals, or it could even be interference from that Emperor-damned defence shield. You throw enough rainwater at that thing, it'll generate enough static interference to block out most comm signals,' Korte grunted, unsurprised. So far, little about this evacuation had gone as planned.

On the surface, armoured Arbites Eagle shuttles emerged from their shell-proof bunkers, their pilots impatiently firing up their lifting thrusters in warning of imminent take-off. Arbitrators - all that remained of the Imperial presence on Belatis after the final evacuation of all non-Arbites personnel from within the Imperium compound - abandoned their positions on the courthouse walls, running through churned mud towards the shuttles' open belly ramps. Shellfire landed around them as the enemy siege batteries intensified their bombardment, and Korte saw a group of running Arbites troopers suddenly enveloped in a roaring blast of flame and shrapnel as a direct hit landed amongst them.

On the walls, the macro-cannon turrets opened fire, and, over the sound of the big guns and shuttle engines, Korte could hear the howl of triumph from the surrounding heretic mob - more than ten thousand of them, the Arbites spotters estimated - as they realized that their moment of victory was at hand. Emerging from their hiding places amongst the pulverised ruins surrounding the Imperial compound, they charged forward in their thousands. Inside the macro-cannon turrets, servitor gunners fired shell after shell of high-explosive and special anti-infantry grapeshot rounds, blowing open gaping, bloody holes in the enemy ranks, and still the cultists charged onwards. As they came closer, the air was filled with a terrifying staccato chatter as the courthouse's secondary defence line of heavy bolter emplacements opened fire en masse. The cultists died in their hundreds. Yet still they charged onwards.

Soon they would be amongst the minefields the Arbitrators had seeded in the ruins around the courthouse and after that they would be within range of the heavy flamer units that were the Arbites fortress's last line of defence. And it still wouldn't be enough to stop them. The blindly obedient servitors now manning the wall defences would perform their final duties well enough, Korte knew, but it would only be a matter of minutes before the cultist horde was inside the compound.

Or perhaps in even less time than that. 'Vehicles!' reported a voice on Korte's helmet vox-cast link, coming from the Arbites pilot of one of the shuttles that had just taken off. From the air above the fortress, the pilot had a clear view of the cultist lines. 'They're bringing up vehicles. Armoured tractor rigs, a whole column of them coming along Regent's Boulevard from the north.'

Korte cursed. He knew the kind of rigs these would be: huge behemoths used in the forge works of the city's northern industrial fringe to haul extra-heavy loads of steel and adamantium alloy. At full power, one of those monsters could smash through the courthouse main gates with ease.

Yes, definitely time to be leaving, he grimly surmised.

'Mahan! Where's Mahan?' he yelled, standing at the foot of the last shuttle in line and counting heads as the last few Arbitrator stragglers boarded.

'Here!' The shout from across the compound echoed over Korte's helmet radio, and he saw the young Arbitrator commander racing with his squad across the open ground of the landing area. Shells landed around them, chasing them, almost as if the cultist gunners could see them. They had stayed behind longer than ordered, checking that all the servitor gunners were functioning properly in order to buy the final evacuation wave as much time as possible. Running through the falling hail of rain and shellfire, they charged up the loading ramp, taking their places amongst the other Arbitrators now strapping themselves in for take-off.

Korte took one last look round the now abandoned courthouse compound. A shell landed a direct hit on one of the macro-cannon turrets, tearing a hole through that section of the wall. From beyond the walls came another howl of triumph from the cultists. Korte spat in contempt into the bloody mud.

'Definitely time to be going,' he murmured, turning and walking up the ramp. The nervous pilot had his craft airborne even before the ramp had slid shut, the shuttle pirouetting at speed into the skies above the fortress, riding a path through the storm of small-arms fire that poured up at it from the ground. Opening its lifter thrusters, the craft accelerated upwards to join the rest of the shuttle formation.

The last Imperium forces had left the surface of Belatis. As of now, the planet had been officially abandoned to the Despoiler.

INSIDE THE COCKPIT of the lead shuttle, the Arbites pilot took a last look out over the vista of the city. Other than the rocky peak of the governor's palace and the soaring spires of the Ecclesiarch cathedral to the south of it, there were no other familiar landmarks remaining that he could see. The city generarium had been destroyed by sabotage weeks ago, and, as the gloom of night descended on the city, all that was visible were great dark patches spread out across the face of the blacked-out city, interspersed by the random blazes of burning buildings and the scattered constellations of cultist and refugee camp-fires amongst the rains. Occasionally, stuttering bursts of las-energy or phosphorous tracer fire arced up into the sky, although it was impossible to tell whether the fire was directed at anything specific or was just part of the heretics' spreading madness as they celebrated victory amongst the burning ruins of the fallen capital city.

Suddenly, bright light splashed across the pilot's photochromatic helmet visor. He looked up in alarm, thinking that his shuttle was being targeted by anti-aircraft fire, but seeing nothing.

'There! Over there!' urged his co-pilot, pointing out towards the blank darkness. And then, suddenly, there it was again, emanating from somewhere amongst the thickly forested hills to the north of the city. Brilliant, angry fingers of laser energy stabbing up into the night sky. Reaching up to grasp and pull down the bright, star-like lights of the ships orbiting overhead.

The planet's orbital defence laser batteries were opening fire.

## ELEVEN

THE FIRST VOLLEY of lance fire from the planet's surface struck the *Graf Orlok* on its underside, just fore of its main engine array. Like many officers of his kind, Titus von Blucher mistook a maniacally strict adherence to every rule, regulation and tenet as being marks of the true worth of a vessel's captain, and drilled his crew rigorously and continuously. It was this blind obedience to navy regulation, ironically, which was to save his vessel from catastrophe.

The *Graf Orlok* was orbiting at fifty per cent full void shield capacity, as prescribed in navy regulations. In practice, few commanders maintained this "minimum half power" rule. Void shields were a heavy drain on a ship's energy resources, and constant operation of the complex and often temperamental void shield generators greatly increased the risks of them failing when they were most needed, during battle. Here, in orbit above an Imperium world, with other navy vessels patrolling out-system and able to provide ample warning against enemy attack, many naval commanders would have quietly satisfied themselves with running void shield generators at minimum power.

The volley of defence laser fire impacted against the cruiser's void shields, burning through them in seconds but expending the greater part of its energy in the effort. What was left struck the Imperial ship's underbelly, scoring through the armoured hull and into the mechanical innards of its engines' power feeds. Had the void shields been at any lower level, the lance beams would have punched through into the ship's generarium core, erupting amongst its volatile plasma reactors and possibly destroying the entire vessel in a catastrophic chain reaction.

On the *Graf Orlok's* command deck, Titus von Blucher screamed death and damnation at his crew, threatening them with the direst court martial and summary execution offences if they didn't get the void shields up to full power immediately. If they didn't restore full power to the engine systems. If they didn't give him a complete damage report. If they didn't locate the exact source of the enemy fire coming at them from the planet's surface. Despite their captain's haranguing and often contradictory commands, his crew were able to accomplish the most immediately vital of these tasks. When the recharged defence batteries struck again less than a minute later, their deadly beams exploded harmlessly against the Lunar class cruiser's now fully-restored void shields. Elsewhere amongst the orbiting fleet, vessels fired up main drives and manoeuvring thrusters, seeking to escape the batteries' high orbital reach. Aboard warships, gunnery officers shouted angry instructions to surveyor officers and tech-priests, demanding target co-ordinates for their batteries to zero in on, while in the generariums of almost two dozen transports, armies of sweating engineers encased in bulky, heat-resistant suits struggled to divert power from aged reactors to weak and unreliable void shield generators.

Meanwhile, on Belatis, in command bunkers buried below the planet's surface, cultist gunnery commanders cursed their foolishness in targeting their first shots at a large and well-armoured warship vessel, and frantically dialled in new target co-ordinates.

There were, after all, many other more vulnerable targets to choose from.

THE *ARCONA* WAS just another aged, decommissioned transport hulk that had been hurriedly refitted and called back into active service at the outbreak of the war, but for Lito it was the first spacecraft he had ever been on, and consequently the grandest thing he had ever seen. The shuttle journey up from Belatis had been a voyage of marvels; the final embarkation aboard the *Arcona* another such world of discoveries. Lito was confined to the lower chambers of the passenger decks along with the other novice acolytes, but what little of the vessel that he had been allowed to see seemed to him to be an endless source of wonders and mysteries. The ship echoed with strange sounds and vibrations, and while at first they filled the impressionable young novice with great fear, he soon became accustomed to these strange, apparently meaningless phenomena that rang up from the depths of the ship's mechanical bowels. This was the realm of the strange and terrible Machine God, he knew; the unknowable - and false, the preachers and confessors of the Ecclesiarch thundered mightily from their pulpits - deity worshipped by the tech-priests. Lito secretly wondered if the sounds he heard were not the Machine God calling out in anger at the presence aboard one of his vessels of the rival priests and adepts of the Imperial Faith.

So it was that, when he and the rest of the congregation of Ecclesiarch evacuees were gathered in the immense cavern space of the ship's main hold for a service of thanksgiving, Lito at first thought little of the faint but insistent sound of klaxon alarms which could be heard emanating from the other decks. Then there came a thick booming ramble from somewhere deep below their feet,

and the definite sensation of movement.

*They were moving*, Lito realised in thrilled terror! The ship's mighty engines had been activated, and they were moving! Perhaps they were even about to ascend into the empyrean itself, he thought to himself with an even greater rash of fearful excitement. Others obviously had similar thoughts, and a hubbub of nervous and whispered excitement broke out amongst the ranks of the assembled adepts. Angry lector-priests armed with whipping canes moved swiftly to quell the disturbance, but even the cardinal astral himself had broken off in confusion from his droning sermon of thanksgiving as the rumblings and klaxon sounds grew even louder.

Suddenly, a tremendous impact threw Lito and all around him to the ground. From the far end of the chamber came a blinding flash, and he heard the voices of the adepts rise in one single choir of screams. For a moment, he wondered if all ascensions into the empyrean were as dramatic and terrible as this, and then he saw the wall of flame gushing along the hold towards him, immolating all in its path. For reasons that Lito would never now understand, his last thoughts were somehow of his blind astropath master, left behind on the world below. Seconds later, the stricken *Arcona* blew apart as the deadly focused streams of energy lancing up from the surface of Belatis cut it in half.

FURTHER OUT-SYSTEM, Erwin Ramas, master of the *Drachenfels*, tried to make sense of the first confused reports coming in from the evacuation fleet orbiting the doomed world. The Belatis system was not a large one - scarcely a third of the size of the Terran system - but the *Drachenfels*, maintaining watch over the outer system approaches, was still several light minutes distant from the rest of the Imperial force. The subsequent delay in normal communication channels - at this distance, it would take almost quarter of an hour to receive and send back the simplest vox message - necessitated the use of astropaths to instantaneously relay vital battle orders and communiqués between vessels in the same star system. Ramas could only wait as his ship's astropath received word from his brethren aboard the other Imperial vessels, communicating to the *Drachenfels's* command crew who would in turn feed it through to their incapacitated captain inside the strategium shell which was both his prison and nurturing shelter. Partially linked into the pulsing machine-mind of his vessel, Ramas sifted through the streams of data fed to him not only by the crew of the command deck, but also by the ship itself. From the reports from his astropath and bridge officers, he knew that the evacuation fleet was under attack, but the ship whispered to him of a threat closer and more immediate than that. From the very edge of its surveyor senses, the ship sensed something amiss, whispering the first word of it in soundless electronic murmurings too faint for the vigilant but dull-witted surveyor monitor servitors to yet pick up. Only Ramas heard it. More than any other vessel commander within Battlefleet Gothic, aboard the *Drachenfels* captain and vessel truly were as one. Ramas heard the ship's warning, and was already reacting even as the first spoken confirmation crackled over the command deck's comm-net link with its patrolling escort craft.

'*Pegasus* reporting. We are in surveyor contact with five or more enemy vessels, including one capital ship. Emperor knows where they came from, but they're moving in-system at speed, heading for the evacuation fleet. We're directly in their path, and after that they'll be coming your way. We'll try and hold them as long as we can. Good hunting, *Drachenfels*. *Pegasus* out.'

Ramas said nothing, knowing that the *Pegasus* was already doomed, and respecting the frigate commander's decision to go down fighting rather than retreat, buying time for the rest of the Imperial fleet. Ramas turned his attention to checking his ship's status and issuing orders to his crew. One of the Emperor's ships may already be lost, but his vessel and crew were still very much alive, and soon they would have a battle to fight.

EMERGING FROM ITS hiding place amongst the gas giant's upper atmosphere, the Chaos flotilla swept in-system, the *Charybdis* at its centre, shielded by the protective fan of its Infidel class torpedo ship escorts. Faster than their Imperial equivalents, and armed with longer-ranged weapons batteries, they were moving in attack formation, intent on destroying any enemy vessel in their path. The *Pegasus* was the first to fall, advancing bravely into the face of the oncoming Chaos formation, but destroyed in a wave of Infidel-launched torpedoes before it could bring its own formidable but shorter-ranged laser battery armaments to bear. One of its sister Sword class vessels, the *Achilles*, fared only slightly better. Making a darting flank attack on the Chaos formation, it succeeded in crippling one of the Infidel raiders in a brief but withering storm of laser fire. But, before the craft could recharge its weapon batteries' depleted energy reserves, an answering blast from the *Charybdis's* enormous starboard plasma cannon batteries tore off the *Achilles's* prow and destroyed its internal power relay systems. Drifting crippled and powerless, the *Achilles* was completely defenceless yet the Chaos ships contemptuously spurned the chance to complete its destruction, sweeping on past it in-system and towards a far more rewarding target. Towards the *Drachenfels*.

ERWIN RAMAS HAD heard the princeps commanders of the Legiones Titanicus described as "gods of battle", linked into the living minds of their Titan war machines, striding across the battlefield like angry, vengeful gods, leaving armies of men and other, lesser machines crushed and broken in their wake. Those who had seen the terrifying spectacle of Titans in battle - and Ramas himself had - never forgot it, but Ramas laughed at the notion of such power being described as godlike. No, the power to traverse the warp and travel anywhere within the almost limitless bounds of the Imperium of Mankind; the power to rain fire down from the heavens on the heads of the Emperor's enemies; the power to enter battle in command of an Imperial warship, to feel blows that would crush the greatest Titan war-machine deflect harmlessly off your armoured flanks, to send back volleys of fire that would destroy an entire Titan legion with one blast.

*That* was power, Ramas thought. Perhaps the greatest power any mortal could ever know. To be linked into the mind of a warship, as he was, was to have only the merest inkling of what it was to be truly godlike.

Ramas called his attention away from such blasphemous thoughts and back to the matter at hand. Checking the surveyor information being fed through to him, he saw the Chaos formation bearing down hard on his vessel like a pack of wolves, the faster-moving escorts ranging ahead of the slower but more powerful Murder class cruiser.

'All ahead full,' he ordered, feeling the surge of power ran through the ship as additional energy was channelled through to engine systems already burning with the heat of a miniature sun.

For a while, he allowed his mind to drift through the maze of information made available to him, checking status reports, issuing and clarifying further, lesser orders, and comm-net communing with his second-in-command on the ship's bridge. Finally, when he shifted his attention back to the surveyors, he saw that the moment was almost at hand. The escorts were pursuing him like eager young wolf cubs, closing on the *Drachenfels* but surging too far ahead of the enemy cruiser.

'Burn retros,' he ordered, feeling the flow of power course through the ship in the opposite direction, towards its forward-firing braking thrusters.

'Hard to port, ninety degrees!' he ordered, feeling, even hearing, the ship's ancient infrastructure groaning in protest at the strain being put upon it as the entire vessel swung ponderously round in space. A difficult and dangerous manoeuvre - vessels had broken in two or fractured their reactors attempting it - but Ramas knew his ship and he knew his crew, and felt sure that neither would fail him now.

The *Drachenfels* was now lying abeam of its pursuers, ceasing all forward movement and presenting its broad port side to the enemy's sights. Ramas could imagine the simultaneous fear and excitement aboard the Chaos vessels. The Imperial cruiser had presented itself as an easy target, but at the same time it was now able to bring its fearsome portside batteries of lance turrets to bear on its pursuers. The next few moments would be vital, Ramas knew, and he intently studied the images on the strategium's surveyor screens.

Overconfident, sure of another victory, the Chaos raiders surged onwards, closing to firing range. Had that eldar torpedo strike of so long ago left Ramas with any lips, he would have smiled with them right now.

'Lock on,' he commanded. 'Open fire, portside batteries!'

Thick streams of energy blasted out from the *Drachenfels*'s lance armaments, flickering across the gulf of space to find the line of Chaos vessels. The lance beams played over two of the Infidels, exploding one apart, sending the other one drifting helpless and dying, its internal compartments and atmosphere set alight by the star-hot lance beams. Ramas did not allow himself any moment of pleasure or triumph; he knew what was about to happen.

Closing to attack range, the Infidels had loosed their torpedoes. Watching the surveyor screens, Ramas could see eight of the deadly missiles - one of the lance-struck vessels had succeeded in firing its torpedoes before it was destroyed - darting towards the *Drachenfels*.

'Brace for impact!' ordered Ramas. All over the Gothic class cruiser, his crew rushed to complete the command, sealing off decks and bays, shutting off non-vital power relays, manning fire control stations, taking shelter in specially-prepared, blast-proof compartments.

The *Drachenfels*'s anti-ordnance defences opened fire, destroying two of the missiles. Another two went astray, failing to acquire their target. The remaining four torpedoes hit the *Drachenfels* in close succession.

Two of them smashed into the rear portside turret batteries, one of them completely destroying Turret Octo, the other striking the thickly armoured mantle of its twin, Turret Sextus, damaging its turning mechanism. Turret Sextus would fire again, but not in this battle.

The remaining two torpedoes impacted against the cruiser's hull armour, one of them causing widespread explosive damage to one of the upper engineering decks. The damage was not serious, but the casualties of several hundred skilled and difficult to replace engineers were troubling.

In his strategium, Ramas felt the ship's systems react to the damage done to them even as his officers were still formulating their initial damage reports. Although no follower of the strange creed of the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Ramas felt, as any true navy man did, that his ship was a living thing, and through his link with its numerous power systems he felt his vessel's pain as it struggled to recover from the wounds just dealt to it.

Bleeding energy from severed power feeds, the *Drachenfels* fired up its manoeuvring thrusters, swinging round to present its lethal torpedo-armed prow to the Chaos formation and shielding its injured portside from any further attack. Damaged as it was, the Imperial cruiser was still quite battleworthy, and more than ready to prove so to its opponents. The next move was the enemy's, Ramas knew. In tandem with the Murder class cruiser, the Infidels could out-manoeuve and out-gun the Imperial ship, but almost certainly not without further loss to themselves.

The veteran naval commander watched, unsurprised, as the changing images on the surveyor screens showed the Chaos vessels withdrawing back towards the protective cover of the Murder class cruiser's batteries. Over the comm-net, he heard cheering amongst the crew of his command deck, but Ramas knew better than to celebrate.

The Chaos force had achieved its objectives, although perhaps with greater losses than they had imagined. They had struck at the Imperial force and driven it back in-system, leaving them in command of the main approach to the Belatis system from its chief edge-of-system warp jump point.

They're waiting for something, Ramas realised. And they know that it's coming. Coming soon.

SOMEWHERE WITHIN THE *Macharius*, a life-force totally unlike the other thousands aboard the vessel also sensed the imminent glories to be. It had found another, safer burrow deeper within the ship's metal innards. There had been other creatures in the burrow - more of the weak, squealing prey things that infested the ship - but it had dealt with them swiftly and brutally, revelling in its newfound strength and powers. Nesting amongst their torn, rotting remains, it began the work of its next stage of transformation. It had subsumed much of its prey's flesh into itself, filtered it through the disease factories of its own poisoned viscera, and now it felt horrid new life ripening within it. Its body was gross and obscene, splitting into two as another being - its plague-twin - emerged slowly out of it like some monstrous tumour growth.

As the entity gestated alone in the dark, it felt the growing purpose for its existence continue to slowly but surely reveal itself. It

saw now that its original intent - to spread its plague gifts amongst the prey creatures - was too small and base. It was a daemon-creature of Chaos, a child of Grandfather Nurgle, meant for far greater things than skulking and hiding in the dark. It felt the source of its existence approaching towards it through the warp. It would wait for it, the entity decided. It knew the moment of glorious fulfilment was coming. And coming soon.

FROM ORBIT, THE batteries of the Imperial warships spoke in reply to the glittering lance beams still piercing up from the planet's surface. As well as the damage done to the *Graf Orlok* and the destruction of the *Arcona*, the cultist-seized defence laser batteries had struck twice more, the probing, flickering fingers of energy each time seeking and finding targets within the cluster of convoy vessels. The promethium tanker-freighter *Brennus* had taken a direct hit, erupting with spectacular effect and sending a rain of burning promethium down into the upper atmosphere of the planet. Moments later, the forward transport holds of the troop carrier *Varus* had been eviscerated by a lance strike; when the 48th Valetta Imperial Guard regiment went into action on whatever world it was next destined for, it would have to do so two full infantry battalions short.

Now, however, the gunners of the *Graf Orlok*, the *Borodino* and the *Inviolable Retribution* had finally zeroed in on the cultist-seized defence laser batteries.

In the planet's capital, to the terrified and shell-shocked populace still sheltering amongst the shattered ruins of Madina, it seemed that the very stars were raining death down upon them, as a curtain of solid light descended down to envelop the hills that surrounded the city.

Armaments that could hurl energy hundreds of thousands of kilometres across space now turned their power on the planet's surface in an awesome display of destructive capability, gouging wounds hundreds of metres deep into the rock and soil of the hills in search of the silos, command bunkers and generator caverns buried there.

In the ruins of a township at the foot of the hills, a congregation of almost a thousand Chaos cultists assumed that the Planet Killer had come at last. They danced and howled in maddened, orgiastic joy in celebration of their impending deaths, commending their souls to the powers of the warp. A gunnery officer aboard the *Borodino* unwillingly granted their wish, directing a mis-aimed salvo of energy blasts away from its intended target down the hillside and onto the heads of the cultists, wiping the township and all it contained off the face of the planet.

Inside one of these buried bunkers, the loyal servant that Khoisan had left in command of the cultist forces there felt the growing, rumbling tremors as the impacts from the Imperial bombardment pushed closer and deeper into the rock strata. In front of him was a control console linked into the chain of missile silos hidden throughout the area, a series of blinking status runes on it signalling which missiles were ready to launch. On the floor behind him lay the body of the merchant, his throat slashed, his usefulness to the cause of Chaos over. The servant felt the booming vibrations grow closer; saw the glow-lamp lighting in the chamber start to flicker and fail; saw dust fall from the low, rockcrete ceiling as a network of growing cracks spread across its surface.

'For the Warmaster,' he intoned, leaning across the console and activating the launch runes. 'For the ascension of Khoisan the Faceless. I give my life for your greater glory, master, gladly and willingly.'

Seconds later, the roof of the chamber caved in. A split-second after that, the entire bunker complex was obliterated, vaporised, in the all-consuming furnace of white-hot plasma. But by that time it was too late.

In silos studded throughout the rock of the surrounding hills, missile engines roared into life. In several of those silos, launch preparations were not yet complete and work-crews of cultists, still inside the launch silos at the time, were immolated by the engines' fiery ignition blast. Missiles shot out of their hidden silos, several of them barely clearing the ground before they were caught and destroyed in the storm of energy being hurled down from orbit. It didn't matter. As the now dead merchant-cultist puppet had told Khoisan, there were still more than enough of them for the Chaos champion's purposes.

'MISSILE LAUNCH! INCOMING torpedo wave detected from the planet's surface!'

Ulantí looked up sharply at the surveyor officer's alert. Through the command deck's viewing bays, he could see the continued confusion amongst the evacuation fleet. Ships firing up their engines to evade the targeting scopes of the surface-based laser batteries, their panicked manoeuvres ironically taking them out of defensive formation and making them more vulnerable to attack. The lifeless corpse of the *Arcona*, broken in half and surrounded by a nimbus halo of wreckage fragments. The wounded bulk of the *Varus*, the burned and decompression-exploded remains of the men of two Imperial Guard battalions still spilling out of the jagged tears in its hull.

And, moving amongst it all, the bright silver-hulled darts of the Fury Interceptors, launched just moments ago by the *Macharius* as it sped back to rejoin the rest of the convoy.

'Mister Nyder?' queried Ulantí, aware of the mood of unease aboard the *Macharius's* command deck since Semper's departure.

