

WARHAMMER
40,000



Beneath the sands, something is stirring...

DESERT RAIDERS

Lucien Soulban

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

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To my mother, Pieretta Ramponi Soulban, who I miss daily: Thank you for believing that all abandoned shoes on the street belong to kidnap victims; for believing that the outstretched telephone cord you walked into that time was a garrotte. In short... thank you for your wild imagination.

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

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

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

PROLOGUE

There was, there was not...

'All tales spoken from Tallarn fathers to their sons, and mothers to their daughters, begin in this fashion. It is a way of saying that, by the Emperor's will, this story may or may not be true.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

There was, there was not...

2

THE TRANSMISSION FELL like a carelessly discarded blade from the heavens, straight into his naked brain. The astropath's muscles seized into hard cords, and his teeth snapped down, cracking the enamel. His skeletal hands gripped the cradle's iron grasp-bars, cutting flesh with rust, and he bucked against the leather straps holding him fast. There wasn't enough time to mouth a litany of protection or to will a psychic bulwark into place against the buckshot rain of thoughts. From the heavens, tonight, fell death, and visions of history undone and ghosts unmade.

The warning chimes rang and the lume-tubes in the alcove washed the psyker in an infernal red light. He saw none of it; heard none of it.

The psychic images slowed and then accelerated. They toppled and turned his mind inside out. He didn't understand the visions, but they crucified his senses: faces he did not know, voices he'd never heard, yet each intimately familiar as a sort of *deja vu*. In his mind, flesh unravelled and skin was spooled like string; mothers grieved over the bloodstained sand and stabbed each other in their lunatic grief; the foul miasma of discharged bowels, ozone and cordite filled the nostrils; a moon in the sky with eyes for craters drowned the stars with its black tears; an eagle caught in tar, struggled and dissolved.

The astropath screamed. He saw himself seeing himself seeing himself, *ad infinitum*, like two mirrors facing each other with him trapped in the middle, and within the infinite reflections. He saw himself dying between the razor-edged flashes of the transmission, strapped into the cradle, his death echoed endlessly.

A grey-robed tech-acolyte with the *Adeptus Astra Telepathica* ran down the narrow corridor with its exposed wiring and moisture weeping walls. He moved past the alcoves where astropaths sat in restraint bubble-cradles, up to the alcove marked "Socket 9:12" with its flashing red alarms. He checked the green-hued monitors that hung from the ceiling as the astropath struggled and bucked. On screen, his vitals sent out jagged peaks and troughs of activity. The echo-plasm box imprinted psychic visualisations that bled into one another and sent images into the *vist-immateria* plate. The fusillade of visions, however, came fast and hard, fusing the already grainy images into a horrid collage of blood and static.

The tech-acolyte quickly punched the button below the wall-vox. 'This is Tech-Acolyte Resalon on Providence Watch. Father Nuvosa, we—'

'I know,' the impatient, metallic voice replied. 'It's a mortis-cry, relayed through the *Torquadas Observium Array*. A nasty one at that.'

'The cogitator banks cannot process most of the images,' Resalon said. 'It's interpreting them as static. We're losing the sanctity of the vision.'

'Then filter it through the other astropaths. Let them pick it clean of chaff.'

'The Emperor's Will be done,' Resalon said.

He studied the astropath. The restraints cut into the psyker's flesh, but they were necessary so the astropath didn't pull free the filaments plugged into his spine and helmet. Blood dribbled in fat droplets from under the astropath's black *sens-dep* helmet, however, and although Resalon could not see through its poly-fibre surface, he imagined that the man's nostrils and eyes were bleeding freely. He briefly wondered if the *sens-dep* helmets weren't just designed to tune the world out, but to shield others from the horrors perceived by the psykers. Indeed, the other astropaths merely rested in their cradles, unaware that one of them was dying in agony.

Resalon opened the echo-plasm's control panel and drew out the red filament and tube bundle pinched with yellow parchment. He plugged the leads into the adjoining sockets and suddenly, four astropaths in their cradles seized and bucked against the mortis-cry.

'WHAT DO WE have?' Tech-Father Nuvosa demanded. His winnowed frame rested at the centre of the room, his body plugged into a circular dais. The lower half of his body had been surgically amputated years ago, the metallic sacrum of his reinforced spine the platform's socket that linked thought to the surrounding techno-artefacts. Slow-moving plates orbited him, each of them pulling streams of rune-code from the etherium.

Tech-Acolyte Resalon was pale, his eyes sunken. He wavered on his feet, but he handed the flims-pic to Nuvosa. It was part image, part x-ray. 'It's the only thing the cogitators could translate,' he said. 'Three astropaths dead... one we had to put down after he—' Resalon sighed. 'The vision's too corrupted by the psyker's death.'

Nuvosa studied the flims-pic. It was grainy... a tattered, blood-caked standard half-buried in sand among a sea of torn bodies. The shot caught the standard's frayed edges in mid-flutter. Upon it, the double-eagle crest of the Imperium.

'Where did the mortis-cry originate from?' Nuvosa asked.

'A desert world in the Barrases System... Khadar. It's in the underbelly of the galactic plane of the Ultima Segmentum. The transmission was an Imperium distress cry. The cogitators couldn't identify the astropath that sent it.'

Nuvosa's eyelids fluttered briefly as he accessed the Administratum's data-scrolls. The million-plus planet names were transmitted to the cerebra-ocular implant keyed into his occipital lobe. The names appeared only to Nuvosa, as scrolling ghostly runes. The search distilled it down to a thousand, a hundred, a dozen worlds, and finally to one. After a moment, his eyes shot up and he captured Resalon in his gaze.

'That's not possible,' Nuvosa said. 'Khadar's a desert planet, yes, but there's no Imperial presence there. It's not even settled. Khadar is uninhabited.'

CHAPTER ONE

'My tribe and I against outsiders, My brother and I against our tribe.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

DAY ZERO.

The fleet of small ships drifted in the pitch of stars and held formation on approach to the system's outer planet - a frozen ball of nitrogen and methane. Ribbons and spittle-threads floated around them, grey immaterium plasma ejected during the fleet's explosive birth at retranslation from Emyprean space.

Cruisers with gun-barrel bodies, frigates with flying ribbed buttresses, destroyers, transports and squadrons of patrolling Fury interceptors all orbited the heart of the fleet - the Defiant-class cruiser *Oberron's Flight* with its carbon scorched prow and eagle figurehead.

2

COMMISSAR REZAIL STOOD at the ornate lancet window of his small cabin aboard *Oberron's Flight* and soaked up the hum of the ship through his black boots. He stared out at the fleet, but could barely see the ships against the star scattered darkness. Only their blinking red and yellow beacons assured him of their presence.

'Attention.' The vox-box crackled, and a voice echoed through the ship's corridors. 'This is the officer of the watch. We're entering the Barrases System. We'll anchor in three hours. Prepare for planet-fall.' The vox-box went silent.

Rezail straightened his peaked cap and the high collar of his brown coat. He turned and faced the Tallarn Guardsman standing at attention, the one in the yellow tunic, leather boots and white cotton kafiya, wrapped loosely around his neck. The Guardsman's skin was a sun-baked brown, which brought out the streaks of white in his peppered moustache. An ivory-handled dagger hung from his black leather belt. He stood in sharp contrast to Rezail's pale skin and stocky, almost soft, body.

'Sergeant Tyrell Habaas,' Rezail said. 'As my aide, one of your chief duties will be to teach me Tallarn battle-cant.'

'Yes, commissar,' Tyrell said, 'but which one do you wish to learn? Tallarn has many tribes and tribal alliances. There are four battle-cants and many—'
'High Cant... from your holy books.'
'That is a language of nobles. Not many soldiers—'
'They'll learn. Which tribal alliance do you belong to?' Rezail asked.
'The Hawadi. We number eighty-seven tribes.'
'Your people are neutral?' Rezail asked, studying the densely clustered runes of the intelligence dossier.
Tyrell wove his head a touch. 'We are teachers and scholars.'
'Yes,' Rezail said, motioning with the data-slate in his hand. 'It says here that your tribe serves the Tallarn regiments as support staff. Why is that?'
'We are respected by the others for our great learning. We arbitrate disputes. We mediate. We are trusted because we allow two sides to reach a truce without either losing face.'
'Face is very important to your people.'
'Of course. Without it we are dishonoured.'
'And you are neutral in this conflict, between the Ture-nag and Banna alliances?'
'Always.'
Rezail considered his steps carefully. This wasn't going to be easy. The different battle-cants were only a symptom of a larger problem facing the newly formed regiment. The Tallarn were a "passionate people" according to one scroll in the Stratum Populace dossier prepared for him by the Administratum, but in his experience, "passionate" was a bureaucratic cipher for "hothead", and by that definition, orks were exceedingly passionate and exuberant.
'In that case,' Rezail said, 'I need you to teach me something... something called the promise of salt.'

3

THE OBSERVATION DECK of the light cruiser, *Blood Epoch*, offered an unparalleled view of the surrounding stars. The striated green and white marble of a gas giant drifted by the port lancet windows, the last planet before Khadar swung into view. Prince Turk Iban Salid, lost to private thought, was barely aware of proceedings.

Commissar Rezail stood on a rusting iron dais, coroneted by the system's distant blue sun in the window behind him. As Rezail spoke, Tyrell stood by a window near the stage and spoke softly into the micro-bead, translating Rezail's speech for those officers unfamiliar with the nuances of Gothic. 'Five weeks ago,' Rezail said, 'astropaths received a psyker distress cry... Imperial. It originated from the uninhabited desert world of Khadar.'

Turk nodded automatically and cast a sidelong glance at the other high-ranking officer in the room, the ebony-skinned Nisri Dakar. Nothing short of Turk's knife at his throat would bring Turk pleasure. Every centimetre of Nisri's two metres disgusted him: his clean-shaven head demanded to be split, his thin body broken, his wiry muscles snapped, and his dark skin deserved to glisten with his blood instead of his sweat.

'It is our glorious duty to establish a small garrison on Khadar, to investigate the source of the transmission.'

Nisri nodded, but Turk noticed that he also listened with a half-cocked smile. He was no doubt pleased with his new posting.

'Prince Iban Salid, who do you serve?'

Turk started; he almost didn't realise that Rezail was speaking directly to him in a broken Tallarn that fumbled over the guttural consonants. Turk straightened, immediately aware that all eyes were upon him. It electrified the room and set everyone on edge. He could see it in the darting glances, and in the hands that looped their thumbs on their belts, closer to their blades.

'I war for the Emperor! All that is left of the 82nd Shaytani of the Dust wars for the Emperor,' Turk said.

'Aya!' Turk's officers cried out.

'May His light bless our meagre lives,' Turk concluded.

'And whose hand does the Emperor guide?' Rezail asked, again in broken Tallarn.

'Yours,' Turk responded, but Rezail stared at him for longer than was comfortable. He gritted his teeth against the admission, but continued, 'and our Iban Mushira - Colonel Nisri Dakar - our new commander's. May his bravery lead us to victory,' and *may the Saints take his eyes*, he concluded silently.

Colonel Nisri Dakar watched as Turk responded to the commissar. He watched how the commissar gestured to both men with his right hand.

He understands our customs, Nisri thought. *He isn't showing favour by using the left hand to signify a lesser.*

Nisri despised Turk, who seemed lazy and dull with his squat body, his heavy muscles and the tan-brown touch of many suns. Turk kept his beard trimmed short, but there was cold calculating mischief in his black eyes.

Although he delighted at Turk's forced conceit, Nisri took care not to display it. He was the regimental colonel; he had to lead by example.

'And you, Colonel Dakar,' Rezaïl asked, turning to Nisri. 'Who do you serve?'

'I serve the Aba Aba Mushira, the Emperor, in all things. I am His sword and He is my hand. All that is left of the 351st Derv'sh Blades of the Imperium submits to his will.'

'Aya!' cried the officers of Nisri's regiment.

'And who do you greet as brothers in this room?' Rezaïl asked.

Dakar smiled; the commissar already possessed the small tokens of Tallarn formalities, enough to tie his hands in honour and custom.

'I share my salt with you, Commissar Rezaïl,' Nisri said, bowing his head, 'and I share my salt with Iban Mushira, Battalion Commander Turk Iban Salid. May I prove worthy to lead him,' *and may he prove himself unworthy to be led.*

Rezaïl nodded to his adjutant, who rushed forward and offered the commissar a worn leather pouch.

Rezaïl opened the drawstrings and tipped the pouch. Nisri accepted the poured salt in both palms.

'We are brothers in battle and we are both sons of the Emperor,' Nisri said, slowly spilling the salt to the ground. 'Will you offer me the wisdom of your council?'

'I will,' Turk said, accepting his share of the salt from Rezaïl and spilling it slowly. 'Will you offer me the wisdom of your guidance?'

'Indeed,' Nisri said.

There was a slight pause; Rezaïl caught the translation of the exchange with Tyrell's discreet assistance over the micro-bead. 'I'll leave you to prepare your men, then,' Rezaïl said with a simple nod.

4

TURK DID NOT slow his clipped pace down the ship's corridor, but Master Gunner Nubis caught up to him in a handful of long strides. Nubis glanced back at the officers following Turk, and they immediately fell back, offering them a moment alone.

Master Gunner Nubis was a large man and he took up space in every sense of the word. His skin was the kind of deep ebony that space itself envied, while across his forehead rose the patterned scars of his tribe, made from rubbing ash into tiny cuts. Each signified a campaign won, a kill of prestige made. They were but a fraction of the scars on his back, most of them trophies belonging to the regiment's lash-officer.

'Now's not the time,' Turk said, anticipating his friend's grievance.

'When then?' Nubis whispered, half-turning to address Turk. His voice was thick with the tribal dialect of the free-spirited Nasandi tribesmen. When he spoke, his accent added spice to his words.

'When Nisri sends his men to slit our throats?'

'We shared salt. Tradition is—'

'Yes,' Nubis replied, 'you shared salt while the commissar pressed a gun to your head.'

Turk grinned. Nubis's flare for the melodramatic always brought a grin to his face. 'The commissar did not press a gun to my head. He, rightly, reminded us of our duty.'

'Did we need reminding when the orks killed half our men?'

'My men,' Turk corrected.

'Your men, my friends,' Nubis said. 'May their deaths honour the Emperor; they died doing their duty. To say we need reminding is an insult to their sacrifice.'

'Yes,' Turk said, 'but that's not the point. The 82nd's record is not in question. Our feud with the Turenag is.'

'We have a right to demand blood,' Nubis said, 'and having that Turenag dog as your superior is too much to bear!'

Turk sighed, but slowed down. He motioned for other officers to join him.

'I haven't forgotten the blood feud,' Turk whispered, his voice soft against the walls, 'but I will not disgrace us as a regiment. We serve the Emperor first. Nisri and his men are insignificant in the face of that duty. But keep a vigilant eye, and protect yourselves. If you suspect anything, see me first. Spill no blood.'

Nubis smiled, but Turk fixed him with a scowl. 'Swear it, Nubis.'

'What?' Nubis replied. 'You do not trust me?'

'You are a stubborn goat—' Turk said.

'And about as ugly,' one of the officers interjected. The others laughed.

'I trust your word when you give it and I've seen you endure the lash to keep it,' Turk said. 'Give me your word.'

Nubis shook his head. 'Fine, I will not spill a drop of their watery blood unless you ask it.'

Turk nodded. 'Good. You'd better not, because if it comes to that, Nisri belongs to me.'

The men laughed and patted Turk on the back.

5

NISRI WALKED INTO the sacrarius chamber and tucked the end of the seamless white cloth into his braided waistband. The cotton cloth measured roughly four metres long and was wrapped around his body and over his shoulders in the traditional manner of the humble supplicant. Nisri's bare feet ached at the touch of the cold metal floor, but once inside the sacrarius chamber with its wood-panelled floors, his toes unclenched.

He greeted the handful of surviving officers of his 351st Derv'sh Blades with a nod and a smile.

Then, he knelt at the edge of the washing pool with its white cerite tiles and the iron lock-box in the corner. The *Trumpet of the Golden Throne* was a Sword-class frigate and one of the few ships in the fleet with a Tallarn captain. As such, the good Captain Abraham had converted part of the ship's cathedrum into a sacrarius where the Tallarn could observe worship of the Emperor in their own fashion.

The officers washed their pattern-scarred arms and faces at the edge of the pool, while the hum of regurgers filtered and recycled the water; the erratic gasps of the ship's engines sent ripples across its surface.

After several minutes of prayers for absolution, strength and victory, Nisri straightened and looked to each officer.

'This is the last time we battle together as a regiment,' Sergeant Saheen Raham said. He was deeply tanned, but his blond hair and purple eyes betrayed his Cadian heritage, a rare gene-stock on Tallarn.

'I know,' Nisri said, simply. 'After this moment the 351st exists only in Imperial records. We are the 892nd now.'

The officers exchanged glances. Nisri knew what they were thinking, but he chose to let them voice their concerns.

Sergeant Darik Ballasra cleared his throat and waited. He was the old man of the unit and a true tribesman with his leathery, brown skin. His hair and beard were white and thin, and his body lean with age but alive with strength. A delta of wrinkles splashed out from the corners of his dark eyes.

Once everyone turned to face him, he spoke, his voice soft and silken. 'The 892nd cannot be a regiment. Its left and right hands are at war. Peace will only come when one hand severs the other.'

'Turk won't hesitate to kill you,' Raham said.

'You should not have put him at your back,' Ballasra concluded.

Nisri nodded and calmly dried his hands on the skirt of his own cloth. 'Prince Iban Salid is at my back because I know you are at his.'

'We will protect you,' Raham said, 'but—'

'But,' Nisri said, interrupting, 'Prince Iban Salid is also a cunning man, give him that due. He will not easily betray his oath to the Imperium, and he won't allow his men to do so either. He would shame his tribe after that oath he gave.'

Raham shook his head, but it was Ballasra who spoke. 'The feud continues because of the Banna Alliance. The Commissariat said our actions were righteous.'

'It is the Banna who ignore the Writ Nonculpis. They are the traitors. They deserve to be struck down!' Raham said.

'And in doing so,' Nisri replied with a languid smile, 'you ignore the same edict that proclaimed the Banna Nonculpis. It is a stalemate. The Commissariat left it for us to finish.'

'Then let us finish it,' Raham said.

'No,' Nisri replied. 'I will not allow my first command to fall under disgrace. We serve the Emperor; Commissar Rezaal was right to remind us of that. Prince Iban Salid also serves the Emperor, in his limited fashion.'

'And if Turk moves against you?'

'Then I expect you to act accordingly or to let me die a martyr's death.'

'What would that serve?' Raham said, a bitter edge to his voice.

'If I die a martyr,' Nisri said, 'then Turk and his men have done nothing but impale themselves on their own blades: the commissar will put them to the slaughter. Let them be the fools, the disloyal ones. But, if you see the blade poised at my back... well, don't let it come to that, eh? I have a few more prayers left in me.'

A few smiled, but it was a hard edict for them to follow. The voice of their kinsmen was strong, and the cry for satisfaction a steady thunder overhead.

'The Emperor will reward us for our loyalty,' Nisri said. 'Our actions have remained righteous. It is the other tribes that have faltered. It is they who will fail. Nisri nodded to the iron lock-box and waited as Ballasra opened it and removed the rosewood case.

The men nodded and knelt before the sacrarium pool. Nisri entered the waters and waited with his back turned while Ballasra removed the hooked suturing needles and threads soaked in charcoal dye from the rosewood box. Ballasra gently pinched a measure of flesh along Nisri's back and pierced the skin with the needle.

Nisri inhaled softly, but refused to gasp. He would not shame himself in the eyes of his men or the Emperor. Ballasra threaded the charcoal string through Nisri's flesh, tattooing more intricate and florid patterns along his already scarred back. Occasionally, he splashed cooling water to wash away the blood, while the officers uttered the melodic cantos of submission to the God-Emperor and waited for their turn.

6

'WILL THAT BE enough?' Commissar Rezail asked as Tyrell helped him remove his jacket. 'How strongly will the promise of salt bind them to their word?'

Tyrell sighed as he thought of the answer. He strung the jacket on a wire frame and turned to face the commissar, his expression apologetic. 'The promise of salt does not make honest men of the liars. It makes honest men honour their word, and it makes dishonest men more careful.'

CHAPTER TWO

'Constant sunshine a desert makes.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

DAY ONE.

The heavy whine of atmosphere brakes pierced the dust choked air. The artificial sandstorm was a fiery orange churned by the waves of landing crafts that roared to the surface with supplies and soldiers. The storm was spread across kilometres, a mix of displaced dust and the exhaust smoke of the transports that left fat skid marks in their climb back up.

Private Ahsra Sabaak fired a flare skyward. Vox-chatter on his headset marked another flight inbound to his location and he needed to show them where to land. 'Acknowledged,' he cried over the roar of a nearby ship. He pulled his kafiya tighter over his youthful face and adjusted the oculars protecting his eyes before fighting his way through the howling winds. He stabbed more phosphor-lume torches into the sand to mark the corners of his grid.

A moment later, the screaming whine of the protesting transport threatened to rattle his teeth loose. He barely avoided the blast of the ship's backwash, as its thrusters fought to control its descent.

Sabaak was sure his uniform was singed, and muttered a curse against the pilot's mother.

The sand melted under the inferno thrust exhaust and would later re-materialise as rippled and blackened obsidian. Sabaak steered clear of the vessel's melted footprint and waited for the vice clamps to disengage with loud metal *pangs*. Rectangular bolted containers lining the ship's underbelly suddenly dropped, shaking the earth. The landing craft tore off into the dusky sky again. Sabaak ignored the lingering heat and examined the cargo containers. He squinted at rune markings in confusion, and groaned. He pulled the vox from his belt and fumbled for the switch through his heavy gloves.

'This is grid 12-23,' he yelled into the vox. 'Tell those old whores aboard the *Trumpet* that they're sending the wrong supplies!'

Sabaak listened to the angry chatter for a moment before yelling back. 'Fine! If you can find me a river on this world, then I'll apologise. Until then, you tell me why we need two hundred rafts on a desert planet!'

2

THE SEARING WINDS rattled bones, while black-hulled troop carriers disgorged Guardsmen. The soldiers wore calf-length puttees, webbing with canteens, battle-pack bags and shelter quarter rolls. They wrapped their weapons in swaddling cloth and protected their faces in kafiyas and blast-

oculars. Many soldiers scooped up a handful of sand or knelt down to kiss the earth before scrambling back into formation.

Turk watched the Guardsmen, like ghosts in the storm, file past the Chimera's armoured visors before directing his attention back to the others. The chatter inside the command Chimera was loud, partly to be heard over the thunderous din, but mostly, just to be heard. The Chimera was cramped compared to the more open HQ Salamanders, used for this exact purpose, and it was a speck's shadow in relation to the mammoth command Leviathans used during major offensives. For the Tallarn regiment, it was the best they could muster, especially since the open-topped Salamanders proved less than useful in desert campaigns.

Along the Chimera's back wall sat a bank of auspex devices, rune-plates, a vox-transmitter, a small holocaster, and two operators. Nisri and Turk stood hunched over behind the operators, each accompanied by their respective and immediate subordinates. They motioned to an iron-framed brass plate mounted on the wall. The brass plate was acid-etched with the soft contours of local cartography. The subordinates spoke, while Nisri and Turk remained silent, and studied one another in quick glances.

'We should pitch camp here,' Major Alef Hussari said, indicating an area of rippled lines. Alef appeared as weathered as the map, his wrinkles carved into his dark brown skin. His bushy goatee hid his mouth and seemed to dance, almost comically to his words. 'The dunes will shelter our tents.'

'The dunes migrate,' Sergeant Ballasra said.

'It's sand, not water,' Hussari countered. 'The dunes won't drown us.'

'They may,' Ballasra said. 'Many dunes are even on both sides. Their faces might collapse.'

'Possibly,' Nisri said, stroking his chin, 'but that's not what concerns me. We'll pitch here,' he said indicating a small plateau. 'This will protect us from this sea of sand, and that dune pressed against it will be our ramp.' He pointed to the snaking contour of an ancient riverbed at the base of the plateau. 'With the riverbed protecting our backs, we can see for kilometres in all directions.'

'On the plateau?' Turk asked, impatience skirting the edges of his temper.

'We're exposed. The tents—' Hussari began.

'We will not stay in tents,' Nisri responded. 'We will build an outpost with defensible walls and turrets.'

Hussari raised an eyebrow, but swallowed his words. By Turk's reaction, he shared Hussari's disbelief.

'An outpost?' Turk asked. 'Our strength lies in our mobility. You're talking about penning us in a cage.'

'I'm talking about protecting us,' Nisri said. 'Some enemies you cannot outrun. They are a flood that will overtake you. Your best hope is to let their tide break around the rocks of your shores.'

'Tyranids,' Turk said. 'You're talking about your fight at the Absolomay Crush.'

Nisri said nothing, but Ballasra nodded.

'With respect,' Turk said, 'by placing us on a landmark, you make it easier for rangefinders to target us with artillery.'

'What artillery?' Nisri said, shaking his head. He tapped one of the auspex operators on the shoulder.

'Have the fleet's cogitators found any sign of life yet? An army? Machines? Anything?'

The operator shook his head. 'Auspex are clean so far.'

'There you have it,' Nisri said.

'And the transmission?' Turk asked. 'Someone sent the mortis-cry. Someone died here.'

'The word of the mind witches,' Nisri said. A look of displeasure eclipsed his features. 'Who knows what they saw, or why they claim to have seen in. There's no sign of life here and the dunes stretch to the horizons. Even if an army hides here, no artillery can navigate the dunes easily. We make our base on the plateau. That is my order.'

Turk bit his tongue, but it was difficult to keep it coiled in his mouth. He felt foolish; he knew the artillery argument was weak the moment he raised it, but he was eager to dissuade Nisri from his decision. An uncomfortable moment passed, long enough for everyone to exchange wary glances.

'As you wish,' Turk said finally, biting down on his words.

'Now,' Nisri said, barely acknowledging Turk's bitter acquiescence, 'on to the matter of the patrols.'

COMMISSAR REZAIL NAVIGATED past the crates and boxes, the soldiers, and the packs of baying dromads and muukali. Chaos had overtaken the plateau, but at least Rezail's tinted oculars and rebreather mask protected him against the dusty winds. Several kilometres away, transports and troop carriers continued to labour skyward, further agitating the storm.

Tyrell, meanwhile, pointed out the various members of the expedition. The first man to earn description was Duf adar Nab'l Sarish, a lanky man with ropes for muscles, dark brown leather for

skin, and an untamed beard and moustache. He wore a bandolier across his chest and two laspistols at his belt. Sarish pulled at the reins of a mottled dromad that complained and snapped. With its long neck and skinny legs, thick bristles of hair, humps and hooked snout, it was a creature alien to Reza'il's experiences. Sarish gripped its reins tight and yanked the beast along.

'Duf adar?' Reza'il asked. 'That means sergeant, correct?'

'In a manner, but do not tell him that,' Tyrell responded. 'Duf adar Sarish is a Sen'tach rider. They are a very proud people, very stubborn. Sergeant means servant, yes? And they are no man's servant.'

'We are all servants of the Emperor,' Reza'il said. 'So the rank of Duf adar is equal to sergeant, but nobody calls them that, correct?'

'Yes, commissar. Duf adar Sarish tends to our riding animals and teaches us how to shoot at full gallop. He is an accomplished marksman.'

Reza'il nodded. 'Excellent, but there is one thing I find confusing. Tallarn was viral bombed, yes? Sulphuric and rust deserts from the decomposing corpses of a million tanks.'

'Yes, commissar,' Tyrell responded, a faint smile on his lips. 'You are wondering why our people need pack animals? Tallarn is a wasteland, but our sheltered undergrounds are a vast network of tunnels as great as any hive-world. We also have a sister planet, two systems away, Ibanna Tallarn. The princes of the various tribes grow and train their herds there.'

'Why?'

'Livestock is the privilege of the truly wealthy, commissar. The princes have great estates on Ibanna Tallarn, and they train their riders there.'

'Is this sister world of yours free of tribal friction?'

'No, commissar,' Tyrell said as he shook his head. 'No place is free of it.'

4

TURK NODDED TO the commissar as Tyrell gave him the tour of the camp. The battalion commander arrived at a small tent and entered without knocking. The stench of fuel and pack animals seemed instantly forgotten, overtaken by the scent of oil and freshly crushed jasmine. The censers added a pleasant haze, but the cot and regulation gear were otherwise standard issue.

'This is opulent,' Turk said, half-entering, making sure the tent flap remained open, to avoid any suggestion of impropriety. He locked eyes with the woman who sat on the cot. She stood slowly, uncertain and nodded. Her black hair curled at her shoulders and her thick, black lashes swept him into her almond-shaped, black eyes. Red henna tattoos with florid curls covered the backs of her hands and the lower half of her face. She wore loose robes, and a psychic hood made from bulwark plates, haemorrhage valves, a focusing visor and sheathed cable bundles rested next to her, to help focus her powers as the unit's sanctioned mind witch.

'Colonel Nisri Dakar is a conservative man. It's best I not be around the men, battalion commander,' the woman said. 'It wouldn't be good for their morale.'

'Battalion Commander Turk Iban Salid. It is only fair you should know my name, Kamala Noore.'

She nodded. 'Of course. How may I serve a prince of the Banna?'

'Have you... sensed anything yet?'

'If a psyker died on this world, then the winds swept his cries away. I sense nothing. It's as if we're alone in the most terrible way possible.'

'I'll expect a full report later,' Turk said. He paused, saying nothing, but remaining at the door.

'Yes, battalion commander?' Kamala said, apparently uncertain how to act around Turk.

'If you were Banna, you would receive better treatment than this,' Turk said. 'You are blessed, an instrument of the Emperor.'

'And you are idol-worshippers according to the Ture-nag,' she whispered.

'The Orakle is the Emperor's voice. We do not worship him. He is an astropath and he guides us: a saint keeping us on the Emperor's road.'

Kamala smiled and her face seemed to blossom. Turk almost gasped at the sudden and honest beauty in her features.

'Perhaps,' she said, 'but your men fear me as much as the Turenag. I've seen them ward themselves when I pass.'

'Our fear is respect. You could have a place of honour among my people, a consort to the Orakle perhaps?'

'And the blood spilt between our two people?'

'What the sand drinks, the Banna still remember. I won't deny that.'

'As do the Turenag. Oh trust me, I know,' Kamala said. 'It's all I can see on everyone's mind.'

'How close are we?' Turk asked softly, taking a step inside, the tent flap kept open by the whisper of his fingertips. 'How close to bloodshed?'

'Very close. I can taste iron on the winds. The men would gladly spill their enemies' blood.'
'Who will start it?'

'It has started already,' Kamala said, her smile retreating. Her eyes seemed to fall away.

'What of you, then?' Turk asked. 'Where do you stand? Should I fear you?'

Kamala smiled, the question anticipated. 'You already fear me, sir,' Kamala said, each word spoken with some pain. 'But Banna or Turenag, I serve the 892nd. I serve the Emperor to my dying thoughts.'

'Thank you,' Turk replied. 'I'll expect your report in an hour.'

5

DAY ONE: HOUR NINE.

The camp was only hours old and still in turmoil when the planet's whispers turned into a steady howl that drove thick drifts of sand across the dunes. The horizon was already a deep orange, a sure omen of the storm's power, and the fleet had stopped the supply drops for the night. The Guardsmen didn't have time to erect storm walls or to dig trenches; instead, they lashed down the supply containers using gas-powered nail-pumps to secure the cargo netting before running for cover. The dozen or so vehicles were already parked at the foot of the plateau, facing away from the storm, and several platoons lay sheltered behind their treads.

Colonel Dakar tightened the kafiya around his face and adjusted his blast-oculars. He stumbled towards the command Chimera, which had already extended its snort mast high into the dusty air. If the storm buried the vehicle under a lake of sand, the collapsible snorkel tube would be the only thing saving the crew from certain suffocation, and it would indicate to other Guardsmen where to dig. Nisri grimaced and entered the coffin. Being buried was the worst part of these storms, if one discounted being caught outside by the flaying winds. Nisri silently wished his own men good luck tonight, and hoped the storm would take some of Turk's soldiers.

6

MAJOR WAHID ANLEEL trudged through the maze of cargo containers, pulling at locked doors and cursing a dozen epithets against the storm. Anleel's men, 1st Company, were scattered somewhere in these stifling steel boxes. The storm, however, tore at his clothing and threw drifts of sand at his feet. He needed shelter, and he needed it now.

Anleel spotted a raised snort mast in the near distance. All Tallarn regiment containers were equipped with such devices, and functioned as emergency shelters. Unfortunately, the regiment's new quartermaster had only opened and unloaded a handful of containers before the storm had overtaken them.

Anleel stumbled towards the cargo container. Half-buried metal crates lay scattered outside its door, probably supplies thrown out to make room for more refugees inside. A black, carbonised flash mark from a laspistol marked the demise of the door's missing padlock: not the quartermaster's standard key, but Anleel was grateful for someone else's initiative. He touched the door and yelped at the nasty jolt of static electricity. His entire arm jerked and cramped. He shook his hand, freeing it of the tingling.

He opened the door, and then quickly shut it against the protest of the winds outside and the huddled men inside. With a grateful gasp, he removed his oculars and kafiya.

'You're not one of us,' a voice said.

Anleel spun around and put his back to the door. He faced two-dozen men, all unfamiliar to him, all hostile, all rival tribesmen belonging to the Turenag. Some had drawn their long scimitars.

'You're not welcome here, dog,' a voice said from the darkness. 'Leave while you have the legs for it.'

'The storm outside—' Anleel said, stammering. 'You cannot refuse a man protection from the desert - Colonel Dakar and Battalion Commander Iban Salid... they shared salt.'

'That is why we're letting you leave alive.'

Anleel studied their faces before pulling his oculars back down and yanking the kafiya over his face. He backed out of the door, pushing against the drifts piled against the container, and vanished into the howling storm. He was completely turned around, uncertain which direction offered safety. His best hope was to stay near the cargo containers. He stumbled away, one arm against the corrugated walls as a guide.

A flash of light pulsed by Anleel and was swallowed by the storm. He barely had time to turn before a second laspistol beam caught him on the shoulder and cooked the wound. Anleel tried to scream, but his kafiya slipped off his chin, and sand rushed in to choke him. Two more shots punched him in the chest, both white hot, both cooking and cauterising flesh, muscle and bone.

Anleel collapsed face first into the sand. Two Guardsmen swathed against the storm grabbed him by the armpits and pushed his body over the plateau's edge. The wind and sand took care of the rest.

7

CAPTAIN BER'NAM TORIA of C Platoon was exhausted. He was searching for Major Anleel, who'd failed to report back to his company. When Anleel was nowhere to be found among the containers, Toria ventured down to the base of the plateau to search the vehicles. Foolish of him, he knew, but the storm made vox chatter impossible, and now he was alone, lost and turned around, his compass useless.

Toria's legs were iron bundles. The fatigue settled in with a deep ache that burned at the wick of his muscles. His shins sank into the loose sand, and it was growing harder to pull them out. He'd heard something about the properties of the desert, how the sandstorm generated an electric charge. He didn't understand mechanical crafts, specifically why they affected his compass or the voxes, or even friction, but he was told they did. So there he was, in sand drifts that seemed more liquid than solid as they almost parted beneath his feet. It cost him more in energy to pull his feet out than it did for his weight to push them down.

In the distance, over the howling winds, a crack of electricity snapped and lit the murky air. Captain Toria had never seen lightning without storm clouds, and the notion that air could generate a charge from nothing frightened him. He stumbled forward, crying out for someone, anyone. More electricity bit at the air in the furthest glooms, coming from the same direction as the last two blasts of lightning.

Toria hesitated. It was hard to think; the fatigue had numbed him, and even the storm's sting was too distant to wake him. He shook his head. 'Think,' he muttered. 'Why would lightning strike the same area?' Something was attracting the electricity, something constant in the storm. It was his only landmark. Static lightning be damned, Toria didn't intend to drown in this dusty sea. He lurched forward, burning through the last rush of adrenaline, forcing his feet to make one step after another. Too far, it was too far. Toria stumbled and fell forward. The sand swallowed his arms past the elbows. His knees sank and dragged him down to his waist. His face hovered centimetres above the sand, his strength fading, his leverage gone. He tried pushing up, but he sank further. He cried out, but the winds smothered his voice. The struggle to be free pulled him down another deep centimetre. He fought harder, panic overtaking reason, rational thought all but gone. Toria grunted and whined like an animal facing death.

Another few centimetres, and Toria would be drinking sand. His limbs quaked at the exertion, and he moaned softly.

'In or out, boy?' a voice asked, shouting over the wind. 'I can push you in if you've surrendered; make it easier for you to die.'

'Help,' Toria shouted. He could barely see the man out of the corner of his oculars, but he struggled against the sand.

'Out it is.' Someone's arm looped under Toria's armpit and struggled to pull him up. 'Work with me, boy, I'm too old to lift you.'

One arm came free, and then another. In a moment, Toria was standing again, his heart pounding and rattling his senses. His vision swam with fatigue, and the head rush almost tipped him over again. He allowed his rescuer to pull him along.

Moments later, they arrived at a full-track lorry that was buried up to its lower road wheels in sand. A faint bluish light flickered and jumped at the treads, sprockets and rollers; the static electricity was expending itself, the sand no longer as frictionless. The man pushed Toria up the access steps despite the minor jolts that shocked them both. Toria collapsed in the cabin's seat while his rescuer sat in the driver's seat. The engine was running and the air gauzers cleared away most of the interior dust.

'Thank you,' Toria managed, stripping off the kafiya and leather chamfron wrapped around his helmet. He was olive-skinned, his nose aquiline.

His rescuer nodded. 'You're lucky I saw you,' he said tapping the night vision periscope attached to the ceiling before unwrapping his kafiya. He was old, with a full growth of frosted hair that glowed against his nutmeg dark skin and elaborate, looping tribal scars spread across his chin.

A jolt shot through Toria. His rescuer was Turenag, his markings those of one of their chief tribe, the D'Shouf.

'You're Turenag,' Toria said.

'I couldn't tell which tribe you belonged to,' the man admitted. 'But, curse my father for raising me right, I would have saved you either way.'

'I thought all Turenag blood ran hot at the thought of killing us.'

'Not mine,' the man said. He leaned in close, the glimmer of a mischievous smirk on his lips. 'My blood is ice cold, boy. Would you care for a sip?'

Toria smiled despite himself. 'No,' he said, drawing up his canteen, 'I have my own water.' He tilted the bottle towards the D'Shouf tribesman. 'Not as cold as yours, though. Have some.'
The old man shook his head. 'Thank you, no.' He revved the engine of the lorry and pushed the steering lever forward. 'I have to keep her out of the sand. Another minute and I wouldn't have seen you at all.'

'Captain Toria, 1st Company, C Platoon.'

'Captain Qal Abantu, Armoured Support.'

Toria grinned. 'We have armoured support?'

Both men started laughing.

'Barely, boy,' Abantu replied, 'barely.'

It was the last thing Toria heard before he fell fast asleep.

8

DAY Two; HOUR TEN.

The storm was a day old and still pitching its fit. The interior of the command Chimera had grown stale and humid on body sweat, and a crackling voice filled the interior. From the wash of hard static, a few words floated through the cacophony.

Immediate - Forced - Althera Beta - 892nd - Orbit - Weeks.

One of the two auspex operators continued fiddling with the knobs on the vox, trying to fine tune it.

The voice was heavily distorted, the bursts of static haemorrhaging through the signal.

'Can you decipher it?' Nisri asked.

Corrupted - Anchor - More - Hives - Sector Lord.

The operator shook his head. 'It's the storm. She dirties the air and wreaks havoc with communications.'

'I've heard worse,' the other operator replied. 'On Canimos Prime, the static discharge was enough to kill a man. But, this is the best we can get, sir.'

The vox warbled in response.

Alert - Command - Light of - Unable to - Estimated, two - 'I've heard that before,' the fair-haired Sergeant Raham said, straightening up in his seat. 'That sentence fragment, I heard it before.'

'Confirmed, sir,' one of the operators replied. 'The transmission is looping.'

Supplies - Time - Munitorum - Location - Convine

'I heard Convine,' the second operator said. 'Isn't that a hive?'

'I heard hive mentioned before,' Raham said.

'Why would they be sending us a looped transmission?' Nisri muttered.

Expedite supplies - Weigh - Unable to - Two.

'They may have been trying to reach us for several hours, sir,' the second operator replied. 'The interference varies. This is the clearest window we've had in a few hours.'

'Fine,' Nisri said, annoyed. 'Keep listening, start piecing the transmission together. Raham, I need your ears on this.'

Nisri and Raham gathered around the vox-caster while the two operators collected message strings and transcribed them to a data-slate. The words slowly clustered together into sentences.

Alert ground forces Khadar, 892nd Command.

They switched words out...

The Convine Manufactorum Hives on Althera Beta have turned against the Light of the Emperor.

...and back in again, like a grammatical puzzle.

All Imperial forces required to respond by order of Sector Lord General Behemot.

The sentences flowed together...

Fleet immediately weighing anchor to respond to call.

...some more easily than others...

Unable to send more supplies for the time being.

...until finally, the truth stood out.

Will request Departamento Munitorum expedite supplies to your location, estimated, two months.

Nisri's eyes widened. 'When was the message sent? When?'

The operators scrambled, trying to find a time-stamp in the transmission.

'About seven hours ago,' one replied, 'probably more.'

'Transmission source confirmed to be a satellite relay,' the other responded.

'That puts them outside the system,' Raham said.

'They've already left,' Nisri said, falling back into his seat.

'But it's only two months,' Raham replied. 'They sent us enough supplies for that.'

Nisri shook his head. 'They sent us the wrong supplies, sergeant, and the storm prevented them correcting their mistake! Get me the quartermaster on vox. We need to find out how much trouble we're in.'

CHAPTER THREE

'The Greedy pray for what they do not have.

The Blessed pray for what was given them.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

DAY THREE.

The desert seemed renewed, the passage of the 892nd brushed away by the winds and new coats of sand. On and around the rocky island, Guardsmen were busy digging out vehicles and cargo containers. The rosy hued plateau rose a dozen metres from the dunes on its east side, while on the west, a large dune had pressed against it, forming a ramp for treaded vehicles to traverse. The plateau's roof was a hundred metres in diameter, and the highest one the Guardsmen could reach among the many scattered throughout the region. A tall pole already stood at its centre, the newly minted double-headed eagle banner of the 892nd.

While the men worked in groups that were exclusively Banna or Turenag, they sang songs, each trying to be louder or more insulting than the other. Naturally, they weren't vulgar or deliberately demeaning, but they said enough to hint at a slur. The Banna's songs praised the Emperor and the Transmitter of His Word, the great Orakle, while the Turenag sang of their love for the Emperor alone and of the perils of following false gods.

THE REMAINING VEHICLES were clustered around the command Chimera in the shadow of the plateau. Colonel Nisri Dakar sat with his men upon a mottled tan Hellhound, while Lieutenant-Colonel Turk Iban Salid stood with his at the treads of a tan Chimera. Commissar Rezail and Tyrell Habass, stood off to the side, at the open ramp of the command Chimera.

Captain Ural Kortan, Quartermaster of the 892nd, had noticed the commissar's adjutant dropping sodium and potassium powder into the commissar's canteen earlier. Heat exhaustion, Kortan surmised, given the commissar's pale, sweaty complexion. Kortan, standing in the open circle between the vehicles, continued with his report to the command staff and ranking officers. He motioned to the data-slate for emphasis.

'We were sent supplies we didn't need,' Kortan replied, 'inflatable rafts, carbon-filtered rebreathers, five full pallets of green vehicle paint... I can continue,' Kortan said, shrugging.

'Fine,' Nisri said, rubbing his scalp hard. 'What do we have that we can use?'

'We have enough rations to last twenty-three days, and water for twenty-five.'

'Ration them both out,' Nisri said. 'That's a meal per soldier, per day, two for the sick. We'll switch to night operations to stave off dehydration. Sergeant Ballasra?'

'Um, yes,' Ballasra said, stroking his white beard. 'By your will and the Emperor's providence, my squad can see what the desert provides.'