Aware of the appraising gaze upon him of the command deck crew. Aware that his hive world noble house heritage still did not sit well with many of his brother officers. Aware that, even if the most hidebound of them would now have to admit - grudgingly, perhaps - that he had proven himself to be a highly able flag officer, there was still a world of difference between standing in the captain's pulpit, and relaying orders issued from it. Aware that there were many here on the bridge who would question whether the young hive world aristocrat was ready to make the transition between the two positions.

Standing in his captain's customary place on the command deck's central nave and surrounded by over two hundred command crew, Hito Ulantí was learning just what a lonely place the bridge of an Imperial warship could be for the man who was supposed to be the vessel's master.

If the *Macharius's* Master of Ordnance held any such doubts about going into combat under Ulantí's temporary captaincy, there was no clue to be found in the characteristic, gruff, clipped tones of his reply. In all matters relating to the conduct of his duties and the operation of his precious attack craft squadrons, Remus Nyder was every part the experienced and no-nonsense naval man. 'Twelve missiles,' reported Nyder, reading off the information on his lectern screen. 'All of them are orbit-capable. We have

elements of *Storm* and *Tempest* squadrons already launched and on course to intercept them. I also have Starhawks from *Firedrake* outfitted for planetary atmosphere operations and warming up in the launch bays. With your permission, I recommend we send them in to pick over anything left down there on the ground when the gunnery crews on the *Orlok* and the *Borodino* have finished their work.'

Ulantı nodded his assent, turning to watch the events of the battle outside the viewing bay windows.

'VANDIRE'S OATH!' CURSED Kaether, sharply jinking his fighter craft out of the path of high-density streams of massed but unfocussed autocannon fire that poured out of from the underbelly of the transport freighter. 'Someone tell those Emperor-damned idiots aboard that junker heap to cease fire with their defence turrets until my interceptors are out of the way and the targets they're supposed to firing at are actually within range!'

A brief touch on the manoeuvring thrusters brought his Fury back into position alongside those of Altomare and Zane, the three of them forming up into a wide intercept pattern. He didn't have to check his surveyor screen to see the target coming up towards them; its engine flare showed starkly against the darkness of the night-side surface of the planet below. 'Concentrated, intersecting fire,' he told his wingmen, quite unnecessarily, he realised. 'Remember, it takes a lot to stop these brutes. We'll only get one shot at it. Let's make sure we do it right.'

'Check, commander,' came back Vale's typically relaxed and comradely mocking reply. 'And, after that, you want to remind us not to open our cockpit canopy seals until we're safely landed back aboard the Mach again?'

From Zane, there was only the appropriately cold, curt sound of a brief comm-net acknowledgement blip.

Ahead of them, Kaether saw the darkness light up with the tell-tale flickering light-lines of lascannon fire, followed seconds later by the bright corona flash of a missile harmlessly exploding just beyond the upper fringes of the upper atmosphere of Belatis. That's one of the brutes gone, thought Kaether, just as he fired his own wing-mounted laser weapons in tandem with Vale and Zane. The triple streams of las-fire reached out to intersect the oncoming missile, which blindly passed right into the Furies' intended kill-zone. Las-blasts hammered against the dense shell of its warhead armour, ripped off fused and shattered chunks of its body casing, raptured into almost spent fuel tanks and reduced engine components to melted slag. Finally, after long seconds of intensive punishment, the missile exploded apart.

The Fury formation cruised through the outer fringes of the explosion, already searching for the next target.

'Commander, I have another missile target on my screen, one hundred and sixty kilometres away and closing. It's—' Over the comm-net, Zane's voice suddenly broke off in a momentary lapse of almost human-sounding surprise, before returning seconds later, its usual cold and unemotional tone once again in place.

'Commander, the missile is firing retro thrusters and radically changing course. It is no longer heading towards any of the transport vessels. It is falling back towards the planet's surface.'

'TOWARDS BELATIS?'

Ulantı checked the readings on the pulpit's lectern screen, what he saw only confirming the report relayed to him by the command deck's surveyor section.

'Confirmed, captain,' reported a metal-masked tech-priest. 'Five of the missiles have so far been successfully intercepted by our attack craft. One has been destroyed by the target vessel's own anti-ordnance defences. Four of the remaining missiles have changed course and are falling back at speed towards the planetary surface.'

'A guidance system malfunction?' asked Nyder, questioning doubt in his voice.

'Doubtful,' answered the servant of the Machine God, pausing in his reply as he communed with the ship's own machine-mind, checking complex, matriculator-spun probabilities and calculations. 'From the nature of their matching trajectories, it seems most likely that they have been converted to atmospheric ballistic missile use and deliberately targeted at a pre-planned target on the planetary surface.'

'What target?' enquired Ulantı sharply.

Another pause as the tech-priest again checked equations fed through from the ship's ancient and complex logic engines.

'The capital city, Madina. Most likely, the palace of the planetary governor.'

## TWELVE

PANIC, BUND AND instinctive, numbing and all-consuming, reigned supreme inside much of the governor-regent's palace.

It had begun some hours earlier at the base of the rocky pinnacle, amongst the still-loyal planetary defence force units which had been guarding the main ground-level entrances against the threat of enemy infantry sallies through the defence shield barrier. As those at the top of the palace peak made their final preparations for departure, sealing off the upper palace from the lower levels, panic and outrage set in amongst the planetary defence force troopers as it became obvious that they were being abandoned to die along with the rest of the planet's population, in breach of what their commanding officers had promised them.

Their numbers swelled by the crowds of lower level household servants similarly betrayed by their governor-regent master, the troopers tried to storm the upper levels of the palace and seize the shuttle bays there, clashing head to head with the units of elite and still-loyal palace guard troops set to guard the entrances to the upper palace.

Sounds of combat echoed through lift shafts and stairways that traversed the rock of the ancient palace. Several of the lower levels were now on fire, abandoned to the cultists and refugees now streaming past the abandoned ground-level defences. Panic, along with the heat and smoke and sounds of screams and gunfire, now rose up through the palace in a palpable wave, penetrating even into the sanctified surroundings of the Sarro family chapel.

At the last moment, the governor-regent had decided that if the living branch of the House of Sarro were to escape the planet's destruction, then so too would the mortal remains of his honoured ancestors. The congregation of nobles and family retainers visibly fidgeted with impatience as Vitas Sarro went about the business of conducting the necessary but time-consuming prayers and rituals involved in the disinterment of his ancestors' sacred ashes.

*Coin-counting while the Imperial palace burns*, thought Semper to himself, remembering the legend of the chancellery adept who had insisted on conducting a review of the holdings of the Imperial palace treasury as the shells of the Traitor Warmaster's renegade Space Marine legions rained down on the palace's inner walls.

Still, even Sarro started to hurry through the final litanies as the sounds of conflict from the levels below grew noticeably closer, and then broke off altogether as flashes of violent red light flared through the high stained-glass windows of the chapel, accompanied by distant sounds similar to the dry crack of a lasgun firing but magnified a hundredfold. As one, the congregation pushed out onto the chapel's outer balconies, staring in terrified awe at the scene beyond the city's edges, where dancing beams of laser light flickered up from the hills, the flash of their firing reflected in the dull mirror of the cloud ceiling that hung over the city.

'What is happening?' asked the governor-regent, his voice tight with fear and growing panic. 'The defence laser batteries are firing! I did not order this! What are they firing at? Surely the Planet Killer cannot be here already?'

Sarro looked to his first minister and the commander of his planetary defence force for answers, but Kale and General Brod could only stare at the display flickering defence laser beams in confused incomprehension.

'I... I don't understand, your lordship,' stammered Brod, unable to tear his gaze away from the lines of flickering laser beams that continued to knife upwards, piercing through the cloud cover towards their targets in orbit. 'The enemy must have seized the batteries, using them to fire upon the vessels in orbit.'

'How could this be allowed to happen?' shrieked Sarro, apparently forgetting the fact that his entire world had now almost completely descended into anarchy and disorder. Suddenly, a second, more immediately vital, point occurred to the governor-regent.

'These weapons, could they be used to fire upon the palace?'

It was Semper, pushing his way towards the governor-regent through the crowd of panicked nobles and retainers, who answered.

'They are orbital-aimed weapons, your lordship. Their elevation is too high to fire upon surface-based targets, but that is not the issue. The issue is that we cannot delay our departure any further. The safety of the evacuation fleet is paramount. If the orbital defence batteries have fallen into the hands of the enemy, then the area of space around Belatis is no longer secure. The commanders of the navy escort vessels will order an end to the evacuation operation and the immediate departure of the convoy fleet from Belatis, no matter if all the Emperor's servants - even one as significant as the planetary governor - have not yet been safely evacuated. That is what any vessel commander would order under such circumstances.'

Including myself, without any hesitation whatsoever, Semper thought to himself bitterly, if I were where I belong on the command deck of the *Macharius* instead of down here pandering to a weakling idiot like you.

'What the captain says is correct, brother,' said the Lady Malissa, taking hold of Sarro's hand and comforting him by holding it against the smooth, pale skin of her face. 'You have already done all you can, and none will ever doubt your bravery or your devotion to our beloved homeworld, but now it is time to leave this place and take up your duties in the service of the Emperor elsewhere.'

'Yes, yes, of course. You are always so right, always so good at knowing the correct thing to do, dear sister,' murmured Sarro, allowing his sister to guide him away from the balcony and towards his waiting attendants.

The milling crowd of nobles and servants followed him, knowing that he was their sole remaining lifeline to safety. An eruption of light and sound, greater than anything that had come already, suddenly made them turn back towards the scene on the hills, where they saw solid lines of fire fall down through the cloud cover to envelop the hillsides where the defence laser batteries lay hidden. A thrill of fear ran through the assembled watchers, many of them crying out in terror. Even Semper, who had stood on the bridge of a warship and watched the phenomenon from high orbit, felt a clutch of fear as he witnessed first hand the tremendous energy now being hurled down from space by the orbiting warships of the Imperial Navy. The energy blasts and cannonades of shells and missiles tore through the veil of clouds, impacting deep into the bedrock of the hills and sending powerful blast waves rippling out over the city below.

Looking up through the swirling-edged rents in the cloud cover, Semper could see the tell-tale flashes in the night sky firmament that signified the massed firing of a warship's weapons batteries. He saw also the unmistakable flickering glow of a ship ablaze in orbit, and scattered comet trails of fire emanating from another damaged or destroyed vessel as debris from it fell, burning, down through the planet's atmosphere.

Which one was the *Macharius*, he wondered? Which one of those flashing broadsides was his vessel? Or could it even be that doomed vessel which appeared from the surface as only a glowing ember of light, beginning to dim now as the fires that raged through its broken hull consumed the last of its atmosphere gases? He cursed the futility of his presence here on the planet's surface. His vessel was in combat - in danger - and meanwhile he was trapped on this world, a helpless bystander to events that by all rights he should be participating in, perhaps even to the extent of being able to influence the final outcome.

As if on cue, he saw and heard roaring rocket trails shoot up skywards from amongst the conflagration of the burning hills.

'Orbital torpedoes!' muttered Judda Kale in stunned disbelief, standing beside Semper and looking in naked terror at the lines of fire now tracing a path up into the space. 'Emperor's mercy, we've been betrayed! I never knew, I never—'

'Quickly, to the shuttles!' called the Lady Malissa urgently, drowning out whatever else the governor-regent's first minister had to say. The panicked mob of courtiers needed little encouragement, and stampeded for the doors from the chapel. Fighting against the surging movement of the crowd, Semper looked around for the familiar dark blue uniforms of Battlefleet Gothic, spotting with relief the bulky figure of Maxim Borusa pushing towards him, followed by his other three petty officer bodyguards, all of them

using fists and weapon butts to clear a path through the milling, panicked herd of Belatis nobility. Reaching him, the four armsmen formed a protective shield around the *Macharius's* captain.

'I'd say it was high time we were getting back to the Mach, sir,' said Borusa, with the casual and contemptuous indifference to matters of rank and formality that Semper already realised was the distinctive mark of the man.

'Agreed, petty officer,' said Semper, removing a vox-caster from his cummerbund sash, talking into it through the heavy crackle of static interference still emanating from the palace defence shield. The personal vox-caster's signal could not penetrate the shield and allow him to make contact with his ship, but it could still certainly reach the ship's shuttle waiting in the landing bay several levels below.

'Semper to *Macharius* shuttle. We are on our way back to you now. Stand by to take off as soon as we are aboard.'

'The mood's turning ugly down here, captain,' warned the voice of Milos Caparan. 'We've got some of their ground-pounder troops guarding the entrances to the bay, but they look like they're thinking about bailing out on us or perhaps even trying to storm aboard before we can take off. What orders?'

In the cockpit of the shuttle, there was a pause, and then came Semper's answer.

'Clear the landing bay, by force of arms if necessary, and secure the entrances using your own crewmen, commander. If it comes through the doors and it isn't wearing a Battlefleet uniform, then by all means feel free to shoot it on sight.'

DOZENS OF KILOMETRES overhead, doom descended on the governor's palace. Launched out of synch with the other retargeted missiles, the first orbital torpedo reached the apex of its upwards launch trajectory. Internal gyros revolved and changed, manoeuvring thrusters fired, and the missile tumbled back towards the planet's surface, its simple logic engine machine-mind finding and zeroing in on its new target. Its main drive spluttered and died, its fuel cells exhausted by the arduous climb up into the upper fringes of the atmosphere. Now only gravity, and a few well-timed, final bursts of manoeuvring thrusters, would carry it to its target.

The first missile hit the palace at tremendous speed, passing harmlessly through the defence shield as it was designed to, just as if the energy screen were the void shields of a target space vessel. By chance, it crashed through the roof dome of the governor-regent's throne room, completely obliterating the chamber. Designed to penetrate through adamantium hulls and thick bulkhead walls, the densely-armoured warhead cut through the comparatively light stonework structure of the palace, ploughing on down through the building, before finally exploding in the kitchens and stockrooms levels, some twelve storeys below.

The impact and detonation of the missile rocked the palace rock to its core. Ceilings and passageway roofs collapsed onto the heads of the palace's screaming inhabitants, killing them or burying them alive. Fire and blast wave damage roared through combat-filled stairways and elevator shafts, killing everything in their path. An entire surface section of the rocky spire that the palace was built on gave way, raining hundreds of tons of rock down onto the mobs still milling about at the base of the palace rock. In the generarium level, buried deep within the rock itself, the impact destroyed or interrupted many of the power feeds to the shield projectors studded across the outer surface of the rock. The shimmering defence shield suddenly stuttered and then vanished.

Not that it was needed any longer, anyway. High overhead, the remaining three missiles were even now reaching the apex point of their own upwards trajectories before turning back down towards their shared target on the planet's surface.

THE IMPACT OF the blast threw Semper to the ground, dust and debris raining down upon him from the collapsed passageway ceiling behind him. The main palace lighting cut out, to be replaced by the dim radiance of glow-globes set low into the passage walls. One of his armsmen bodyguards helped him to his feet, the man even respectfully and ludicrously taking the time to brush some of the coating of dust from his captain's uniform. All around him, Semper heard screams of panic and groans and cries of the injured buried in the rubble behind him. From somewhere close came the bark of gunfire. Either the battle in the lower levels had spilled up to the upper palace, or the nobility of Belatis and their servants were turning on each other in maddened panic to secure themselves a place on the evacuation shuttles. What had already been a confused rash to the landing bays now turned into a blind stampede.

'Captain Semper!'

Semper turned, seeing Byzantane and a squad of fully-armed Arbitrators shouldering their way through the press of bodies towards him from along a side passage. Gunfire chased them along the corridor, and the troopers at the rear of the Arbiters squad turned to fire roaring shotgun broadsides into the darkness behind them.

'Your shuttle is closer than mine. Get to it, and get this fat fool and his companions out of here.' Byzantane gestured to the huddled group of Sarro and his retinue. Semper saw the cringing, terrified figure of Hyuga with them, although there was no sign of the Munitorium adept's two scribe assistants, no doubt lost or abandoned somewhere in the confusion.

'Get moving. That was a torpedo hit, and apparently there's more of the same already on the way,' continued Byzantane. 'My men and I will hold this junction and herd the rest of these wretches to the other bays on the next level down.'

The Arbiters commander grinned in mirthless humour, seeing the questioning, doubting look in the eyes of the Imperial Navy captain. 'Don't worry, captain. I have no wish to sacrifice my men or end my service to the Emperor today, or any other days in the foreseeable future. Now get moving, and we'll see each other again in high orbit.'

'I look forward to it, marshal,' said Semper, offering his hand to Byzantane, 'and to seeing this world disappearing from view behind me on my ship's rear scanners.' The two men clasped hands again, Byzantane pulling Semper close. 'Watch them. Watch them all, captain. Do not turn your back on any of them,' Byzantane hissed urgently into his ear. Semper looked in surprise at this strange Imperial lawkeeper, and then nodded in unspoken understanding. And, with Byzantane's warning still ringing in his ears, Semper led his group off down the main corridor to the shuttle bay.

Twice on their brief journey, they encountered resistance. Once, a bank of elevators had spilled open to disgorge a terrified mass

of humanity: servants and mutineer PDF troopers fleeing the destruction and battle that now filled the levels below. Semper had hesitated to give the necessary command to clear a path through them, but Borusa had not.

'Open fire!' he yelled, even as the armed mob surged towards them.

The four armsmen's shotcannons, designed for use in the target-packed close confines of a space vessel's corridors and airlocks, were perfect for this kind of butchery, and several combined blasts from them sent the remainder of the mob fleeing away up another corridor, leaving the shrapnel-torn bodies of their dead and dying behind them.

Further ahead, at the entrance to the shuttle bay, they ran straight into an ambush, black-garbed cultists firing upon them from the top of a nearby stairway, or from amongst the cover of the pillar-lined antechamber hall to the shuttle bay. A volley of shots cut through the group of fleeing navy men and Belatisite nobles as they ran the gauntlet across the open space towards the bay entrance. Semper saw two of Sarro's aides cut down by a burst of autogun fire, one of the shots also catching General Brod in the shoulder.

A las-blast felled the armsman beside Semper. The captain grabbed the man as he fell, intending to drag him into the bay, but then found himself staring into the excavated crater of the man's skull, where the las-shot had blown half his head away. Semper let the corpse drop, but snatched up the dead man's shotcannon, sighting it at the nearest black-cloaked figure hiding behind a stone pillar. He may have hesitated to fire upon panicked Imperial subjects just a few moments ago, but he had no such qualms concerning the servants of Chaos. He fired, seeing his target disappear from view in a burst of exploded flesh and shattered stonework. Before he could find another target, he was shoved brusquely from behind, Maxim Borusa propelling him out of the firing line and into the relative safety of the shuttle bay. The others scrambled in behind him, one young nobleman pausing in the entranceway to return fire at the cultists, only to be instantly gunned down in a blast of lasfire.

They ran towards the beckoning open belly of the shuttle, the rising scream of the shuttle's engines drowning out the sound of gunfire from behind them. Blood maddened, the cultists charged after them into the open bay. Inside the craft, First Gunner Daksha swivelled round in his top turret, panning the barrels of his quad-mounted autocannon across the mouth of the bay entrance. At the press of a trigger, firepower intended to blow apart armoured starfighters in an unstoppable hail of armour-piercing shells was unleashed upon the Chaos followers, indiscriminately reducing them to a sprayed mess of pulped matter. Maxim Borusa stood at the top of the ramp, screaming brutal-sounding Stranivarite obscenities at the ruling elite of Belatis as he hurried them on into the interior of the passenger cabin. He paused on the ramp, checking that there was no one else left to come. A cultist, maddened with bloodlust, made it unscathed through the hail of turret fire and charged up the ramp towards him, brandishing a blood-dripping chainsword. Maxim allowed him to get almost within striking range and then raised his bolt pistol and shot the madman through the face, dismissively kicking his falling corpse over the side of the ramp before stepping back into the shuttle cabin, hitting the ramp seal rune as he did so.

'All aboard. Forvolkk's sake, go! Go! Go!'

Upfront in the shuttle cockpit, Caparan needed little encouragement. He pushed forward heavily on the guidance stick as he fed power through to the main lifting jets. In a roar of blinding thruster fire, the shuttle touched off, blasting out of the open bay at reckless speed.

Beyond, in the darkness of the rain-soaked Belatis night, Caparan and Torr saw the running lights of a clutch of other shuttle craft blasting away from the palace rock. Above them, through the cockpit canopy, they saw the blazing engine trails of the three missiles now streaking down towards the palace. Caparan hit the main engine thrusters, sending the shuttle coursing away up out of reach of the torpedoes' blast radius.

They almost made it.

The remaining three missiles hit the palace in close synchronisation, blasting apart the entire upper palace. One of the warheads, still unexploded, burrowed down into the living rock of the spire the palace was built upon, finally detonating near the generarium. The reactor, powered by thermal energy pumped up from deep below the planet's surface, exploded immediately, cracking open the entire palace rock as the energy stored within it surged outwards at incredible speed.

From a distance, it looked as though the palace and the rock it was built upon simply erupted apart like a volcano.

The blast-wave swept away everything in its path, levelling the centre of Madina and hurling huge pieces of flaming rock for kilometres in every direction. Caparan and his co-pilot fought for control of the shuttle craft as it was caught up in the initial blast-wave. For a moment, they thought they had succeeded in riding out the worst of it, and then the craft was struck by the hail of rock missiles thrown out by the explosion. One of the starboard engines exploded, struck by a rock chunk travelling with all the deadly velocity and impact of a macro-cannon shell. Instantly transformed into shards of shrapnel, pieces of the shattered engine workings flew off, peppering into the wing and fuselage of the shuttle and causing further damage. One of the shrapnel fragments, a jagged piece of engine casing as large and as flat as a manhole covering, tore through the side of the passenger cabin, spinning like a buzz-saw blade through the cabin and decapitating two of the governor-regent's court advisors as they sat strapped into their acceleration couches. Sitting behind them, Semper felt the spray of blood strike him across the face, although it took him several seconds to realise that it was not his own.

In the cockpit, Caparan felt the craft begin to die around him. The controls were sluggish and unresponsive, and the panel in front of him was lit up with a rash of red, flashing warning runes. From the rear of the cockpit came the smell of burning flesh and wiring as one of Shanyin Ko's servitors and the console system it was plugged into overloaded and caught fire. Caparan and Torr looked at each other, both of them sharing the same realisation.

'We'll be lucky if we can even stay airborne another few minutes, never mind make it back up into orbit. We need to find somewhere to put it down onto the ground.'

'Where?' replied Torr, looking down on the darkened city below and seeing nothing but dense, built-up ruins, no doubt crawling with more heretic madmen. Caparan brought the shuttle round in a long, slow turn in an attempt to maintain altitude while they scanned the ground below for a landing place, instead seeing only ruins and burning buildings. Then, briefly, a tall, instantly

recognisable spire shape stood starkly silhouetted against the night-time horizon.

'There!' Caparan pointed excitedly. 'The Ecclesiarchy cathedral. If it's like every other one I've ever seen then it'll have a wide, open square around it, maybe even an inner courtyard we can try and touch down in.' He glanced at his co-pilot, suddenly remembering something else.

'And didn't someone say something about it still being under Ministorum control? Be good to have some friendly Imperium faces around us while we wait for a rescue shuttle from the Mach to come and pick us up.'

DEVANE WOKE FROM a dream-troubled sleep. He had seen himself naked and alone on an empty and barren plain, running from some vast and nameless threat which was close behind and pursuing him.

He dared not look behind him to see what it was, but he could see its massive shadow reaching out towards him, stretching past him to blot out everything around him. The shadow of the thing spread out over the entire world, and no matter how far or how fast he ran, he knew he would never escape it...

It was not the first time he had had the dream in these last few weeks, and he knew from private talks with the members of his adopted flock when they came to share their doubts and worries with him, that many others here had experienced similar nightmares, but tonight the dream had seemed far more vivid. Far more immediate and terrifying.

'Father confessor!' A hand gently but nervously shook him, trying to rouse his still sleep-dulled senses. Devane automatically reached for the power sword lying beside him, assuming that the heretics had returned in force yet again to mount another attack on the barricades, but the frateris elder who was bending down over him laid his hand on the scabbarded hilt of the weapon.

'No, father confessor, not another attack. But there is something outside you must see.'

The Imperial preacher followed the frateris across the great floor of the cathedral, taking care not to step on any of the blanket- or cloak-wrapped figures huddled everywhere around his feet. Many of them were sleeping, trying to snatch a precious few hours' rest, as Devane had been doing, after the latest heretic assault had been successfully repulsed. Several of the sleepers cried out or moaned in their sleep, perhaps haunted by dreams similar to Devane's, while from elsewhere around him came the differently pitched moans of the injured and dying. The cathedral infirmary was full to overflowing, and now the white-habited sisters of the Adepta Sororitas Order Hospitalier attended to them out here too, amongst the thousands of other pilgrim refugees sheltering inside the Emperor's house.