'Very well, search the area for edibles, preferably something more appetising than sand. Duf adar Sarish,' Nisri said, turning his attention to the stable master. 'We may need to slaughter some of the animals if they cannot graze, or if there is no water for them to drink.'

Sarish scowled, but he nodded. Turk and his officers straightened; they seemed ready to say something, but Nisri was quick to interrupt them.

'Which of your men do you recommend to help Sergeant Ballasra,' Nisri asked.

Turk bit his lip for a moment, before nodding to the olive-skinned man next to him. 'Captain Toria and his men are fine trackers and hunters.'

'The same Captain Toria that Captain Abantu saved?' Raham asked.

Of Nisri's men, all but Captain Abantu chuckled at the jibe, but Nisri silenced them with a harsh glare. He was not pleased, his look cruel, like the drawing of an assassin's blade from its sheath. Even Raham reddened and looked away.

Turk, meanwhile, had forcibly grabbed Master Gunner Nubis by the arm and pulled him back.

Kortan noticed all this, and took measure of where the lines were being drawn.

'And for that,' Turk said, keeping his eyes on Nisri, 'Captain Abantu has my thanks. Captain Toria was searching for Major Anleel, First Company's commander, during the storm.'

'And have you found him?' Nisri asked.

'No sir. Five men went missing last night, from both companies. The electric discharges may have rendered them senseless long enough for the storm to get the better of them.'

'I sent two Sentinel squadrons searching for them,' Major Hussari said. 'There's no sign of them.'

'Unfortunate,' Nisri said. 'Very well, Captain Toria and Sergeant Ballasra will coordinate their efforts to locate food and water. What else, Captain Kortan?'

'Plasm-tins,' Kortan replied, 'to cook the food, we have enough for twenty days.'

'Perhaps we can siphon vehicle fuel?' Nisri asked, looking at Abantu.

'What's mine is yours, but we were only sent half of what we needed. The storm robbed us of the other half, and we're low on power cells for the vehicles.'

Nisri thought for a moment, before sighing. 'Ration the fuel as well. The command Chimera has priority on the power cells—'

Lieutenant Osam Djeer, the command staffs engineering officer, quickly interrupted. 'We can tether the command vehicle to the solar generators.'

'Do so. Major Hussari's squadron receives priority on the fuel, whatever is required to stretch our reserves to two months. Regular patrols will use any dromads and mukaali that Duf adar Sarish can spare. Now tell me, good quartermaster, and for the love of the Emperor make it favourable news, is there anything we do have in good supply?'

'Yes,' Kortan replied with a smile. 'We have plenty of sand.'

2

'PUT YOURS BACKS into it,' Nubis barked at his men as they struggled at the lip of the plateau. He wiped the sweat from his face with his forearm. The night air was graciously cool, and he was happy to be away from the sun. He watched as his men struggled to pull open the collapsible wire-frame cubes. The articulated mesh expanded to form interlinking baskets ten metres long. These would form the battlements atop the plateau. Once they'd riveted them into the hard rock, the companies would fill the layered rows of baskets with sand, creating walls that could absorb heavy bolter fire and shelling.

Nearby, a Turenag work detail was laying the foundations for the command bunker, and singing about their beautiful wives and the children they had left at home. A couple of men in Nubis's group began singing the praises of their wives in retort, when Nubis pushed through his men and slapped one across the back of his head.

'What are you doing?' Nubis said, spittle flying from his mouth. 'Singing with them? These are Turenag! They killed the Orakle Murha and they've ambushed our fathers and our uncles. Go on, then! Sing! Sing like women, because you certainly aren't acting like the men of the Banna!'

The men hesitated, and then returned to their work, their prides stung and their skin flushed with heat. Nobody spoke, and even the Turenag work detail watched in silence.

'Well?' Nubis shouted at the Turenag. 'Keep singing! My men deserve to be entertained by women.'

The Turenag exploded into curses and insults, and several men moved forward with their pickaxes ready. Nubis and his men positioned themselves to face the enemy, pry bars and shovels in their hands. They were only metres apart when a white las-shot, instant and lethal, lit the night and scorched the earth between them. Two more landed in quick succession, for emphasis, stopping everyone in their tracks. Duf adar Sarish held two dissimilar laspistols, one trained on each group of men.

'Get back to work,' the Sen'tach rider told them. 'You are frightening my animals.'

Nubis eyed Sarish and motioned his men back to work. Slowly, the work crews returned to their details, but none of them sang any more. They glared at one another and at Sarish, who was watching them carefully in return.

3

MAJOR IAS'R DASHOUR stood at the opening of the tent, waiting to be acknowledged by Nisri. He was a dour-looking man, his brow constantly knotted in some distant thought. He was light skinned with a pale olive complexion, and he kept his face clean.

Nisri sat at his desk, a folding table with thin, spindly legs. Stacks of data-slates and print-sheets covered the surface in neat, ordered piles. The colonel shook his head and motioned to the information.

'Useless,' he said.

'Sir?' Dashour said, taking the opportunity to step into the cool dark of the modular tent, with its open peel-back front and peaked roof.

'All this information, and it tells me nothing. You know what nearly killed us at Absolomay.'

'The tyranids?' Dashour asked. He suppressed a shudder at the thought of firing round after round into the advancing wall of screeching, chittering xenos, their claws scrambling at the rocky terrain, their strength undiminished despite the steady, winnowing salvos. The tyranids operated as an organism, sacrificing individuals to advance the whole. They leapt into lines of dismembering fire, protecting those behind them like living shields of carapace armour. Dashour felt humbled by the purity of their... faith. Faith was the only word that fitted, Dashour decided. He couldn't stop thinking about them.

'No, the tyranids took advantage of our weakness, but what almost killed us was lack of useful intelligence, stretched supply lines and poor support. Now where are we? We have a mind-witch's word of a massacre, and no evidence to support it; we have a ghost of a regiment with two meagre companies that are at each other's throats; and we have limited stocks with no guarantee of resupply. We're back where we started.'

'Not exactly true,' Dashour said. 'At least there are no tyranids.'

'That we know of,' Nisri said, laughing. 'But, after Absolomay, I expect the whoresons to pop out of the ground again.' He shook his head. 'You came to see me about something?'

'I wish it were good news.' Dashour took a quick breath. 'Some of my men found Major Anleel's body. He was murdered. It looks like las-burns to the chest and shoulder.'

Nisri shook his head and leaned back in his chair. 'Do you know who did it?'

'No sir.'

'Would you tell me if you did?'

'I would tell Prince Nisri of the Turenag, and perhaps even Lieutenant-Colonel Dakar of the 351st who it was that made his tribe proud, but, no, I wouldn't tell Colonel Dakar of the 892nd. His loyalty to the Aba Aba Mushira would humble me.'

'I see,' Nisri said, chewing on his lip. 'Do Turk's men know?'

'No sir. We hid the body until we could speak with you.'

'Very prudent.' Nisri closed his eyes, a scowl pulling at his face. 'Bury the body,' he said, his decision a heavy weight as far from here as possible. 'Major Anleel vanished in the storm and that is the end of it. Oh... and tell your men to keep their mouths shut. They do not celebrate. They do not speak of it, even to each other. Tell them this. Tell them I'll keep my blade sharpened just in case they choose to wag their tongues.'

Dashour nodded.

'I can trust you to do this, Dashour?' Nisri ask. 'I serve you, prince-colonel. I am therefore doubly loyal to you.'

Nisri dismissed Dashour with a nod of his head and returned to his work.

4

KORTAN NODDED TO Dashour as he left the tent, though he received no recognition in return. He waited at the tent flap for Colonel Dakar to bid him to enter.

'More bad news?' Nisri asked, looking at the reports.

'No,' Kortan said, smiling. 'In fact, it's a small blessing, my good sir.'

Nisri looked up, the veins on his forehead strained and a glint in his dark eyes. 'I do not appreciate your familiarity with me.'

'Of course, sir,' Kortan said without missing a beat, 'but the Emperor blesses.'

'No praise for your Orakle this evening?' Nisri asked.

'The Orakle is a man,' Kortan said with a smile, 'a rather humourless one at that, no sport for drink or gambling, or women.'

'Are you trying to get on my good side?'

'Certainly not,' Kortan said. 'I'm merely charming by circumstance. I cannot help who likes me and who doesn't.'

'So the Emperor's blessing? What form might that take?'

'In last year's case, it took the form of a beautiful daughter of a salt merchant of Abusida Rehan. I was very blessed that night, and by morning, blessed twice more, but,' Kortan said, holding up his hands to forestall an irate looking Nisri, 'today, our blessing comes in the form of this.' Kortan held out a data-slate.

Nisri snatched the data-slate from the quartermaster's hands and studied the information. It was a topographical scan of the region with three triangular glyphs marked at the extremes of the map.

'What are these?' Nisri asked, studying the map.

'The location of three emergency orbit-drop containers, courtesy of the fleet before it weighed anchor.'

'They sent supplies?' Nisri said. A broad and cautious smile snaked across his lips.

'It appears so. The storm jammed their torch beacons until half an hour ago. I just confirmed their locations, though one... that one,' Kortan said, tapping a glyph on the screen, 'appears to have been damaged in the drop.'

'Do we know the contents?'

'Some food, water and clothing... ammunition; enough to extend the rationing for a couple of extra weeks.'

'No fuel?'

'Too volatile for an orbit drop.'

'We'll take what we can get, eh? I'll send three squads to recover them. I want one of your men with each squad to make sure there's no pilfering of supplies. Coordinate with Duf adar Sarish for the pack animals. Make several trips if you have to. We can't waste fuel for this.'

5

KORTAN WAS ON his way to the supply tent when Captain Lornis Anuman and a handful of his hard-nosed cadre stepped in the quartermaster's way. Anuman was a boorish looking man with a thick growth of peppered stubble on his jaw and a bulging chin. He was squat with a permanent tan to his flesh and a crooked bulge to his nose. He scratched at it his jaw with lazy disinterest.

'Captain Anuman,' Kortan said, spreading his arms. 'The Orakle delights me with your company.'

'I'm sure he does,' Anuman said. 'You were in Nisri's tent. I hope you're not getting too comfortable with the new colonel.'

Kortan laughed. 'Ah, captain, you're too ugly to be my wife, so why are you meddling in my business?'

Anuman and his men stepped forward, their hands resting casually on the pommels of their scimitars. 'Take care, Kortan. You should never turn your back on your own tribe.'

'Trust me, the last thing I'd do around you is turn my back. Now, out of my way,' he said, shooing them away.

'I have work to do. And, if you find yourself in my way again, I'll make sure some broken glass finds its way into your rations, or have you forgotten who handles your food?'

Anuman's grip closed around the pommel of his blade. Kortan could see the anger in his eyes and a tremble at the corner of his lips, but the quartermaster's smile never diminished. After a moment, Anuman stepped to one side. The captain's men followed suit, and Kortan brushed past them with no further trouble.

6

'How is COMMISSAR Rezail?' Turk asked. He continued walking among the cargo containers atop the plateau, watching chains of men tossing box after box to one another down the line. Tyrell walked alongside him.

'Better,' Tyrell responded, speaking in tribal cant. 'He is resting in his tent. By day, he's in the command Chimera. It is the coolest place I could find.'

'Good. Should he need anything, let me know.'

'Of course.'

'One other thing,' Turk said, stopping to face Tyrell. 'Has he heard about the incidents?'

'The incidents, sir?'

'Don't play me the fool,' Turk said, a friendly smile on his face. 'The fights, the two companies almost coming to blows?'

Tyrell looked around. 'I am not comfortable discussing this behind the commissar's back.'

'But he hasn't heard about them, correct?'

'No,' Tyrell said, 'not yet, not with his heat exhaustion.'

'Good, then I have a great favour to ask of you.'

'You want me to lie to the commissar. I cannot do—'

'Yes you can, just for now, for the sake of the men. The two companies need time to adjust to their new conditions. They are Guardsmen, and they are good soldiers, but their hatred runs deep. They need more time. If Commissar Rezail starts executing men, they will not only despise one another all the more, but they'll also come to despise the commissar. How long do you think he'll last then?'

'Not long,' Tyrell admitted.

'Give us time,' Turk said.

Tyrell bit his tongue for a moment and privately mulled over the matter. 'You have two days, at best,' Tyrell said, finally.

'That's not enough—'

'Are we speaking as soldiers, lieutenant-colonel? Or are we speaking as tribesmen, Prince Iban Salid?'

Turk straightened. 'I am a prince of my people, first and foremost, but my duties as prince require that I serve my people as the Emperor's soldier. You are speaking to both.'

'Then may I be honest, as Hawadi and as a soldier?'

Turk nodded.

'You want more time? You and the Turenag have had generations to settle your differences. I could give you a year, two even, and it would solve nothing. Your men are soldiers; they should follow your example and act like it. The same goes for Colonel Dakar's men, but he hasn't asked for my council.'

'What are you saying?' Turk asked.

'I am saying I will not tell the commissar what has happened in his absence. But when he returns, rest assured I will report everything that happens from that moment forward. I have no other choice. If reason will not rule your men, then perhaps fear will.'

7

DAY FIVE.

The large bonfire was weak, the growths of dry brush found on neighbouring plateaus being poor fuel for the flames. The animals refused to eat the bone-white branches and thorn-brush leaves; all that was left was for the fire pit.

The half-finished base camp was clustered around the bonfire, just beyond the skirt of light. The command centre and the barracks were nothing but sandbag walls, and were still being built. Tents with peaked roofs, box frames, and black cloth, designed to absorb the heat, littered the interior compound. A grid of solar panels plastered along the walls of one tent glistened under the stars, quietly awaiting morning.

The camp's modular, sand-filled walls were completed. They measured seven metres high, with an interior ledge for the gun emplacements, and barbed wire topping the battlements. At the base of the wall rested funk holes, alcoves to protect troops during shelling.

The atmosphere around the bonfire was quiet, the men finding little reason to socialise or interact beyond their small circles. As always, the Turenag sat on one side, the Banna on the other, and the command staff in the middle. Angry glares passed between the two tribal alliances, but with Commissar Rezaïl sitting there, still pale, but ever fierce in his vigilance, nobody exchanged words or pursued feud-oaths.

SERGEANT NUBIS RECLINED on his prayer roll and stared at the fire. Captain Anuman was at his side, his tone decidedly venomous.

'I'm sure of it,' Anuman said. 'Kortan is an opportunistic snake.'

'Yes,' Nubis said, 'but he is our snake.'

Anuman shook his head. 'Aya, but you can be sure of one thing, a snake always bites. It has no friend. It has no master.'

'Perhaps.'

'Listen to me; I'm sure Kortan is giving more supplies to Nisri and his dogs. We're on strict rations so they can keep themselves fat. Sabaak was on recovery duty with Sergeant Raham's squad.'

'So?'

'Let me finish. When the squad returned, Majri saw one of Raham's men pay Sabaak for extra meals, and Baloos says that neither the squad nor the animals looked particularly dehydrated after their trip. His father was a Mukowwa'en, a dromad driver, and he knows the look of thirst and water rationing. What do you think?'

'I think your men gossip like old women at the market... but there's use in that. Keep your eyes open. Let me know if you find anything else.'

COLONEL NISRI DAKAR and Lieutenant Colonel Turk Iban Salid sat on a large carpet with Sergeant Ballasra, Major Hussari and Captain Toria. The bonfire crackled gently, and they were studying the samples of things that Ballasra had wrapped in cloth strips, and was now unfolding for them.

'This desert is not entirely without hospitality,' Ballasra said. 'These small animals are meagre on meat and taste, but at least they are not poisonous.' He showed them several small strips of brownish meat, all cooked, and all looking dry and tough. 'Take it,' he said. 'Eat. It's cooked.'

Reluctantly, the men each took a strip and bit into the meat; grimaces all around. They chewed harder to force their meals down, the slightly rancid flavour filling their mouths with unwanted tastes and coating their tongues. Major Hussari chuckled at his compatriots' expressions while fighting to control his own. Finally, he burst out laughing.

'By the Emperor,' Hussari said, 'it's like eating feet.' The others chuckled as well. Only Ballasra appeared indignant.

'I'll need all my water rations to wash that taste from my mouth,' Nisri added, slapping Ballasra on the back.

'Speaking of water,' Toria said, swallowing his meal hard. He struggled a moment to retain his composure. 'I found more river beds scattered throughout the area, all dry. I also found a small oasis. It's three metres wide, at best. It's being fed by an underground spring.'

'Good news,' Turk said.

'Maybe,' Toria said. 'It's a fair distance from here and I'm not sure the spring will yield much. I fear we may be wasting more water trying to get at it.'

'Still, we have to try,' Turk replied.

'No,' Nisri responded. 'I agree with Captain Toria. Our resources are thin to begin with.'

'I think we have enough breathing room,' Turk said.

'What happens if the fleet doesn't return when they're supposed to and we squander our water?'

'Exactly what happens if the fleet doesn't return and we've squandered our water while waiting?'

'We'll have nothing. We should do this while we have the luxury to gamble.'

'I do not gamble. We'll search for another oasis, a larger one.'

'And while we search, we lose precious time.'

'Lieutenant-colonel,' Nisri said, his voice low to avoid drawing attention. 'The matter is settled.' He turned to Hussari and Toria. 'Find me another spring, something larger.'

Turk rose to his feet, his face flushed. 'Excuse me,' he said. He shot Toria an angry glance and walked away.

Toria sighed under his breath and rose as well. 'Am I dismissed, sir?' he asked Nisri. Nisri nodded. Somewhere nearby, people began playing small drum jars, and more men were clapping their hands in rhythm.

'Locust?' Ballasra asked, holding out a cloth with small blue insects. 'For an indigenous species, they're quite flavourful.'

COMMISSAR REZAIL AND Tyrell Habass sat with a group of men. Two Guardsmen, older members of the unit, played clay drums and slapped the animal hide stretched over the drum's hollow top. Four more men with bare feet, their puttees wrapped around their ankles and under their heels, wielded glittering scimitars etched with the tribal markings of the Banna. The dancers moved slowly around one another in a slow dance pantomime, while the rest of the men clapped their hands in time to the beat.

'Literacy is not widespread on Tallarn,' Tyrell said. 'Many tribes remember history through oral traditions, and battles are recounted in war dances.'

Rezail nodded. 'The Turenag were once part of the Banna Alliance, but then, something about the Orakle divided them?'

'The Tallarn,' Tyrell said with a wistful smile, 'are always hot-blooded, always fighting, except in their duty to the Emperor. We almost had a civil war. The two greatest alliances, the Doraha and the Makali, grew very angry with one another, and they threatened to draw their vassal tribes into the conflict. If that happened, then over half of Tallarn would still be in blood.'

'But a psyker brokered the truce,' Rezail said. 'Right?'

'Yes. In his honour, the tribes created an Orakle of the Emperor, a supreme scholar who would speak the Emperor's wisdom. Throughout the galaxy, he would merely be an astropath, but among my people, the greatest of the astropaths becomes the Orakle, a mouthpiece for the Emperor's guidance through the holiest of bonds, the Soul Binding.'

'You believe in the Orakle of the Emperor?'

'Believe? No, but we respect his elected position. He is a man, no more, no less.'

'But some Tallarn venerate him, don't they?'

'The same way you venerate your Living Saints. The Orakle is a conduit of the Emperor's will, no more, no less.'

'But the Turenag don't see it that way. When the Banna tribe agreed to the creation of an Orakle of the Emperor, a few tribes split from them on religious principles.'

'Yes, and they formed the heart of the Turenag tribe. Then others joined, all of them believing the Orakle is a false idol. The Turenag and Banna have been quarrelling ever since.'

Rezail nodded, and continued watching the war dancers. He was exhausted, his mind still throbbing from the heat. He could have slept where he sat, but there were far too many unanswered questions.

'Tell me about the Orakle... the one that was murdered.'

'One hundred years ago,' Tyrell said, whispering, 'the Orakle of the Emperor was chosen from the Banna, the first of them to receive that honour. He was a strong man, beloved, and a son to all Banna. But the Turenag alliance not only refused to recognise him, they said he was warp spawn... corrupted. The Turenag sent assassins after him and killed the Orakle. It was a blow against all Banna. They retaliated, slaughtering entire tribes of Turenag in vengeance, and the Turenag

retaliated in turn. At first, the war was only between Turenag and Banna, but then Banna raiders attacked and supposedly killed a village belonging to Doraha.'

'Supposedly?'

'It was never proven. Some say it was Turenag posing as Banna, to gain more allies. Some say the Doraha were already helping the Turenag, and the Banna retaliated.'

'So, how did the Commissariat become involved?'

'My tribe, the Hawadi, it was our suggestion.'

'You suggested the Commissariat mediate the matter?' Rezail said. He was surprised. Most people feared the Commissariat and its rulings, for the fate of worlds often hung in their decisions.

'Tallarn worlds were on the verge of civil war. There was much fighting, much murder, far too much. Even the Hawadi could not bring peace. The only thing the two tribes respected was the sovereignty of the Aba Aba Mushira. The Commissariat served the Emperor as men of war, not men of religion.'

'I see,' Rezail said. 'So you gambled. You thought that if the Commissariat ruled, then both sides would be forced to submit to the ruling.'

'Yes, but the Commissariat remained neutral. They executed the agitators on both sides and issued a Writ Nonculpis for the surviving Banna and Turenag, saying the matter was settled.'

'Not the answer you hoped for.'

'No.'

'Even if the judgement had put an entire tribal alliance to the flame?'

'Better an alliance than the planet. Both Banna and Turenag so believed they were right that they were willing to risk Exterminatus. The Commissariat was very clear, though, saying that the Writ Nonculpis was to stop the fighting. There was to be no more civil war; but the fighting remained, hidden, but there.'

'Aren't they disobeying the Commissariat?'

'It's like the promise of salt, commissar. The Writ Nonculpis does not make men honest.'

'I see your point,' Rezail said, watching the dancers swing their blades with poetic grace. 'I see your point.'

8

TURK STOOD ATOP the battlement, the fire at his back, and watched the stars. He tried to pretend he was home again, staring at familiar skies, but the self-deception wouldn't hold. This sky was too perfect, too unblemished, to pass for Tallarn's polluted vistas. It was beautiful, but he could sense its strangeness. None of the stars called to him as old friends.