From outside, Devane heard the sounds of distant but powerful explosions, the Imperial Guard veteran in him immediately identifying it as a naval barrage. He was not surprised that the orbiting warships were now firing upon the planet's surface - to Devane, it was merely a sign that the planet-wide civil breakdown was entering its final agonising stages - merely by the fact that he must have been so exhausted that he, and hundreds of other exhausted frateris fighters, had actually managed to sleep through the noise and earth-shaking impacts of an orbital bombardment.

Frateris brethren crowded the barricades outside, although Devane couldn't help but notice just how thinned their ranks were compared to even just a few days ago. The heretic attacks, although beaten off for the moment, had taken a heavy toll on his flock. The brethren manning the barricades were pointing in nervous excitement to the fiery glow on the horizon, and Devane could still see orbital barrage fire streaking down from space to strike at whatever hapless target there had incurred the wrath of the mighty Imperial Navy. It was the other glow - closer and brighter - though, that caught his attention. Unless he was much mistaken, it was coming from where the governor's palace was situated, but...

Suddenly, something else caught Devane's attention. A thin, whining noise, like the sound of a shuttle's engines. Distant, but apparently coming closer. 'Quiet!' he called. 'Listen! Where is it coming from?'

'There!' one of the frateris pointed. 'Over there!' Devane saw the running lights of the approaching shuttle, coming towards them, skimming low across the night sky, and almost instantly realised that something was very wrong. As it came closer, he saw why. What he thought were additional, irregularly flashing running lights were flames licking around its tail and starboard wing, and there was a pained, worryingly vulnerable tone to the craft's struggling engine sound.

It dropped down fast, too fast, towards the cathedral square. Devane saw flame-scorched naval markings on the underside of its wings, and even though its pilot somehow managed to pull it out of the dive and prevent it crashing nose-first into the middle of the square, its tail still clipped and broke against the rooftop of one of the townhouse buildings that surrounded the open forum. 'Look out! Take cover!' shouted Devane, pulling gaping frateris down away from the barricades as the shuttle craft belly-flopped down towards them.

It hit the ground hard, landing on its underside, shattering the cobbled surface and ploughing a ragged furrow across the already scarred face of the square. Fire from the remains of the heretic force still hiding out in the buildings on the other side of the square rattled off its broken, armoured hull, but even the enemy seemed too stunned by its sudden, dramatic appearance to properly bring their guns to bear. Its nose smashed through the barricade on the northern side of the square, the impact snapping off one of its wings and spinning it round in a hull-crashing but highly effective braking motion.

For a second, no one moved, and then the first shots started ringing out from those few brave or foolhardy frateris brethren who had remained at their posts on the barricade, as they opened fire at the scattered line of heretics who were attempting to charge across the square in the wake of the crashed shuttle. More frateris rejoined their brethren on the barricade, and the heretics quickly and wisely retreated back to cover again.

Devane warily approached the crashed wreck of the shuttle, hearing the first groans of pain and sounds of movement from within its split-open fuselage. A human shape - so big that for a split second Devane almost thought it might be a that of a Space Marine - stumbled forward through one of these rents. Nervous frateris raised their weapons in alarm, but Devane recognised the uniform the figure was wearing as being that of a Imperial Navy petty officer, and signalled for them to lower their weapons.

Maxim Borusa nursed his crash injuries, spitting out a mouthful of bloody saliva and shattered teeth fragments as he studied his surroundings, finding himself confronted by an Imperial preacher and the assembled ranks of the frateris faithful.

'Volkk me,' he muttered, favouring Devane and his flock with a savage bloody-toothed grin of impious bemusement. 'Either I'm dead, and, despite everything, still managed to end up in the same place as all the rest of you miserable, prayer-mumbling bastards, or I'm alive but still stuck on this rain-sodden dump of a world. All things considered, I'm not sure which idea I like least.'

## THIRTEEN

SOMEWHERE FAR OUT on the fringes of the Belatis system, something vast and terrible ripped its way out of warp space and back into the realm of the real universe. Following in its wake, dragged through the breach in the fabric of reality by the pull of the object's massive warp drive field were numerous smaller vessels, some of them formidable weapons of war in their own right, but none of them as terrible and powerful as the object they clustered around. This far out-system, it would take many light-minutes for the energy of the object's unique and massive warp-burst signature to register on the surveyor screens of the Imperial vessels gathered further in-system, but already the strong but localised disturbances in the currents of the warp caused by the object's arrival would have been sensed by every psychically-sensitive being in the Belatis system.

ON EVERY IMPERIAL vessel amongst the evacuation fleet, astropaths and navigators suddenly reeled in shock and nausea as an overwhelmingly powerful wave of warp-born energy surged through their minds. Even before they had begun to recover from the shock of the assault on their psychic senses, they were already putting through emergency comm-net calls to their vessels' captains.

IN THE DEEPEST reaches of the lowest decks of the *Macharius*, the growing daemon-thing thrashed in spastic ecstasy, its disease-ridden, otherworldly flesh reacting in instinctive symphony with the waves of invisible warp energy that lashed through it. It blindly realised something of the nature of the object that now sat on the system's edge, but it also sensed out there the presence of something far more important and personal to it. Something familiar. Something, like it, that was blessed with the gifts of the Grandfather. In paroxysms of joy at this knowledge, the daemon-thing entered the final stages of its transformation.

ON THE SURFACE of Belatis, on the outskirts of Madina, Khoisan the Faceless turned his featureless visage up to the clouded night sky, sensing the arrival of the blessed object. Another involuntary shudder of imminent and glorious transformation ran through his Chaos-warped body. His moment of ascendance would come soon now, he knew, but he sensed also that there was still one more task required of him. He cast his eyeless gaze around him, studying the darkened horizon of the ruined city. Behind him, the hills to the north were ablaze, still the target of the thunderous orbital bombardment. Ahead of him was the smoking pyre of the governor's palace. Something further to the south drew his attention, and he saw the dark spires and turrets of another edifice jutting up from amongst the jagged ruins around it.

Khoisan nodded to himself in understanding. The Ecclesiarch cathedral, somehow miraculously untouched by the destruction which had been visited on the rest of the city.

Around him, his cultist followers howled and gibbered in fear and excitement, sensing in their own crude way the arrival of the object on the edge of their planetary system. Khoisan silenced them all with a curt gesture, pointing at the spired peaks in the distance.

'Gather others of our kind from amongst the ruins,' he commanded. 'There is still work to be done.'

SOBEK LET THE Imperial tarot pack fall from his hands, seeing in his mind's eye, even before it happened, the thin, brittle and impossibly precious material of the cards shatter on impact with the hard stone floor. He would have no more need of them now. With one last exception, the time of visions and prophecies was over. The worst was now known, and had finally come to pass. The Planet Killer had arrived in the Belatis system, and the time to the planet's imminent destruction could be measured not in weeks or days but now in mere hours.

RIDING IN THE rearguard of the Chaos fleet, the *Virulent* swept into the Belatis system in the warp wake of the massive Planet Killer vessel. During the journey through the warp, many vessels had joined with or departed from the giant weapon's escort fleet, either despatched to other tasks or summoned by the will or whim of the Despoiler. The *Virulent* had joined the fleet from choice, following its own psychic call through the warp which, by coincidence or otherwise, had led it to the same destination as the Planet Killer.

From the bridge of the plague ship, Bulus Sirl sensed the presence of the thing that had unknowingly called out to him through the warp, the thing that had drawn him here in pursuit of his prey. It was one of his own plague-children, birthed from the disease gift that he had bestowed on one of his followers, now hatched out and growing in secret in the belly of the hated enemy vessel *Macharius*.

The Imperial fleet would flee before the Planet Killer's advance, Sirl was sure, but there would be no easy escape for the *Macharius*. Psychically linked to his daemoniac plague-child aboard that ship, he would take steps to ensure it. For himself and for Grandfather Nurgle, Sirl would take revenge on the *Macharius* and its crew for both the destruction of the Grandfather's warship *Contagion* and the humiliation of the defeat at Helia IV.

## PART FIVE EXECUTION HOUR

### ONE

LIKE THIEVES IN the night, the evacuation fleet slipped out of orbit and stole away into the stellar darkness, heading away from doomed Belatis.

Aboard the *Macharius*, the mood on the command deck was sombre and subdued. It had been several hours since the final wave of evacuation shuttles had docked with the cruiser *Inviolable Retribution*, carrying the last of the planet's Adeptus Arbites garrison force. In their wake had come a battered, damaged Arbites Eagle shuttle craft, barely managing to limp its way up out of the gravity well. The heavily armoured shuttle, designed for combat operations, had just managed to survive the blast-wave of the explosion that had destroyed the governor-regent's palace. Its passengers - the Arbites commander and his squad, and a handful of local dignitaries - had been the only ones to escape the destruction. It was now presumed that all the other evacuees, including Captain Semper and the governor-regent, had perished in the explosion.

Ulanti stood at the wide viewing bay to the rear of the command deck, mulling over the comm-net conference that had just ended between the captains of the convoy's principal warships. The conference had been short and succinct, and had not ended well, at least from Ulanti's point of view.

'Your request is denied, *Macharius*. You will take your place in the escort line and continue underway to the jump point with the rest of the convoy formation.'

All Imperial communications had been disrupted since the arrival of the Planet Killer in the Belatis system - just one of the Chaos weapon's many strange and unsettling technological properties which the Imperium's tech-priests had so far been unable to explain - but even over the fluctuating comm-channel, Ulanti had still been able to detect the arrogant disdain in the voice of the captain of the *Graf Orlok*. Titus von Blucher had always been jealous of Captain Semper's growing reputation within Battlefleet Command. Bitterly, Ulanti had wondered how much von Blucher's response was part of his maniacal adherence to orders and correct naval procedure, and how much was motivated by personal animosity.

Next had come Erwin Ramas, his rasping, mechanical-aided voice cutting sharply through the blanket of static. 'Reluctantly, *Drachenfels* must agree with *Graf Orlok*. The safety of the convoy is all that matters now, more than the life of one man, even one such as Leoten Semper. We have advancing renegade ships all over our long-range surveyor screens, and maybe not so far behind them is the Planet Killer itself. Both my vessel and the *Graf Orlok* are damaged, and it's still a damnably long way to the system's edge, especially at the crawling speed those junker transports move at.'

Ramas's voice had softened for a moment, belying the popular image of him as the stone-hearted, flint-edged terror of Battlefleet Gothic. 'Leoten was a friend of mine, Ulanti, and your loyalty to him is commendable, but it's been hours now, and there's no sign of his shuttle returning from the planet's surface. The last thing he would have wanted would be for his ship to be endangered in some foolish and pointless solo action. Leoten was a fine commander, one of the best I have had the honour to serve with, but a good captain knows when to fight, and when to break off. Semper was a good captain, lad. Honour his memory, and follow his example.'

'*Borodino* concurs,' spoke the voice of Lupis Fiske. Now captain of the Lunar class cruiser, Fiske had been a comrade of Semper's since their days together as cadets at the harsh naval training colleges on Cypra Mundi. 'There'll be other battles, *Macharius*, other times to avenge your former captain's memory.'

And so Ulanti had given the necessary orders, taking the *Macharius* out of Belatis orbit to take its place amongst the fleeing evacuation convoy. All upon the command deck had heard the comm-net conference with the other captains, and all knew that he had tried his best, but it did not make Ulanti's sense of failure any easier to bear. He wanted confirmation that his captain was truly dead before he abandoned his orbital vigil, and now he felt as if he had betrayed both Semper and the ship itself. He watched as Belatis receded into the distance behind the retreating evacuation convoy. It was a tomb now, he thought to himself, not just for Semper but for all still left alive upon it. They had less than a day to live, if the estimates of the astrogation lexmechanics were correct. For, moving through the outer system towards Belatis was the Planet Killer, closing slowly but inexorably on its target. Long-range surveyor scans showed that most of its escort fleet were still with it, moving slowly in-system at the same ponderous speed as the gargantuan vessel itself, but other vessels were speeding ahead of the main fleet, rushing to secure the target world in advance of the Planet Killer's arrival.

Elsewhere out there, closer still, was that Murder class cruiser and its Infidel escorts, shadowing the trail of the retreating Imperial convoy. The *Macharius* was now bringing up the rear of the group, sending out attack craft patrols to shepherd lines of transport vessels into secure formation. The furthest rearward Starhawk patrols had twice come into contact with Infidels, each time driving them off with fusillades of armour-piercing missiles. The enemy scout vessels were probing the convoy's defences, testing it for weaknesses as they awaited the arrival of the first reinforcements now speeding to join them.

At its present speed - agonisingly slow by the standards of a warship vessel, but as fast as many of the aged and barely spaceworthy transports could manage - the convoy should be safely out of reach by the time the Planet Killer arrived in-system, but Ulanti still knew that it would be a long and nerve-wracking run towards the new jump point at the system's far fringes.

'A bad business all round, captain, but all that happens does so by the will of the Emperor.'

Ulanti turned in surprise at the sound of the unfamiliar voice from behind him. Standing before him was the powerful, daunting

figure of an Imperial Arbitrator, the gold rank flashes on his shoulder pads and the silver Imperial eagle badge emblem on his carapace-armoured breastplate gleaming under the command deck's low-key illumination. His helmet was removed, revealing a strong, proud face marked with the faded pattern lines of some kind of ritualistic scarring common amongst many of the less civilised peoples of the Imperium. His dark eyes shone with a keen, shrewd intelligence. The Arbitrators on Necromunda had, for the most part, been brutal, unimaginative killers, often little better than the hive-trash gangers they frequently hunted down and exterminated in the labyrinths of the Underhive. This one, Ulantí realised, was quite unlike such badge-wearing thugs.

His name was Byzantane, Ulantí knew, the Arbites commander of the only shuttle to escape the destruction that had claimed the life of the *Macharius's* captain. Badly damaged and leaking fuel and air, the shuttle had had to emergency dock with the closest friendly vessel as soon as it reached high orbit, the *Macharius*. Now, with the convoy underway and heading at maximum possible speed towards its jump point, there had been no opportunity for him to be returned to his own vessel.

'You truly believe that, marshal?'

'I believe it is my duty to serve the Emperor's will, even though the meaning and purpose of that will may not always be apparent to me. I am merely mortal, but the Emperor is divine. Where I see defeat and ignominious retreat, I must believe that he sees the seeds of later victory. Where I have failed to serve him properly, I must believe that he already knows that other, more able, servants than I will later succeed where I have failed. Other than that,' he added with a grimacing half-smile, 'and whenever possible, I leave the philosophising to the Ministorum's worthy brethren and instead just try to do my duty bringing law to the lawless, heretic rabble that it pleases us to know as the Emperor's loyal subjects.'

Byzantane looked out of the viewing bay at the dim and receding point of light that was Belatis. He sensed what was on the young naval officer's mind.

'He struck me as a capable man, your captain. He was a loyal servant of the Emperor. His death will not go unavenged.'

'He was an officer in the Imperial Navy,' answered Ulantí. 'If it was the Emperor's will that he was to die, it should have been here where he belonged. On this bridge, in command of his vessel. That is what Captain Semper would have wanted. That is the only proper death for a ship's captain.'

Byzantane nodded to himself, only able to agree with this naval man's sentiments. When his time came to be called to the Emperor's side, he did not wish it to come with him lying sick and dying in some Arbites precinct house infirmary, greedily fighting to hold on to the last pathetic dregs of life like all those wretched tech-priests who lived on for centuries, replacing their failing human organs with machine parts, trying to deny their own mortality and turning themselves into something less than human in imitation of their damnable Machine God. No, when he died, it would be as he lived, with a bolt pistol in one hand and a power maul in the other, fighting the enemies of the Imperium and maintaining the iron rule of the Emperor's Law.

Looking through the viewing bay at the starfield beyond, Byzantane thought of the comm-net message he had received from Korte, aboard the *Inviolable Retribution*. Byzantane had always seen the strike cruiser's name as a good omen, summing up as it did his own personal belief in his role as an Arbitrator. Inviolable retribution: the promise that, no matter the cost or risk, the guilty will always be pursued and punished. Again, Byzantane thought of the name that Korte had told him, the name of the secret traitor who had betrayed the Imperium and deliberately engineered the downfall of Belatis. His instinct about there being a Chaos agent in the governor-regent's palace had been correct, but not even he had suspected just how highly-placed the traitor had been within the planet's ruling hierarchy. They were dead now, killed along with so many others during the escape from the palace, and many might consider that just punishment of a kind.

Not Byzantane.

He could only think that the traitor had escaped true punishment. The traitor's death during the destruction of the palace would have been swift and merciful, carrying with it none of the righteous retribution that the Emperor's stern laws required. Looking back at the retreating speck of light that was Belatis, he realised that he and this naval officer shared something in common. Both of them had been cheated by the Planet Killer's arrival. For one, it was a matter of honour, the desire to not to abandon hope when there was a still a chance - no matter how slight - that a comrade might still be alive. For the other, it was a matter of duty, a need to know that no traitor ever escaped unpunished. But, for both of them, the ignominious flight from Belatis represented the same thing. Unfinished business.

'EMPEROR'S MERCY!' choked the lead armsman, recoiling back from the open mouth of the filth-choked hatchway in front of him. Koba Kyogen brusquely pushed the man aside, but even he staggered back in revulsion at the wave of foulness that welled up from the compartment beyond.

They were somewhere deep within the lower decks of the ship, moving through the maze of ancient, lightless passageways and compartments that no schematic or plan of the ship's layout, no matter how old or detailed, would ever admit to. All vessels held areas like this, abandoned completely or inhabited only by the very lowest, least important crew dregs, and they were the perfect hiding place for deserters or even for the secret, illicit cabals - either criminal or heretical - that often flourished aboard even the most vigilant Imperial vessel.

Or for stowaways, thought Kyogen.

It had been suspected for some time that there was some kind of enemy stowaway aboard the *Macharius*, a survivor of the boarding action assault from the Battle of Helia IV. First there had been the outbreaks of disease amongst the crew of the lower decks, then several deaths and disappearances. The foolish and superstitious wretches that inhabited these lowest and most dismal areas of the ship spoke in terror of a daemon creature in their midst, but unnerving reports from Astropath Adeptus Rapavna and Navigator Solon Cassander, the two most senior Imperial psykers aboard ship, also spoke of the possibility of there being something hostile and malefic aboard the vessel. Augurs had been cast, alerts sounded, and at last squads of armsmen had descended in force into the bowels of the ship.

Kyogen paused before the hatchway, aware that the eyes of the crewmen were upon him and trying not to gag at the foul stench

wafting through from the chill darkness beyond. The smell was indescribable, somehow seeping through the supposed protection of his rebreather mask. It carried with it the reek of corruption and decay, and something else. Something unknown and terrible. From behind Kyogen came the soft chanting of one of the ship's Ministorum preachers as he offered up prayers of protection and swung a strongly perfumed incense burner to ward off the threat of disease that hung in the foul-smelling air. The commissar considered himself to be a pious man, but, in matters of protection, he looked more to the chainsword in his hand and the full dozen shot-cannon-wielding armymen accompanying him than one prayer-chanting and incense-burning priest.

'Light! Give me light!' he called, climbing through the hatchway. Armymen scrambled through after him, shining their weapon-mounted lux-beams to reveal the compartment beyond. They might fear whatever might be lurking in there, but Kyogen knew they feared him even more. Aboard the *Macharius*, Ship's Commissar Kyogen was a figure of fear and respect. Mostly fear, Kyogen always thought to himself, satisfied that his role aboard ship was as it should be.

Inside the compartment, several of the armymen, the preacher amongst them, stifled gasps of shock and revulsion. Kyogen had entered charnel places before - had seen the human devastation left by fire, vacuum and blast-shock in ships' compartments destroyed during space combat - but he had never seen anything such as this, and prayed that he never would again.

There were bodies here, many bodies, although how many was now impossible to say, since all that remained of them was a thick, fleshy paste that had been smeared across the walls, ceiling and floor of the chamber. Jagged pieces of bone and other, less recognisable but no less human and organic components jutted out from the mess, and things moved amongst it all: crawling pieces of corruption that had hatched out of the pustule-like egg clusters that grew and ripened amongst the bloody filth. The big Imperial commissar saw the corruption was eating into the very stuff of the ship, opening up brittle, flaking wounds in plasma-forged alloys made to last for centuries. Metal bulkheads and pillars were shot through with streaks of decay. The whole compartment was a living canker growing within the body of the ship; left unchecked, it would spread to consume the whole of the *Macharius*.

Kyogen turned, about to call up the flamer units from the rear of the armymen squad, intending to scour clean the source of the Chaos infestation within his vessel, when the disease daemon came at them.

The lead armyman swung his shotcannon up, the beam of the lamp mounted on its barrel catching sight of something tattered and pestilent as it rushed at him from out of the darkness, detaching itself from where it had been nesting amongst the rotted filth of its victims. The light from the lux-lamp suddenly turned red, bathing everything it illuminated in shocking tones of scarlet, as the armyman's blood splashed across its crystal face, his throat ripped open by one sweep of the Chaos creature's bone-shard claws. The interior of the compartment became a riot of sound and light as the creature descended on its would-be hunters. Lux-beams danced round in search of targets, and there was the strobe-flash of shotcannon muzzles firing as confused and terrified armymen shot blindly into the darkness. Five armymen died in as many seconds, at least one of them killed by unaimed panic fire from his own comrades. Kyogen saw the daemon close its clawed hand over the face of the Ministorum preacher, heard the Ecclesiarch servant's falsetto shrieks of agony as sickly yellow fluid wept from the open mouth-wounds on the creature's palms, the fluid burning through the preacher's rebreather mask and into the flesh then bone off his face.

Kyogen tore a shotcannon from the grasp of a terrified arms-man, turning it on the creature and firing it on full auto-spread, mercifully blowing apart the screaming preacher. The creature staggered under *the* impact of the explosive shotcannon shells, its tattered flesh knitting and reforming almost as quickly as the shotcannon shells tore and ripped it apart. Kyogen looked down at the weapon's ammo counter, seeing with a shock of fear that at his current rate of fire the shotcannon's ammunition cylinder would be completely emptied in the next few seconds, and that the daemon creature showed no signs of dying before despite the heavy damage being inflicted on it.

'To me!' he called, rallying the surviving armymen around him. 'Send this warp-spawn back to the hell it crawled from!'

First one armyman, then another, and then a third joined their commanding officer, sending non-stop volleys of explosive-head shotcannon shells into the body of the daemon creature. The creature reeled back, now suffering damage at a rate faster than its body could regenerate. Under impact from the hail of gunfire, the creature's flesh seemed to unravel itself, exposing the new horrors of its disease-warped innards to the eyes of its attackers.

Kyogen's gun clicked empty. Seconds later, the weapons of the others followed suit. To their horror and disbelief, the daemon instantly started to recover once more. It screeched in anger, and in response, ribbons of flesh detached themselves from the organic mess smeared onto the surfaces all around it. They reached out towards the daemon, wrapping themselves round its gunfire-ravaged form, clothing it in horribly borrowed new flesh. In seconds, Kyogen knew, the creature would be fully regenerated and on the attack again.

'Flamers! Where are those flamers?' he barked. 'If you've got one, show me that you haven't forgotten how to use it!'

Two armymen stumbled forward, clearly terrified of approaching the creature. Still, Kyogen's fearsome reputation terrified them even more, just as it should, and they took up position at the commissar's command, triggering their bulky flamer weapons and playing long jets of burning promethium chem-mix over the screaming creature.

Kyogen watched the creature thrash and burn. Unfastening his gleaming leather holster, he drew his bolt pistol, aiming it at the creature and slowly and deliberately pumping one bolter shell after another into its fire-melted form. Only when the pistol in his hand clicked empty, only when the volatile flamer fuel had completely consumed the creature and all that remained of it was a foul, greasy stink hanging thickly in the air of the chamber did he finally cease fire.

The compartment would have to be scoured free of the Chaos contamination that had taken root here, and after that the area would be ritually purified by the ship's appointed Ministorum Confessor and then probably sealed off and quarantined for a period that might stretch into decades, but for now, Commissar Kyogen was satisfied that he had done his duty.

Re-holstering his side-arm, he activated his communicator; this deep below decks, the comm-link with the command deck more than three dozen decks overhead crackled and buzzed with interference from the ship's power systems and dense hull structure.

'Kyogen to command deck. Mission accomplished. Acting captain Ulanti will have my full report before the end of this quarter

day-cycle, but the contagion has been found and eradicated.'