At the very least, it dampened the sour knot in his stomach. Turk was argumentative to begin with, he knew that, and he enjoyed the respect that occasionally accompanied his position. Nisri, however, seemed determined to undercut him, to remind him that his voice held no sway in decisions. It was expected given the bloodshed between the two alliances, and while Turk could justify and reason through his situation, the fact that he was raised to despise the Turenag coloured his views. The thought of being subordinate to Nisri, a hated enemy, gnawed at him.

'It's not home, is it?' a woman's voice asked. 'Not quite?'

Turk turned to find Kamala Noore walking up the duckboard ramp that led to his ledge. A chill ran down Turk's spine... had she read his mind? Could she do that without him ever knowing?

'I'm not reading your thoughts,' she said quietly. 'Your face, however...'

'I apologise.'

'I don't need an apology,' she said. 'I'm used to the reactions. But some company, I'd like that.' Turk hesitated.

'We don't have to talk, I promise. Just let me enjoy your company. I'm tired of hiding in my tent.'

Turk nodded and went back to studying the stars. He could almost feel Kamala sighing, her body relaxing. She was beautiful, he knew, but she caught him staring before he could look away. 'The Turenag,' he stammered. 'How do they—'

'You don't have to make conversation for my benefit,' she said, blushing.

'I want to know,' Turk said, facing her. 'Do the Turenag treat you fairly?'

'No,' she admitted. 'I am a vessel through which corruption flows.' She turned to Turk. 'How do I explain this? Ah... do you know the Turenag are so absolute in their faith that they possess no images of the Emperor? To paint him, sculpt him, or illustrate him in anything but words is to worship the image and not the power. To record his image is to deny his boundless nature.

Omniscience, omnipresence, they cannot be recorded, and to do so is to imply that the Emperor has limits. It is the Turenag mark of absolute humility and absolute submission.'

'What's that got to do with you?'

'The Turenag decided that to suggest that our power makes us greater than anyone else is also to suggest that we are closer to the Emperor in power. That implies that we are somehow closer to He that cannot be qualified. We become a point of definition, and you can't have that in respect to the Emperor.'

'I can see why that can be confusing. Perhaps if you read their minds,' Turk said, straight-faced, 'then it would make more sense.'

Kamala laughed. 'A joke, lieutenant-colonel, thank you.'

Turk shrugged, a modest smile on his lips.

'But no,' she said. 'I wouldn't want to read a Turenag's mind. Some tribes murder their baby daughters, and I know they kill psyker children when they have a chance.'

'How did you escape?' Turk asked.

'The Inquisition's Black Ships found me first. I returned to my tribe when they drew up the regiment. I was battle-trained by then and more than capable of defending myself.'

'Indeed,' Turk said. It was easy to stare into her black eyes and forget her power. Despite himself, Turk found he was swimming in her gaze, and she in his. It was a pleasant distraction from the road that he knew lay ahead.

CHAPTER FOUR

'As the passage narrows, there is no brother, there is no friend.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

DAY SEVENTY-THREE

'You think they forgot about us?'

Sergeant Ballasra knelt down and checked the tracks again: more of Khadar's indigenous rats, but a large pack this time.

'The commissar lashed another five men. It's getting worse at the camp.'

Ballasra sighed and ignored the nattering Guardsman keeping him company in the open desert. He examined the tracks. There were at least eight different indents in the ground, the only indication of direction, a spray of sand from where their feet kicked back as they moved. He followed the tracks, and spotted them walking up the slope of a distant dune. They were too far away to determine their numbers.

'And water,' the Guardsman moaned. 'What I wouldn't give to fill my bladder with water.'

Ballasra motioned to Private Ignar Chalfous to join him. Chalfous pulled the two dromads by their reins and approached. They bayed and snapped their hooked beaks in displeasure.

'More of the rats?' Chalfous sighed. 'I'm tired of the rats.'

Ballasra scowled at the young soldier. 'No, young idiot. We're not hunting these rats for food.'

'So why are we following them?'

Ballasra turned to the younger soldier and shook his head. 'You're from the city, aren't you, boy?'

'Yes. Dasra City in—'

'Yes, yes, fascinating. What do the rats eat? What do they drink?'

'Well, I assume, food and water,' Chalfous said, laughing at his own cunning. Ballasra simply nodded and waited for him to finish the thought.

'Oh!' Chalfous said, finally understanding. 'You're following them to see if they lead you to water or scrub.'

Ballasra shook his head. 'Your parents must cry themselves to sleep every night,' he muttered.

'Pardon?' Chalfous asked.

'We'd best follow them before night comes,' Ballasra replied, shouldering his lasrifle.

2

KORTAN STUDIED THE officers as he offered his report. Nobody smiled, and Kortan knew better than to bring levity to the moment. Everyone appeared on edge and dangerously quiet, trapped in their own thoughts. He noticed a few angry glances being tossed about... they were losing patience. The last two months had taken their toll, and they were looking for someone to pay.

'We're not much better off than before,' Kortan replied. 'We're down to a week of food and two of water.'

'Water reclamation?' Nisri asked, his gaze fixed on the grey washed wall of the single storey command bunker. Most of the equipment had been turned off, with the exception of a vox and a single auspex device. It was dark, the lights turned off to conserve energy.

'The solar stills are only collecting eighty quarts a day. That's twenty gallons, enough drink for twenty men, forty with rationing,' Kortan said.

'Is someone pilfering water?' Nisri said, exasperated.

'No sir.'

'Then how is this possible?' Nisri barked. 'We've built over two hundred solar stills. That's—' Nisri struggled, trying to think through the maths; he, like everyone else, however, was dehydrated and unfocused.

'Two hundred quarts, fifty gallons,' Turk said impatiently.

'I know,' Nisri said. 'Don't interrupt me again.' Turk mumbled something, his face marred by an ugly scowl.

'What was that?' Nisri said. He looked predatory, dangerous.

'I said,' Turk replied slowly, 'we wouldn't be in this predicament had you listened to me two months ago.'

'This again!' Nisri said. 'You would have had us wasting precious resources trying to get at water that might not even be there. Instead of running out of water in two weeks, we'd be dying of dehydration now, all to suit your pride.'

'Excuse me, sir,' Turk responded. 'If you want me to agree with your decision, then you'd better make it an order. Until then, you made a mistake. You decided that cutting my authority was worth more than following a valid suggestion. And now, we might be months away from dehydration, not weeks!'

'On my father's blood, lieutenant-colonel, you will keep your mouth shut or I will shoot you for insubordination.'

'Your father's blood,' Turk said, sneering. 'The same coward who raped and murdered the women of my tribe?'

It was an instant flashpoint, the room moving from stunned silence into heated action. Nisri and Turk drew their weapons simultaneously. Men kicked over chairs as they reached for scimitars and guns. Nubis and the other Banna officers stood in front of Turk, while Nisri's men guarded him. Bolters and laspistols were pointing in both directions. Kortan did his best to shrink into the wall. He didn't want to take sides.

The room was quiet for a moment, filled only with ragged breathing and angry glares. Knuckles whitened, and fingers slowly pressed on their triggers.

A pair of las-shots punctured the silence.

COMMISSAR REZAIL AND Tyrell stood their ground, each one pointing a laspistol at one of the groups in the command bunker. They had everyone's attention, the two holes punched into the far wall still smoking.

'Enough!' Rezail said. His voice was a snarl, perfectly controlled and modulated, as per the Schola Progenium lessons on speech-craft and intimidation. It was enough to keep everyone's attention on him. The angry stares did not diminish, but he could see realisation slowly creep into their expressions. They were on the edge of a precipice. They knew that, but they didn't know how to back away from it.

Rezail finally understood that the purpose of the Hawadi tribe wasn't just to mediate. It was to offer both parties an exit from their predicament without losing face. The Tallarn were too proud for their own good. They dug themselves into deep holes without thinking, and then relied on the Hawadi, or someone else, to defuse the matter without appearing the fools.

What the two factions needed right now, Rezail realised, was a greater concern. If they really wanted to fight, there was little he could do to stop them from pulling the triggers. But, until then, he could offer them a greater threat: himself.

'All of you, out!' Rezail barked. 'One word of this to the men, one more outburst, and I will execute you like dogs.'

The Tallarn tribesmen hesitated, but eventually, they sheathed their weapons. Rezail and Tyrell, however, did not.

'Colonel, lieutenant-colonel, you two stay,' Rezail said. He nodded to Tyrell to leave with the others. When the three men were finally alone, Rezail said, lightly tapping the pistol against his thigh, 'Any other unit... any other unit, and I would have you both executed for that pitiful display of soldiery.'

'Nobody insults my father,' Nisri began.

'Both your fathers are dogs,' Rezail snapped, 'and they should have mounted better mongrels than your mothers.'

Both Nisri and Turk looked at the commissar aghast, their faces working through the insult.

'Now that we've dispensed with the petty idiocies,' Rezail continued, 'you will not interrupt me again. Make no mistake, gentlemen, we commissars have executed generals before now for dereliction of duty and gross incompetence. Rest assured, neither of you would be the first regimental officers that I've shot.'

Nisri and Turk both bit their tongues, but some of the colour had certainly left their faces.

'In this case, I choose not to plant a las-bolt in your collective skulls,' Rezail said, almost sneering at them. 'I need you both to keep your mutts in check. If I shoot one of you, I might as well kill every member of your tribe, but, make no mistake, I brought enough clips for the task. Cross me once more, just once, and I swear your men will suffer the consequences of your pitiful leadership.' Rezail remained quiet for a moment, waiting to see if they still had any defiance left in them. They didn't appear to, however, their tempers cooled for the moment, and their duties as soldiers remembered.

'I want you to speak to your men,' Rezail said calmly. 'Remind them of their duty to the Emperor. When the supply ship comes, and it will come, I want the fleet to find a proper, by-the-book operation. They will not find a rabble of men ready to kill each other. They will not find our faith in the Imperial Fleet, or the Emperor, lacking, is that understood?'

Nisri straightened and brushed the creases from his tan uniform. 'Perfectly, commissar.'

'Yes, commissar,' Turk said, regaining his composure. He still looked haggard, his thick frame winnowed by the rations, but his eyes were clear. 'Do you also wish to speak to the men?'

Rezail tapped the laspistol against his thigh. 'No,' he said, finally, 'I leave that to you.'

3

THE WINDS PUSHED at the sand, sending small ribbons across the compound. The camp appeared deserted; the Guardsmen stayed out of the heat or, if on sentry duty, sat in the shade of the covered watchtowers along the walls. Kortan could see the broken, distant gaze in the eyes of the Guardsmen. They were going through the motions, their actions mechanical. They'd grown anaesthetised. There was little to draw them away from the hunger lingering in the pits of their souls.

So much for the grand mission to investigate the mortis-cry, Kortan thought. For a month, the camp had been paralysed under the heat and restrictive rations. The med-hall was already filled with soldiers suffering from chest colds, fevers and even pneumonia, in one case. The rigours of rationing had weakened men to the point where ordinary ailments became extraordinary problems. The medicae were coping, but barely. Medical supplies had run out, and without water to help clean and sterilise the med-hall, the number of infections soared.

Kortan walked past the med-hall, into the assembly ground where rested the self-propelled Basilisk artillery piece, a massive gun fitted to the frame of a Chimera. Four recoil braces extended from the corners of the Basilisk, each anchored to the plateau rock with heavy pins. Kortan glanced into the vehicle stables on his way past; the giant sliding hangar doors were open and the vehicles inside covered by tarps. They'd been sitting quietly for weeks now, to conserve fuel. That didn't stop Captain Abantu from keeping his men busy with regular vehicle maintenance.

Kortan continued for the orange door of the supply shed. The shed was made of plascrete and provided some cool relief from the sunlight. He walked through the door, anticipating the flush of cool air of the storage facility, but instead came face to face with Captain Anuman and two startled Guardsmen. They stood near one of the stacked crates, its lid torn open, stuffing rations into a rucksack. Sabaak was on the duckboard floor between two metal shelving units, lying face down, and bleeding from the head.

Anuman was the first to react, and drew his laspistol. Kortan barely had time to duck behind a metal container before the las-shots peppered his location.

4

'WHERE ARE THEY?' Chalfous asked. The dunes had subsided into a ribbed plain of sandy-grey loam, broken by mounds of weather smoothed white limestone. 'I'm starving. I could do with a bit of rat.'

'Here,' Ballasra said, holding out his hand. A thumb-sized insect with a black and red carapace struggled between his fingertips, its legs high in the air.

Chalfous made a face and waved off Ballasra. 'Too bitter,' he said. 'They make me thirsty.'

Ballasra shrugged and peeled off the insect's carapace before sucking out the meat and entrails.

They continued moving between the limestone mounds, Chalfous pulling at the dromads, and Ballasra searching the ground for tracks. He motioned to a large formation of limestones, a series of soft-faced pillars measuring at least ten storeys high.

'Was this ocean once?' Chalfous asked, staring at the limestone around them.

'No, perhaps a sea or a mighty river near the ocean. But, there was life here once. She must have been a beautiful world, rich and green, like Tallarn of old.'

Chalfous nodded, half interested in Ballasra's mean-derings, if the fatigued expression on his face and stifled yawn spoke of anything else. Ballasra shook his head. He hated the "domesticated" Tallarn, those who'd eschewed their tribal ways to live in the hives. They'd grown soft and easily distracted.

Without another word, Ballasra continued forward, towards the formations. The sign of limestone was good, as were the multiple tracks in the sandy loam, far more tracks than the family of rats they followed. There was life here, more life than they'd seen on Khadar before, probably tucked into the niches of the shady outcrop-pings. While the others searched the small cluster of shrubs for signs of water, Ballasra preferred to listen to the rocks. The loam seemed fat with moisture. If nothing else, solar stills built here might pull more water from the ground. It was a pity they were so far from camp. It would take them half a day to return, weather permitting.

'What's that?' Chalfous asked, staring at the formation. He was standing to Ballasra's far left, which gave him a better vantage of the limestone clusters.

Ballasra sighed and wished the boy would keep his mouth shut. He joined Chalfous, just to see what had his subordinate gawking. He stopped short of chastising Chalfous, however, when he found himself staring at something completely unexpected.

'Well, well,' Ballasra said with a smile. 'This planet is far more interesting than we anticipated.'

'We should go back and report it?'

'Report what, boy?' Ballasra asked. 'No, we find out what "it" is first. Then we go back.'

Chalfous didn't seem eager, but Ballasra was already moving forward, a grin on his weathered face.

5

SERGEANT RAHAM WAS running for the supply shed and the sounds of fighting when the orange door burst open. A Banna Guardsman stumbled outside, firing his laspistol back inside at someone. He dragged a heavy rucksack along the ground, and turned to flee. He spotted Raham and fired wide in panic.

Raham dived for the ground, laspistol in hand, and fired back. The Guardsman took the blow to the upper chest, and fell silently to the ground.

Everything seemed to go quiet at that moment. Raham barely had time to pick himself off the ground when he heard the shouts.

'He killed Barakos! The Turenags killed Barakos.'

The fury of two months found its crack in the disciplined but flagging wall of soldiers, and the crack spread like a lightning bolt. A handful of men quickly surrounded Raham, all of them Turenag to the sergeant's relief, all of them trying to protect him, regardless of the reason. Before Raham could order anyone to stand down, several Banna tribesmen rushed Raham and his defenders.

It only took Raham a second to realise that he was in a brawl. All the ugly, tribal, sectarian violence spilled out in shouts of anger and clenched fists. This wasn't the kind of fight where punches were thrown, it was the kind of violence where centuries of hatred found howling release. Men strangled each other, driving their thumbs into eye sockets, biting, smashing heads into the rocky ground.

NUBIS WAS LEAVING the vehicle stables and trying to reach the commotion at the supply shed when someone leapt on him. Nubis reacted, throwing the Turenag off his back. As quick as a flood, the fight had overtaken him. He backed away, trying to put some distance between him and the mob of grabbing hands. Somewhere, he heard the whine hiss of laspistol fire followed by bolter fire. Daggers and sabres flashed in the light, and Nubis saw Turenag and Banna fighting. Men screamed and fell to the ground, where boots silenced their cries.

Nubis hissed a curse. A Turenag brandishing a curved dagger lunged at him. Nubis grabbed his wrist and moved to the side, exposing the man's elbow long enough for the master gunner to break it.

The next two adversaries didn't have the opportunity to attack. Nubis darted forward, driving a fist into one man's nose and breaking it flat. The second man earned one boot to the gut, and a second to the jaw.

More Turenag tribesmen advanced on Nubis, all intent on satisfying old debts.

REZAIL, NISRI AND Turk all emerged from the command bunker, into the full onslaught of chaos unfolding in the centre of camp. It was all a blur, a horrific vista of tribal violence and anger. At this moment in time, it did not matter who had started the fight or the rightness of it. A dozen men already lay on the ground, and Guardsmen, both Banna and Turenag struggled in each other's grips. More men were trying to rush in to help their compatriots, the reason for the skirmish unimportant.

Turk and Nisri immediately began pulling men back or off each other, but only Rezail knew a heavy price was demanded of the moment.

'Protect my back,' Rezail said calmly.

Turk and Nisri both nodded, their faces pale. They both knew what came next, but neither could do anything against its inevitability.

Rezail drew his chainsword, and revved the spinning links into a roar. Those who heard and stopped, scurried away at the sight of a commissar hell-bent on enforcing the law. Those who didn't were locked in deadly combat. Rezail moved past them, decapitating the arms of those wielding weapons, or firing a las-bolt in the heads of those standing over dead bodies.

'I am the Emperor's dark angel!' Rezail shouted, his voice carrying above the noise, as he executed one soldier after the other. Those Guardsman who heard and stopped were spared. All those who watched were stunned into silence, their mouths open.

'I dispense the will of the High Lords of Terra. I am the keeper of the regiment's fire, and I alone can spill the regiment's blood. Those of you who murder your fellow soldiers are no better than dogs! And I excel at executing dogs.'

'Stop fighting!' Turk roared, winging a couple of his own men for emphasis.

Silently, Nisri did the same, with gritted teeth.

The fight was quickly breaking up, but there was a cluster of men still brawling near the supply shed. Rezail knew that bloodlust had overtaken reason. There was only killing to be had.

NUBIS HEARD THE commissar and Turk shouting, but he could not disentangle himself from the fight. He seemed surrounded by

Turenag. One bearded man charged, but Nubis sidestepped him and sent him headfirst into the ground. Three more converged on him, two with knives, and one with a laspistol. Nubis tried to mutter a prayer, but the pistol came up too quickly.

Suddenly, the hissing whine of a las-bolt rang out. The tribesman with the laspistol fell to the floor, his face blackened. The remaining men turned to run. Another shot caught one in the back of his head, cratering the skull and punching through the other side. The acrid scent of burnt hair and meat filled the air. Nubis turned to find a wild-eyed and bleeding Captain Anuman pointing a laspistol at the fleeing men. Before the master gunner could stop him, Anuman fired wildly into the crowd, killing kinsmen and allies alike in battle lust. More men fell. Some tried to fire back, but Anuman seemed possessed and felled opponents one after the other. Others scrambled for the door or dived out of windows.

Nubis grabbed him by the wrist, pushing his arm up.

'Stop!' Nubis snarled. 'Stop!'

Anuman struggled with him, his face contorted in a pitch of rage. 'Let me kill them! They're dogs! They're dogs!'

Half of Anuman's face vanished under the flash of a las-bolt, and Nubis stumbled back, his front painted in blood and viscera. He turned, expecting the next shot to end him, but Commissar Rezail was staring down. Nubis followed the commissar's gaze, until it came to rest on Sergeant Raham's body at his very feet. His blond hair was matted with blood and a knife was lodged in his chest.

ANUMAN'S RAMPAGE AND death undid the knot of fighting, but Nisri seemed intent on revenge. He strode forward, his pistol pointed at Nubis.

'You killed Sergeant Raham,' Nisri said, his voice shaking.

'I did no such thing,' Nubis said, staring with fierce defiance. 'I tried to stop the fighting, and my knife is still sheathed.'

'You lie,' Nisri said.

'Colonel,' Rezail shouted, 'stand down.'

'I want satisfaction for Raham's murder.'

'Over my dead body,' Turk snapped back. 'Nubis had no—'

'That can be arranged!' Nisri shouted.

A bursting roar came from the commissar's chainsword, and links sparked and skipped over the rocky ground.

'Battalion Commander Iban Salid!' the commissar said. 'You will take First Company and retire to your barracks. I want details on what happened. Tyrell, escort Second Company to their barracks and get their side of it. Colonel Dakar, with me.'

THE COMMAND BUNKER was emptied, left to Rezail and Nisri as they shouted. The only people left outside were the medicae, who were tending to the wounded.

'Colonel Dakar,' Rezail shouted, 'I shouldn't be the one reminding you about your duties! The mere fact that you'd have me shoot Nubis, who clearly had nothing to do with Raham's death, proves to me that you've forgotten your duties to the Emperor.'

Nisri's face contorted into a hateful scowl. 'I know my duties as a soldier better than you, political officer. Sergeant Raham's record as an NCO was peerless. Sergeant Nubis's record, if you'd taken the time to examine it, is earmarked with disciplinary actions. He could have been a lieutenant or a major by now, but he always finds trouble.'

'And yet,' Rezaïl said, 'Sergeant Nubis was stopping his own man from shooting your tribesmen in the back. And how do you repay him for saving the lives of your men? By demanding his execution! Your judgement is impaired. Battalion Commander Iban Salid's judgement is impaired. Frankly, I would execute the whole lot of you for putting your petty, vindictive feud ahead of your duties to the Emperor. Since we've been stranded here, we've already lost three qualified officers and at least a dozen men... and none to the enemy! We've fought nobody except one another! One another, damn it!'

The anger left Nisri's body. He seemed to deflate, the life vacating him in a rush. He steadied himself against the desk. Rezaïl had to stop as well, his head swimming from dehydration, from hunger and from the fatigue. Neither of them said anything. There was nothing left to say; the situation seemed hopeless. They were trapped on a desert world with no apparent hope of rescue. For the moment, it felt like they'd come here to die.

6

THE COMPOUND SEEMED deserted. There was no unauthorised movement, and all off-duty personnel were confined to their barracks while Commissar Rezaïl spoke to each platoon in turn. A Guardsman sang a prayer hymn to the love and devotion of the Emperor, over the loudspeakers mounted on the building. His throaty voice echoed in the lonely desert, and his words melted into one another to form the river of a melody that washed the ears and soothed the jagged heart. Turk did one last sweep of the two barracks belonging to the Banna, before heading to the lone tent tucked at the foot of the wall. After a quick glance around, he ducked inside and immediately fell into the arms of Kamala Noore. There was nothing to say at the moment. They fell into the each other's embrace.

NISRI SAT IN the darkness of the command bunker. The solitary lights of the only two remaining active control slates bathed him in their blinking wash.

'You're overdue by several hours,' Nisri said, not bothering to look up. 'I can't afford to send out search parties.'

'The desert provides me with all I need,' Sergeant Ballasra said, coming down the three stone steps. 'I heard what happened. Raham dead?'

'Saving the quartermaster's life. I wish to be left alone.'

'I know, but this is not the time for such privileges, not when your tribe needs you.'

Nisri shook his head. 'My tribe... I'm in danger of losing my command. Commissar Rezaïl would be within his rights to assume command. Do not speak of such things, not now, not after what's happened.'

'Was it not said,' Ballasra said, 'that we would find a new world... a paradise free of the heretic Orakles and iconoclasts? Here,' Ballasra said, handing Nisri his canteen, 'taste the waters of paradise.'

Nisri stared into Ballasra's eyes and saw, for the first time in ages, the spark of joy. Something had enraptured Ballasra, and it sang to Nisri as well. He took the canteen and was surprised at its weight. He hadn't felt a full canteen in months. He smelled the clean water and drank its cool freshness. This was not distilled water; this was not stale drink. He could taste the rock over which it had flowed in the heavy minerals that clung to his tongue. Ballasra smiled at Nisri's mystified expression, and produced a curved red knobby fruit. Ballasra sliced off a piece with his knife and offered it to Nisri.

'Here, eat from the gardens of paradise.'

The fruit was meaty and succulent, and thick with red juice that dribbled down Nisri's chin. He laughed, a quick bark that echoed off the walls, and devoured the fruit down to the rind.

'I have found us our world,' Ballasra said. 'All that remains is for you to lead your tribe there.'

CHAPTER FIVE

*'Thank the Emperor for His blessings,
And surely you must thank him for your misfortunes.'*

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

DAY EIGHTY.

The limestone rock formations seemed incongruous in the surrounding desert. They simply appeared, as though alien, displaced. They were massive, ten storeys tall and thick in girth. Red, green and orange shrubs grew around their base, in thick clusters, and the air carried an earthy musk. It was the smell of moisture.

A wide tunnel mouth nestled at the roots of the pillars, almost shielded by them, as if Khadar had started to yawn, and had forgotten to stop. The tunnel mouth was large and pressed into the earth like a thumbprint. Three Chimeras could drive into her, shoulder to shoulder, with little risk of bumping against one another. As it was, one Chimera was already sheltered inside the cavern's mouth, gathering food and water for transport back to camp.

The tunnel branched into a delta of smaller passages, some large enough to accommodate the chicken-legged Sentinel walkers under the command of Major Hussari. Bio-phos paint and lumetubes illuminated the main tunnel, consigning the remainder to darkness. The corridors eventually stopped, leading back up to the surface, or reconnecting to the main passages. A mere handful dug down deep into the stone, eventually ending in what the Guardsmen had designated "Cavern Apostle", and that was only the beginning of the network of giant caves.

Apostle was huge, like the grand hall of the battle fleet's cathedral ships. The ceiling arched high above the floor, while stalagmites and stalactites reached low and high. In a few places, thick columns that tethered sky and earth broke through the deep deposits of loam covering the ground. Captain Toria, who possessed some skill in caving, explained that the caves were formed from water passing through soft limestone, eating away at it until it formed chambers. He called them solution caves, and theorised that, given the dry river beds that scarred the surface, Khadar was once a water-fertile world. Over time, the rivers ate through the limestone, forming an underground network of tunnels, exposing reflective pyrite flakes that glittered and improved any ambient light. Over the millennia, erosion turned the tunnels into caves, and any water that evaporated from the heat condensed on the walls and ceilings and dribbled down in thick rivulets. Given the strength and thickness of the larger streams, Toria theorised that there were more caverns such as this, filled with a sea's bounty in mineral-rich waters.

What Captain Toria was at a loss to explain, however, was how the cavern could hold a rich, verdant jungle, an ecosystem unlike any the Tallarn had ever seen.

2

KAMALA NOORE STOOD on a high ledge overlooking the jungle canopy of Cavern Basilica. The cavern remained largely unexplored and partially dark, save for patches of bioluminescence. Thousands of light strings, which seemed to shine a soft white, glowed along the ceiling. Someone told her they were creatures that used their light to lure insects in for the feast. Kamala hesitated; did someone tell her, or was it another random thought plucked from their minds? She couldn't tell. It was hard to focus.

Several metres below her, the canopy glowed slightly, the fronds tipped with yellow glow bulbs that sent a sparkle across the jungle. Foliage rustled and the trees shifted, the bulbs dancing. She could hear the whines of the Sentinels' servo-motors as they explored their new environment, their guide torches flashing through the breaks in the canopy.

Unable to pierce the gloom with her eyes, her mind seemed to scramble wildly through the caverns, unfocused, untethered. Since arriving on Khadar, Kamala had been searching for some sign of an Imperial presence, of a massacre, but there was none. With the exception of a survey team that had made a cursory examination of the planet ages ago, Khadar remained pristine and inviolate.

It wouldn't be the first time a psyker had received distorted images and misidentified them, but this felt different. There was a ghost of something in the air, and it was maddeningly elusive. It slipped through her fingertips and haunted her with the haze of dead faces. She could almost see an Imperial banner half-buried in sand. She could almost see the vague faces with their dead eyes that stared up at the sky, but, like a name that was on the tip of the tongue, it remained formed and unformed. It was never complete, and without it, she felt incomplete.

Whatever it was that Kamala believed was missing, she felt that the caves were critical to it. She reached out and sensed the enormity of the cave system. They spread out for dozens of kilometres, maybe more, and they pulled at her, stretched her thin. As always, the answer rested just beyond her grasp.

A brush of boots against the ground brought Kamala out of her reverie. She didn't need to turn around to know that it was Turk. With a nod, he dismissed the two Guardsmen watching her. Nisri wouldn't allow her anywhere unescorted, the fear of psyker corruption a steady refrain in a psyker's life.

'Found anything?'

'No,' she replied, staring out across the jungle. 'Some animals and I - I wish I knew more.'

'Well, all we need to know is that the Emperor has delivered us from harm. There is enough food and water, to last us for forever.'

'Praise be to the Emperor,' Kamala said, her voice barely a whisper.

Turk stood next to her. He glanced around, ensuring they weren't being watched.

'What is it, my love?'

'I - I don't know. I feel stifled, suffocated. I can't focus. Something is pulling at my senses.'

'What?' Turk asked. His fingertips touched her hand.

'I don't know,' she said. She quickly squeezed his finger before letting go. 'I feel like I'm enjoying the last peace I'll ever know.'

'You can't know that.'

'Can't I?' she asked. A flicker of psychokinetic electricity flickered across her skin. She seemed embarrassed. 'I'm sorry, but whoever sent the mortis-cry... he stood here as well, looking out across the same jungle. It's as if he was here a few seconds ago. Did I just miss him?'

'You've found the expedition?' Turk asked.

'Just the whispers of their ghosts. No, not even that. It's as if I'm seeing... hearing the echoes of their ghosts. It's as if whatever killed them didn't even leave behind enough of them to matter. Please, don't leave me alone.'

Turk nodded and held her hand gently.

3

THE SENTINELS CRASHED through the jungle, using their cannons to push branches and swathes of vines out of the way. Their torch lamps burned brightly, illuminating their surroundings. Major Hussari and his pilots marvelled at the jungle with its thick green trunks, giant fronds that brushed against the cockpit's open frame, vines that girded the massive columns and walls, and thick roots growing from the soft loam. Captain Toria had surmised that the surface rivers had left behind thick deposits of fertile earth. In some places, where the vegetation was barest, rock and limestone peeked through, but in the places where trees were thickest, Toria estimated that the soil was dozens of metres deep.

The major was under strict orders not to burn or clear any paths through the jungle, a point Colonel Dakar seemed feverishly adamant on. Hussari did as instructed, though the going was far too slow.

At this point, they were better off on foot, like Ballasra and Toria's squads.

'Runner Two, what's on auspex?' Major Hussari called into his micro-bead.

'Runner One, the jungle's thick, but we're coming up on a shallow stream forty metres ahead. After the stream, there's a wall with what appears to be a large cavern opening. It's a big one. Shall I designate it Devotion?'

'Negative, not yet,' Hussari responded. Toria warned us we might encounter maze caves with wall segments and partial half-walls. 'Let's make sure it's another cave first and not part of Basilica.'

'Understood, Runner One.'

Suddenly, 'Nobody move, nobody move!' Runner Two shouted.

It was too late. Runner Three, moving ahead of the pack through a small gap in the trees, had entered what appeared to be a clearing. Hussari was almost through the gap when a sharp crack echoed across the cavern. Runner Three vanished in an instant as the ground disintegrated beneath his bird's feet.

The clearing was a crevice covered by a thin layer of limestone. Runner Three screamed in his micro-bead as his walker fell. Seconds later, his bird crashed to the ground and exploded.

Major Hussari managed to pull on the steering levers in time, back peddling from the chasm that was opening at his feet and barely avoiding Runner Two.

'I'm sorry, major,' Runner Two said. 'Auspex didn't pick it up until it was too late.'

'This is Runner One to base.'

'Acknowledged, Runner One. Did we just hear an explosion?'

Hussari sighed. 'Confirmed. We lost a bird. Warn the other squads to watch their step. Auspex doesn't pick up crevices until it's too late.'

'Acknowledged. Return home, Runner One.'

Major Hussari switched off his micro-bead. Both Sentinels lowered themselves to the ground, kneeling on reverse-articulated legs until their cabins were a metre off the jungle floor. Hussari and Private Amum Bak flipped open their canopy frames and dropped to the jungle floor. They

approached the lip of the chasm, carefully, and peered down. Smoke billowed up from the wreckage of the fallen bird while the fire lit the surroundings. It wasn't just a chasm, it was a rift in the ceiling of another jungle filled cavern. Fortunately, the forest was too wet for the fire to spread. 'By the Orakle's beard,' Amum muttered. 'How big is this place?'

4

THE TROPICAL FOREST in Apostle was thin in comparison to the deeper jungles. The air was also more humid the further down one ventured, but with water rationing at a cautious end, Commissar Rezail gladly indulged his thirst and hunger. He sat on a rock at the treeline, staring into the yellow bulb-lights that seemed to float in the darkness. He chewed on one of the peeled fruits, relishing its freshness and aroma, both of which filled his nostrils and coated his taste-deprived tongue. Everyone at camp was clamouring to see this so-called paradise, but for now, the camp would remain where it was. Only when the fuel shortage turned absolutely critical would they establish another camp within the caves. At least, that was Turk's wise contribution to the discussions. Nisri, however, seemed pensive and rather territorial about the entire matter. He wouldn't commit to any answer, and instead loosened the water and food restrictions to just shy of luxuries like showers and laundry.

Rezail was lost in thought when Tyrell cleared his throat. Colonel Nisri was standing, waiting.

'A moment of your time?' Nisri asked, smiling and calm.

'Certainly,' Rezail said, wiping the juices from his mouth. 'Alone?'

'No, your adjutant may be helpful in... facilitating an explanation of my request.'

'All right,' Rezail responded, intrigued. There was still considerable tension between him and Nisri, but the colonel seemed oblivious to the events surrounding Raham's death and the riot... a riot that had left others, including Quartermaster Kortan and his assistant, Sabaak, recovering in the med-bay.

'I would like to formally announce my tribe's interest in colonising Khadar.'

Rezail was not expecting that. He glanced at Tyrell, who looked equally surprised.

'But, service in the Imperial Guard is a lifetime commitment,' Rezail said, cautiously.

'I know that, of course, but the High Lords of Terra have rewarded a home world with sister planets before. I am asking that my tribe, the Turenag Alliance, be allowed to colonise Khadar on behalf of the Imperium.'

'That only happens under extraordinary circumstances: extended campaigns, meritorious service so far above the call of duty that the war is entered as a Holy Action in all Remembrancer accounts, and in the official history of the Imperium.'

Nisri shrugged and smiled broadly. 'I would call these extraordinary circumstances, would you not?'

'No,' Rezail responded, 'and the only times the High Lords have done this is in recognition of the efforts of the Adeptus Astartes, never for a regiment.'

'Almost never,' Nisri said.

'You're splitting hairs,' Rezail said. 'The fact is, colonising a world is such a monumental undertaking that it's hardly done. And, whether I agree with you or not is beside the point, it is not my decision to make. Coming to me first carries no weight.'

'Yes, but they would listen to a political officer more than they would a colonel, correct? Besides, there is a greater consideration here.'

'And what's that?' Rezail asked cautiously.

'What I'm proposing would end the struggles between the Turenag and the Banna Alliances. I'm offering you the opportunity to end the threat of civil war on my world, something not even the Commissariat could do.'

5

NISRI HAD ONLY just left when Rezail threw a cautious glance at Tyrell. 'What do you think?' Rezail asked.

Tyrell looked around. 'I think that this is a very dangerous thing.'

'A chance to end the violence? How bad is the fighting on your worlds?'

'We skirt civil war constantly. The Banna and Turenag cannot battle openly without risking the wrath of the Adeptus Arbites, the holders of Imperial Law. But they can induce others to draw blood for them, and they've grown adept at manipulating proxies to war on their behalf. It is a civil war fought in back alleys and in assassination. But, nothing can stay in the shadows forever. This will not remain hidden.'

'Would this be perceived as taking sides? Or favouritism?'

'Indeed, yes,' Tyrell responded. 'By giving the Turenag this world, you are rewarding them for their actions, for killing the Orakle, for every Banna they killed. The Banna would never allow this, and they are on the same expedition. Iban Salid has as much claim on Khadar as the Turenag has.'

'If the High Lords of Terra agree,' Rezail said, shaking his head, 'which I highly doubt, the undertaking would be massive: the ships, the logistics, the formation of a planetary governance, the inclusion of the Adeptus Arbitres to ensure the colony is being built according to Imperial Law, a military presence to protect the planet, the redrawing of naval patrol routes to include Khadar... even to call it mammoth is to treat the matter casually.'

'Of course, commissar.'

'But, wouldn't the Banna want to be rid of the Turenag?'

'They would be sharing Tallarn, not owning it, so to speak. By the blessing of the High Lords of Terra and the Munificence of His Golden Throne, the Turenag would settle and colonise this world.'

'And the Banna's pride prevents them from allowing it.'

'All the alliances would take umbrage. They would all be demanding a world to settle on this precedent. But for the Banna, it would say that the Turenag are right. More important, it means the Banna would be admitting that they are wrong, in the eyes of the Imperium.'

'Damn,' Rezail said. 'Your people are stubborn.'

Tyrell nodded without hesitation. He was a patient man, which the commissar appreciated, especially in light of the tricky manoeuvring to be undertaken between the Banna and Turenag. Whenever Rezail felt like handling the situation with the rough bluster of the commissars, he looked to Tyrell for a calmer response.

'Can I ignore the request, and contribute to the growing violence between your two tribal alliances?'

'There is another consideration,' Tyrell said, scratching his chin. A sly smile crept across his lips, and Rezail knew he wasn't going to like the suggestion, if only because it would be the prudent course.

6

'I HAVE TO admit,' Nisri said, standing next to the commissar at the jungle's tree line. 'I didn't expect an answer so soon.'

'I don't have an answer for you, not yet,' Rezail replied. 'I recognise the importance of this world in saving Tallarn from civil war, but I also recognise it as a shrewd move to legitimise your assassination of the Orakle and your conflict with the Banna.'

'I assure you, that I'm only interested in obtaining this paradise for my people.'

'Even if it required you and your tribe to "admit" that you made a mistake in assassinating the Orakle?'

Nisri's smile remained, but there was a ruthless edge to his admission. He understood the game, far better than the more straightforward Turk. 'Our assassination of the heretic Orakle was righteous. To admit otherwise is to renounce our claim of serving the Emperor and, more importantly, our claim on this world.'

'I understand that,' Rezail said, 'but as an official representative of the Imperium's interests, I must appear impartial.'

'Of course,' Nisri said, 'and as an official representative of the High Lords of Terra, you must also protect the security of the dominions of man. By giving us a home, Tallarn is made peaceful. Is that not in the best interests of the Imperium?'

Rezail chuckled aloud, something Nisri was not expecting. It was obvious that Nisri enjoyed a position of power, and people followed his word, often without question or criticism. The laughter ruffled his feathers, and he appeared indignant.

'Colonel Dakar,' Rezail said, still chuckling, 'you're trying to argue the politics of the Imperium with a political officer. You are a savvy man, I respect that, but I was trained by the Battle Orators of the Schola Progenium, so I'd appreciate not being "handled". The fact is, you are making a request for consideration under the articles put forth by the Master of the Administratum, the ancient right of an Imperial Guard regiment to claim an uninhabited or conquered planet for colonisation by their homeworld, is that correct?'

'Yes,' Nisri said, trying to curb his impatience. 'And—'

'And, under those articles, your regiment is composed of elements of the Turenag and Banna tribes. So consider your course very carefully, because, as it stands, both the Banna and Turenag have an equal right to make a claim for their people.'

'You have no right to make—'

'Don't interrupt me again, colonel,' Rezail said, his voice even and cold. 'You have one option for your people to settle this world, Colonel Nisri, if the High Lords of Terra even entertain the matter, and that's through the Administratum, after the High Lords' blessings, of course. Now, seeing as

your regiment is comprised of Banna and Turenag, I would bet my life that you never even discussed your plans for this world with Lieutenant Colonel Iban Salid. Am I mistaken?' 'I am his superior. I do not need to discuss anything with him.'

'You do when you're using Imperial law to favour your tribe above his. We've been through this, colonel. You have no tribe when you wear that uniform, and all soldiers are equal in their duties to the Emperor. If you truly wish me to treat this matter seriously, you will include the lieutenant-colonel in any discussions involving colonising this planet.'

CHAPTER SIX

'Look to the sky too often and you open your throat to the knife.'

- *The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault*

1

DAY EIGHTY-FIVE.

The mood had lifted considerably at camp in the last couple of days. The fresh fruit, meat and water reinvigorated the soldiers, and different squads were allowed to help explore the caves in shifts. So far, they'd uncovered seven caverns spread out over nineteen kilometres, with new tunnels and passages discovered daily. There was no telling the extent of the network, but for certain, they had only touched upon a fraction of the true paradise beneath.

The tunnels and caverns continued descending deeper into the earth, where the jungles grew thicker and wilder.

The Sentinels couldn't navigate the jungles of Caverns Cathedral and Emperor, while the trees of Golden Throne grew in such tight clusters that the squads could only advance a few metres every ten minutes. Nobody had yet found the cavern where the Sentinel had fallen, and one squad reported discovering an underground lake. Unfortunately, their pathfinding skills proved insufficient to find it again through the maze of tunnels.

Still, it was all done in high spirits, the lack of supplies and the events of last week ignored in favour of the recent good fortune.

Both Sergeant Ballasra and Captain Toria were on extended patrol, venturing so far underground that they couldn't be reached by voxes and micro-beads. Sergeant Ballasra's last report indicated that he had found the head of a beautiful waterfall that plummeted into the dark mists below. Meanwhile, back at the camp, the Guardsmen had built a fire pit from collected shrubs, and were enjoying a rare feast of seven Khadar pigs, hairless albino-like creatures with snouts and no eyes, slaughtered and mounted on spits.

2

TURK, NISRI, REZAIL and Tyrell sat in the shade of the command bunker. The door was closed and two Guardsmen waited outside. The laughing and the reverie of the men drifted through the walls, and the smell of succulent roasted Khadar pig tickled the nostrils. Nobody wanted to be inside, but the argument was too heated to walk away from it.

'Absolutely not!' Turk said. 'My tribe has as much claim to this world as the Turenag.'

'This paradise is not befitting idolaters,' Nisri said, growing more heated.

'Oh, but it is promised to murderers and butchers?'

'We kill the undeserving. You should thank us for saving you from—'

'The undeserving? You misbegotten—'

'Keep it civil,' Rezail warned, casting an eye on both men.

'Fine,' Turk responded, throwing his arms in the air. 'What of the ruling of the Commissariat, Colonel Dakar? This means nothing to you? Some would say that is treason!'

'The Commissariat already commended us on the execution of the Orakle—'

'And on our just actions against your tribe!' Turk countered.

'Oh yes,' Nisri snapped back, 'because the murder of innocent women and children is the kind of nobility I'd expect from—'

'Don't speak to your betters about nobility—'

'Gentlemen,' Rezail said, briefly entertaining the idea of shooting them both, 'we're not here to argue who's in the right. You've been doing that for... how many generations?' he asked Tyrell.

'Forty.'

'That many?'

'No, commissar, not forty specifically. Among the tribesmen, forty means many. It means too many to count.'

Rezail nodded. 'You've been fighting for countless generations with no end in sight. Back to the matter of this planet.'

'The Banna Alliance will never agree to the Turenag's claim on this world,' Turk said. 'It is either shared, or it belongs to no one.'

'No,' Rezail said, correcting him, 'actually, it belongs to the Emperor. Who acts as custodian, however, is another matter, one that makes this entire debacle moot.'

'Commissar Rezail,' Nisri said with a grand sigh. 'What is the purpose of this meeting?'

'The purpose of this meeting, gentlemen, is to demonstrate that neither of you holds any legitimate claim to this world. At best, and that's a highly slim "at best", you may be able to make the request as a regiment, but not as an individual tribe. By doing that, you're splitting your nonexistent odds even further.'

'I am fine with that,' Turk said with a smile aimed at Nisri.

'We would no longer be at each other's throats,' Nisri said.