TENS OF MILLIONS of kilometres distant, Bulus Sirl finally broke off psychic contact with his plague-spawn, sensing the last of its spirit fade back into the warp just as the glowing phosphorus flames consumed the last of its corporeal form. The effort of maintaining the active psychic link with his disease-child was taxing in the extreme, especially over such vast physical distances, but Sirl found the experience to be joyously rewarding. Confined to the bridge of the *Virulent* by the nature of the plague-gifts and body-altering mutants that Grandfather Nurgle in his munificence had bestowed upon him, Sirl had almost forgotten the vicarious pleasures of close-quarters combat, and, after so long viewing battles on a ship's surveyor screen, it had been a bloody-edged thrill to experience through the mind of the plague creature the sensation of killing at close-range with claws and teeth.

Besides, he half-smiled to himself, what proud parent couldn't be excused for indulging itself in a few precious moments of enjoyment at the precocious deeds of one of its own children?

Although the plague-vessel's captain had severed the link with the vanquished Chaos daemon, he did not yet allow his mystic warp-gaze to rejoin his resting body. Instead, he probed deeper into the innards of the enemy ship, searching through ducts and conduits, pipeways and maintenance shafts, instinctively homing in on the mind of the other creature now crawling through these cramped and secret byways.

His other plague-child. The glistening newly-birthed twin to the one now killed by the weak and foolish Imperial scum. On its own, the first creature had at first busied itself spreading its plague-gifts amongst the crew of the Imperial vessel, but its actions, while pure in motive, had been blind and instinctive, lacking direction and planning. Its presence aboard their vessel had been detected too early by the weakling humans, and so it had had to be sacrificed. It was an old and brutally expedient naval ruse, Sirl knew: sacrifice one vessel to the guns of the enemy, creating a diversion and allowing another vessel to pass undetected through their defences.

Making contact with the newborn, Sirl spoke to it in its mind, soothing and comforting it. It was weak and vulnerable, but there was one important task that he required of it.

He suddenly relinquished contact, his mind snapping back aboard the bridge of his vessel as, irritated, he became aware that there were matters that required his attention.

'Signal from the main fleet, lord,' reported his unctuous new second-in-command. 'We are commanded to reduce speed and rejoin the second rank of escorts protecting the Warmaster's vessel's starboard flank.'

'Maintain present speed and heading,' ordered Sirl, fighting down a wave of dangerous irritation, knowing that he must keep his mind clear of strong emotion if he was to maintain the fragile link with the newborn aboard the *Macharius*.

'But, my lord, the Warmaster himself commands—'

The second-in-command's bleating objections were silenced by Sirl's angry hiss. Nesting at their master's feet, playing amongst the festering filth that littered the floor of the plague-vessel's command deck, the swarm of Nurgle spawn yelped in sudden excitement, perhaps sensing another unexpected treat that might soon come their way, gifted to them by their master's anger.

'We obey the will of Grandfather Nurgle, not the Warmaster,' warned Sirl. 'You would do well to remember that, if you are to remain in my service for very much longer. Continue on course. Our target and objective is the *Macharius*!'

This time, the second-in-command's tone was measured and respectful, carefully free of any hint of criticism or reproach.

This one learns fast, mused Sirl. Perhaps, if he continues like this, he might even live out the rest of the year.

'The *Macharius* is amongst the rest of the enemy convoy, lord, heading directly away from us and the rest of the Warmaster's fleet. Even at our current speed, it is unlikely that we will catch it before it reaches the edge of the system and escapes into the warp.'

Perhaps not, thought Sirl, revising his earlier estimate of his second-in-command's life expectancy chances. Perhaps not even the duration of this current voyage. 'Fool, attend to your charts and estimates. Meanwhile, I will prepare to do the Grandfather's bidding and bring his vengeance upon those that have already defied him twice already now. The *Macharius* shall not escape us again. The Plague-Father and I will see to that.'

Sirl closed his eyes in concentration, focussing again on the faint psychic aura of the daemon-spawn creature aboard the enemy cruiser. It had a hard and dangerous journey ahead of it, crawling through the kilometres of pipes and conduits that twisted through the entire gargantuan bulk of the warship, but already Sirl could sense the signs of the creature's eventual destination, and he guided it in that direction accordingly. Towards the source of the heavy, deep-set vibrations that shuddered along the length of the ship's hull from its main drive engines. Towards the source of the growing blasts of heat that swept through the maze of conduits from the heart of the ship's power systems.

Towards the vital and highly vulnerable generarium core that powered the *Macharius*'s engines, weapons and defences.

## TWO

'ANYTHING?'

Semper bent down to peer into the exposed mechanics of the cathedral vox-ark, watching as the nimble, surgically-adapted hands of the tech-priest sifted through the tangle of wiring and rune-covered circuit boards. Despite the tech-priest's best efforts, the gargoyle speakers atop the ark remained stubbornly silent, emitting only a low, steady snarl of static.

'Nothing, sir,' answered Caparan, wincing from the pain from his injured, sling-held arm as he tried to stand to attention in the presence of his captain. Semper waved off such formalities; under the circumstances, with them all probably only a day or so away from extinction, normal naval protocol now seemed strangely unnecessary. 'It's working, but we can't send or receive anything. Looks like we're on our own, after all.'

Semper cursed. The comm-systems aboard the shuttle were destroyed, and his personal vox-caster was only good at short, sub-orbital ranges, but the cathedral's powerful vox-ark, linked into the miraculously-unscathed antenna of the building's cloud-piercing spire, should be able to reach anything within the borders of the planetary system. Looking at the bronze-sculpted features of the ark's ornamental speaker, listening to the strange, almost rhythmic, bursts of static emanating from it, a disquieting thought occurred to Semper.

'Tech-adept, could it be that our signals are being somehow jammed or blocked? There have been unconfirmed reports that worlds targeted by the Planet Killer experience planet-wide communications blackouts shortly before they are attacked. Could this be what we are encountering now?'

Shanyin Ko paused to consider the question in that strange, considered way distinctive to so many members of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Unlike many of his brethren, the Starhawk tech-adept was unmasked, but perhaps he felt no need to be so. At some point in the past, the tech-adept's face had been removed, and Semper could clearly see the surgical scars left by the procedure. Beneath the man's paper-like skin, patterns of gold and platinum wire circuit diagrams had been woven into the bone and musculature of his skull prior to his skin being grafted back on again, giving the adept's face an eerie, death-mask-like appearance. 'That would be the most likely possibility, captain,' ventured Ko, after consulting whatever augmented thought processes the Mechanicus surgeon-priests of Mars had gifted him with. 'However, the power and jamming systems required to effect a total, planet-wide communications blackout from that far out in space would be...'

The tech-adept's voice tailed away in confusion. Semper and Caparan exchanged glances; it was not often that one of the servants of the Machine God was lost for words when discussing technical computations, but the forces of the Imperium had never faced a weapon such as Abaddon's Planet Killer before.

'Just one of the many, many things we still don't know about this new weapon's capabilities,' grunted Semper.

'And how are we to learn anything about it,' replied Caparan, 'if all we do is turn and run away from it every time it is used against us?'

'You suggest attacking from a position of ignorance, squadron commander? Squandering precious and thinly-stretched military resources against a target that has so far proven invulnerable?' Ulantu would have recognised this favourite tactic of Semper's, but Caparan had little direct experience with his ship's captain, and did not realise that he was being tested.

'Invulnerable?' answered Caparan, refusing to be cowed by his captain's tone. 'Only because we refuse to put that legend to the test. I've faced supposedly unbeatable foes and their super-weapons before. When I was a novice pilot, we were told by the tutors at the flight academy that there was nothing in the Imperium's armouries to match the capabilities of the attack craft of the eldar. Maybe that was true once, but we developed new tactics to deal with those alien ghosts, and now I've lost count of how many debris clouds from destroyed eldar corsair fighters I've seen splashed across my cockpit surveyor screens. New tactics, captain, and a willingness not to believe a damned word any time anyone tells you anything about invincible enemies and their unbeatable weapons. That's all it takes.'

Semper clapped Caparan on his uninjured shoulder, favouring the surprised-looking Starhawk commander with a grim smile. 'I agree wholeheartedly, captain. Would that there were more at Battlefleet Command who thought the same as you and I.'

We need more men like this, thought Semper. More men like this Starhawk commander and that Imperial preacher, if we are to win this war. Men who simply do their duty to the Emperor without wasting time considering the enemy's supposed invincibility or in counting the odds against them.

In considering his own position, Semper had to acknowledge that the odds were certainly against him, but that did not stop him trying to continue to do his duty, despite the circumstances. A day ago, he mused, he had commanded one of his Divine Majesty's mighty warships, with a crew of ten thousand under him. Now he was here, trapped on the surface of a world destined for destruction, taking refuge with these ragged and ill-equipped pilgrims, and with scarcely half a dozen naval crewmen left to command.

They had survived the shuttle crash, but not without cost. The reinforced armoured shell of the shuttle's passenger cabin had functioned as intended, with its occupants suffering on the most part nothing more serious than a few broken bones, but the rest of shuttle had not withstood the impact of the landing so well, and neither had its crew. Caparan's co-pilot had been crushed against the brass and bronze levers and fittings of his cockpit instrumentation panel, and now lay injured - probably dying - in the cathedral infirmary below. The corpses of the nose turret gunners were still trapped within the remains of the shuttle's smashed front. Caparan himself had suffered a fractured arm and had been lucky to avoid being crushed to death amongst the tangled wreckage of the destroyed cockpit, but by far the worst of the casualties had been the shuttle crewmen stationed in the craft's cargo compartments and belly gun turret, killed instantly on impact as the shuttle struck the ground and ploughed across the stone surface of the cathedral square, completely ripping away its underside. Even the craft's complement of servitors was no more, dying at the same time as the onboard power systems that they had been plugged directly into.

Now, besides Caparan and Ko, the only other crew of the *Macharius* left under Semper's command was Caparan's barbaric tail-gunner Daksha, and Borsua and Rahn, Semper's two remaining petty officer bodyguards. Six men - so much for having one foot on the steps of the Golden Throne, he thought to himself wryly.

Ko gathered up his tools and resealed the instrumentation panels of the vox-ark, intoning the necessary purification rites as he did so. Together, he, Semper and Caparan descended the narrow stone stairs back down to the main hall of the cathedral. There they found the Ecclesiarch preacher Devane and a group of his frateris followers kneeling in a huddled circle around the altar of a side-chapel. Semper would have guessed they were praying or conducting some kind of sacred Ministorum rite, but, as he came closer, he recognised the situation for what it truly was: a pre-battle briefing. Devane was issuing orders to the leaders of the frateris combat squads. The faces of the assembled men - and several women - were tight with concentration as they listened urgently to their commander's instructions. Like most officers of the Imperial military, Semper thought of the forces of the Frateris Militia as a disorganised, ill-disciplined rabble, only to be used to wage the Emperor's wars in the last resort, in want of other, more

professional and dependable forces. Now, seeing the determined looks on the faces of these warriors as they prepared once more for battle, knowing, whether they were victorious or not, that they still faced imminent death, Semper realised that he would willingly exchange these frateris brethren for any few thousand of his own crew.

The Imperial preacher glanced up the approach of the navy men. He looked expectantly at Semper, but the look in his eyes suggested that he already knew the answer to his unspoken question.

'It would seem, Preacher Devane, that my men and I will be remaining here rather longer than we imagined,' confirmed Semper, with a wry smile. 'We are at your command. What would you have us do?'

'The spotters on the barricades say that the heretics are massing again on both the northern and eastern sides of the square, no doubt getting ready to attack us again. We'll need every able-bodied servant of the Emperor we can get on those barricades when they do.'

Devane broke off, staring doubtfully at the bloody and bandaged figures of the navy men, and especially at Semper's full dress uniform, now smeared with blood and grime. He indicated the sheathed sabre and bolstered laspistol that Semper wore along with his ceremonial crimson cummerbund. 'You know how to use those things?'

Semper drew the sabre, showing Devane the sword-blade's gleaming, razor-tempered edge. 'I'll admit it's been a while, Confessor Devane, but I haven't always merely seen combat from the bridge of a warship.' He smiled thinly, touching first the jagged, ancient scar that split one side of his face and then the distinctive Order of the Gothic Star decoration on his tunic breast. 'After all, how else do you think I earned these?'

'Very well. I'll take the north side, you take the east. We're short of warm bodies on the east barricades, but I'll try and send you whatever we can spare from the south and west sides.'

'No need to risk weakening our defences elsewhere, confessor. If they attack us on the north and east, it might only be as feints to make us draw defenders away from our other flanks. Don't worry, though. I know where I can find a few extra bodies to fill the gaps in my line.'

Devane followed Semper's gaze, looking over to a side-chapel off the main cathedral floor. A group of figures sat there, shying away from the rest of the mass of wretched humanity huddled all around, a line of tall, armed guardsmen in palace guard uniforms making sure that none of the pilgrims approached the group sheltering in the side-chapel. Devane looked back at Semper, sharing his smile.

'The governor-regent has several times expressed just how much he shares his peoples' suffering. If he suffers with them, I'm sure he wouldn't mind fighting alongside them either.'

THE GREAT AND the good of Belatis aristocracy took some convincing before coming round to Semper's way of thinking.

Maxim Borusa broke the wrist of the first guard officer who tried to bar Semper's way as the *Macharius* captain marched up towards the assembled dignitaries. When the second tried to draw his laspistol on Semper, Maxim merely took the weapon off the man and used it to club its owner unconscious, mindful of Semper's instructions to do as little crippling damage as possible to anyone who tried to stop him. They would, after all, be needing these men soon enough in the defence of the cathedral barricades. A warning stare from the hulking hiveworlder, backed up by the weapons in the hands of Caparan, Daksha and several of Devane's frateris brethren, quickly dissuaded the rest of the governor-regent's bodyguards from any further interference.

'What is the meaning of this?' spluttered First Minister Kale, standing to face Semper. Behind him, Sarro huddled with his sister, clutching at his chain of regal office as if it were some protective talisman that could ward off the awful reality of the situation that the governor-regent now found himself in. Sarro's eyes were wide with disbelief, his shell-shocked gaze that of a man trying to convince himself that none of this was really happening.

Semper had seen that look many times before, mostly on the faces of navy pressgang victims as they were brought unconscious aboard ship and awoke to find themselves unwilling new recruits of His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy, condemned to a brutal and often short-lived slave existence aboard the strange and dangerous surroundings of an Imperial warship, doomed never to see their friends, family and entire homeworld again.

'His highness the governor-regent is still the Emperor's appointed representative and is still in command here, captain,' continued Kale, with all the false dignity and authority that he could manage. 'By all means take what few men we can spare from his personal guard, but you surely can't expect any of the rest of us to fight?'

'I can, and I do,' replied Semper, gesturing at the ranks of the frateris around them. 'The light of the Emperor has been withdrawn from this world. The protection of the Imperium is gone. Rank and privilege mean nothing now. Take a look around you, Kale, take a look at these people. They are the poor and low-born of this world. Their kind count for nothing to the likes of the Emperor's worthiest servants, to the ministers and governors of the Emperor's world and the commanders of the Emperor's fleets, and yet their dedication to the service of the Master of Mankind shames us all. They have been fighting here for days. They know they are soon to die, and yet still they keep on fighting. This is the Emperor's house, and we are still his servants. What other choice do we have but to join mem in this final duty?'

Behind Semper, Kale and the others saw only the sullen, hostile stares of the frateris. Devane had gathered his flock from amongst the populations of the impoverished rural districts far from the prosperous planetary capital. To these simple, Emperor-fearing people, Governor-Regent Sarro and the rest of the planetary nobility were remote and obscure figures, decadent and debauched aristocrats of the kind that Imperial preachers frequently railed against from the pulpits of their rural parish churches. Most of the wealth and all of the power of Belatis was concentrated in its capital of Madina, and many of the frateris peasants here would have come from ancestral estates owned by the nobles; ancestral estates which many of those nobles would never even have visited, seeing them merely as distant but useful additional sources of income, appointing harsh and merciless estate managers to squeeze every extra piece of worth out of these agricultural lands and the peasants who were expected to work mem. No, clearly the people here bore little love for Governor-Regent Sarro and the rest of the ruling elite of Belatis, and Kale's insistence on the governor-

regent's continued authority would find few supporters amongst them.

Sarro's bodyguards, sensing the increasingly tense mood in the chapel and completely outnumbered by the frateris facing them, shifted nervously, their fingers edging towards the firing studs of their las-weapons. It was the Lady Malissa, stepping forward into the firing line between the two groups, gesturing to her brother's bodyguards to lower their weapons, who diffused the situation.

'We are all fellow Belatisites here, captain, all loyal servants of his Divine Majesty. Our nobles and guards will be glad to serve alongside Confessor Devane's brave frateris brethren in their defence of this holy place. I and my servants will be glad to serve alongside the Sororitas sisters in the infirmary, tending to the injured and dying. All I ask,' she said, stepping forward towards Semper, her voice softening as she indicated with a subtle and graceful gesture back towards the quivering form of the governor-regent, 'is that my brother be excused for the moment from taking his place with the other defenders. The events of this last day and the suffering of his people have temporarily disordered his mind, but he will find solace here in the Emperor's house, and I feel sure, when the final time comes, he will be ready to take his ordained place amongst his beloved subjects on the barricades.' Semper nodded in acquiescence, realising, as Byzantane had before him, that it was the House of Sarro's misfortune, and the planet of Belatis's as a whole, that the local laws of regal succession did not allow a woman to sit on the governor-regent's throne. General Brod, his uniform stiff with dried blood from his shoulder wound, came forward to organise the remaining troops and nobles. Other than the bandaged sling he wore on his injured arm, Brod had refused all medical attention, refused to be given a place amongst the rest of the wounded, even though it was plain to see that he was in much pain. Barking hoarse-voiced orders and supported by one of his few remaining aides, he moved stiffly through the throng, pausing to rearrange the details of his uniform. To Semper, he looked like a man who had failed once in his duty and was determined not to do so again. He looked, thought Semper, like a man preparing to buy back his honour at the willing price of his own life.

Looking round, Semper also saw a frateris-cloaked figure stealing away from the main group, lurking behind the side chapel's holy statuary.

'Adept Hyuga,' called Semper. 'Eager for battle so soon? No need to join the ranks of the frateris brethren. I will be honoured to have you with me on the eastern barricades, in the first line of defenders.'

Even as the *Macharius* captain spoke, Maxim Borusa materialised in the Munitorium adept's path, pulling away the tattered cloak disguise to reveal the rows of glittering decorations on the terrified Munitorium official's gaudy uniform tunic and the ornate, hand-crafted laspistol tucked into his waist sash.

In panic, Hyuga reached for the pistol, squealing in pain as Maxim's huge, paw-like hand shot out and seized his wrist, almost crushing it.

'Nice gun,' Maxim growled, taking the weapon off the official and studying it with a practised eye. Studded with gems and made from finely wrought platinum and other precious metals, the pistol was probably worth enough to equip an entire company of Imperial Guard. And, decorative toy that it was, would probably explode the first time it was actually fired, thought Maxim.

Defly tucking the pistol into his own belt, Maxim selected a heavy stubber handgun from the brace of pistols he himself wore in a bandolier across his chest. 'Here, have a real weapon instead,' he said, pressing it into Hyuga's hand. 'It's not as pretty as yours, but it'll do the job a whole lot better than that little thing.'

Semper called out to Maxim. 'Petty Officer Borusa, we can't have the lord adept wandering off and getting himself injured. I'm detailing you to watch over him. Make sure he never leaves your side, no matter what happens.'

'Gladly, sir,' growled Maxim, grinning down at Hyuga, relishing the adept's fear. Maxim had been at the mercy of men such as Hyuga all his life, the high and mighty lords of the Imperium, who decided the fates of millions, often on an apparent whim. On Stranivar, it had been men such as Hyuga who had sent the Arbitrators downhive to conduct a brutal cull of the population of the lower levels. Tens of thousands had been killed, thousands more rounded up and consigned to the labour camps on the prison moon Lubyanka, Maxim amongst them. And again, it had been a Munitorium official such as Hyuga, perhaps even Hyuga himself, who had issued the orders that would have eventually led to Maxim being press-ganged into the Imperial Navy and ending up aboard the *Macharius*, as the gulag camps of Lubyanka were emptied to provide fresh fodder to try and stem the ever-increasing crew casualties suffered by Battlefleet Gothic.

Men such as this had always been in command, controlling Maxim's destiny from afar. Now, at last, he was able to look one of them in the face. He was not best impressed with what he saw.

'Cheer up, lord adept,' he grinned at the cringing senior bureaucrat, unaware that he was almost directly echoing the earlier words and sentiments of Commissar Kyogen. 'Fight well, and maybe you'll die earning the right to wear one of those fancy baubles on your chest. Who knows, if you put up a good enough fight, maybe I'll even think about giving you some bullets to load into that gun I just gave you.'

NEARBY, AMONGST THE remaining nobles and dignitaries, one mind did not share the same concerns as the others around it. Those other, lesser, minds were filled with a mixture of emotions. Fear. Confusion. Pious devotion. A grim determination to do their duty to the bitter end. This mind felt none of these things. It only thought of how it could escape this situation or turn it to its advantage, as it had turned so many other accidents and incidents to its advantage, and to the advantage of the powers of the warp. Yes, something had clearly gone wrong, realised the owner of that most cold and incisive of minds. That fat fool Sarro had delayed their escape from the palace too long, and, somehow, missiles that should have been targeted at the evacuation transports and the Arbiters courthouse had instead been sent to destroy the governor's palace, and the owner of the mind had almost been killed along with so many others. Particularly galling was the fact that it was only through the clandestine efforts of the mind's owner that the forces of the Faceless One even had the arming codes that had allowed them to re-target and fire the missiles in the first place. Lesser, more feeble, intellects would have suspected betrayal - one of the tricks and falsehoods that the fools of the Ministorum would have all believe were typical of the of the powers of the warp - but this mind knew better. It simply had too

much to offer its new masters, and, once safely away from this miserable, warp-begotten rock, would yet prove to be an invaluable agent to the cause of Chaos, working from within the ranks of the Imperium to ensure the final victory of the forces of the Despoiler here within the Gothic sector.

For the traitor had no doubt that it would escape the fate that would soon befall the rest of Belatis, just as it had no doubt that Chaos would finally prevail in this war. The escape from the palace had been a close thing, but it realised now that its survival had all along been pre-ordained. The Powers of Chaos were watching over the life of their new and faithful servant, for it was, it knew, simply too valuable an asset to their cause to be left to die with the rest of these fools.

And, of course, the Faceless One was still here, and it was clear that a being as cunning and powerful as a champion of Chaos would not allow itself to be destroyed along with the rest when the Planet Killer finally hung in the heavens above the doomed world. The Faceless One would have his escape already prepared, and would take his most useful and valuable allies with him, the traitor was sure of it.

All it had to do, it knew, was be patient and wait for whatever means of escape its new Chaos masters had prepared for it.

FROM ALL OVER Madina they came, like rats scurrying through the rains of the dying city, to answer the call of the Faceless One. The insane and the blood-crazed, subsuming themselves completely to the aura of madness that now hung over the doomed world; the weak and the foolish, still believing against all available evidence that the Powers of Chaos would somehow spare them in return for their new-sworn loyalty; the faithful and devout, commending their souls to the ever-hungry powers of the warp, all too eager to give up their lives at the whim and command of their uncaring daemonic overlords.

Khoisan the Faceless did not care why his army of followers came to die - and die they would, either now or in less than a day's time - just as long as they did so obediently and at his command.

Looking out over the corpse-strewn rain of the cathedral square, he sensed the invisible energies stirring around him. Through the warp, bleeding through the surface skin of reality, he felt the rippling currents of energy that announced the presence of the Planet Killer, now within the planetary system and approaching its target. Inside him, he sensed his body preparing for its final, glorious transformation, the rhythms of this imminent metamorphosis building in synch with the growing, almost palpable, sensation of the Planet Killer's approach.

And now, from across the square, from amongst the milling, pitiful throng of the defenders of the house of the false Emperor, Khoisan sensed something else, perhaps the reason some intuitive sense had drawn him here in the first place. Some other, new task was expected of him here, Khoisan realised. The powers of the warp still required one final act of obedience to their will before his ascendance would be complete.

Khoisan concentrated for a second, allowing that aspect of the Blood God which he had accepted into his flesh to manifest itself. He smiled, running a long, drooling tongue over newly-formed lips and fangs, relishing the hot rush of blood-lust that welled up unbidden from within him. He raised a hand that had now been transformed into a scale-covered, blood-dripping claw, pointing the blade of his power sword at the line of defenders sheltering behind the cover of the barricades. 'The Blood God is angry. He awakens and calls for nourishment,' he snarled in a string of guttural barks that no human throat could ever have produced. 'Go, feed him.'

As one, their minds filled with a growing bloodlust that their master had deliberately infected them with, the dense wave of cultists moved forward out of cover. Seconds later, the first sounds of gunfire rang out across the wide square.