'Fine, admit your mistake in murdering the Orakle, and apologise.'

'No,' Nisri said, sitting against a console. 'We were just.'

The room was quiet for a moment, both men spent of their argument. It was long enough to realise that everything was too quiet. The noise outside had abruptly died. One of the Guardsmen hammered on the door.

'Sirs, you need to see this....'

The four men quickly exited the command bunker.

3

THE DREAM THREW Kamala into a storm's pitch of images. A silence pressed her against the wall and did obscene things to her. She fought it, her fists connecting with nothing, her body wet with blood. For a moment, she forgot about her powers, her ability to defend herself. The shadows whispered at her and encouraged her to fight back.

'Here,' they said in disjointed chorus, 'take more power. We have more to give, much more, enough to split open your skin.'

Kamala fought the siren allure of their voices. She struggled against their promises, and recited a Cantic of Purity. The silence was trying to worm its way into her brain through her ears and eyes, nose and mouth. They shoved it into her mouth, that raw, moist thing that empowered her.

Energy flared within her breast, and she shattered the silence for a moment. The static of stars washed through again, if only for a moment. The quiet rushed back in, the way blood fills the empty heart. It was inevitable.

Kamala Noore sat straight up from sleep, her sheet soaking wet, the ghost fire of remnant psychokinetic energy pulsing around the tent. Clothing and personal articles were strewn across the room, scattered by her poltergeist mind. Kamala rose and dressed quickly. Something was terribly wrong. She could feel the panic welling up inside the minds of everyone around her. They battered her, and she stumbled. She pulled the psyker hood over her head, drowning out the fear.

A moment later, Kamala pushed past her tent flaps. Everyone gathered around the fire pit stared at the northeastern sky.

A grey moon of oddly spiralled craters hung in the heavens and neared the horizon at astonishing speed. Its underbelly glowed with a near-incandescent white light.

4

MAJOR HUSSARI LED the two other Sentinels through the night-blessed desert. The Sentinel was an ungainly vehicle with a cockpit box mounted over two reverse-joint legs, and was armed with a single weapon. The squadron affectionately referred to them as "birds", because they didn't seem all that graceful until they were in a full run, like now.

Their long, fast strides kicked up a dust storm and filled the air with the steady hiss-thump of their gait. It was among the few times in recent months that they could bring their vehicles to full sprint, and their fast run through the desert felt incredibly liberating. Still, while the wind that blew through their canopy was deliciously refreshing, the men were eager to reach camp and partake of the feast.

'Runner One, does Khadar have a moon?' the new Runner Three pilot asked.

'What?' Hussari asked into the micro-bead. 'Negative.'

'Then what the hell is that over there?'

Hussari checked Runner Three's co-ordinates before he turned to his left and slowed his bird to a stop. The others followed suit and stared at the north-eastern sky, where the grey moon's fast orbit brought it to the horizon.

'Emperor's Light,' Hussari muttered. 'Runner Two, get on the vox and ask them to confirm.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Sir, is that a meteor?' Runner Three asked.

'No, no... it was a moon,' Runner Two exclaimed, 'and it was on fire.'

'It wasn't on fire,' Hussari replied. 'It was entering the atmosphere.'

'Oh, Emperor's Love,' Runner Three said, whining. 'It's going to impact. It's a meteor strike.'

'No it isn't!' Hussari barked. He watched the moon dip below the horizon. He was almost whispering into his micro-bead. 'It was decelerating. Whatever it was, it just landed. Runner Three.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Mark its relative position. Dust Runners, back to base camp, full gait.'

The squadron of Sentinels lurched forward again, their movements almost ungainly until they finally opened their strides into full-out runs.

5

THE CAMP WAS in full motion. Guardsmen ran to their positions along the compound's battlements, and lined up at the quartermaster's shed where Kortan and Sabaak worked through their injuries. Over the vox, a priest offered one Canticle of Courage and another of Devotion. Three birds with the Dust Runners squadron strode into the courtyard, through the main double gates. Soldiers automatically moved clear of them, the ballet of warfare fully choreographed and in motion. Nobody seemed to pay attention to one another, and yet they avoided each other with practice and near-subconscious fluidity.

The Sentinels slowed their gait and stopped at the vehicle stable where Captain Abantu and Armoured Support were getting the vehicles fuelled and ready. Tech-crews ran to Hussari's Sentinel as the legs folded beneath it and dropped the cabin close to the ground. Hussari leapt out and headed for the command bunker.

'Full complement of fuel and ordinance on all my birds,' Hussari called back to the squadron crew.

'We're not here long.'

'Yessir!' someone snapped back.

Soldiers ran past the major with a stack of ammunition crates between them. Hussari smiled; no tribesmen or tribal politics here today. Only soldiers were invited to this party. He entered the command bunker into the fullblown chaos of organising warfare, and offered Nisri a sharp salute.

'REPORT,' NISRI SAID as Hussari saluted him. 'Did you see what crashed?'

'No sir,' Hussari responded, 'only what you saw, and it didn't crash. I swear it was decelerating before it vanished.'

'Auspex,' Turk called out, 'anything yet?'

'Negative,' the operator called out. 'We picked up a slight impact tremor, but nothing even close to a meteor or orbit strike. Whatever it was, it made a controlled landing.'

'It was guided down, sir,' Turk told Nisri. 'Anything on vox?'

'Negative,' a vox operator responded. 'More background static than normal. Whatever fell or landed disturbed the sand and generated an electrical field like the ones we've experienced. If there's a vox signal anywhere in there, they can't hear or receive.'

'No contact,' Nisri instructed. 'There's no reason to alert them to our presence just yet.'

The command bunker was bursting with activity. All the operating stations, including vox and auspex, were on active sweeps, not to mention the command staff waiting on intelligence, and the platoon leaders waiting for their orders. 'Options?' Nisri demanded. 'Send scouts to uncover what landed before the invaders can mobilise; if there is a "they",' Turk said.

'Anyone else? Sergeant Noore?' Nisri said, talking to Kamala, who was standing in the shadows, her hood covering her face. 'Sergeant Noore?' Nisri repeated.

'Sorry, sir,' Kamala finally replied. 'I was trying to pierce the silence.'

'Silence?' Nisri asked.

'It's nothing. Whatever landed, it's invisible to me. But, I can tell you this, the ghosts of those who died here before are growing more restless.'

'The ghosts?' Nisri repeated. 'I thought you found no evidence of an Imperial presence before.'

'Nothing... tangible,' Kamala said, her voice distant, 'but their spider-web echoes linger. Whatever killed them was powerful enough to wipe away everything around them, and while I can hear nothing from whatever it was that landed, the echoes of the ghosts are growing stronger, despite the silence.'

'You mean death?' Turk asked. 'No,' Kamala said, 'I mean silence.' Again, the room fell quiet. A collective chill passed through the spines of everyone present, and a few Guardsmen spat on the ground to ward away the evil spirits. Kamala turned back to the shadows. After a moment, the noise seemed to return to the command bunker, much to everyone's relief.

'Major Hussari,' Nisri said, 'I want you to take your squadrons on reconnaissance. Find out what landed.'

'How many, sir? I have twenty at full strength and one at half-strength.'

'Take six squadrons just in case. I want the remainder on picket duty until we know what we're dealing with.'

'We'll be ready to leave in less than thirty minutes.'

'How long to get there?'

'I'll have to check the terrain, but I'd say a few hours. Whatever landed did so two hundred kilometres away, I'd estimate.'

'It was that big?' Turk asked.

'We could only triangulate between two points... our patrol's position and base camp. Still, it indicates something mammoth.'

'Find out what it is,' Nisri replied. 'Meanwhile, the camp is on alert. I want scout snipers five kilometres out, and I want regular vox contact. Nothing sneaks up on us. Nothing surprises us, again.'

6

MAJOR HUSSARI'S SQUADRON of three Sentinels, the Dust Runners, took the lead. The other five squadrons, each three birds apiece, assumed arrowhead formation behind the Dust Runners. The blue sun was beginning to break over the horizon, throwing cobalt spears of light through the distant cloud cover. It was a clean, crisp morning, a fine day for a run. The squadrons followed the dry bed of an ancient river that measured kilometres across. It was a circumspect route, but it allowed the birds to move faster than the dunes permitted, and it minimised their dust trail. Nobody spoke. The pilots wore their kafiyas over their mouths and noses, and their oculars over their eyes. At about two horizons out from the estimated landing zone, the squadrons left the river bed and began threading the dunes at reduced speed. By midday, they could see the wall of dust, agitated by whatever had landed. It was an orange clot on the horizon, masking all particulars of whatever had newly arrived. Lightning sparked and flashed inside the cloud, briefly illuminating the silhouette of a gigantic dome.

An hour later, the Guardsmen disembarked, and Major Hussari and his two best spotters proceeded on foot. Private Harros Damask was a hawk of a man in features and attitude, while Private Shanleel Qubak was short, squat and quick, both on his feet and with his tongue. Qubak was one of the few Turenag Sentinel pilots in Hussari's squadrons, but Hussari liked him just the same. The Turenag carried the vox on his back.

The three men remained low to the ground as they threaded their way around the dunes. The two scouts carried their lasrifles in swaddling cloth while Hussari kept a grip on his plasma pistol. The sand was coarse of grain, and there was very little of the fine dust to mark their passage, not that anyone inside the storm was likely to see out for the time being. At the crest of the first dune, they could see more, if barely.

A mountain of rock had fallen to the planet, but it was too spherical to be natural. The storm of sand shrouding it was highly localised and appeared to be in wild flight. No currents or direction guided it. It seemed agitated and unsettled, yet never lifted from around the dome. Lightning sparks manifested from thin air and arced in upon the enormous rock-like structure. The electricity was keeping the sand in flight, sheathing the dome in a turbulent orange mist. The wash of heat watered their eyes and prevented them from properly identifying the rock, although there seemed to be strange patterns etched into its surface. Even through the oculars, heat shimmers and vapour clouds masked its design, but it was huge, the size of a battle cruiser and easily a factorum tower in height. The area was still heated from its entry into the atmosphere. The nearby dunes appeared as though melted away.

'Whatever's in there won't be coming out yet,' Hussari whispered. 'I bet you a week's pay the surrounding sand's still molten.'

'I'll take that bet,' Qubak said.

'It was a rhetorical bet,' Hussari whispered.

'Closer, then?' Damask asked.

'Closer,' Hussari agreed, 'but not close enough to be struck by lightning.'

Four kilometres from the crash site, the three Guards men encountered their first black river of molten glass. The top of the dune had melted away and poured down the steep slope. It collected in

the trough between dunes, and bled a small river of glass. Sand insulated heat efficiently, and the pool looked as if it was in no hurry to crystallise. It could well remain liquid for days.

As the three advanced, the heat soared and a foul smelling miasma penetrated the air with a mixture of rotten eggs and spoiled meat. Hussari covered his face and wet his kafiya with water from his canteen to keep out the stench; the others followed suit. They continued closer into the furnace-like heat of the landing zone and into the periphery of the storm. The dunes were smaller, their tops melted down along their slopes. Melted silicate collected in large pools and streams. The scouting team couldn't approach any closer; the ground was melted and the heat suffocating. Even the partial lates in the sand storm felt hot, a shower of heated glass spray. Still, in the distance, they could hear a strange cracking thunder, like thinning ice. The men glanced at one another, and Hussari pointed them up the nearest dune.

They clambered up the partially melted dune, its shallow side apparently free of molten glass. The heat pummelled them and rose with each increment that they scaled the slope. Suddenly, a section of sand slipped away under Damask's feet and he fell forward to steady himself. Hussari realised their folly in one sickening moment. The glass hadn't slipped down the opposite slope... it had collected into a small caldera atop the collapsed dune.

The shifting sand broke the lip of the crater and a deluge of melted glass broke free. Hussari and Qubak barely leapt out of the way, but the avalanche swept across Damask, who was caught off guard and off balance. His howling scream was lost against the dunes as the molten river covered his arms and legs. His clothing combusted into flame, and in pulling his hands out of the glass, he sloughed the flesh off his own muscles.

Hussari and Qubak could only stare horrified as Damask fell backwards into the glass and was carried to the bottom screaming. He stopped crying when the glass poured over him at the bottom and burned off his face and throat. He stopped jerking a moment later.

The two Guardsmen remained sitting where they had landed, lost to the shock of their friend's brutal death. Finally, Hussari pulled the vox from Qubak's set and reported the tragedy, and their findings. Nisri encouraged them to investigate further.

Hussari scaled the dune from another spot, alone this time, and tentative in his steps. When he reached the top, he motioned Qubak to join him.

They could see more clearly now. The dust storm was thinner, the air melting the sand in flight into a steady rain of glass. Ghost flickers of lightning sparked and snapped, but it was diminished. The landscape around the ship had been flattened for a kilometre. Through the haze, it looked like a giant snail shell, organic and glossy, sitting in a huge crater lake of obsidian glass. Tiny dune islands slowly melted into the crater's great cooking pot, while vent spumes along the ship's spiral spine jettisoned streams of fetid-smelling gas, cooling and hardening the lake. Giant steam columns rose into the air, and the sound of cracking glass peeled like thunder off the crater's walls.

Hussari and Qubak stared at the sight dumbfounded. Well before tube-like orifices opened along the shell's bottom and disgorged their cargo; long before the chattering, snapping mass of beasts collected at the glassy base of their ship; long before the assembled host of thousands roared and waved their scythe-like appendages at the desert sky, Hussari was already on the vox, his voice strangled.

'Tyranids,' he whispered back to the outpost. 'It's the accursed tyranids.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

'As the dromad falls to its knees, more knives are pulled from their sheaths.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

'CLOSE THOSE DOORS!' Nisri snapped. 'Nobody leaves.' Tyrell and Turk quickly sealed the command bunker doors. Nisri was quiet for a moment, waiting for the men to calm down, waiting for the fervour to die.

Tyranids, Nisri thought, his mind numb with mortified reflection. Of all the races to strike the heart dead with fear, the tyranids were the most frightening.

'Not a word of this to the men, not yet at least,' Nisri said, and for once Turk nodded his quiet assent. Idle speculation would only fuel the panic, and they didn't want to reveal anything until it was confirmed.

Commissar Rezail paced a small corner of the sand strewn, rockcrete floor, while auspex and vox compiled crucial data. Nisri and Turk, two veterans of the intolerable waiting that afflicted all military operations, stood by the vox operator and received reports as they came in.

'You're sure about the numbers?' Nisri asked.

'Certain,' Hussari's voice crackled back. 'We're looking at several thousand tyranids. They're milling about, waiting for the lake of glass to cool.'

'So they're trapped?' Nisri asked.

'Relatively. Some are capable of flight, but none have ventured far from the ship.'

'They're preparing,' Nisri said. 'The tyranids always act as a consolidated force. Any sign of other ships?'

'Negative, sir. But, if this is part of a splinter fleet, it could explain why we haven't seen any supply ships.'

'A good assumption,' Nisri said. 'Keep a watch on them. Let me know if they start to move.'

'Yes, sir, I will.'

Nisri shook his head and sat down at the planning table. Topographical etchings covered the table's clear surface, along with a designation rune for the tyranids' landing zone. The outpost appeared too small and too close to the swarm. Nisri tapped the glass.

'I wish it was orks,' Turk said. 'I could tell you what to do.'

Nisri looked up at his subordinate and nodded. 'I wish it were orks as well. They'd be easier to fight.' He noticed Turk raising an eyebrow. 'No offence meant, but orks are predictable.'

'Tyranids aren't?' Turk asked, sitting in a chair across from him.

'Not in any way that can help us,' Nisri responded with a sigh. 'They don't respond to our tactics.'

Worse, they learn from them. We can trap them in a pincer manoeuvre, and still they'd break through. We can box them in a canyon, and they'd scale their own dead to reach us.'

'Actually, the tyranids are like orks in some ways.' The two men turned to find Major Dashour standing there.

'Forgive me,' Dashour added.

'No, speak,' Turk offered. 'I've never fought the tyranids before. I've fought orks and the dark eldar but not tyranids.'

'Sit,' Nisri said, offering Dashour a seat. 'Dark eldar?' Dashour said quietly. 'I've never faced them.'

'They are graceful,' Turk said. 'So graceful and so terrible it almost hurt to look at them. I've never seen such agonising death at the hands of such elegant looking weapons. What were you saying about the tyranids?'

Dashour nodded. 'They are like orks in that they're scavengers. Nothing is wasted on the battlefield, and blood only fuels their thirst. Orks may strip and rebuild equipment, but the tyranids let nothing organic go to waste. Smaller creatures wait behind the front line and digest the dead, theirs and ours. They return to their flesh factorums and rebuild their forces anew from the raw materials.'

The entire room had gone quiet, Nisri's men heavy with the memories of their last exchange, Turk's in frightened rapture of an enemy no Guardsman ever hoped to confront.

'We faced a splinter fleet at Absolomay Crush,' Nisri said. 'The battle was fought and won by the noble Adeptus Astartes, the Blood Ravens. We were sent to clean up the remainder; not a difficult task, supposedly.'

'But,' Dashour continued, 'the planetary governor forgot to mention the secret underground factorums he'd kept hidden from the Imperium, factorums to build and equip a heretic army.'

'The tyranids were hiding in the factorums,' Nisri said, 'feasting on the private army and factorum slaves, rebuilding their strength until they came flooding out of the very soil itself.'

Nisri and the others remained quiet, the screams of allies still fresh in their thoughts.

'What happened?' Turk asked gently.

'The fleet admiral thought our position was lost. So, they scoured the surface from space, and when they finally ran out of munitions to throw at us, they used the fleet's hooked chains, the ones they use to disembowel ships, to drop orbital debris on us.'

'I'm sure the fleet admiral did what he thought was best,' Rezail said.

'Perhaps,' Nisri sighed. 'All I know is that the rain of fire and molten steel did little to stop the tyranids. They went underground, and we held our position for weeks against attack. Absolomay Crush earned its name on the day of our rescue, the entire world of Absolomay crushed and lost to us forever.'

After a moment, Dashour interrupted the heavy silence, trying to shift its direction, for which Nisri was grateful. Absolomay Crush had ripped out his regiment's heart, and it was a wound that would follow them to the grave.

'The tyranids are singular in purpose,' Dashour said. 'We are born to serve the Aba Aba Mushira, but our lives are one of distraction. Not them, they are bred with one aspiration, and it is an aspiration without diversion, without division. They are remorseless, they are driven and they fear nothing. Why would they? They are reborn again and again, ready to fight and die, and to continue on.'

'You admire them?' Commissar Rezail asked, his voice questioning, but with an element of an accusation lingering.

'I admire their capacity to die,' Dashour said. 'Any man can oath-swear his fealty to the Emperor, but whether he lives or dies by that oath is what makes him true. I have faced down death before and never once hesitated in my allegiance to the Golden Throne and the High Lords of Terra. I see the same in the tyranids, as perverted as their cause may be. I cannot help but admire them, for if I can weather my faith against theirs and stand unbowed, then I have proven my loyalty to the Emperor. I ask that I die strong.'

Nisri and the other Turenag nodded.

'What can we expect from the tyranids, colonel?' Rezail asked, joining them.

'What can you expect of any storm? You can expect a portion of it to sweep over you while the remainder continues on its path, somehow undiminished. You cannot run and engage them in moving battles, you will only die tired. They are relentless.'

'There goes our advantage,' Turk said.

'Unfortunately. The best we can hope for is to bunker down and weather their onslaught.'

'We need more time to prepare,' Dashour said. 'Once the tyranids start moving, they will not stop. They'll be on top of us within hours.'

'Agreed,' Nisri replied. 'We must fortify this position. Meanwhile, I will buy us the time we need.'

Nisri stood and went to the vox operator. He took the handset. 'Major Hussari, this is base camp.'

'Yes, sir,' Hussari's voice crackled back.

'How close are the tyranids to moving, in your estimation.'

'I wish I could say, sir... a few more hours.'

'Then I have a great task to ask of you; I need your squadrons to engage the tyranid host before they move, and draw them in the opposite direction.'

The line went dead for a moment, the weight of the request heavy in the air. Finally, the line crackled. 'That's eighteen birds against legions of enemies, sir.'

'I am aware of that,' Nisri said. 'The camp needs more time to prepare. We need you to bait the enemy away from here. Do so and you will be saving the lives of hundreds of men.'

Another pause. 'Understood, sir. We'll engage the enemy the moment they appear ready to move.'

'Acknowledged, Major Hussari. Fight with the Emperor's grace.'

Nisri put down the handset, half-expecting an argument from Turk, but Turk simply nodded. He understood the necessity of the feint and the sacrifice.

'Tell the men what's happening,' Nisri said. 'Tell them to prepare for a large-scale assault. We need to fortify our positions.'

Officers hurried out of the command bunker to relay the orders. Turk, however, hesitated before leaving. He drew in close to Nisri.

'We're exposed out here, sir,' Turk said. 'Surely you can see that. The caves—'

'The caves are off-limits,' Nisri said, quietly. 'Have Captain Toria and Sergeant Ballasra returned yet?'

'They're due to arrive shortly,' Turk said.

'Good. We'll need all the help we can get.'

'Yes, sir,' Turk said, snapping to a salute before leaving.

2

THE TYRANID HORDE milling about at the edges of the snail ship seemed to grow larger by the moment. The more Major Hussari watched them through his pair of magnoculars, the more certain he was of his impending death.

The tyranids seemed diverse and uniform at the same time. He could identify various species, but the strata seemed many, far too many for his eyes to identify. They moved in and around one another, like currents in the ocean, never colliding or trampling one another underfoot; a great choreography of organisms with one shared thought. The smaller swarms knew when to shift and move around the larger, tank-like creatures. There was no hesitation in their steps. They scuttled around impatiently on clawed feet, pereopods bristling with thorns or on their bellies. None slept. None waited. They were eager to be unleashed, and the din they made grew steadily.

A glossy carapace covered their bodies, their heads and ribcages plated with thorny bone shields. Barbed tongues darted from between rows of spiked, needle-like teeth mounted in powerful jaws. Some slavered, their spittle scorching the glass lake upon which they waited. And still, Hussari could not help but stare at their limbs, multiple arms that flowed into wicked-looking scythes, curved talons for hands, chest tentacles with hooked suckers, and tails that ended in stabbing lances or elongated stingers. They offered so many horrible ways to die, and all while staring into their black, impassive, abysslike eyes.

Hussari also noticed that some of them carried organic-looking cannons, powered by pulsing veins and piston-like muscles. The cannons melted into their arms and backs. That alone frightened Hussari beyond reason. Better to think of them as animals, with no thought beyond the basest instincts. The weapons implied cold calculating intelligence. The weapons implied tactics and planning, and an agenda.

Hussari privately cursed the magnification strength of his magnoculars, which showed him far too much detail. He grabbed the vox that Qubak held for him and deliberately sighed before speaking. 'So what am I looking at?' Hussari asked.

'You see the weapons?' Dashour asked, his voice crackling over the line.

'Some sort of organic gun with cable feeds tied back into their bodies?' Hussari said. 'What do the guns fire?'

'Horror,' Dashour replied. 'If you're lucky, they'll fire spines with deadly poisons that cripple and kill.'

'And if I'm unlucky?' Hussari asked. He looked at Qubak and shook his head. Qubak mirrored the sentiment.

'They'll fire a wad of worms that will bore into your body and eat your nerves until you die screaming, or a cluster of beetles that will devour clothing, armour, flesh and bone.'

'Wonderful,' Hussari muttered.

'Don't underestimate the small ones. They are the fastest on the battlefield. They will try to overtake you and swarm you. They'll drag you down. If they cannot kill you off, they'll slow you down long enough for their allies to finish the job. The larger ones kill and sow terror by wading into the ranks of enemies. The largest are there to break through defences.'

'Understood, major,' Hussari said, trying to push the fear from his thoughts, trying to find something to inspire him and his pilots. 'Do we have any advantages over them?'

'Range,' Dashour replied after a moment's consideration. 'They have some weapons that can match ours, but not the fast ones, not from what I remember. The small ones are deadly within close range, mostly.'

'Are there any... commanding officers in their ranks? Something we can kill to sow confusion?'

'Nothing you can easily identify. Already, by your descriptions, these tyranids seem different from the ones we faced, but that's to be expected.'

'Different?'

The line crackled. 'The ones we faced,' Dashour said, 'were mostly subterranean dwellers, diggers. They used boring horns, dirt eaters and acid to burrow through the earth. I suspect the ones you described are better adapted to the desert. Their colouring matches the sand, yes?'

Hussari stared through the magnoculars at the tyranids' pigments, the orange and tan mottling. It was a perfect mirror to the surrounding sands. 'They do.'

'I've heard of splinter fleets quietly orbiting planets for weeks, reabsorbing their own biomass to create new warriors suited to the planet below.'

'Understood,' Hussari said. 'The news was growing grimmer by the moment. Not only were they smart, but they had also adapted to Khadar already. How long had they been up there? It didn't matter, Hussari realised. The advantage was theirs in every way.'

'Major, listen,' Dashour said, a little more quietly. 'The tyranids possess shared thoughts, but from what I've heard about them, they have masters... a link through which their thoughts flow.'

'Would it be on that snail ship of theirs?'

'Perhaps. I can't say with any certainty, but yes, I believe a master tyranid would remain on-board ship for safety. If it dies, the tyranid link is shattered.'

'Thank you, major,' Hussari said. 'I have an idea, but I'll need to speak to Colonel Dakar first.'

'Certainly, but one more thing: I suggest you withdraw back to the Sentinels. Some tyranids are capable of flight, but others... they're chameleons.'

3

'I WON'T LIE to you,' Hussari said, 'we face a grim task.'

Sixteen men stood in a semi-circle around Major Hussari. Their Sentinels waited behind them, close to the ground and idling, ready for action at a moment's notice.

'The outpost needs more time to shore up its defences, and they need us to buy them that time,' Hussari said.

'My father would disown me if he knew I was saving a bunch of Turenag,' Corporal Ziya Rawan, one the men, quipped. The others laughed.

'My mother would shoot me for helping you Banna,' Qubak said, taking the joke in his stride. 'She's done it before.'

More laughter followed, and Hussari allowed the men their moment. He was asking much of them, and a little levity was the least he could do to repay their sacrifice.

'You can tell your fathers and mothers,' Hussari said, finally, 'that you were protecting the men of the Banna tribe. The Turenags just happened to be hiding behind us.'

The men roared with laughter or nodded their appreciation. This pleased Hussari; they were ready. 'Many of you have participated in the desert races of Skakar or Harneel. This is no different. Your priority isn't to engage the enemy; it's to outrun them, while keeping them close enough for them to continue chasing you. Use your weapons to draw their attention or to save a fellow pilot. Do not stand your ground. Race, and race as a squadron. Use cross-patterns to draw enemies away from you and to create the mother of all sandstorms. The Aba Aba Mushira willing, I will see you when this is done.

'But,' Hussari added as a sombre afterthought, 'if your bird is brought to the ground and escape is impossible... nobody will think less of you if you save the last shot for yourself, just don't tell Commissar Rezaï I said that.'

The men nodded, their enthusiasm dampened by the gravity of what lay ahead. But, they remained steady.

'Who do we war for?' Hussari shouted.

'We war for the Emperor, aya!' each man shouted back. Without a word, Hussari sank to his knees and faced east with his men. They prayed, opening their arms to the sky to receive the Emperor's blessing, and kissing the ground where they believed His feet rested, in absolute submission to His will.

4

THE VENTING GAS from the snail-craft cooled the glass fields, solidifying them enough to support weight. Soon, more tyranids would emerge from the spawning chambers, and the horde would begin its spread across the planet, seeking out organic material to digest and add to their birthing factorums. The tyranids on the ground already seemed eager and skittish. They appeared to smell the air, drawing on some scent that drove them to a greater frenzy.

Major Hussari prayed they couldn't smell the fear impregnating every drop of his sweat. The tyranids remained in their clusters, however, agitated but otherwise disciplined.

The opening salvo caught the tyranids by surprise. Six birds from the various squadrons Cadian-and Armageddon-pattern Sentinels, swooped over the lip of a dune and opened fire with their long-range guns. The air crackled with the energy fire of the lascannons, while the fast revolving chambers of the autocannons spewed out a steady chain of rounds. The Sentinels continued running along the dune's ridge, their guns swivelled towards the tyranid mob and firing blindly with accurate devastation.

Tyranids exploded from the autocannon fire, the stream of shells stitching its path through their ranks and tearing craters in carapace, bone and glass. The lascannon unleashed steady beams into more creatures, vaporising smaller targets and punching searing holes through the larger ones. The tyranids were so tightly clustered, it was easy shooting. Almost every second drew its share of tyranid ichor.

Major Hussari could have stayed on the dune's lip for a long while, strafing the enemy lines and venting the lethargy of the last few months, but the tyranids were reacting far too quickly for his taste. From the moment the first shots landed, the tyranids shrieked in a cacophony of voices, and began moving as one. The glass field cracked and broke under the combined weight of the tyranids moving with a united purpose. Some were already firing back with electrically charged rounds. Many shots landed comfortably short of the birds, but a cluster of tyranids with simian-like swaggers and limbs carried mounted cannons on their backs, their ammo sacs pulsing and throbbing. They braced, and the tendon pistons on their organic cannons contracted. Blue electricity enveloped the cannon muzzles as the creatures fired clustered spores at the Sentinels.

'Scatter!' Hussari said into his micro-bead. A volley of electrified shots sailed through the air, almost lazy in their arcs. The birds broke formation down the dune slope, each of them scrambling to rejoin their squadrons for the mad run.

Hussari silently blessed each man for his skill as the birds half ran, half skated down the dune's back. Pistons whined and contorted metal groaned as the Sentinels moved in ways they weren't meant to move. They should have tripped and fallen, but the pilots were trained for desert combat, trained to stay on their feet in the most uneven of terrains.

Behind them, the spores hissed and popped. Hussari glanced backwards and saw the spore pods explode on their descent. They unleashed a sudden rain of long needles that peppered the sand, missing all but one Sentinel, a straggler that had reacted too slowly to the danger. Hussari watched in horror as the needles imbedded themselves into the steel chassis of Corporal Kadi Y'dar's bird. Several shots breached the canopy and impaled Kadi's flesh with fifteen centimetre-long needles. Even from where he was, Hussari saw the needles spinning, drilling through steel and skin.

Kadi screamed and contorted in pain inside his cockpit. His bird toppled end over end down the dune, towards Hussari and others.

'Move!' Hussari shouted as Kadi's bird barrelled down on them. Hussari pushed his bird into a long stride and jumped down into the trough between the dunes. His actuators and pistons rattled hard, and Hussari was wrenched down tight by his safety harness. The birds scattered in tight turns along the trough, almost being upended in the process, but Kadi's Sentinel rolled past them, kicking up sprays of sand, and barely missing the other pilots.

Hussari groaned with relief before yelling into his micro-bead: 'Go, go, go!'

The Sentinels split to rejoin their squadrons. The dunes shed sheets of sand from the approaching tyrantid stampede.

CORPORAL ELAPH CARTOUK, squadron leader of the Burning Falcons, lay on his stomach at the edge of the dune and stared through his magnoculars. He felt exposed outside his bird, so close to the snail ship, but as Major Hussari had promised, their attack was drawing the tyrantid horde away. He watched as the swarm streamed over and around the dunes, in the opposite direction. Cartouk breathed a sigh of relief, and stared at the snail ship. Only a handful of the creatures remained.

'What now?' Private Dubar Iban Dubar whispered. He was a young man, barely a campaign old, but already familiar with fighting the tyrantids.

'Emperor willing, Hussari will keep the tyrantids busy long enough for reinforcements to arrive.'

'So we wait?'

'We wait.'

After a moment, Dubar whispered, 'I never thought I'd be hoping for a Banna to succeed.'

5

TO THE UNTRAINED eye, the squadrons didn't appear to be operating together, but then again, this wasn't tank warfare. The Sentinels used their speed to their advantage, weaving around one another and hopefully raising enough dust to blind the enemy behind them. The Sentinels were in contact with each other, each squadron watching out for its own, and the squadron commanders answering to Hussari.

Sergeant Cortikas Iath's squadron, the War Chasers, split to the east, taking a portion of the tyrantid brood with them. He manoeuvred through the troughs of the dune sea, his general course already determined. At first the tyrantids tried overtaking him by mounting the dune crests, but that slowed them even further. Eventually, the tyrantids learned, and funnelled through the maze of furrows, following the squadron like the head of a flood.

'Sergeant!' a voice cried over the micro-bead. It belonged to Private Deeter Mohar, a spotty pilot with one campaign under his belt already. 'They're splitting off!'

Iath pivoted in his seat to look, the Sentinels moving and rattling too much for him to make use of rear-reflectors. Behind him, a group of creatures was veering off into a connecting channel. They were quick runners, their six legs barely touching the sand, their squat barrel bodies compacted with muscles. Every so often, they generated a burst of leaping speed that propelled them ahead of the pack.

'They're trying to outflank us,' Iath said. 'Mohar, on my left flank, and make ready.'

The three Sentinels shifted position, moving around one another with barely a break in their speed.

Rounds whipped past their open canopies and slapped off their metal skins. Some shots looked jagged and barbed, and others consisted of super-heated matter. What distressed Iath were the *splat* sounds he heard as rounds struck his bird's chassis. He knew they were organic in nature, and prayed they didn't eat through the Sentinel's plate, or remain volatile for long.

Fortunately, it took almost all their speed to keep pace with the Sentinels, so whenever a tyrantid fired at them, it also fell back.

'Get ready, Mohar!' Iath shouted. 'They're going to flank us.'

The squadron was just about to intersect a channel to their left. The pack of runners emerged around the shrinking edge of the dune, their toothy maws open and their long red cartilage tongues whipping around in their open maws. They were almost on top of Iath's squadron, their speed blinding, their piercing howls startling.

'Now!' he screamed, perhaps more loudly than he intended.

Mohar swivelled in his Catachan-pattern bird and opened up with his only weapon, his flamer, spewing out a gush of promethium fuelled flame. The gel fire washed over the runners and clung to their skin as it burned. They screeched and dropped to the sand, writhing in agony. One collided with another pack on the heels of the War Chasers, setting several of its compatriots ablaze. It writhed around momentarily, before a larger tyrantid with cloven hooves and two scythes for upper arms sliced into the beast and dismembered it with a handful of blows.

The last thing Iath saw before turning his attention forward was the remaining tyranids devouring their dead compatriots. No living matter was left behind in battle. Everything was devoured, everything reclaimed.

6

SERGEANT UMAR HADOORI of the Heretic Slayers squadron played games with the tyranids, trying to keep them off balance. He had to continually remind himself that because of their hive instinct, the tyranids could transmit vital information to one another almost instantly. Any ploy he used would have to be quick... quick enough for him to fire a couple of rounds before veering away and running for dear life.

Private Damask's death had already put him at a disadvantage, his squadron of three birds now down to two, but Hadoori prided himself on his cunning and quick wits. At his signal, the other Sentinel split from him around a dune. The two birds raced parallel to one another, straddling and flanking either side of the dune as it rose between them. They succeeded in shearing the tyranids into two groups.

At the next channel, as one dune tapered away and another began, the two Sentinels suddenly wove past each other. The manoeuvre was so sudden that the tyranids stayed on their targets and tried to switch over. The chasing mobs collided with one another, all manner of beast slamming into allies and tripping over each other. To their credit, only the front wave collided. The rear guard merely ran around or climbed over their companions, and began following the new targets.

Sergeant Hadoori was pleased. 'Well there's a trick that will never work again.' But it didn't need to for the time being. The tyranid mob had fallen back, giving Hadoori the breathing space he needed to concoct some other plan.

7

'NOT AGAIN,' HUSSARI moaned. He'd managed to pull up alongside Corporal Tanis "Mad" Maraibeh's Sentinel. Mad was an apt description for the squadron's maverick and unhinged pilot. Maraibeh was driving with his bare feet, pushing both steering levers forward and making minute shifts in direction with skilled practice. Hussari knew better than to chastise the grizzled old man with his dark skin and thistle of tribal scars knotted on his face. He had a well-chewed cigar in his mouth, unlit. He enjoyed the taste of them, he said.

'How far behind us do you think they are?' Maraibeh asked over the micro-bead.

Hussari peered back and adjusted his running path so that he was clear of his own dust cloud in a moment. They'd entered a long, wide river bed, and the running was smooth. After checking the green auspex screen to confirm, 'I'd say two minutes,' he responded, running close to Maraibeh again. 'Set the timers for two-and-a-half.'

Maraibeh nodded, and cranked the screw timer atop his home-made pipe bomb. He tossed it out of the open-topped cockpit and primed two more tubes, which followed the first.

About two-and-a-half minutes later, the three charges detonated in fifteen second increments.

Hussari was far enough away from the squadron's dust trail to see the explosions blossom in the heart of the tyranid mob. Beasts were thrown into the air, and the remaining group spread out further across the river bed's width.

'Did I get em?' Maraibeh asked over the micro-bead.

'Confirm that. You can probably shave ten seconds off the first timer, but they've spread out. You won't snare as many next time.'

'Smart bastards,' Maraibeh grumbled.

'Too smart. How many bombs did you make?' Hussari asked.

'Eighteen... fifteen now.'

'Save them for when we really need them.'

'Yes, sir,' Maraibeh reported back. 'That should keep them angry for a while.'

Hussari strode back into formation, the striding rumble of his squadron comfortably familiar. He noticed, however, that Maraibeh was still steering with his feet, cradling the back of his head with his hands.

8

CORPORAL RAWAN LED his Holy Striders through the uneven dune canyons. His auspex was a collision of topographical information, a mess of orbital resonance taken when they landed over three months ago and the current data streaming through auspex. With an angry snarl, he shut off

the old intel; the dunes shifted quickly around here and the orbital scans were no longer valid. He'd have to rely on auspex to navigate through the maze of dunes, regardless of how limited its range. More shots screamed by Rawan's bird. He glanced back and realised that the tyranid swarms chasing him were only metres behind. The damn things were fast, and no matter what he did, his squadron couldn't shake them. The beasts were relentless, and for the past couple of hours since this began, they'd been gaining steadily.

The collective shrieks startled Rawan as six-legged runners launched themselves at the Sentinels. Rawan watched in horror as two of the creatures latched on to the rearmost Sentinel, piloted by Private Elma Taris. One of the creatures tried to grab an exhaust stack and pull itself up, but burned its hand on the super-hot metal. It let go with an angry cry, but held on to the multi-laser cannon and its battery packs with its other three arms.

The second runner was already atop the canopy frame, unbalancing Taris's bird. Taris fought for control, and the last thing Rawan saw before turning away was the creature atop the canopy plunging two spiked pere-opods into the cockpit. A geyser of arterial spray followed. The Sentinel fell, and Rawan prayed that Taris would be dead long before the devouring horde swept over him. Rawan's auspex picked up more movement along the adjacent dunes. The tyranids were moving along the ridge crests, firing down at them. This time the pack consisted of larger creatures: cloven-hoofed, bone-crest swept brows, multi-jointed legs, upper arms that seemed to melt into scythes and pairs of lower arms that held bone-guns. What they lacked in speed, they made up for in range.

'No!' Rawan cried, giving voice to his worst fears. The Holy Striders were about to be overtaken. The tyranids opened fire, peppering the Sentinels with a salvo of shots. Rawan managed to pivot his bird's cabin in time, allowing the twin exhaust stacks behind his cockpit to shield him. Private Damous Obasra, in the Sentinel ahead of Rawan, wasn't so lucky. He spun his frame around, but a round splattered against his canopy frame, and his face. He screamed as the acidic globules destroyed his oculars, and then attacked flesh and bone. Within seconds, his entire skull appeared to collapse, right before Obasra's death spasms sent his Sentinel crashing to the ground.

Rawan tried to avoid the fallen bird, but he clipped the Sentinel on his way past, tangling his legs with Obasra's. The steering levers whipped out of Rawan's hands and his Sentinel fell hard. It crashed and rolled a couple of times before finally coming to a stop.

Despite the safety harness locking him in place, the fall knocked the wind from Rawan's lungs. He was rattled and on his side. He knew enough to know that he was in trouble as he fumbled for the holster snap of his laspistol. The tyranids were bearing down on him, the critters running full bore on all six legs to reach him. They were a handful of metres away when Rawan managed to pull his pistol. Unfortunately, instinct took over when the creatures launched themselves at him, their mouths open wide and their cartilage tongues wet with clear mucus. Rawan fired two crackling las-shots that ionized the air with yellow beams. The first shot bounced off a beast's exoskeleton armour, but the second shot caught it in the mouth. The dagger of light punched through the back of its skull.

A large tyranid landed atop the Sentinel, rocking it with its weight. Its scythe arm stabbed through the canopy frame, and through the meat and muscle of Rawan's thigh. He tried to scream, tried to draw his pistol up to his temple, but the monster vomited on his arms. The yellowish mucus began to dissolve his body. Rawan's hand fell off, dropping the pistol, the caustic bile instantly disintegrating the exposed bone. It was breaking him down into bio-soup. Rawan continued screaming as the tyranids arrived to lap up the remains of his dissolving body, their heads fighting to push through the frame of his exposed canopy.

9

THEY WERE OVER a dozen kilometres away from the snail ship when the small caravan of two Hellhounds and six Sentinels came to rest. The Hellhounds were modified troop carriers, each equipped with an inferno cannon and a turret-mounted heavy bolter. The two squadrons of Sentinels consisted of Catachan- and Mars-pattern birds, short-range vehicles designed to spread terror through the ranks of an enemy that felt no fear.

Corporal Cartouk was at the crest of the dune, staring out at the tyranid ship through his magnoculars, when the vehicles arrived in the dune trough below his perch. He slid down the sand slope, demanding, 'Is this it? Is this our support?'

'It's all you're getting,' Sergeant H'lal Odassa of the Dust Marauders squadron said, standing up in his cockpit. He stretched out his back. 'And, as senior officer,' he grunted, 'you're my support, as of now.'

Cartouk ignored Iban Dubar's quick indignant glance at him. Now was not the time to indulge the typical Banna/Turenag rivalries. 'Yes, sir,' he said.

The two Turenag mounted their birds and wheeled them around to follow in step behind Odassa's Dust Marauders and the second squadron, the Blight Thorns.

THE PLAN WAS simple, conferred over micro-bead on their way to the snail ship. The Blight Thorns would strafe the small swarms still milling about the base of the tyranid vessel and draw them into giving chase. The Burning Falcons, the Dust Marauders and two Hellhounds would then attack the ship and attempt to gain entry. Given the size that some tyranids reached, Odassa reasoned that they could enter the vessel with their vehicles and destroy both it and any hive-mind driving the swarms. Cartouk disliked the plan immediately and expressed his doubts, as one of the only veterans to have faced the tyranids. Nobody, in his experience, had ever entered a tyranid vessel, and nobody knew what to expect inside. Moreover, any number of the enemy could be waiting within, and only the Emperor knew what shapes and horrors awaited them.

Odassa had his orders, however, and he was dead set on killing the tyranid mind beasts, and proving the hero of the day. Not that Odassa said that, but Cartouk assumed as much.

So... just out of sight of the ship, nestled between the bosom of dunes, the squadrons and Hellhounds waited. The Blight Thorns' pilots, quiet to the last, streamed past the dunes and built up steam on their run for the ship. Cartouk listened over the vox, and to what he could hear within earshot.

'Contact!' a voice said over the vox.

The whoosh of promethium-driven flamers, and the steady pulse of las-fire being spewed out from the rotating barrels, sounded over the dunes, followed by the echoes of terrible screeches. A rumble filled the air, and the ground shook, the dunes sloughing off sheets of sand.

'We got them mad,' the vox chatter said. 'Disengage and run!'

Cartouk and the others listened, their collective breaths held and their plan hinging on this precise moment. After what seemed like forever, the rumble faded, the sand no longer shook and the shrieks grew distant.

'Report,' Odassa said, his voice hushed over the vox. 'How many did you pull away?'

'I don't know,' the voice rang back, 'a good number. There're far less of those bastards there now, I know that.'

Odassa waited another gruelling half-hour before deciding that the swarms were far enough away.