GUNFIRE... HE COULD hear gunfire coming from somewhere below. The cathedral square, perhaps, but why would there be gunfire coming from there? Perhaps Lito would know... He would ask the boy when he finally got here... And where was that Emperor-forsaken young fool, anyway? Sobek had been ringing the bell to summon his novice servant for what seemed like an eternity, and there was still no sign of—

Lito. In his mind's eye, the astropath saw the face of his novice initiate, his screaming features suddenly illuminated in a flash of star-hot light. He saw plasma fire engulfing the barbican towers of a star vessel, and then he remembered.

Lito was dead. Belatis was now without the light of the Emperor, had been abandoned to the enemy. The Planet Killer was here, now almost upon them. Sobek could feel its leviathan presence pressing against the barriers of his mind, its all-consuming shadow blotting out the greater part of his mystic vision. The aftermath of its arrival out of the warp - psychic Shockwaves rippling out to touch the minds of every sentient being in the Belatis system - had almost overwhelmed Sobek's formidable mental defences. A less experienced astropath might have been killed by the experience, and, as it was, Sobek knew that he had suffered a stroke - several, perhaps - triggered by the effects of the psychic shockwave. He knew that he was probably dying, that parts of his mind were already dead or dying; that his memory and mystic vision were already starting to fail him.

Still, aged as he was, he was a psyker, his power fortified by the agonies of the soul bonding rites with the mind of the God-Emperor himself, and a psyker was far more than mere weak flesh and blood. The Emperor still required one more task of him before he was allowed to die. Gathering his failing strength, Sobek staggered to his feet, making for the doorway out of his chamber and the corridor beyond. His inner vision was dimmed, its clarity and range curtailed by the spreading damage to his brain, but he had walked this way countless times before. He knew every flagstone beneath his sandaled feet, every turn of the corridor and worn step of the descending stairs beyond. He had walked these chambers and halls for the last sixty-eight years; even truly blind and without his psychic gift, he could have found his way through them with ease. Now he travelled this way for the last time, leaving the chamber where he had lived for nearly seven decades and heading down towards the main body of the cathedral.

Towards the sound of the gunfire.

## THREE

THE WAVE OF cultists swept across the rain-soaked square, trampling underfoot the torn and blasted bodies of their erstwhile comrades from previous attacks. Volleys of gunfire rang out from the frateris defenders sheltering behind the cover of the barricades, finding easy targets amongst the first ranks of the attackers. Figures screamed and fell, joining the litter of corpses on the ground; those unlucky enough not to be instantly killed by the gunfire would soon be crushed to death by the stampede of feet. The fire from the barricades increased in intensity as the cultist attack came within full range of most of the defenders' guns. Increased - and then suddenly faltered and almost died away completely as the frateris defenders realised what it was they were firing at.

The heretics were employing new tactics. They had found themselves an army of human shields. A living wall, fully five ranks deep. Women and children, the sick and infirm, none had been spared, all of them rounded up in their hundreds from their hiding places amongst the rains and pressed into the service of Khoisan the Faceless. Lines of blood-maddened cultist killers followed close behind the packed ranks of the shield wall, howling their devotions to the powers of the warp, shooting and stabbing their weapons into the backs of the captured civilians, driving them forward in a terrified stampede into the gunights of the cathedral defenders.

A low moan of collective despair rose up from the line of frateris defenders. They were prepared to die, they were eager to die fighting the Emperor's enemies and to take as many of the heretic traitors as possible with them. They were not prepared for this. Semper and Devane saw the danger immediately. Every second the human shield survived brought the cultist attack wave a step closer to the cathedral defences. Intact, it would quickly overwhelm and sweep aside the defenders on the barricades. Nervous frateris brethren cast questioning glances at the two Imperial commanders. Both men knew what must be done, but both men hesitated to give the required order.

It fell to Maxim Borusa, hive-scum criminal and killer, to do what was necessary.

'Open fire!' he bellowed, charging up and down the line of defenders and lashing out in anger at them with his heavy jackboots.

'Open fire, you bunch of prayer-mumbling sob sisters! They're good as dead anyway. We all are! So what are you waiting for!'

The gunners on the eastern side of the square opened fire at the hiveworlder's command, many of them whispering silent prayers for forgiveness as they pressed the triggers and firing studs of their weapons. Moments later, there came a second, answering crash of gunfire from the northern side of the barricade defences as the frateris gunners there followed suit. A hail of bullets and las-fire smashed into the human wall, cutting through flesh, blowing apart bone and tissue.

In the forefront of the firing positions, Semper saw and heard the pitiful screams and pleas for mercy as the living components of the human shield wall were mown down in their hundreds. He saw a lone child - probably no more than six or seven years old - standing alone amongst the carnage screaming for its parents, only seconds later to disappear beneath the crushing weight of the bodies charging forward from behind it. He saw a mother protectively clutching a swaddled bundle of cloth that could only be an infant baby just as a burst of heavy bolter fire ripped through the ranks of the living shield wall, mercifully obliterating her from view.

Semper saw all this, and then tried to blank it all from his mind, tried to see nothing else but target objects and the vile enemies sheltering behind them as he fired his laspistol over and over again, sending shot after shot of searing las-fire into the screaming, pleading mass of humanity.

Semper kept firing, until there were no more of the target objects left standing before him, only living enemies. The laspistol's plastic and metal grip burned against his hand and the whole weapon was dangerously over-heated, its power pack almost fully depleted from cyclic over-firing. Semper discarded it without a second glance and drew his sabre, knowing what would come next. As a young and ambitious officer, Leoten Semper had led many boarding assaults on enemy vessels or commanded repulsing counter-assaults on enemy boarding attacks on his own vessel. Always he had been first into the fray, always he ended up fighting in the thick of the action. It had been years since he had taken part in this kind of vicious close-quarters fighting, and, before this, he might have doubted whether he was still capable of that kind of bloody-handed savagery again. Now, seeing the lines of loathsome, black-garbed enemies charging forwards towards him, seeing the cultists ruthlessly cutting down the few remaining civilians who stood in the way between them and the barricade defenders, Semper knew that he would be more than capable of the required level of blood-thirsty savagery. Killing scum like this would be a distinct pleasure, over and above being his duty to the Emperor and Imperium.

'Stand ready!' he called, brandishing his sabre as he scaled the lip of the barricade. 'Give them a greeting to take back to their masters in the warp.'

With the shield wall gone, a second hail of fire rang out from the barricade defenders, ripping into the mass of heretics. Dozens of them were killed in seconds. Hundreds more, unharmed, charged on, weathering the storm of gunfire, crashing against the barricade like a living wave.

Maddened with fear and bloodlust, the first ranks of cultists threw themselves at the makeshift bulwark of the barricades, fighting amongst themselves to be the first to scale over it.

Those who succeeded were instantly met and attacked by the frateris defenders waiting there. Other cultists tore at the barricade foundations with their bare hands, trying to pull sections of it down, or thrust gun barrels through any available apertures or breaches in its structure, firing blindly in the hope of hitting those hiding on the other side.

In front of Semper, the black-cloaked followers of the powers of the warp swarmed over the top of the barricades, falling on the defenders. Semper thrust his sabre point through the throat of the first wild-eyed madman to come at him, stepping back sharply to avoid the man's falling body. Another killing thrust with the sabre dispatched the next enemy in line, but more bodies pressed forward to take the places of the men Semper had killed. A hail of rag-lit, promethium-filled glass bottle and clay pot missiles -

which side had thrown them, it was impossible to tell - landed all along the top of the barricade, engulfing attacker and defender alike in a blanket of flame and instantly setting ablaze sections of the barricade. Men, soaked in burning promethium, rolled across the rain-slick cobbles on the ground in a vain attempt to put out the hungry, chemically-fuelled flame now consuming them. Semper silenced the screams of one man with a stab of his sabre, not knowing whether he had killed another enemy or mercy-killed a fellow servant of the Emperor.

More black-cloaked figures scrambled over the barricade top, leaping through the wall of flame, many of them setting themselves alight in the process and running amok, still burning, through the ranks of the defenders, their screams of pain and joy an insane epiphany to their daemon masters. One of the burning figures ran shrieking at Semper, waving a fiery scythe weapon above its head, only to be pulled down seconds later by a group of frateris secondary defenders. They hacked at it with knives and makeshift tool weapons until its dirashing and shrieks finally ceased, although even in its death-throes it proved a deadly opponent, spitting one of the frateris on the cruel blade of its burning weapon.

Glancing round, Semper found it impossible to tell how the battle was going. Everywhere he looked, he saw chaos and confusion, the ordered lines of defence falling into a bloody struggle for survival as the tide of cultists continued to sweep across the now-broken barricade defences.

Rain fell unceasingly from the skies, muffling the sounds of screams, cries and gunfire from all around, mixing with the gory detritus of battle to form treacherous, blood-filled puddles on the cobbled ground.

A cultist stepped out in front of him, a brace of severed heads hanging from the braided human hair belt around his waist. The man giggled insanely, swinging a gore-dripping cleaver at the Imperial Navy commander. Semper parried the attack with ease, splitting the heretic butcher's skull with his return blow.

A deformed hand thrust a pistol muzzle towards Semper's belly. Semper severed it with a sabre blow before it could pull the trigger.

A YOUNG WOMAN leapt at him, reaching out for his face, eyes and exposed throat with fingers twisted into long cartilage-formed talons. Semper ran her through with his sabre, using her own momentum to impale her through the heart.

He pulled the blade free as her body tumbled to join the others on the corpse-littered cobbles. All around him, he saw the black-and brown-cloaked figures of the heretics and frateris. Nowhere did he see the navy blue of any of his own crewmen. Rahn had been with him minutes ago at the beginning of the battle, faithfully watching his back, but Semper had not seen him since the battle had descended into this bloody and confused melee. Grimly, he wondered if he was the last surviving crew member of the *Macharius* left on Belatis, and then the next wave of heretics swarmed forward, calling his attention back to more immediately urgent matters.

ROARING IN ANGRY defiance, throat raw from bellowing a nonstop stream of Stranivarite curses, Maxim swung his chainsword like a maul, using it to shatter the skull of yet another black-cloaked madman. The weapon had ceased functioning minutes ago - it was either out of power or the workings of its whirring monomolecular chain-blade had become clogged with gore - but Maxim had preferred to keep hold of it. Its jagged razor teeth could still tear through flesh and its heavy, solid blade casing could still crush bone, particularly when wielded by someone of Maxim's strength.

Adept Hyuga lay nearby, face staring up into the sky, rainwater splashing into his dead, sightless eyes. His bravery had given way as soon as the Chaos charge began. With a whimper of terror, he had turned and ran back towards the safety of the cathedral. Mindful of his captain's orders, Maxim had let him take all of five or six steps before turning and smartly putting three heavy slug pistol rounds between his shoulder blades. Frateris defenders had contemptuously scooped up the adept's still-twitching corpse and added it to the others, using their own dead as makeshift building blocks to fill the breaches in the barricade defences. Stacked with these other gruesome human sandbags, Honoured Adept Munitorium Hyuga contributed more in death to the valiant, desperate defence of the Ecclesiarchy cathedral than he ever could have in life.

Maxim kept on fighting, killing everything in front of him that came clambering over the barricade. Frateris defenders, awe-struck by the terrifying sight of this blood-drenched, bellowing giant striking down the Emperor's enemies, rallied around him, throwing themselves at their attacker with renewed energy.

Maxim roared with savage laughter as he swung the broken chainsword, smashing it through the ribcage of one cultist, sending its jagged blade teeth slicing through the spine of another. Somewhere deep inside himself, Maxim began to wonder if he wouldn't actually somehow survive all this. After all, he had been born amongst the clanless dregs of the Stranivar hive, into the lowest strata of hive society, where the average life expectancy was twenty years or less, and he had survived that, just as he had later survived and even flourished amongst the brutal and lawless ganger culture of the Stranivar underhive. And then too there had been the Arbitrator cull and enforced slavery on Lubiyanka's gulag factories, before finally coming aboard the *Macharius* where again he had not only survived but flourished, a combination of strange fortune and calculated ruthlessness elevating him from indentured slave crewman to petty officer rank in a matter of months.

Maxim remembered the words one of the ganger women had whispered to him as they lay together in his underhive crib, surrounded by the rest of his gang. She had been a strange, wild one, Tanyara, with more than a touch of the wyrd sight about her. Exhausted by the night's revels, intoxicated by tajii root and fiery underhive-brewed liquor, he had listened as she told him that she had seen him in her visions. He had been on the bridge of one of the mighty vessels which sailed between worlds. He was wearing an officer's uniform, and there was the gleam of medals on his broad chest. Maxim had laughed at the idea then, thinking that it was the liquor and tajii root talking, knowing that, like all his nameless forbears before him, he would live and die on Stranivar without ever seeing - or wanting to see - anything of the other worlds that lay across the unimaginable gulfs of the Emperor's space.

Tanyara was probably long-dead now - if the Arbitrators hadn't got her, then the Ecclesiarch witch hunters or Redemptionist

maniacs almost certainly would have - but Maxim no longer laughed at the memory of her words. After all, part of her vision had already come true. He had stood on the bridge of one of the Emperor's warships, had he not? Crucially, though, the uniform was that of a NCO petty officer, and there weren't any medals on his tunic breast.

At least, not yet.

Did that mean that the girl's vision was of a time yet to come? If so, then that meant that Maxim wasn't fated to die here with the rest of these prayer-mumbling madmen. Which meant that, somehow, he was destined to escape from here.

Laughing, he got ready to swing his chainsword again, and was almost disappointed to see no more black-cloaked cultists rushing lemming-like over the top of the barricade to offer themselves to his blade. All over what was left of the cathedral defence line, the thinned and scattered line of the remnants of the latest cultist assault wave was in retreat. Maxim threw the chainsword after them, drawing a pair of stub pistols from the bandolier of holsters and emptied them into the backs of the fleeing cultists, sending the survivors on their way with a stream of bullets and coarse Stranivarite curses. Blood mixed with rainwater ran down his face from a scalp wound that he didn't even remember receiving. Maxim ran his tongue round his lips, tasting the blood that coursed down his face, laughing again because at least it meant that he was still alive.

Alive, and destined to stay that way, or so he fervently hoped.

KHOISAN WATCHED DISPASSIONATELY as the ragged remains of his force retreated back to the ill-assumed safety of their own lines. He had intended to order his own gunners to open fire at them, but a better idea now occurred to him. 'Round them up and disarm them,' he ordered an acolyte lieutenant, the man's face rotting off in tattered strips as the new mutant form gifted to him by the powers of warp grew out from underneath. 'They can serve as the shield wall for the next attack.'

In truth, the failure of this attack did not surprise or even greatly disappoint the Chaos warlord. The troops employed had been a disorganised rabble, little better than the human shield wall prisoners whose place they would now take in the next attack. Other, better, troops were on their way, called away from the plunder of the Arbites courthouse fortress on the other side of the city. With a trained mental effort, he had quelled the Blood God aspect of his no longer human soul, instead giving free rein to the part of him that belonged to the Lord Tzeentch, observing the battle with the clinical, cold intelligence of a servant of the Great Conspirator, studying it for evidence of his enemies' strengths and potential weaknesses. The cathedral defenders were close to breaking point, he suspected, their ammunition and fighting strength almost exhausted by repulsing this attack. The next attack, supported by captured artillery and even armoured vehicles that were also on their way, would smash through what remained of the hitherto stubborn cathedral defences with relative ease.

Casting out his Tzeentch-blessed mystic senses, Khoisan divined the purpose of the final task that was expected of him here.

There were several important servants of the false Emperor amongst the cathedral's defenders. All of them would die, of course, but one amongst them in particular must perish, the voices of the warp whispered to him. A simple task, and easily achieved, thought Khoisan.

His minions waited around him: weak, fallible things every one of them, scarcely able to understand the transformation that he would soon undergo. He favoured them with a commanding glance. 'There is one amongst the defenders, a captain in the false Emperor's navy. Issue commands that, when we begin the final attack, care is to be taken that he is not killed or injured. His death is promised to me alone.'

The minions bowed in compliance. Khoisan did not know why this one servant of the false Emperor had been so marked for death by the powers of the warp, but die he would, if that was their divine command. In his time, the Chaos champion had personally killed untold thousands of the weakling servants of the false Emperor. What difference was one more now?

SEMPER GATHERED WHAT was left of his force in the leeway of the cathedral doors. By his estimate, there were scarcely a hundred able-bodied defenders left to man the shattered barricades, and, of that number, probably less than half had a clip or more of ammunition left for their weapons. The next enemy attack, if it came in anything like the ferocity and numbers of that last one, would simply roll right over the top of them. Caparan was there, supported by the turret gunner, Daksha. Both of them were wounded, but still willing to fight. Daksha's weapon of choice - a strangely curved, heavy-bladed chopping weapon which he referred to as a *kukri* - was clotted with gore, and now the quiet and reserved little feralworlder was ritually cleaning it, mumbling prayers to himself as he did so. Rahn was dead - Semper had seen his headless corpse amongst the rains of the barricades - but Borasa was still with them. Looking at the big hiveworlder, swigging out of a bottle of no doubt potent liquor that he had apparently spirited out of nowhere, laughing to himself at some private joke, his arms and face painted with dried blood to add to his skin collage of ganger tattoos, Semper wondered if anything could kill the man.

The members of the governor-regent's court had acquitted themselves surprisingly well and with honour, but had suffered casualties accordingly. Only a handful of them, mainly palace guard officers, was still alive. General Brod lay back there on the barricades, his lifeless, bullet-riddled corpse surrounded by a litter of enemy dead. Whatever redemption the general had sought, he had now found.

Nearby, Jarra Kale lay slumped against a pile of fallen masonry, staring down in incomprehension at the gaping wound in his stomach that he had received from a ripping knife thrust.

'No... This can't be happening. This wasn't how it was all meant to happen,' Kale mumbled to himself over and over again, watching gaunt-faced as his life's blood spilled out of him, pooling on the cobbles around him before being washed away by the ever-present torrent of rain. Two frateris orderlies carefully lifted him up and bore him off inside. The wound was almost certainly fatal. The cathedral infirmary had run out of even the most basic medical supplies and the Sororitas sisters and their attendants there could now offer the many wounded little other than prayers of comfort. Semper did not expect to see the former first minister again.

Devane too had survived. He had lost three fingers on his left hand at some point during the battle, and sat crouched in the cover

of a row of statuary, the graven images of stern-faced heroes of the Imperial Faith looking down in disapproval at him as he bound up his crippled hand, cursing loudly in language rarely heard from any Imperial preacher pulpit. Looking up, he caught Semper watching him, and grinned despite the pain of his wound.

'You hear them howling? I think they're getting ready to make another attack. Ready to do it all again, captain?'

'With what?' answered Semper, not yet ready to greet the prospect of his own imminent death with the same grim humour as Devane. 'The barricade line is almost gone, and we've hardly enough men left to defend one side of the square, never mind all four. We should fall back to defend the cathedral entrances.'

'Agreed,' replied Devane, and then added with a laugh, 'and at least we'll be out of the damned rain.'

'Some more firepower would be a fine thing. That way, when they come through these doors, we could turn the hallway beyond into one long, cover-free shooting gallery.' No one disagreed with Semper's choice of the word *when* rather than *if*. The heretics' final victory seemed assured; the only matter still in dispute was how many of them the defenders would kill in the process. Semper looked round, spotting the remains of the shuttle that had brought him and his crew here. Whole sections of it had been cannibalised to provide more material for the barricades and what little remained was a stripped-down wreck. 'Tech-Adept Ko, are any of the turret weapons aboard the shuttle still useable?'

The non-combatant tech-priest stood nearby, displaying the unnerving calmness typical of the servants of the Machine God.

'Three of them, captain,' he answered, 'although the craft's power systems are irreparably damaged. Hence they cannot be made to fire.'

'Can they be removed from their turret mountings on the shuttle?' Semper asked. 'If we find other power units, could they be set up somewhere else, perhaps inside the cathedral?'

'There are several portable power generators in the storage chamber in the vaults,' said Devane, excitedly. 'We found them when we were searching for weapons. Emperor knows if they're in any kind of usable condition.'

Caparan rose to his feet, helped by Daksha. 'If they are, we'll get them up and running. It'll be a job getting those guns out of their mountings, though.'

'Take as many of the brethren as you need to help you. You'll need some covering fire too, to protect you from those damned snipers.' Devane turned, grinning at Semper. 'A good plan, captain. If we can set up even one of those guns inside that hallway, they'll have to wade through their own blood to get to us. Maybe we'll take a few more of them with us than they were counting on.'

'Captain Semper.'

Semper looked up in astonishment at the grey-habited figure standing before him that had seemingly materialised out of nowhere, seeing the distinctive psychic warding tattoos on the man's aged face, seeing the blank stare of his hollowed-out, empty eye sockets and recognising him instantly for what he was - an astropath, capable of sending messages through the warp to his brethren in other far-distant star systems. Or even, thought Semper, those aboard not-so-distant Imperial warships.

'Captain Semper,' repeated Sobek in the strange, sonorous tones so distinctive of those of the astropath caste. 'It is not the Emperor's will that you die here today. That is why he has commanded me to live this far. That is why he has guided me to you.'

## FOUR

'A MATTER OF the greatest urgency, *Drachenfels*. We have received an astropathic communication from Captain Semper. He is alive, and trapped on Belatis, along with the survivors of his shuttle crew, the governor-regent of Belatis and members of his court. I am requesting permission to leave the convoy and return to Belatis to pick them up.'

There was silence on the command deck of the *Macharius*, before the voice of Ramas crackled over the comm-net. When he spoke, his voice was heavy with disbelief. 'From Semper? How can you be sure? The malign powers always seek to deceive, Ulanti. There are many false and misleading voices in the warp. How can you be sure that it comes from Semper?'

'With respect, Captain Ramas, I believe the message is genuine,' answered Ulanti. 'It carries Captain Semper's personal command codex known only to him and this vessel's chief astropath. Adeptus Rapavna is a loyal and experienced servant of the Astra Telepathica, and swears that the message transmitted to him is true, with no hint of the false or malefic. Speaking for myself, I am convinced it is from the captain.' Ulanti glanced towards the impassive figure of Kyogen standing nearby, who nodded at him in silent assent. 'Other senior officers aboard *Macharius*, including Ship's Commissar Kyogen, also concur with me in this respect. We are certain that if anyone could have escaped the destruction of the palace and survived the growing anarchy on Belatis, it would be Captain Semper.'

'And what would you have us do, *Macharius*!' barked Ramas over the open comm-net channel. 'Turn back to rescue him? Risk the entire convoy for the life of one man?' Ulanti had been expecting the question. His reply was considered and succinct.

'Our mission was to safely evacuate from Belatis all valued servants of the Emperor before that world's destruction. That mission is not yet complete, not while Captain Semper and the planetary governor remain trapped there.'

'I still cannot countenance releasing any vessels to return to Belatis, no matter the reason. The evacuation of Belatis is complete. Our first duty is to the Emperor and Battlefleet Gothic, not the life of one man, even if it is that of Leoten Semper. Maintain current speed and course, *Macharius*. I too grieve for Captain Semper, but, regretfully, your request is again denied. *Drachenfels* out.'

An angry murmur of dissent ran round the command deck. Like Ulanti, the command crew's loyalties were with their captain. Then, from beyond the bridge's central nave, a figure stepped forward, gesturing for the tech-adepts manning the communications section to hold open the comm-net link with the master of the *Drachenfels*.

'Captain Ramas, I am Marshal Primus Jamahl Byzantane of the Adeptus Arbitres, commander of the garrison on Belatis. Matters

have come to my attention regarding the continued presence of Imperium servants on the world behind us.' Byzantane held out his hand, gesturing for the data slate in the flag-lieutenant's hand. 'Lieutenant Ulanti, may I see the transcript of the message received by your astropath.'

Byzantane scrolled quickly through the message, which was composed in the terse, abbreviated style typical of most astropath-conveyed communications, analysing Semper's brief version of the events, together with the names of the survivors and their current dire circumstances inside the fragile safety of the besieged cathedral. Grimly satisfied, he handed the data device back to Ulanti.

'It is as I thought, Captain Ramas,' he said, his deep voice taking on a new, extra tone of authority. 'Amongst the list of those who have survived along with Captain Semper is the name of one who I now know to be a traitor to the Imperium and agent of the malign powers. It is perhaps solely due to this person's treachery that the crisis on Belatis escalated as rapidly and disastrously as it did. Such treachery cannot be allowed to go unpunished. I concur with acting Captain Ulanti's plan to return to Belatis immediately to effect the rescue of Captain Semper and punish the one who has betrayed us all.'

'My reply to you is the same as it was to the flag-lieutenant, marshal. I cannot—' Ramas's voice was abruptly interrupted by Byzantane's own, booming command.

'You misunderstand, Captain Ramas. I am an Arbitrator, and the only power I answer to is the Emperor's sacred law. I do not need your permission. I am telling you what I intend to do.'

There was a long pause over the comm-net link. When Ramas spoke again, there was a new tone of slyly amused understanding in his voice. 'Very well, marshal. I wish the record to show that I object in the strongest terms to your actions, but, that as a loyal servant of the Emperor and his law, I realise my hands are tied. Good hunting, *Macharius*. Bring your captain back to us safe and unharmed. Battlefleet Gothic is the poorer without a man of his abilities. *Drachenfels* out.'

Byzantane turned to Ulanti, seeing the look of confusion on the navy officer's face. 'This vessel is no longer part of Battlefleet Gothic, lieutenant. In the Emperor's name, by the authority invested in me as one of the keepers of his sacred law, I'm commandeering this vessel and its crew.' Byzantane smiled, relishing the look of surprise on Ulanti's face. 'This vessel is now under the command of the Adeptus Arbites, at least for the time being. Issue your orders to your helmsmen, lieutenant. You may change course back to Belatis whenever you are ready.'

Kyogen stepped forward. At over two metres in height and wearing the imposing black uniform and silver-skull rank insignia of an Imperial commissar, Kyogen was used to putting the fear of the Emperor into just about every crewman aboard the *Macharius*; with Byzantane, who stood almost as tall in his bulky black-armoured uniform, he enjoyed no such advantage. The word of a ship's commissar was law on a navy vessel, but the word of an Arbites marshal was immutable law on every world throughout the Imperium. Byzantane locked eyes with the commissar, the two servants of Imperial justice facing up to each other.

'You intend to force a way through the pursuing enemy vessels with just one ship?' asked Kyogen. 'I have no qualms with your intentions, marshal, and I recognise that your authority is greater than mine, but as ship's commissar I must speak if I believe that the security of this ship is threatened by foolish or suicidal orders which must surely result in its wasteful destruction.'

'I assure you that we will not be alone, comrade commissar. After all, the *Macharius* is not the only Arbites vessel in this convoy,' said Byzantane, gesturing again to the communications adepts.

'Open a comm-net channel to the *Inviolable Retribution*.'

Seconds later, the thick, hiveworld-accented voice of Marshal Secundus Korte sounded over the command deck vox-speakers. 'I have been monitoring your communications, marshal. What orders?'

'Come about full,' instructed Byzantane. 'Form up with your new Arbites sister vessel *Macharius* and make with all speed on a return course back in-system. Justice awaits, Marshal Secundus. We have unfinished business to settle back on Belatis.'

LINKED INTO HIS ship's surveyor senses, Ramas watched as the *Macharius* and the Arbites strike cruiser broke ranks with the rest of the Imperial convoy and set course back for Belatis. Reaching out with a fire-withered claw-hand, Ramas opened up an internal comm-channel to his vessel's bridge. 'Signal the rest of the convoy to proceed as planned,' he ordered his second-in-command.

'We will fall back and take up the rearguard position vacated by the *Macharius*.' He paused, and then ordered, almost as an afterthought, 'And instruct Magos Herihor to make good the damage done to our main drive systems.'

'Sir?' queried the voice of Ramas's long-suffering second-in-command, confusion evident in his tone. 'The main engines are fully operational. Those Infidel torpedoes caused only minor damage to our drive systems, all of which has now been repaired, according to the magos.'

'Then tell that blasted Machine God groveller to check the systems again,' suggested Ramas, a conspiratorial tone creeping into his voice. 'I fear that not all the damage may have been found and repaired. It would be unfortunate indeed if we were forced to drop out of the convoy due to any kind of engine malfunction or the need to make urgent battlefield repairs.'

His second-in-command, by now used to the irascible captain's often unpredictable ways, finally took the hint. 'Most unfortunate, captain,' he smiled, realisation dawning in his voice. 'I shall make the necessary arrangements without further delay.'

ON THE BRIDGE of another warship, another captain and his underlings were in urgent conference.

'Two of them, commander,' reported the captain of one of the forward Infidel escorts from over the *Charybdis*'s command deck comm-net. 'A Dictator class cruiser and another warship. Its configuration is unfamiliar, although we believe it is some kind of light scouting cruiser. They are both heading directly back towards us. What are your orders?'

The captain of the Murder class Chaos cruiser considered the question. He knew that he had already risked the Despoiler's displeasure by his squadron's failure to destroy the *Drachenfels* and attack the Imperial evacuation fleet as it lay in vulnerable orbit position above the Planet Killer target world. The Despoiler did not suffer failure, or even over-cautiousness, in his commanders, and the master of the *Charybdis* knew that he must throw caution to the wind if he were to regain the Warmaster's

favour. Death in space combat could come in many different forms, but any of them would be better than the kind of fates reserved for those who had displeased Abaddon the Despoiler. The Chaos captain did not know why two of the Imperial warships had broken away from the convoy, but he knew that in doing so they offered him a chance to redeem himself to the Warmaster. 'Charybdis to squadron,' he commanded. 'Form up for attack.'

THROUGH HIS MIND link with the plague creature now worming its way through the *Macharius's* metal innards, Sirl was aware of his prey's change of course minutes before it registered on his vessel's long-range surveyor screens. Reverberating through the pipeways and ducts along which his puppet creature now crawled, he felt and heard the rumbling boom of the enemy vessel's main engine drive firing up to full capacity; he felt that strange, tell-tale, invisible tugging sensation that came as a vessel's artificial gravity field shifted to compensate for sudden changes in its course and trajectory. The *Macharius* was radically coming about, he realised excitedly, turning away from the rest of the convoy and accelerating away on a return course back to Belatis.

Sirl did not know or understand why his prey was now hurrying back towards him, towards its doom, but he knew that this unexpected turn of events would only make his task all the easier. The Chaos captain smiled to himself. The powers of the warp were clearly with him; Grandfather Nurgle himself must be watching over the fortunes of his loyal servant.

'Faster. The Grandfather grows impatient,' he snapped to his crew, looking at the display on the command deck surveyor screen. Ship icons glowed in sickly shades of colour through the crystal cataract-clouded surface of the screen. The *Charybdis* and its escorts were already racing to intercept the *Macharius* and its still unknown companion vessel, but Sirl was not concerned, knowing now that the destruction of the hated Imperial ship was fated to him alone. Around the *Virulent*, in the vanguard of the Chaos fleet, other ships swarmed forward, their captains eagerly slipping free of their leashes as enemy targets of opportunity now presented themselves to their vessels' surveyor senses.

And, behind them all, came the Planet Killer, its massive energy presence blossoming urgently across surveyor screens. Crackling bursts of seething energy flowed freely around the spires and turrets of the huge weapons platform as it drew power directly from the warp itself, powering up its terrifying armageddon gun weapon array in readiness for unleashing that energy, magnified many times over by the arcane technologies used in the vessel's construction, on its chosen target.

For Belatis and all upon it, execution hour was here at last.

ALARM PEELS SOUNDED through the many decks of the *Macharius*, calling its crew to arms. Armsmen and shouting petty officers roused men from what meagre rest they were allowed, kicking and cursing them as they herded them out of their bunk rooms to their appointed duty stations. Teams of sweating, straining gunnery ratings dragged colossal platform-mounted guns along wide metal tracks, locking them into position and making them ready for firing. Chain-gang crews of indentured workers hauled on pulley chains thicker than a man's body, opening up gun ports in preparation for battle. Deep in the ship's generarium core, armour-suited engineers and prayer-intoning tech-priests nursed the ship's ancient plasma reactor hearts, bleeding additional amounts of energy through to feed the hungry demands of the vessel's thousands of power systems.

In a small chapel shrine below the main crew decks, Reth Zane finished off his prayers, and hastily gathered up his collection of personal relics and charms, wrapping them in the woven prayer mat which he tucked inside the thick, padded jacket of his flight suit. It was uncomfortably hot and humid in the shrine room - thick energy conduits, humming with power, passed through the bulkhead walls around it - but Zane preferred to carry out his devotions here, in private, away from the main shrines on the busy crew decks above. Still, he would now have to hurry back to the flight deck in answer to the general alert signal now sounding. 'Zane'.

Zane stopped short in the corridor outside, uncertain whether he had really heard the faint, whispering voice. Perhaps he had just imagined it amongst the dull throb of the ship's engines and the distant but distinct clamour of voices from the decks above. And then, from out of the darkness, he heard it again.

'Do your duty, Zane!'

A spectral figure, encircled by a pale, dancing nimbus of light, stood at the turn of the passageway. Zane felt the eerie radiance play over his face. Within the light, few details were visible: only the shining face of the haloed figure and the sacred runes glow-etched into its archaic power armour. Zane had seen that face - so impossibly beautiful - before. Years ago. As a young Ministrorum novice acolyte. On *Sacra Evangelista*.

With a shock of recognition, he fell to his knees. 'My lady,' he gasped, bowing his head, unable to look the blessed vision in the face.

'Do your duty, Zane. To your ship. To the Emperor. To me. Serve me. Be my Avenging Fury!'

The nimbus of light shifted from his face. He dared to look up, seeing the light fade away, disappearing round the corner of the passageway. From behind him came the sound of the alarm bell, calling him to his duty as a crewman aboard a vessel of the Divine Emperor's Imperial Navy. Ahead of him was a summons to a far different, higher, duty. It had been almost a quarter of a century - a lifetime ago - since the warrior angel had appeared to him, changing his life forever. Now it had come to him again. He had obeyed its call once; what other choice did he have now?

Zane drew the short, snub-nosed laspistol from the holster-pocket of his flight suit and moved off up the dank passageway, following the nimbus of light in the distance.

Following it into the unknown darkness.

JARRA KALE WANTED to sit up, but the pain from his torn belly and guts seared like white hot fire whenever he tried to move. With a newfound clarity that only comes too late to men such as himself, he realised that he had been tricked. There would be none of the pleasures and rewards which the one who had bewitched him had promised. He realised now that he had been played for a fool all along, that there would be no escape in death, that he had damned his soul to an eternity of suffering within the hungry coils of

the things that waited for him in the warp.

With a trembling hand, he reached out to grasp the robes of a passing Sororitas nurse, pulling urgently on the hem. 'Sister,' he gasped, 'you must help me. The confessor or the navy captain, you must bring them to me. There is something... Please, I beg you. There is much they must be told.'

The Sororitas sister looked into the face of the dying man. She had seen so much death and pain here amongst the infirmary's inmates in the last few days. She was inured to the horrors of so many dying, suffering patients, to their delirious babbling and their begging cries for relief from the pain, and yet there was something in this one's eyes - an unexpected, desperate intensity - that struck a chord within her. Had Korte been here, he could have told her what it was; the desperate need to confess at the moment of death, to be able to say one last truth after so many falsehoods and betrayals.

She clasped Kale's clutching hand, squeezing it on a small but genuine gesture of assurance. 'Wait, I will bring someone to you. One of the seraphim sisters or a preacher, if one can be found.'

Kale waited, drifting in and out of pain-edged unconsciousness. He was awoken again by a dark-robed figure kneeling over him. His vision was blurred and indistinct, his sight failing as the life ebbed out of him. 'Father,' he began, 'I must speak with someone. I must—'

A jewel-ringed hand clamped over his mouth, cutting off the words of his final confession. The figure leant down over him, hissing urgently into his ear. 'Fool, did you really think I would let you betray me now?'

Kale tried to straggle, tried to cry out, but who would notice one more moaning, weakly thrashing figure amongst the hundreds of other seriously injured that filled the infirmary to overflowing? He felt the figure's other hand close at his throat, felt the bite of a tiny cutting edge against his skin and remembered the crystal venom ring that his betrayer always wore.

A brief second's straggle, as the coursing venom wracked his body with a final spasm of agony, and then it was all over. His killer knelt for a few seconds more over the body, touching a hand to its neck, satisfied that there was no pulse. To an observer, the dark-cloaked figure could have been any of the infirmary's Ministerum attendants, conducting the rituals of the last rites over the body of a dead or dying man.

When the Sororitas sister returned a few minutes later with a sister superior - the nearest thing she could find to a preacher - she found that her efforts had all been in vain. Whatever First Minister Jarra Kale had had to say, he had taken the secrets of his deathbed confession with him to the warp.

'THEY ARE COMING,' gasped the dying astropath.

Sobek reached out, running his hands over Semper's face as the navy commander leaned down to support him, one arm round his shoulders. It was the only means of "vision" the astropath had left. The mental effort of piercing the maelstrom of psychic energy thrown out by the Despoiler's terrible exterminator weapon had been too much for the old man, and now the last of his psychic vision had deserted him as the numbing paralysis spread through his still-haemorrhaging brain.

'You are sure? You have received word from my ship's astropath?'

'My senses are deaf to the voices of my brethren now, but I know that your vessel and another are coming,' Sobek replied. 'I have seen it in the visions that have been granted to me. It is not the Emperor's will that you die here this day, Leoten Semper. He has other tasks in mind for you, perhaps.'

'What other tasks? Why would I be spared? Why not any of these others?' asked Semper, gesturing at the pathetic, heroic remnants of the frateris pilgrims around him. 'Their faith and devotion is stronger than mine.'

Sobek's reply was a sighing whisper, barely audible against the rising din of the heretic chants from outside. Semper lent in close, straining to hear the dying astropath's last words. 'We are all called to serve the Emperor as he sees fit, captain. Remember the sacrifice of those you see around you now. Remember it, for perhaps one day it will be your duty to avenge it.'

'Coming! They're coming!'

Semper, with Devane kneeling close beside him, looked up sharply at the shouts of the young frateris brother as he ran towards them down the aisle of the cathedral hall, calling out the message sent back from the defenders outside. 'They're coming! The heretics are coming! In their thousands, they come!' When Semper and the Imperial preacher glanced back at the figure lying on the floor between them, they saw the lifeless and strangely peaceful features of the astropath looking up at them. The two men glanced at each other.

'If your ship is coming for you, it had better hurry,' noted Devane, bending down to perform the Blessing of the Fallen over the corpse, pulling the astropath's hood down over his sightless face in a final gesture of respect.

'Destiny or not, I'm not planning on leaving here just yet,' replied Semper, accepting and checking the ammo-load of the autopistol that Devane wordlessly handed him. Together, the two Imperial servants gathered up their troops and led them at a sprint toward the cathedral doors.

Seconds later, the first heretic artillery shells crashed into the ancient walls of the cathedral. Inside the building, the wounded and the families of the frateris defenders moaned in despair. The final, surely overwhelming heretic attack had begun. It was now only a matter of time before the place fell to the enemy.

## FIVE

THE CHAOS FLEET was unfamiliar with the design and capabilities of the Arbites Punisher class vessel, mistaking it for some kind of new variant of the Dauntless class scouting cruiser familiar to them from so many other encounters with the armed forces of Battlefleet Gothic. Aboard the *Charybdis*, the Chaos commander quickly realised the enormity of the mistake as the *Macharius* and the *Inviolable Retribution* smashed into his forward line of Infidel escorts.

Furies launched from the *Macharius* swept away the wave of torpedoes fired by the Infidels, immediately blunting the Chaos attack. Even as the crews of the enemy raider vessels' torpedo rooms struggled to reload more of the titanic ordnance missiles into the firing tubes, the Imperial ships struck back. Four squadrons of Starhawks swarmed out of the *Macharius's* launch bays, forming up into attack formation and quickly speeding towards the line of enemy escorts.

Even before they got there, the line had disintegrated. The Arbites strike cruiser's formidable bombardment cannons opened fire, their linear accelerator systems hurtling a stream of lethal magma bomb warheads through the void at something approaching quarter light speed. The salvo of warheads exploded across the line of Chaos ships with terrifying accuracy. One of them disappeared in a white flash, a hundred thousand tonnes of metal and machinery simply vaporised out of existence. Another tumbled out of formation, already breaking apart into burning fragments. The last remaining raider manoeuvred away in panic, abandoning its attack as its captain frantically sought to disengage from the battle. The pursuing Starhawks fell upon it with gleeful abandon, crippling its main drive and detonating its reactor core in a blizzard of armour-piercing missiles.

Now the *Charybdis* entered the battle, its void shields flaring angrily as it passed through the expanding clouds of debris and residual energy vapour which only minutes ago had been its squadron of escort ships. It struck out with its forward lance batteries, beams of brilliant energy cutting through the *Macharius's* void shields and striking its prow, scoring burn lines metres thick into the super-dense material of the cruiser's armoured beak. On the bridge of the *Macharius*, Ulanti felt the shudder of the impact run through the hull of the vessel and saw the nervous, edgy glances being cast at him by the command deck crew.

'Helm, hold her steady. Ordnance, be ready to fire torpedoes on my command.'

'Target is changing course, sir,' reported the urgent voice of one of the surveyor section officers. 'Its energy emission profile is changing. It's trying to disengage!'

Outgunned, the Chaos ship was attempting to break off from battle, radically changing course and cutting off the flow of power to its main systems, rendering it invisible to the surveyor senses of other vessels. It was a standard manoeuvre, and, if successful, the Chaos cruiser would simply fade off the *Macharius's* target screens, drifting away unscathed and undetected. Ulanti had no intention of allowing that to happen.

'Mister Nyder?'

'That renegade scum's going nowhere, captain. We have it on lock on,' confirmed Nyder with a snarling grin.

'Fire all torpedoes,' instructed Ulanti.

In a pre-arranged manoeuvre between the two vessels, the *Inviolable Retribution* fired its bombardment cannons at the same time, the combined salvo finding and striking its target with devastating force, ripping open the Murder class cruiser's underside and blowing apart its starboard flank. On the *Macharius's* surveyor screens, instead of fading away, the target icon of the enemy vessel burned bright and fierce, its position clearly marked by the energy now burning out of the crippled ship.

'Helm, full ahead. Gunnery, prepare to fire starboard batteries.'

At Ulanti's command, the *Macharius* moved forward in tandem with the Arbites cruiser, the two Imperial vessels manoeuvring to pass on either side of the stricken Chaos cruiser. At a given signal, they opened fire simultaneously once more, pummelling the *Charybdis* with dual broadsides and catching it in a merciless crossfire. The enemy ship struck back with its still-functioning portside armaments, lashing the *Inviolable Retribution* with a hail of fire from its still fearsome array of plasma cannon batteries. Explosions ripped along the hull of the Arbites craft, the *Retribution's* own gunners trading blow for blow with their counterparts aboard the *Charybdis*. Attacked from both sides, already badly damaged, the Chaos ship quickly succumbed to the inevitable. The two Imperial ships sped on towards Belatis, leaving behind them the burning wreck of the enemy ship that they had so clinically destroyed.

There were cheers amongst the junior officers of the *Macharius's* command deck crew, but Ulanti knew that the task ahead of them would not be so simply achieved. Enemy ship icons crowded the long-range surveyor screens, all of them closing rapidly on the doomed world. At their rear came the Planet Killer, its target icon almost burning out of the screen with the truly incalculable amount of energy now flowing through it.

'Shuttle ready for launch,' reported Nyder in response to Ulanti's questioning glance. Ulanti nodded, and Nyder sent the order through to the craft waiting patiently in their launch bays. Seconds later, a large troop transporter shuttle fell away from the *Macharius*, its pilot hitting his main engine thrusters as soon as he was clear of the carrier ship. It was quickly joined by a squadron of Eagle craft launched from the Arbites cruiser. Circling Fury Interceptors took up position fore and aft of the shuttle formation, forming a protective phalanx around them. The combined formation moved off at speed towards the shining disk of the planet, the two slower-moving warships following behind at a more stately pace.

On the command deck, Ulanti cast a concerned glance at Nyder. 'How long is their flight time?' he asked.

'We estimate one hour at full speed, perhaps a little more.' Nyder looked at the command deck's main tactical display, seeing the enemy target icons spilling across it towards them. 'They'll get there alright, but it'll be a hell of a fight getting them back aboard again.'

'Prepare your squadrons, Mr. Nyder,' instructed Ulanti. 'I want everything we've got launched to give them the cover they need.'

KAETHER LOOKED UP as Altomare came running towards him, the stocky, heavy-set fighter pilot weaving through the lines of bomb- and missile-laden loading trolleys that trundled across the cluttered expanse of the busy flight deck. The air was filled with the shouted instructions of ground crew, the clanging sound of metal on metal as payloads were secured aboard attack craft and the rising whine of thruster engines being test-fired. Altomare had to shout above the din to be heard by his squadron commander. 'Nothing. No sign of him anywhere.'

Kaether cursed volubly and blasphemously, drawing a disapproving stare from a nearby preacher who was bestowing sacred blessings on a payload stack of melta missiles as they were loaded into the belly bay of a Starhawk. 'Look again,' said the commander of *Storm* squadron. 'Check every shrine and chapel on the ship. Use whoever else you can get hold of to help you, but

find him.'

Altomare hurried off again, already shouting commands at the nearest of *Storm* squadron's ground crew personnel, instructing them to stop whatever they were doing and to join him. Kaether cursed again. Every squadron aboard ship had been given its launch alert. Every available attack craft was being pressed into service. Tech-priests and ground crews were hurriedly conducting desperate quick-fix repairs to damaged fighters and bombers that should, by all rights, have been sent to the workshop forges for major overhauls. And now, in the midst of all this, his best pilot had gone missing.

Vandire's teeth, Kaether cursed to himself once more. Where in the name of the Golden Throne was Reth Zane?

ZANE BENT DOWN over the corpse. He was somewhere in the maintenance sub-levels below the generarium core, he knew, and the corpse was that of one of the servitor things that inhabited such places. The blood and hydraulic fluids that were splashed on the walls of the passage - little more than a crawl-space, in truth - were still fresh, but the organic, human parts of the creature were already rotting away, revealing metal and wire beneath the grey, slick flesh. It had been killed not so long ago, the wet bloodstains said, but the amount of decay that had already set in suggested that it had lain rotting here for days.

There was something unnatural here, Zane knew. Something secret and foul. And he was getting closer to it all the time. Checking the power level of his laspistol one more time, he set off into the darkness again. He was not afraid, he told himself. He was a warrior in the service of the Master of Mankind. He was one of the Divine Emperor's Avenging Furies.

## SIX

FROM UP HIGH on the corner battlements, Daksha had a clear field of fire across the open area of the square in front of the cathedral's main entrance. It had been a difficult and laborious task hauling the turret autocannon weapon up here, but the effort was worth it. Panning the weapon left and right, he sent withering lines of shellfire across the square, right into the mass of cultists that filled area below. Another one of the large armoured tractor rigs rumbled forward across the square, crushing the bodies of the dead and wounded beneath its thick tracks. Daksha swung the weapon round, barely even bothering to bring his sights to bear on it. He was used to firing at the swift, darting shapes of enemy fighters as they flitted briefly across his gunsights, often at extreme distance. The slow-moving, lumbering rig was a laughably easy target in comparison. His first stream of shots blew apart the vehicle's armoured cab and the driver inside, but he continued firing. Riddling the freight space behind the cab with high-velocity armour-piercing shells, ripping apart the human cargo of armed heretics inside. Shattering the vehicle's caterpillar tracks for good measure.

Exploding the vehicle's fuel tank and showering the troops sheltering behind it with a blanket of burning promethium.

Two of the spinning barrels of the autocannon quad weapon stuttered and died. Daksha emitted a short curse in his native tongue. The barrels had jammed again, overheated by constant firing. Steam hissed from the barrels of the weapon as the frateris crew assisting him poured buckets of water over the red-hot metal. In the absence of the weapon's normal auto-coolant systems, this was the best compromise they could find.

Only one of the over-heated barrels commenced firing again. Daksha knew that soon this would fail too, over-heated to the point of melting. Either that, or he would run out of ammunition. After that, he would take up his kukri knife and join the other defenders in the battle below, wetting the weapon's blade with the blood of many enemies, rejoicing in their deaths.

It was not to be. Seconds later, hidden artillery guns on the other side of the square opened fire in response to the stream of autocannon fire, quickly zeroing in on Daksha's position and blowing apart that area of the cathedral battlements. The remains of the weapon and the feralworlder turret gunner and his crew crashed down onto the blood-soaked, cobbled ground below.

THE HERETIC WAVE swept towards the cathedral, overwhelming the last few die-hard defenders still manning the shattered remnants of the barricade. 'Fallback positions!' commanded Semper, firing into the black mass of cultists, dropping several of them with a final burst of his last few precious autopistol shells.

Along with the scattered line of frateris, Semper ran for the cathedral doors. Bullets and las-fire from the pursuing heretics filled the air around them, gunning down many of the retreating defenders. Semper felt something sear into his side. He stumbled, falling to the ground, only to be caught by a powerful grip. Maxim Borusa, that most unlikely of all guardian angels, hauled him back to his feet, almost carrying him through the open doors, sprinting with him down the hallway and depositing him behind the cover of the final barricade that had been thrown across the broad vestibule entrance to the main cathedral hall. 'Fallback positions, sir. Can't be leaving you behind now,' rumbled the big hiveworlder.

Seconds later, the first of the heretics burst through the doorway behind them, charging en masse down the hallway. Devane, commanding the secondary and last line of frateris defenders, allowed them to get within ten yards of the final barricade before he gave the order to fire to the gunners of the two remaining autocannon weapons salvaged from the shuttle wreck.

The eight spinning barrels fired as one, transforming the hallway into a hell of gunfire and death. The first few ranks of attackers simply disappeared in a red mist, ripped to shreds by the massed volley of autocannon fire. Armour-piercing shells designed to blow apart the armoured hulls of starfighters ripped through soft human tissue, passing through body after body amongst the cultists packed into the close confines of the stone hallway. Stray shells ricocheted off the fresco-covered walls and blew apart statues and scripture-engraved stone plinths and memorials, destroying the work of centuries of Ecclesiarchy craftsmen.

The cultists pressed on, suffering truly horrific casualties, those behind pushing those in front onwards and into the gun-sights of the chattering autocannons. To Semper and the other defenders, it seemed as if the cultists were banking on winning out in a simple and brutal battle of numbers, gambling that the autocannon would run out of shells before they ran out of troops. Devane had talked of making the Chaos followers wade through their own blood in order to get down the hallway, and now those words

had become far more than bloodthirsty and bravado-filled battle talk.

Suddenly, a figure stepped forward out of the autocannon-ravaged ranks of the cultists. The air around it swarmed with psychic power, a hazy energy shield forming around the figure to deflect away the hail of autocannon shells. It raised its sword, a crackling nimbus of black-glowing energy surrounding the weapon blade. 'Look out!' called Devane, too late, as daemon fire streamed out from the weapon, exploding amongst the barricade defenders.

Men screamed as the daemon energy consumed them, transforming them into blackened, withered scarecrows. One of the autocannon weapons exploded as the ghost fire played over it, showering both gun crews and all those around them with deadly shrapnel.

Semper stood up, drawing his sabre, ignoring the pain from the las-burn in his side, ignoring the burned and bleeding bodies around him. Seeing only the renewed charge of the cultists now creeping again towards him. Seeing the figure of the Chaos champion that led them, locking eyes with the heretic leader, and somehow seeing his doom written there in the inhuman creature's grotesquely shifting features.

So much for being destined not to die here today, thought Semper, as he rallied what remained of the defenders and led them in a counter-charge to meet the final enemy attack.

THE SOUND OF gunfire and the clash of weapons echoed loudly through the cathedral's interior, carrying into the side-chapel at the rear of the main hall. Vittas Sarro whimpered in fear, burrowing his face further into his sister's shoulder. 'What is happening, sister? The navy captain said that rescue was on its way, but all I hear is the sound of battle. When will it all be over?'

The Lady Malissa kissed her brother's forehead, thinking of what they had been told. She had always feared the Arbites commander, and the news that he was leading the rescue mission filled her with foreboding. She knew what she had to do now. It was regrettable, but she had always known that it would one day come down to this. No matter what happened now, her weakling of a brother had finally outlived his usefulness.

'Soon,' she whispered, caressing his cheek with the crystal edge of her ring. 'I promise you it will all be over soon.'

KHOISAN CUT A path through the press of bodies, killing his own followers and those of the false Emperor alike. The bloodlust was strong in him and he was eager to kill his enemy and fulfil his pact with the powers of the warp. Cleaving through *the* last of the human obstacles in his path, at last he stood before his prize. The man's face registered shock and fear - paltry human emotions that the Faceless One would soon leave far behind him after his glorious ascent to daemonhood - but then, with a cry of despairing rage, threw himself at the Chaos champion.

Khoisan turned the attack aside with almost contemptuous ease, the blade of the human's sabre shattering against the otherworldly, obsidian-like material of his own daemon weapon, the impact of the blow sending the man sprawling. Khoisan raised his sword to deliver the killing strike, but suddenly two more were there to defy him. One of them blocked his blow with a power sword, the energy fields of the two weapons - one warp-born, the other human-made - clashing angrily together. The other human - so large and savage-looking that he might have easily been a follower of the Blood God - thrust a crude pistol weapon forward, pumping bullets into the Chaos leader's chest. Khoisan felt pain as at least one of the heavy calibre bullets penetrated into his flesh, reminding him that he had not yet left behind such human weaknesses. He lashed out angrily, knocking aside the human with the pistol, cleaving his blade through the arm of the human with the power sword, severing the limb, and continuing the blow on through into the weakling human's chest, splitting him open.

Roaring in victory, the Faceless One turned back to the human his masters had commanded him to kill. Turning just in time to see the human snatch up the fallen power sword. Seeing this weak, pitiable mortal wield the weapon with surprising deftness. Seeing him slip the point of the blade past the Faceless One's guard, thrusting it through his armour and deep into his body. Khoisan gasped in shocked disbelief, feeling the stuff of his Chaos-altered body writhe and react as the energy-sheathed point of the blade burned through him.

Khoisan fell back, bubbling black blood spilling out of him from the terrible energy weapon wound. All around him, he heard his followers cry out in despairing disbelief. His soul cringed as he felt the unforgiving powers of the warp withdraw their favour from him. Senses dimming, he heard a screaming sound, faint at first and then growing in intensity. For a moment, he thought that it might be the Gods of Chaos themselves, bellowing forth their rage at his failure, but then, in a last lucid thought, he recognised it for what it truly was and realised then that his failure was now complete.

It was the screaming of shuttle engines coming in to land in the square outside.

THE ARBITES EAGLE craft flew low over the cathedral square, sending missiles streaking into the cultist artillery positions in the buildings around the edge of the square, the turret gunners sweeping clear the landing zone with fire. As they came into land, Arbitators leapt out even before they had settled, opening fire with their shotguns to pick off any stray targets that had escaped the turret gunners' attentions. Their champion fallen, their numbers decimated, the remaining cultists fled into the ruins of the burning city, there to await in terror the coming doom that was now only minutes away.

With the landing area secured, the shuttle from the *Macharius* came to rest amidst a roar of lifting thrusters. From it emerged Byzantane and Kyogen, the former quickly linking up with the Arbites troops from the *Inviolable Retribution*, the latter taking charge of the armsmen detail that descended from the interior of the troop shuttle. Kyogen looked dispassionately around him at the scene of destruction that was the battle-ravaged cathedral square. 'Find the captain,' he commanded the armsmen from the *Macharius*. 'We do not leave this place until you have.'

INSIDE THE CATHEDRAL, Semper staggered to his feet. Nearby, Maxim, groggy from the blow he had received from the Chaos warrior, did likewise. Caparan too had survived the attack, although Ko had not been so fortunate. The tech-priest's fused and

blackened remains lay amongst the other human wreckage left in the wake of the heretic commander's daemon fire attack. 'Shuttles, sir. Imperial shuttles!' grinned Maxim, seeing the activity in the square outside. 'Volkk forgive me, but I've never been so glad to see the eagle crests of one of those Arbitrator bastards in all my life.'

Semper ignored him. Incredibly, Devane was still alive. The captain bent down over the preacher, kneeling in the thick pool of blood that spilled out from his chest and the stump of his severed arm. Retrieving Devane's power sword, Semper pressed it into the dying man's hand. 'Better that you keep hold of it,' coughed Devane. 'I won't be needing it any more, and you'll need something better than one of those fancy, brittle-bladed pigstickers you navy types like to call a sword.'

Heavy-booted feet pounded up the hallway towards him, voices called out the captain's name. Semper ignored them, refusing to let go of the dying man's hand. He followed Devane's glance, seeing the huddled mass of humanity sheltering in the gloom of the cathedral hall behind them. Of the thousands of pilgrims who had flocked to the cathedral for sanctuary, only a fraction now remained. Women and children, mostly. The families of the frateris militia who had laid down their lives to defend the Emperor's house from the defiling presence of the heretic horde.

'Save them,' implored Devane, his voice a fading whisper. 'Don't let all this have been in vain. They are what we fight to preserve. They are the Emperor's children, more important than any number of Adeptus servants or blueblood aristocrats, more valuable than anything carried away in the holds of those transports. They are the best part of this world. They cannot die along with the rest of it.'

Semper nodded, clutching Devane's hand, feeling the preacher's grip slacken as the life slipped out of him. Hands tugged at Semper, trying to draw him away. 'Captain, we must go. We are almost out of time,' implored a petty officer. Only after he was sure that the preacher was dead did Semper let go of Devane's hand. Standing up, he issued a command to the waiting armsmen. 'See to the civilians, petty officer. Women and children first. Have your men carry aboard the shuttles any of the wounded that the Sororitas sisters say still have a chance of surviving.'

The armsman visibly gawped at the orders he had been given. 'Sir, we don't have the space for all these extra passengers. And there's not enough time—'

'Then make space,' snapped Semper. 'Empty the cargo compartments. Jettison whatever you have to, but make no mistake, petty officer, we do not leave this place until every one of these people who still has a chance of life is aboard those shuttles.'

BYZANTANE LOOKED DOWN at the governor-regent, staring into the corpse's still open eyes, the look of horrified disbelief there still evident even through the tortured rictus grin expression that his facial muscles had contorted into, a side-effect of the deadly venom that had killed him. The corpse was still fresh, and Byzantane realised that they had probably missed the traitor by only a few minutes.

It had been the Lady Malissa all along, Byzantane now knew. Kale had been her dupe and lover accomplice. Possibly Brod too. She had probably played the two men off against each other, using their jealousy to blind them to the truth of what she was making them do. Maybe at first, they thought they were involved in plotting a relatively bloodless coup, taking advantage of the larger events happening elsewhere in the Gothic sector to overthrow Imperium rule on Belatis. The Lady Malissa would be installed on the throne in place of her brother, and she had probably promised to each of them that they would be made her consort. And each man would have secretly believed that he would be able to rule as consort, ruling through the Lady Malissa just as she had effectively ruled through her brother. Probably she had promised them that a deal could be brokered with the forces of the Despoiler, assuring Belatis's loyalty to the new masters of the Gothic sector.

It was only later that they must have realised the extent of her treachery and ambition, but by that time, it would have been already too late, and they had both cravenly sought to save their own skins during the evacuation rather than undo any of the damage they had wrought.

Byzantane felt a sense of failure overwhelm him. He would order a search for her amongst the refugees still crowding the cathedral hall, even though she was almost certainly no longer within his reach. The heretics had concentrated their attack on the cathedral's main entrance, but there were other, more secret, ways in and out of the Ecclesiarchy building. Byzantane had no doubt that, if they had time to search long enough, they would find the frateris guards at one such exit lying slain.

Again, the architect of Belatis's destruction had escaped final justice.

MALISSA CROUCHED IN the ruins, watching as the last of the shuttles took off from the square, carrying away their precious naval commander and that rabble of religious zealots to supposed safety. It had finally stopped raining - the wretched monsoon season was another thing that she would not miss about her backwater homeworld - and the skies had even cleared a little. She could see new stars in the sky, stars which she knew must be the Chaos warships arriving to take up position. One of the stars glowed a dull, ominous red. With a thrill of fear, she realised that it must be the Planet Killer itself. She smiled to herself: there was little to no chance that those fools aboard the shuttles would escape now, not with so many of the Despoiler's warships now filling space around Belatis.

She knew that her own time was short, but there were still many cultists amongst the surrounding ruins. Once she made it clear to them who she was, they would swiftly give her safe conduct to the Faceless One, who would then take her off-world with him before the Planet Killer was unleashed. There were many risks, she knew, but she was still confident that this last-ditch plan would succeed.

In the darkness nearby, something shifted amongst the rubble, hissing angrily at her.

She reached for the bolt pistol that she had lifted from one of the Ecclesiarch adepts guarding the crypt tunnel along which she had made her escape, but her attacker was far swifter. Powerful reptilian jaws clamped round her gun-hand, crushing the bones in her wrist. A slick tentacle wrapped round her uthroat, choking off her scream. Something that felt like a giant, bristle-haired spider's leg brushed against her face, and a fanged mouth on the end of a probing tendril bit experimentally into the flesh of her cheek.

Khoisan had not died from the wound Semper had inflicted on him, although, had he any sentience left, the Chaos champion might wish he had. His retreating followers had carried him off into the rabble, abandoning him there in terror as the changes - terrifyingly rapid in their onset - began to manifest themselves out of their master's body. Denying him ascent to daemonhood, the powers of the warp had instead condemned Khoisan to the fate reserved for those who failed in their service to the Gods of Chaos. Khoisan's inhuman flesh had rebelled against him, shifting and splitting into terrible new forms, transforming him into a crawling, mewling, blind-eyed horror - a Chaos spawn-thing, a warp-born abomination given mindless physical form.

Locked in screaming, struggling embrace, the Chaos champion and the traitor who had carried out his every bidding were united together at last under the shadow of the Planet Killer, their deaths only minutes away. For both of them, those deaths could not now come soon enough.

## SEVEN

ULANTI NO LONGER needed the long-range surveyor screens to monitor the progress of the Planet Killer fleet. Through the enhanced opticon systems incorporated into the command deck's viewing bays, he could actually see the constellations of enemy warships as they took up position near Belatis, hovering in space over the doomed world like carrion birds circling in wait above a dying animal. At their heart was the Planet Killer itself, and Ulanti studied the vessel's exotic shape and configuration in appalled wonder, marvelling as he tried to estimate the details of its construction and capabilities.

It looked like no other kind of vessel he had ever seen before, the massive needle-spindles of its main weapon array thrusting out from a central hub that itself bristled with gun batteries, torpedo tubes and lance turrets; even without its main armament, the Planet Killer still possessed a truly formidable amount of firepower. Crackling bursts of energy leapt between the tips of the so-called armageddon gun's projection barrels or spun blazing off in spectacular displays of energy discharge from giant capacitors and other structural features, the purpose of which Ulanti could only guess at. He noticed too that the surrounding enemy ships kept a wary distance from the vessel they were supposed to be protecting; unfocussed and uncontrolled, any one of these random energy discharges could rip through a capital ship's void shields or completely destroy a smaller escort class vessel.

It was a terrifying craft, its very existence a threat to the order of the Imperium, Ulanti thought. He could well believe the whispered rumours that the details of its construction and estimated power requirements could not be easily explained by any normal technical means; that the powers of the warp themselves must have had a hand in its creation and operation. Even as the flag-lieutenant watched, he knew that Magos Castaboras and a small army of tech-priest fabricators and lexmechanics were also studying the Despoiler's flagship vessel. This was the closest that any Imperial ship had ever come to the Planet Killer, and the data gathered by the *Macharius* would be eagerly dissected by the naval tacticians and senior Adeptus Mechanicus magi at Battlefleet Command.

Assuming we actually survive the next hour or so, thought Ulanti, seeing the viper-prow shapes of several enemy cruisers descending fast on the *Macharius*, accompanied by a pack of smaller escort vessels. Magnified by the viewing bay opticon, he saw the launch bays of one of the Chaos ships - one of the dreaded Styx class heavy carrier cruisers - yawn open and spit out a stream of attack craft.

'Three cruisers,' confirmed Officer of the Watch Broton Styre. 'That big Styx class devil is the *Scylla*. The other two are the *Kali* and the *Virulent*, both standard Slaughter class vessels.'

'The *Virulent*, an old friend from the battle of Helia,' noted Nyder.

'And apparently keen on renewing our acquaintance,' added Ulanti, dryly.

The bridge surveyor screens showed the *Virulent* breaking away from the Chaos line of battle, swinging in close to Belatis, using the planet's gravitational field to slingshot itself at speed towards the *Macharius*. And, beyond this forward line of cruisers was the main Chaos fleet, containing not least the Planet Killer itself. The *Macharius* and the *Arbites* ship may have won the earlier skirmish, but they would be annihilated by the forces now closing in on them if they remained here much longer, a fact which everyone on the command deck was all too well aware of.

'Mister Nyder?'

The master of ordnance didn't have to ask what Ulanti's query was referring to. 'The shuttles are in the air. They'll be back on aboard within the next twenty minutes.' He broke off, glancing at the nearing target icons of the enemy ships still crowding toward them. 'It's going to be close, though, especially with those carrier ships of theirs out there too.'

'We stay in position until the shuttles are aboard. Launch everything we have,' ordered Ulanti, knowing as well as Nyder that his orders would cost the lives of many of the *Macharius*'s attack craft crews.

Nyder nodded in assent as he gave the necessary orders. In seconds, the first of the *Macharius*'s entire attack craft capability would be launched and space-borne. How many of them would return to the carrier ship afterwards, though, would be a different matter entirely.

KAETHER BANKED STEEPLY away, charging all available power through to his forward shields as another enemy Swiftdeath fighter blazed through space towards him. He stabbed at the firing triggers just as his Chaos counterpart did the same. Streams of multi-hued laser energy criss-crossed past each other in the void, impacting against defence shields, striking through to shatter plated hull armour. At the last second, Kaether barrel-rolled his fighter aside, barely avoiding a head-on collision with the Swiftdeath, ignoring the flashing warning runes on his instrumentation panel as he brought the Fury round in a tight looping manoeuvre to bring it fast in on his opponent's tail.

The Swiftdeath streaked on ahead towards the bomber formation, its path marked by the energy bleed from its raptured power systems and the glowing trail of laser-melted armour pieces still fragmenting away from it. Kaether locked in on the enemy

fighter, sending a krak missile winging along the same well-marked trail. Moments later, he was rewarded with the sight of the Swiftdeath exploding apart, just seconds before it came within launch range of the Starhawk formation.

Kaether turned away again, feeling the Fury's sluggish response to his control instructions. 'Tell me what I don't want to hear, Manetho,' he spoke through to the Fury's other crewman occupying the navigator's turret gunner position in the cockpit behind him. 'The power packs feeding the starboard wing lascannons have been shot away. We're bleeding energy, but it's not as bad as it looks. I can re-route and draw power from the main engines or the defence shields, although neither of these options does much to increase our long-term chances of ever seeing the *Macharius* again. Also, there's not enough armour plating left in places along our forward fuselage to stop a shot from an underpowered laspistol. Other than that, we're in fine shape.'

Kaether smiled. For a servant of the Machine God, Manetho sounded almost human sometimes. He keyed up the tactical display on his auspex screen, studying the information it conveyed. They were through the enemy's forward fighter screen, with combined losses to *Storm* and *Hornet* squadrons of nine Furies against fourteen confirmed enemy kills, while the jubilant Starhawk turret gunners were reporting another three Swiftdeaths destroyed. The Starhawks were closing on their designated targets - a squadron of enemy destroyers - but there was also the far more threatening prospect of that Slaughter class cruiser now rapidly moving forward towards the *Macharius*.

Several thousand kilometres away, a large group of Swiftdeaths was speeding towards the two Imperial warships. Kaether studied their changing surveyor patterns, suspecting that they were oscillating their energy outputs, attempting to disguise the presence of larger, more powerful Doomfire bombers within their formation. Then, even as he watched, the formation split apart into three separate waves. One group continued on towards the *Macharius* and the Arbites vessel, the tell-tale blips of missile-laden Doomfires now clearly registering amongst them. The second wave - all fighters - moved off to attack *Tornado* squadron, which was escorting the highly vulnerable shuttle formation back to the *Macharius*. The remaining fighter group peeled away on a clear intercept path towards the Starhawk attack that Kaether and his squadron were protecting.

Kaether cursed, opening up a comm-channel to his counterpart in *Hornet* squadron. '*Storm Leader* to *Hornet Leader*,' he began. 'We see them, *Storm*,' came the reply. 'You deal with them. We'll accompany our friends here the rest of the way and lead them in on their targets.'

'Understood, *Hornet*. Dice you for the mission honours back aboard ship,' said Kaether, signing off with the Fury pilot's traditional and well-worn good luck joke, both of them knowing the probable truth of the matter. *Hornet Leader* and his squadron would be leading the attack on the Chaos ships, drawing the murderous hail of anti-ordnance fire onto themselves and away from the more vulnerable bombers.

Not that our survival chances seem any better, thought Kaether, seeing the number of Swiftdeath fighter icons multiply across his target screen as the two fighter formations sped towards each other. There were ten Furies left in his squadron, several of them, his own included, already damaged. Facing them was an enemy fighter wave twice as numerous, their weapons and power systems still fully charged.

Vandire's teeth, cursed Kaether. Where was that damned maniac Zane when you really needed him?

ZANE BACKED WARILY up the passageway, clutching his laspistol, trying to get a fix on the angry hissing of the daemon-thing as it searched for him through the steamy gloom of the generarium sub-chamber. It seemed like hours, not, in reality, a few scant minutes, since he had heard that terrible, continuous screaming down the ducts towards him, drowning out the distant rumbling sound of the ship's gun batteries. Hours, not scant minutes since he had finally exited the maze of pipes and ducts that ran through the guts of the ship, dropping down onto the corpse-strewn deck of the generarium sub-chamber beyond, seeing smashed machinery, the bodies of engineers, servitors and tech-priests gleefully ripped apart.

Hours, not scant minutes, since he that began his battle with the putrescent daemon-thing that had found its way to this place. Zane did not understand the purpose of this chamber or the strange and unfamiliar machinery that it contained, but he knew that it was somehow vital to the operation of the ship, to the massive plasma reactors rumbling with barely-contained energy just a deck or two above his head. The creature had been busy in the short time since it had arrived, smashing and tearing apart machinery, power conduits and rune panels with the same ease it had rent apart the bodies of the chamber's tech-crew occupants. Warning chimes sounded in alert at the destruction caused by the creature's rampage, but they were lost amongst the cacophony of alarms and battle chimes now sounding elsewhere all through the vessel. What difference one more alarm, one more urgently flashing warning rune on an instrumentation panel somewhere on the command deck many levels above? Zane knew that no one else would come to help him, that the task of saving the ship, of preventing the daemon-thing from completing its destructive work fell, to him alone.

He did not know how this monstrous, rancid-fleshed abomination had come aboard the ship, but he knew it for what it was: the Malign, the Daemonic, the Great Foe that he had dedicated his life in service to the Emperor to opposing. Without hesitation, he had raised his laspistol and fired. The las-bolt had seared away most of the creature's face. It had turned, hissing in rage, flesh swarming almost instantly across the deformed surface of its skull to cover the wound. Zane had fired several more shots, dangerously depleting the scaled-down weapon's limited charge capacity. He knew that the shots would do little to injure the thing, but he was satisfied that they had achieved their intended purpose.

Distracted and angered, the creature had broken off from its appointed mission of destruction, pursuing Zane into the honeycombed maze of machinery and pipeways that spun off from the central sub-chamber.

Now it was hunting him through the place. Zane could sense it somewhere close nearby, sense the living taint of the thing souring the air around it. He saw a faint, familiar glow of light around the corner of the passageway ahead of him and ran towards it, drawing the creature after him. He blindly fired the laspistol behind him as he ran, drawing more angry hisses from the pursuing daemon-thing. He rounded the corner, seeing the ghostly aftermath of the light fade away, seeing only the bulkhead wall dead end at the end of the short passageway.

It was hot in the passageway, condensation forming from the thick, humid atmosphere, drops of water falling hissing onto the thick power conduit pipes that ran along the passage, disappearing through the bulkhead wall. Whatever damage the creature had done back in the main chamber, it had spread at least this far. The metal of the pipes glowed with heat, burning away the heat-resistant protective material that surrounded them.

Zane turned, seeing the daemon-thing gallop round the corner behind him, mercilessly bearing down on him. He barely had time to set his laspistol to full charge, raising and firing it not at the creature now almost upon him, but into the weak, heat-softened metal of one of the nearby pipeways.

The pipe split open with a screaming gush, filling the passageway with fire, enveloping Zane and the creature in the pure, white light of burning plasma. In that split-second before the blinding brilliance wiped away his sight, Zane beheld the glowing-armoured figure of the warrior angel in amongst the roaring light, her arms held open towards him in welcome. Zane gladly let the light consume him, bringing him into her embrace.

MANY DECKS ABOVE, on the bridge of the ship, a low-ranking logistician tech-priest - just one of hundreds connected into the *Macharius's* ancient and mighty logic engines and monitoring the non-stop passage of information through the ship's arcane machine-mind - detected damage to one of the generarium sub-levels. It was a relatively minor problem affecting the area responsible for regulating the flow of residue energy from the ship's plasma reactors, pipes that carried away the gaseous waste from the generarium and emptied it out into space from bleed-vents along the ship's hull. One of the pipes had fractured, although the fire appeared to have quickly burned itself out, the ship's auto-systems already closing down those pipeways and diverting the waste gas away to another bleed-vent. There had also been signs of potentially far more serious malfunctions in a nearby generarium sub-chamber controlling the flow of power to the void shield generator capacitors, but these too seemed to have somehow been contained.

The logistician routinely catalogued the information, adding it to the growing list of damage reports coming in from all over the ship as it came within range of the advancing Chaos fleets gun batteries and attack craft squadrons.

Neither incident had inflicted any serious, lasting damage on the ship or its operations, and both were deemed non-critical.

Only when the battle was over, and other more urgent repairs had been dealt with, would there be time to investigate and make good the damage in these two areas.

THE CONVOY OF shuttles ran the gauntlet up out of the planet's gravity well, gratefully falling into place amongst the lines of Fury Interceptors that formed up to escort it. From the cockpit of his Eagle craft, Byzantane beheld the spectacular sight of the battle now taking place in orbit above Belatis. Fiery shards of light glittered all through space. A myriad of minor explosions and las-blasts, evidence of the dozens of different duels taking place between dog-fighting Imperium and renegade attack craft. Ahead were the reassuring and imposing shapes of the *Macharius* and the *Inviolable Retribution*, their void shields flaring with burst after burst of angry light as they came under intensive fire from the vanguard of the Chaos fleet. The gun batteries of both vessels spoke back in reply, and the Chaos warships, clearly mindful of the fate of the *Charybdis*, were keeping a wary distance, out of range of the *Retribution's* bombardment cannons, but it was obvious to Byzantane that neither ship could sustain such punishment for very much longer.

One of the sleek, flat-hulled Chaos cruisers surged forward ahead of the others. Swarms of firefly lights - Starhawk attack craft, Byzantane realised, dwarfed against the gargantuan bulk of their target - flitted around it, pouring light-streams of missile volleys into it. Clouds of burning internal atmosphere gases billowed from a dozen places in the Chaos ship's hull where the bomber attacks had blasted through its armour, but the giant cruiser continued onwards, its defence turrets spitting in irritation at the bomber specks still buzzing round it, its forward lance armaments lashing out at the *Macharius*.

Without warning, one of the shuttles in front of Byzantane's exploded apart, struck by a blast of las-fire from a marauding Swiftdeath that had broken through the line of Fury escorts. Two Furies darted past in pursuit, aptly living up to their name as they vengefully blew the enemy apart in a torrent of las-fire.

'Message from the *Retribution*, marshal,' reported the shuttle's Arbitrator co-pilot. 'Its landing bays have been struck and are out of action. We are directed to dock with the *Macharius* instead.'

Byzantane nodded without word. As a senior lawkeeper of the Adeptus Arbites, he had commanded armies of Arbitrators, had crashed rebellions and uprisings on a planetary scale, but here and now he felt powerless and insignificant in contrast to the scale of the battle going on around him. This was a level of destruction almost unimaginable in its intensity: men and machines pitted against each other in the harsh and unforgiving void of space, where entire vessels - and the lives of their many thousands of crew - could be swept away in seconds, without any mercy or warning.

The Fury escorts suddenly peeled away from the shuttle convoy, leaving it vulnerable and exposed. Byzantane flinched as explosions and las-blasts filled the void around them, assuming at first that they were under attack again from more enemy fighters, realizing a second later that this was their own covering fire, the defence turrets of the *Macharius* throwing out a corridor of covering fire - much of it passing terrifyingly close to the incoming shuttle craft - to protect the shuttles from enemy fighter attack.

The pitted metal escarpment of the *Macharius's* hull loomed large in front of the cockpit window, growing in immensity every second as they sped towards it. The Eagle pilot fired braking thrusters, but - to Byzantane's eyes, at least - they were still coming in alarmingly fast, heading into the gaping maw of one of the gloomily-lit metal caverns that was actually the open entrance to one of the ship's launch bays. The shuttle shuddered, wildly pitching forward for a second, as it passed through the mouth of the launch bay, ancient suspension fields reaching out to catch it in their mysterious, invisible grasp, decelerating it and bringing it to an almost graceful stop as its pilot brought it under control and manoeuvred it into one of the many landing bay tunnels. Only when they had safely touched down in the landing bay did Byzantane begin to breathe easily again.

'*Macharius* bids you welcome,' said the voice of a flight deck controller over the cockpit's open comm-net, affecting the dry, stiff upper lip and slightly mocking tone characteristic of so many Imperial Navy personnel when dealing with the servants of the other branches of His Divine Majesty's martial forces. 'Good to have you aboard again, marshal.'

SEMPER HALF-RAN, half-staggered down the belly ramp of the shuttle, responding in kind to the smartly-executed salute of Officer of the Watch Styre, but little troubled by the lack of elaborate naval ritual that customarily greets a captain when coming aboard his own vessel. Judging by the rocky ride they had had on their way in here and the continuous, booming roar of the ship's guns, Ulanti probably had more pressing matters to attend to than laying on a guard of honour for his captain's arrival, thought Semper, with dour humour.

'What orders, captain?'

'To the bridge,' answered Semper, instantly reassuming the mantle of naval command once more. 'Convey my orders ahead of us to Mister Ulanti. Tell him to recall all attack craft and disengage from battle without further delay.'

Semper looked around him, remembering his promise to a dying man, seeing the stream of pilgrim refugees, many of them wounded and malnourished, now exiting from the other shuttle craft. 'The chief petty officer will accompany me to the command deck. Remain here and attend to these people's needs. Make sure they receive whatever food, accommodation and medical aid they need.'

'The chief petty officer?' queried Styre, looking amongst the armsmen and crewmen for anyone of that rank. He stared in frank disbelief as Semper indicated the scarred, tattooed figure of the giant hiveworlder beside him.

'Chief Petty Officer Borusa,' snapped Semper. 'More men like him, and we might even stand a chance of winning this damn war. My congratulations, chief petty officer. We'll attend to the official rituals of your promotion and possibly some kind of decoration when we can, assuming we're not blown to oblivion in the immediate future.'

'If you say so, sir,' grinned Maxim. Promotion to junior officer rank and a medal, just as that hive-witch had prophesied. Battlefleet Gothic may not yet be winning this conflict, but Maxim Borusa was having himself a splendid war so far.

ULANTI WATCHED ANXIOUSLY as the remnants of the *Macharius's* attack craft squadrons returned to the safety of the launch bays. They had acquitted themselves well, driving off the enemy fighter attacks on the shuttle convoy, intercepting a bomber attack aimed at the *Macharius* and, in return, crippling or forcing into retreat two Idolator escorts and subjecting the still-oncoming *Virulent* to relentless missile bombardment, but all this had only been achieved at great cost to their own numbers, and he knew that Nyder and his staff were keeping a grim tally count of the mounting losses as each squadron returned to the ship. "Paying the butcher's bill" was the famous quip used by Lord Admiral Ravensburg for the task of counting battle losses, but Ulanti, in his first action in full command of a warship, felt none of the morbid elation inherent in the Lord Admiral's flippant words.

'What is the word on Captain Semper?'

'Still en route to the command deck,' answered a junior officer, his reply suddenly drowned out by a shout from a surveyor section crewman. 'Enemy attack craft squadrons are disengaging... The escorts and capital class warships, too. Emperor's oath! They're all on the retreat!'

Ulanti looked for himself, scarcely able to believe what he saw. Both the *Macharius* and the *Retribution* had been taking a pounding, and he had only expected that pounding to increase in intensity as they began the near-impossible task of trying to successfully disengage from the Chaos attack. Now, instead of pressing on with their attack on vulnerable, retreating targets, the Chaos ships were retreating, turning away and moving at increasing speed away from the planet and the Imperial vessels. Suddenly, even as the second shout came from the surveyor section area of the bridge, Ulanti realised with a sense of sickening dread what it was that had caused the Chaos ships to break off from battle on the point of victory.

'Power spike! Throne of Earth, the readings are right off the scale... The Planet Killer, it's opening fire on Belatis!'

IN A TORRENT of energy that overwhelmed ships' surveyor senses and transformed hundreds of tactical screens into blank-faced displays of howling static, the Planet Killer unleashed its power on the world below. A roaring storm of destruction descended on Belatis, passing through the atmosphere and increasing the temperature there a hundredfold in seconds, partially igniting it in a fiery borealis that swept out across the circumference of the planet.

The energy blast struck the planet's largest ocean on its eastern hemisphere some two thousand kilometres south-west of Madina, sending up a huge cloud of steam clearly visible from space as millions of tonnes of sea water were instantly vaporised, boiling away into the burning, super-heated atmosphere. The blast struck and cracked open the ocean bed, unleashing a super-tsunami tidal wave over three kilometres in height which would drown the two nearest continents and island chains and compete with the fiery borealis overhead in its race round the globe.

The Planet Killer's gunnery priests had not chosen this spot on the surface at random. Surveyor scans of the planet's geologic structure and daemon-voiced augurs had guided their aim. The planetary crust was weak and unstable here and the all-consuming energy beam ripped it asunder, setting off a series of cataclysmic underwater earthquakes, igniting chains of long dormant volcanoes into fiery, explosive life and causing new ones to thrust up through the splintering, broken crust. The seismic Shockwaves rippled through the core of the planet, setting off disasters on the far side of Belatis long before the tsunami or firestorm would reach the continents there.

And, all the time, the Planet Killer kept firing into an open wound now almost a hundred kilometres across in the planet's crust, the coruscating lance of otherworldly energy burning a hole deep into the planetary core, bursting open the planet's molten heart. In Madina, crouching there in the ruins, the scattered followers of Khoisan the Faceless looked up in terrified incomprehension as the distant horizon lit up with what looked like the light of a second dawning sun. The light grew in intensity, and the horizon slowly turned into a line of creeping fire. There was a dull rumbling sound from the ground beneath their feet, gradually but surely

growing in volume, and then the rains around them started to tumble down on their heads. Many prayed to the dark Gods of Chaos to save them. Others recanted and instead begged the Emperor for forgiveness. If any gods were listening, they gave no answer.

BARELY TWENTY MINUTES after the Planet Killer first opened fire, Belatis exploded apart. Aboard the triumphant vessel, the gunnery priests held a service of thanksgiving, sacrificing five hundred specially chosen slaves to feed the hungry demands of the daemon spirits bound into the workings of the armageddon gun.

Word came down to them that the Despoiler was pleased with their efforts. To date, the destruction of Belatis was by far the Planet Killer's most successful operation. The gunnery priests sacrificed another hundred slaves in celebration of the Warmaster's approval, reading the future in the dissected entrails of the bound and still-living sacrifices. The auguries were good, they murmured amongst themselves. There would be many more worlds yet that would see the shadow of the Planet Killer fall upon them before the Gothic Sector War was over.

## EIGHT

THE *VIRULENT* WEATHERED the storm of the planet's destruction, riding out the violent waves of gravitational flux as Belatis broke apart. Jets of flaming magma splashed against its void shields, hails of burning meteors smashed off its hull, adding further to the damage caused by the armour-piercing missiles of the Starhawk bombers that had attacked the Chaos cruiser.

'Take it away,' slurred Bulus Sirl, pointing with a deformed, leprous hand at the broken remains of his second-in-command now staining the deck of his vessel's bridge. Two Plague Marines moved wordlessly forward to drag the corpse away. Sirl glared in contemptuous challenge at his command crew, daring any of them to add to the former second-in-command's querulous objections to Sirl's current course of action.

'The Grandfather is with us,' Sirl told them. 'He watches over us, bidding us to carry out his holy work while the servants of the other, lesser powers cower in abeyance behind us, fearing the wrath of the Warmaster.'

He pointed to the view out the command deck's filth-encrusted viewing bays. While the rest of the Chaos fleet had withdrawn to cringe in the shadow of the Planet Killer, only the *Virulent* had carried on in pursuit of the retreating Imperial ships, its surging course carrying it recklessly through the rain of debris from the exploding planet. By the grace of the Grandfather, they had ridden out the worst of the storm, as burning planetary shards many tens of kilometres across spun past them, as the stress of the planet's collapsing gravitational field threatened to tear the cruiser apart. Now only the clear darkness of open space showed ahead of them. 'See? Did I not say that the Plague Lord watches over us. He has carried us safely through the maelstrom, and now at last we will deliver his vengeance on the destroyer of our sister vessel *Contagion*'.

Ahead of the *Virulent* were the twin light specks of the two Imperium vessels, both of them damaged, both of them retreating at full speed away from the Planet Killer fleet. The captains of the other Chaos vessels - craven lackeys of the Warmaster, every one of them - showed little inclination to pursue the two escaping enemy vessels; nor, in truth, did Sirl want them to. The destruction of the *Macharius* was his by rights alone. Damaged as it was, the *Virulent* could still outrun the *Macharius*, the Slaughter class cruiser's superior engine array design pushing it forward at speed and rapidly closing the gap between it and the two limping enemy ships. It was a pity that his plague-child aboard the *Macharius* had been unable to complete its task, but its failure and subsequent death would make no difference to the final outcome now.

'Arm forward lances,' he hissed, settling his vast, vile bulk back into the bone-sculpted armature of his command throne.

'Commence firing as soon as target is in range.'

SEMPER CURSED AS the *Macharius* shook under the impact of another damaging strike to its rear.

'Engine Quintus has suffered a disabling strike to its coolant coils. Main drive now operating at sixty-two per cent capacity,' reported the infuriatingly calm voice of a servitor, uncaring that it was announcing the *Macharius's* slow but almost surely certain destruction.

Semper shared a glance with Ulant, both of them facing the same harsh truths. That damned Slaughter class cruiser had come through hell and high water to pursue them and was still closing, sending blast after blast of weapons fire into the *Macharius's* engine array. At this rate, the ship's main drive systems would be crippled in a matter of minutes. Both the *Macharius* and the *Inviolable Retribution* were in the same desperate straits. If they continued on, they would be destroyed, unable to outrun the faster Chaos vessel, unable to withstand many more strikes into their vulnerable stern sections. If they turned to face their attacker, they would almost certainly still be destroyed, presenting themselves to the massed fire not only from the *Virulent's* prow armaments but also from its formidable side-mounted batteries as they manoeuvred round in a ponderous turning circle. Both Imperium vessels had already taken serious damage in the recently-ended engagement with the Chaos fleet. The *Retribution's* entire starboard gundecks had been gutted by fire, the *Macharius* had no attack craft capability left to launch as the surviving remnants of its Starhawk and Fury squadrons. No, Semper realised, there would be little chance of surviving another battle at present.

'Captain?' prompted Ulant, knowing that a command decision was called for.

'Prepare to come about, Mister Ulant. According to the damage reports, we've still got a few gundecks operating on the starboard side, so we'll favour our enemy with that side as we turn. Signal the *Retribution*. Thank her for her companionship and tell her to keep on making for the system's edge. No sense in us both going down here, and we'll buy her time to make her safe escape. That Slaughter class seems to be solely gunning for us, anyway.'

Ulant nodded wordlessly and turned away to give the necessary orders, only to be interrupted by a shout from the surveyor section.

'New surveyor contact appearing ahead of us. A warship. It's powering up weapons and drive systems!'

'Identify!' barked Semper, angry that he had fallen into a Chaos trap. Somehow, another enemy vessel had outflanked them, cutting off their retreat. Now even the *Arbiters* ship would be unable to escape to the system's edge.

'Welcome back, *Macharius*. Good to have you amongst us again,' rasped the voice of Erwin Ramas over an open, ship-to-ship comm-channel.

ITS SYSTEMS POWERED down so as to render it invisible to surveyor senses, the *Drachenfels* had lain patiently in wait for its prey. Now, at last, its patience had finally paid off. Powering up, it surged forward towards its target, closing on it with near reckless abandon.

'Lock on,' reported the Gothic class cruiser's master of ordnance.

'Launch torpedoes. Close spread,' came the reply from the occupant of the armoured strategium sanctum.

The torpedoes blazed towards their target, passing between the *Macharius* and the *Retribution* in a bravura show of marksmanship. Aboard the *Virulent*, Sirl was still trying to absorb the surprise of the Imperial cruiser's sudden appearance when the command deck alarms screamed in warning as the torpedoes' lock-on signals bounced off the hull of their target. Knowing that the *Macharius* could not launch any more bomber squadrons and needing to urgently replace crew losses elsewhere, Sirl had drawn heavily on the crews of his ship's defence turrets. Now, all over the *Virulent*, caught by surprise by the torpedo attack, men and other, lesser, tilings scrambled to crew the undermanned turret defences.

Whatever defensive fire they could throw up around the ship would be too little, too late.

The *Virulent's* prow exploded apart. One of the torpedoes struck the command tower, blowing away the top of it. The ship's engines stuttered and died as power feeds ruptured open, sweeping the main hull's internal compartments with a burning flood of energy, immolating the greater part of the ship's crew.

Dying and powerless, the *Virulent* blindly tumbled away through space, falling into the gravitational pull of the remains of Belatis. There, it would be either mercifully smashed apart in collision with any of the massive, continent-sized planetoid fragments or would drift forever amongst the rest of the detritus of the planet's destruction.

Trapped amongst the smashed wreckage of the bridge, his plague-swollen body gruesomely burst open by the effects of explosive decompression as the torpedo detonation ripped apart the *Virulent's* command tower, Bulus Sirl remained hideously alive by virtue of his Chaos-altered form. He could survive for months, he knew, his body feeding off the plagues that would hatch out amongst his ruined flesh. Bile bubbled from his lips as he soundlessly mouthed words into the cold vacuum, praying to Grandfather Nurgle to bring him swift and merciful deliverance. If the Plague Lord was listening, he gave no answer.

HOURS LATER, ABOARD the *Macharius*, damage control teams attended to the aftermath of battle, conducting whatever makeshift repairs were necessary, giving what aid they could to the wounded and clearing up the dead. Stacked in heaps in airlock holds, the best the dead could hope for was a hurried prayer from a ship's preacher before they were flushed out into space along with all the other unusable wreckage of battle.

Now a work crew of naval ratings methodically sifted through the crematorium scene inside one of the generarium sub-levels. The rest of this part of the ship had been untouched by the battle, but it was not the task of men such as these to wonder why this chamber alone had been swept clean by fire.

'Over here!' shouted one of the ratings, bending over one of the fire-blackened corpses that filled the floor of the chamber. 'There's one of them still alive!'

His companion looked down in disbelief at the figure huddled on the ground. The man's face and hair were gone, and he wore the charred remains of what looked surprisingly like a flight suit which had been horribly heat-fused to his skin over much of his body. Like the man's face, any name and rank insignia on the suit had been burned away by the fire. Nearby was the twisted, fire-consumed remains of something else. Something organic - several bodies fused together, surely, for it was too large to be the remains of just one man. Unconsciously, instinctively, both men gave the blackened mass a wide berth.

Looking at the burned man's injuries, the second rating reached for the blade he kept tucked into his boot. 'Best to put him out of his misery now. He won't want to live, not looking like that, and those apothecary bastards don't care what happens to the ones that are messed up too bad to fix. They'll sling him into the airlock while he's still alive and flush him out along with all the other stiffs.'

'Leave him be,' commanded the other rating, gently taking the burned figure's raw-fleshed hand, bending down to speak gently into his ear. The rating had been raised a loyal, Emperor-fearing servant of the Imperium, and there was something about the dying man that struck a distant chord in him. 'It's alright, friend,' he reassured the faceless stranger. 'We'll get you to a surgeon. Emperor alone knows what you're doing down here, but we'll get you back to where you belong.'

The stranger groaned, trying to form words from a mouth reduced to a lipless hole. The rating leant in close, straining to listen to the burned man's mumbled words, then looked up in puzzlement at his companion.

'What did he say?' asked the other rating.

'Nonsense, mostly. Reckon he must be from the flight deck after all, maybe ground crew on one of the fighter squadrons. All he could say was something about avenging furies...'

MOVING IN FORMATION with the *Retribution* and the *Drachenfels*, the *Macharius* moved toward the jump point on the system's edge, homing in on the comm-net chatter of the convoy ahead. Before them was the darkness of interstellar space. Behind them was a fading red glow that marked where the world of Belatis had recently been. In time, the drifting remains of the planet would spread out to form an asteroid belt halo around the system's sun, and future generations of Imperial statisticians and map-makers would mark the planet as *Mundus Perdita*, a world now lost to the Imperium.

At the rear of the command deck, Semper, Ulanti and Byzantane stood together in silence, watching the residue of fading, burning light that had once been a world inhabited by several hundred million of the Emperor's subjects. Semper wore a fresh duty uniform in place of the filthy and bloodstained items that he had worn during his sojourn on the planet's surface. At his side, in place of the customary navy sabre, hung the heavy, scabbard-sheathed blade of an Imperial Guard power sword.

'A gift bequeathed to me by a brave and loyal servant of the Emperor,' he said in response to the querying look from Ulanti. 'I wear it in remembrance of him, and of the promise I made to him.'

Byzantane looked at the weapon, recognising it, and remembering the man whose hand he had last seen it in. 'What promise?' he asked, suspecting he already knew the answer, suspecting that he made a similar promise to the same man not so long ago.

Semper gazed out at the vista beyond, taking one last look at the funeral pyre glow of the ruins of Belatis as he signalled for the command deck blast shields to be lowered in preparation for their ascent into the warp.

'That we stop running away. That we stop giving up ground and innocent lives. That we finally turn and fight. From now on,' he grimly vowed, unconsciously laying one hand on the pommel of the sheathed sword, 'we take this war back the enemy.'

Byzantane and Ulanti nodded in silent agreement. Behind them, the blast shields grated down into place, removing from view the last traces of all that had been the world of Belatis.

## EPILOGUE

IN HIS HOLOGRAM chamber sanctum buried deep within the body of the Planet Killer, Abaddon the Despoiler watched in satisfaction as the projected image showed the last few burning asteroid embers of the now-vanished world of Belatis as they tumbled through space. The Despoiler was pleased, but the shimmering image displayed by the chamber was like a finely-carved gemstone that, under close inspection, revealed itself to be minutely flawed in some minor but ultimately displeasing way. The Despoiler turned his head, his attention drawn by something on the fringes of the star system. One of his lieutenants gestured in curt command, and the arcane device's tech-priest operators hurried to change the settings in search of whatever the Warmaster was looking for. The holo-image shifted and changed, tracking through the star system, eventually zeroing in on a group of vessel shapes now making their way towards a nearby jump point. Abaddon frowned in disquiet, his gaze passing over the Imperial convoy line. It displeased him that some of the servants of the false Emperor had defied him and managed to escape the ordained destruction of their world, but there was something more here.

His eyes passed once over the line of ships, stopping on one warship - an ungainly, battle-scarred carrier ship - near the rear of the formation. Again, the Despoiler felt a prescient disquiet, a whispering doubt that he had overlooked something potentially significant, but he angrily dispelled the notion. There was more - far more - at stake here than the fate of one miserable, straggling convoy, or even the destruction of an entire world.

'Show me,' commanded the Warmaster, and the image changed again, showing once more the glittering panoply of stars and planetary systems that was the rich prize of the Gothic sector. And, hidden within this grand vista, were the six true prizes that the Warmaster sought to capture. His eye picked them out one by one, his mind reciting their names to itself.

*Fularis.*

*Anvil 206.*

*Fier.*

*Rebo.*

*Schindlegeist.*

*Brigia.*

THE SIX BLACKSTONE systems, each home to one of the ancient and almost limitlessly powerful artefacts that the false Emperor's servants had, like a colony of insects or vermin building their nest inside the workings of a Titan war machine, turned into bases for their space fleets, little realising the true capabilities of the objects that they foolishly believed to be theirs by right.

Abaddon turned, sensing the approach of one of his lieutenants, the minion abasing himself in a pleasingly obsequious manner before the Despoiler. 'Warmaster, the fleet is regrouped and ready to be underway. We await your orders.'

Abaddon considered. This Planet Killer vessel had now achieved its intended purpose. Fear and confusion were rife amongst the ranks of the enemy. They waited in terror to see what world would next fall under the vessel's shadow, and, as they waited, they did not see or understand the greater purpose of it all. It was time now, the Warmaster realised, to reveal that purpose. It was time to take this war to a level of calamity and destruction as yet undreamt of by an enemy that did not realize what was truly at stake in this conflict. They fought to repel what they assumed was an invasion of the Gothic sector. He fought to seize the six prizes that would in turn deliver the entire Imperium of Mankind to the forces of Chaos.

'Rebo V,' he ordered. 'We make for the Blackstone Fortress at Rebo V.'

*Let the galaxy burn,* the Warmaster Horus had commanded. Soon, thought the Despoiler, so very soon.

*Gordon Rennie «Execution Hour»*

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IN THE GRIM DARKNESS OF THE FAR FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR!

# EXECUTION HOUR

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL BY GORDON RENNIE