The blue sun had dipped down to the horizon, but the air would not be cool for some time. The glass fields were still hot, despite the jets of gas belched out by the ship.

On Odassa's order, Cartouk and Iban Dubar followed the Dust Marauders around the dune and out into the open. The ship loomed into view, suddenly larger and more sinister against the setting sun. The glass field, cracked and broken by the weight of the tyranid swarms, reflected the dusk light like a thousand lakes. The pilots fumbled for the diffusion oculars and swung a wide arc around the ship, making it look as though they were going to strafe and run.

Small swarms of tyranids, numbering in the dozens, immediately moved to intercept from their nests around the vessels. These beasts were larger and slower than their comrades. They were scorpion-like with eight pereopods that ended in wickedly curved scythes that clacked against the glass fields. Their bodies were long and segmented, and measured up to the Sentinel in stature, when they rose on their back four legs and lunged to attack the birds with their front four. Segments of long bone-plate ran from their heads, down the length of their spines, and ended in long tails and bulbs of thorn barbs.

Several of what Cartouk called "scorpions" lashed out with their tails, firing a spray of barbs at the Sentinels. A pilot screamed over the vox, and Cartouk turned in time to see a Dust Marauder tumble to the ground and crack the glass. The pilot was riddled with the spines and screaming, his skin bulging under the strain of the hundreds of welts that were merging and growing, and tearing the skin open.

Cartouk looked away. He had his own problems, more scorpions were chasing them, a good three dozen by auspex count. Two new runes also appeared on auspex, coming up fast behind the swarms. It was working, Cartouk thought. They hadn't spotted the Hellhounds sneaking up. The Sentinels wove in between each other, trying to trip up their pursuers. This strategy was far easier when used against the orks, whose vehicles were not as nimble as the tyranids and more prone to collisions. It didn't matter in this instance, however. The two squadrons were merely the head of the snake, weaving back and forth, distracting the tyranids from the real threat behind them. The two Hellhounds suddenly announced their presence. They pulled up alongside the rear-most scorpions, flanking the train on either side, and fired with their inferno cannons. Sticky promethium flame swept over the swarms, engulfing them before they could react. Even ahead of the mob, Cartouk could feel the heat surge at his back, blistering the paint job on his bird. His ears ached with the death cries of his pursuers.

'Now!' Odassa screamed over the vox.

The four Sentinels broke formation and scattered in different directions. The swarm was distracted, trying to escape the hellish onslaught of the inferno cannons. The Sentinels decelerated and spun around, adding their own promethium to the mix, or opening fire with their multi-lasers.

Tyranids in flight made for good target practice, and for the first time since fighting the beasts on Absolomay, Cartouk laughed and whooped as his las-fire brought scorpions down, one after the other.

It was over all too quickly, however, and the sense of danger returned.

'Hurry, find a way inside,' Odassa ordered. 'The tyranids won't let that go unanswered for long.'

THE SUN HAD almost set, and everything was deathly quiet, the tyranid rock apparently casting a hush over the winds and the sands. Night was already throwing its starry cloak over the heavens when they finally found an accessible door into the ship.

Not a door... a sphincter, Cartouk corrected himself, and shivered.

The oval-shaped orifice puckered out against the skin of the vessel. Many like it honeycombed the ship's surface, but this was the only one level with the ground. It opened into an organic-looking tube that angled upward into the darkness. There didn't appear to be any lights inside the vessel. But then, Cartouk reasoned, the tyranids no more needed to see to navigate their ship, than blood did inside one's body.

'The Hellhounds can't fit inside,' Odassa grumbled over the vox. 'Stay outside and secure the door. Sentinels, with me.'

Odassa's beacon torch flashed on as he entered the dark tube. Cartouk followed, instantly cringing at his surroundings. The dark grey walls seemed to glisten and envelop him. The curved floors felt spongy beneath his bird's feet, and the air smelt humid and fetid in a way that dug deep past his nostrils. Cartouk pulled his kafiya over his nose and mouth, grateful that the stench he smelled was that of his own unwashed body.

They moved slowly through the tubes, past intersections, and up some steeply angled passages and down sharp slopes. What guided them wasn't any sense of direction, but the size of the corridors. No two tubes were exactly alike, differing from each other in dimension and composition. Some tunnels seemed to breathe, the air inhaled and exhaled, the vein-like walls pulsing and glinting. Other places seemed more like a proper ship, the walls and floors made from hardened resin with the coolness of steel.

Throughout it all, there were no signs of life, at least nothing that proved a threat. Small cockroach and crab-sized tyranids scurried about on mysterious business, moving from underfoot when approached, falling back in place when the Sentinels passed. For all that, Cartouk could not help but feel they were somehow witnessing some grand orchestra of purpose, a symphony they would never see or hear entirely. And, for that, he was grateful.

'By the Emperor,' Odassa whispered, stepping into a large chamber. 'This can't be.'

At first, Cartouk didn't understand Odassa's shock. It was hard to see the chamber's true size in the darkness, but it appeared no different than the corridors, fleshy walls and coats of hardened resin melting over everything. Then, Cartouk stepped onto the chamber's tilted floor and heard the metallic ring to his footfall. Slowly, the chamber came into focus in his mind as their torches swept the emptiness. The floor was grated, the holes plugged with detritus. Arched cathedral struts that extended high above them, protruded through the resin layers on the walls, along with the frames of arched windows, bits of stained glass windows floating in the resin.

'It's one of ours,' Odassa whispered. 'It's one of ours.'

'Not anymore,' Cartouk said. 'The tyranids must have cobbled it together from the wreckage of a cruiser.'

'We're never getting off this world,' Odassa said. He continued staring at the chamber, gap-mouthed.

'There's nothing more to see here,' Cartouk whispered, urgently. 'We must leave.'

Almost on cue, the vox crackled and sputtered, the panicked Hellhound driver screaming "Enemy contact. Enemy contact!" The roar of the inferno cannon drowned out the voices. "Too many of them... merciful Emper..." the signal died.

'We're trapped!' Cartouk said. 'They'll be on us now.'

Odassa stared up into the empty cavern of the vaulted chamber, unable to act. 'We're going to die here.'

'Sergeant Odassa!' Cartouk screamed. Nothing. Cartouk spat out a curse at the Banna for his weak blood, and voxed the other two Sentinels. 'We're trapped,' he said, 'but perhaps we can hurt them before we die. Form up on me.'

Iban Dubar and the other Sentinel fell in behind Cartouk. He regretted not knowing the name of the other Dust Marauder pilot, but right now, other concerns took precedence. The three Sentinels ran across the chamber, their torches sweeping from side to side, looking for an exit. They found a side corridor large enough for them to use, the metal walls and floor of the Imperium vessel swallowed up by thick growths of resin and tyranid bio-matter.

Cartouk cast a last glance at Odassa before darting into the tunnel. A moment later, over the vox, they heard him scream.

Where there was nothing before, the tyranid vessel suddenly surged into life. Tyranids appeared in the corridors, as though birthed from the very walls. They scampered along walls and ceilings, racing to overtake the squadron. They seemed to be everywhere at once. Iban Dubar had taken point, and was blistering enemies with his promethium fuelled cannon. His fingers seemed to be stuck on the trigger, the corridor heated to the point where it hurt to breathe, yet Cartouk knew he could never let up.

Cartouk took the rear, and back-pedalled through the corridors, unleashing streams of las-fire at anything that moved. Scorpions, runners, leapers and snakes darted towards him, but in the confines of the corridor, he held them at bay.

Their progress seemed interminably slow, each step a kilometre in the making, until finally, a terrible rending filled the corridor. The ceiling seemed to rip open behind Cartouk. He glanced back, the air filled with screams. An avalanche of white maggots spilled from the rent in the ceiling, drenching two Sentinels under its mass. The screams turned to agonised shrieks, and then to gurgles. Cartouk knew the pilots were being eaten alive. Maggots were already dropping into his cockpit, through the crack in the ceiling, and racing over him.

Cartouk screamed in pain, the maggots biting off fingertip-sized chunks of meat as they bored into his flesh. More rained down, on his face and arms. Cartouk spun his Sentinel towards the other two birds covered in maggots. Blood and pain filled his vision until the things burrowed into his eyes. He spasmed in agony, his finger clutching the trigger, and he opened fire on his squadron.

CARTOUK NEVER SAW his shots clip the Sentinels, or the promethium tanks of Iban Dubar's bird. The accelerant fuelled explosion ripped through the tunnel, detonating the engines and fuel tanks of the other two Sentinels.

The blast tore open the adjoining tunnels and pumped fire through endless corridors, flash-frying all manner of beasts in its path. Walls cracked and tunnels collapsed; perhaps not a deathblow to the vessel, but certainly a crippling blow that sent Shockwaves across the hive-mind, enough to give the creatures pause... enough to pull several swarms back to the nest.

10

SERGEANT A'RTAR SHAMAS, squadron leader of the Orakle's Apostles, craned his neck to look around. They'd been engaging the tyranids for several hours, and night had firmly locked its place over the world. It was a beautiful, star-filled evening, but with the darkness came a sense of isolation. The night winds even sounded different, and Shamas jumped at the errant noises. The tyranids had remained with them for the first few hours when, suddenly, they dropped back and kept their distance. Now Shamas knew they were out there, just out of sight, keeping pace and waiting for the Sentinels to misstep.

'Report,' Shamas whispered into his micro-bead.

'Orakle Three here.'

Shamas waited for another moment before clicking the micro-bead again. 'Orakle Two? Report.'

The subtle hiss of static played back. No answer. It was as though the desert had swallowed him up.

'All right... pull in formation,' Shamas responded. 'I want you in visual contact.'

'I have you on auspex,' Orakle Three reported. 'I'm heading your way.'

Shamas was sweating hard. He ran a dusty sleeve across his forehead and hailed Orakle Two again. There was still nothing on micro-bead or auspex. He tried listening to the desert, picking out sounds between the heartbeat thumps of his Sentinel's footfalls, but it was impossible to discern any noise over the servos or his rattling engine. Worse still, the fuel gauge on his Sentinel was dangerously low. He had enough left in the drums for a few more hours of this hellish pace, but that would mean stopping to refuel, and even a minute standing still seemed too great a risk.

In the distance, he saw the repeated muzzle flare of an autocannon on full bore. A second later, the flashes stopped and it was dark again. The *thump-thump-thump* of autocannon thunder echoed across the desert. Shamas glanced at the auspex, but no identity runes appeared. He seemed alone in a sea of green sensor wash.

'Orakle Three,' Shamas called, 'was that you firing?' That, of course, was an obvious question, since Orakle Three was the only one in the squadron with an autocannon. 'Can you still see me on auspex, Orakle Three? Because I can't see you.'

This time, it was Orakle Three's turn to remain silent. Shamas whimpered, the night hedging in on him. He was all alone, the last one still running. He switched channels on the micro-bead.

'This is Orakle One... is anyone out there?'

He heard nothing for a moment, until, 'This is Runner One,' Hussari's voice crackled back. 'Report.'

Shamas bit his lip and forced himself to speak slowly and clearly. He would not be seen as the resident coward, even though he was fighting the urge to soil himself. It felt as if his insides had suddenly liquefied, and he was struggling against his fear and the urgent need to let go.

'My squadron is gone and I'm running low on fuel.'

'What happened?' Hussari asked.

'For the love of the Emperor, I don't know,' Shamas reported, biting his lower lip against the squirming pain in his bowels. 'One minute they were there, and the next minute... gone.'

'Did the tyranids get ahead of you? Did you double back?'

'No... I don't know, sir. We've been running straight since this thing began. Oh Lord Emperor... I'm almost out of fuel.'

'How much remaining?'

'Ten minutes... less. I have to stop.'

'Not yet you don't. We'll do this together. Rendezvous with the Runners. We'll cover each other as we refuel.'

'And the other squadrons?'

'We lost contact with the Holy Striders a while ago... now yours.'

'I'm sorry sir,' Shamas said, genuinely regretting disappointing the major. Thankfully, the wave of bowel cramps was retreating and the night air flushed his skin with a cool breeze.

'Nothing to apologise for. Just rendezvous at 30.03N 31.15E. Can you make it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'We'll refuel there.'

'What about the tyranids?'

'We'll worry about that when you get here. Just get here in one piece.'

The micro-bead clicked off, and Shamas felt grateful for a moment... a short-lived one at that. The movement was rapid. Something darted across the sky and blotted out the stars for just long enough to draw his attention heavenward. Shamas barely caught the movement as it hurtled towards his Sentinel.

No other thought entered his head other than to click on the micro-bead.

The flying tyranid landed atop the Sentinel, its almost vestigial hook-like feet catching the frame of the cockpit. It nearly toppled the bird, but continued flapping its great leathery wings. Shamas screamed.

'Orakle One?' Hussari shouted.

Before Shamas could even react, the tyranid's long bladed tail lanced into the cockpit, impaling the sergeant through the stomach and out through the back of his chair. He shuddered, his bowels releasing in a warm, wet rush. The tyranid, however, didn't seem to care. It leaned into the cockpit with its elongated, ridged head, and opened its jaws to reveal its hard, cartilage spike of a tongue. Shamas could feel the world slipping away, the wrenching pain of his gut wound submerging beneath a haze of darkness. In the back of his thoughts, there was one last thing to do. He wasn't sure what that thing was, at least not until he said it.

'Flyers,' he said, stutter-gasping into the micro-bead.

'Orakle One? Did you say flyers?'

The spike tongue shot out on pneumatic muscles, cracking through the bone of Shamas's skull and fishing out his final thoughts.

11

HUSSARI GROANED AS he stretched his back and cramped legs, and relieved his bladder. The blue sun was swimming on the deep azure horizon, and for the first time in hours, they had a moment's reprieve. There was time to tend to their aching muscles and to refuel. Qubak was standing nearby with a vox ready. He was downing a few ablative pills to ease the stiffness that had spread across his back and neck. Corporal Maraibeh stood atop his Sentinel, staring out through a pair of magnoculars.

'Confirmed, sir,' Maraibeh said. 'They're heading back.'

Hussari finished his business and motioned Qubak over. He took the vox handset and waited for Qubak to raise the outpost. He finally nodded; they had a signal.

'Report,' Nisri said over the vox.

'We kept them busy for most of the night. They finally pulled back. We have the Burning Falcons to thank for that.'

'Any losses?'

'Yes, sir,' Hussari said. 'We lost many Sentinels. The Orakle's Apostles, Burning Falcons, the Dust Marauders and the Holy Striders are gone. We lost another bird from the War Chasers. The survivors from the Blight Thorns are rendezvousing with us. That leaves us with ten Sentinels, sir. The tyranids have given up the chase, for now. All surviving squadrons report the beasts retreating.'

'Hmm,' Nisri said, musing over his options, 'probably to deal with the damage to their ship. But, we still need more time.'

'Sir, they have flyers. That's what killed the Orakle's Apostles. They might have ambushed us too had Sergeant Shamas not warned us. What I'm trying to impress upon you is that if you remain at the outpost, they'll have you on five sides, and there're too many to fight.'

'The next words out of your mouth better not involve the caves,' Nisri said, the warning clear.

'Of course not, sir,' Hussari said. He clicked off the handset for a moment to mutter a colourful string of expletives, before returning it to his mouth. 'I just hope you're very well prepared for what might be coming your way. What are your orders?'

'Don't let the tyranids escape. You've made the Emperor proud this day with your courage and dedication, but I need you to keep on them... keep them distracted.'

Hussari craned his neck back and stared at the sky. He shook his head and placed the handset to his mouth. 'Understood, sir. Runner One out.' Hussari tossed the handset back at Qubak and headed to his Sentinel. 'The colonel expects us to get massacred defending an exposed position,' Hussari barked. 'Let's not disappoint him.'

'Let's show him how the Sentinels fight,' Qubak said.

Hussari offered Qubak a grim smile as they both climbed into their waiting birds. Hussari dropped into his seat and ordered the remaining Sentinels to rendezvous for another thrust.

12

THE COMMAND BUNKER was silent. Nobody spoke, for Nisri didn't appear to be listening anymore. He stared at the tactical slate, studying the possible approaches to the outpost and their best defence. The operators continued to monitor auspex and vox, Rezail appeared to be asleep on the cot in an adjoining room, while Tyrell simply watched everything with his quiet fastidiousness.

Turk couldn't stand to be inside any longer. Nisri's stubbornness was killing the finest squadrons of Sentinel pilots that Turk had ever known. Now they were being used as cannon fodder to protect an outpost with no hope of ever surviving the onslaught that awaited it. Turk was certain that Nisri knew this, but the colonel was committed to a course of action and unwilling to sacrifice the caves. Nisri was trapped. Turk actually pitied him, for a moment, because he knew that Nisri saw no way out of his situation. The sense of pity lasted but a moment, however. It was mostly his men that were dying in the desert, his Banna kinsmen, and soon, all of them would die. The urge to walk away was overwhelming.

'I'm going to check on the men,' Turk said, by way of an excuse to leave.

Nisri offered a distracted head nod, but continued staring at the indication runes on the tactical table.

Turk walked outside, and felt immediately grateful for the bright wash of sunlight and for the sounds of life, such as they were. Men were adding more sandbags and fastening tripod guns and grenade launchers to the parapets. Rows of mortars rested in the courtyard, ready to provide indirect fire, alongside ammunition crates protected under small plasteel bunkers, water drums to cool the mortar barrels and the hulking form of the self-propelled Basilisk artillery piece. The forward observer and fire direction centre for the mortars and Basilisk were sheltered in a plasteel observation nest on the floor above the command bunker. It offered a 360 degree view of the desert, and it contained several turret-mounted autocannons, facing both the desert and the compound interior.

Turk stood watching the men scramble to prepare the base for a fight they couldn't win. He was surprised when Tyrell walked past him and whispered, 'We must speak. Meet me behind the vehicle stable.'

Turk continued stretching, pretending he'd heard nothing. Tyrell vanished behind the vehicle stable building, and Turk followed.

13

THE REMAINING SQUADRONS approached the tail of the tyranid horde, ten Sentinels against thousands that seemed hell-bent on ignoring them. Major Hussari's small task force was a couple of kilometres behind the swarm and blinded by their dust wake. The Guardsmen spread their formation out and steered by auspex alone, navigating the flat desert plains with cautious ease.

Another kilometre and the Sentinels were closing the gap fast; they would be in firing range within a few minutes. The rumble of the tyranid stampede shook through the soles of Hussari's boots, and he took deep breaths in anticipation of another long chase. He even wondered if their adversaries knew they were shortening the gap behind them, but the auspex returned one solid mass of enemy moving away from them.

They were less than a kilometre behind when Hussari gave orders over the micro-bead to go weapons hot. The guns swivelled in their mounts, the pilots blindly tracking the largest clusters of enemies, their fingers eager on the triggers. In a matter of moments, the autocannons of the Cadian-pattern birds and the lascannons of the Armageddon-pattern vehicles would be in range. Catachan and Mars-pattern Sentinels with heavy flamers or multi-laser weapons were paired with the long-range birds to handle any tyranids that approached too closely.

Half a kilometre away, and the dust storm was blinding.

Suddenly, screams and curses filled the micro-bead. New runes identifying enemy positions by the hundreds appeared among the Sentinel formations.

'Evasion, evasion!' Hussari cried, but it was too late. Tyranids burst from the ground with lightning fast speed. All that Hussari could see were multiple pairs of scythe arms and a snake-like lower body ending in, I mandible stinger, all protected by carapace plating. It haemorrhaged a flood of smaller bugs, behind, electric ity dancing between tyeir mandibles.

'It's a trap,' someone screamed.

Hussari barely avoided the one that broke free of the ruptured earth ahead of him, its scythe arms slicing too close for comfort. A nearby Sentinel was not so lucky. Two snake-like tyranids sank their scythes into the bird's legs and brought it down. Hussari ran past it as the tyranids skewered and pulled the pilot out of the bursi cockpit frame, snapping bone and rending flesh. The smaller bugs swarmed over the screaming pilot, burying him and his cries.

Auspex was a mess, the solid mass of tyranids ahead disintegrating into smaller clusters of skirmish groups that were doubling back to attack the Sentinels. Hussari cursed and hit the channel purge on his micro-bead, silencing all screams and cries for help for long enough to issue a single order.

'Retreat! Full retreat!'

The screams flooded back in, and Hussari cursed the cunning of their adversaries. He continued running through the dust wake, trying to find other Sentinels to help. He may have issued the retreat orders, but he was damned if he was going to leave his men stranded.

Hussari came upon Sergeant Hadoori's Sentinel, which was still standing, but running in a wide circle. Smaller tyranids were crawling up its frame, a bleeding Hadoori steering with one arm and screaming as he fired round after round from his laspistol at the creatures swarming his cockpit.

One dropped inside and turned into a frenzy of whipping claws. Hadoori was done for. Hussari angled his bird straight at the other Sentinel and opened fire with his autocannon. The whine of the spinning barrels was followed by a steady volley of shots that ripped through tyranid, Sentinel and pilot alike. It exploded a moment later, the flying shrapnel lacerating the surrounding sand and anything unfortunate enough to be in the way.

Major Hussari never slowed. He continued running, raking the ground ahead of him with a burst of autocannon fire, when auspex revealed a ghost of a return, another snake-like tyranid hidden underground.

SERGEANT IATH WAS losing Mohar's rune among the throng of tyranid returns on the auspex. It was growing increasingly difficult to read the battlefield signals; the fight was one large, frantic skirmish in the thickening dust storm. Particles of energised sand were generating a static charge large enough to disrupt auspex and vox with ghost images and noise bursts. Screeches, howls and the thunder of autocannon fire or the crackling whip of las-fire saturated the air, as did the muted hiss of tyranid bio-weapons.

Mohar screamed over the micro-bead before his transmission cut. A moment later, the dust storm lit up with a long gout of fire from a heavy promethium flamer. Iath headed in that direction, firing a fusillade of shots from the rotating barrel of his multi-laser into the tyranids that crossed his path. The razor beams of light shredded and cauterised any beast they caught, leaving behind smouldering, dismembered husks. Mohar's flaming Sentinel abruptly ran into view, the charred remains of Mohar slumped forward on the steering leavers, carbon-cooked tyranids fused against the hull like a thick coat.

Iath watched the burning Sentinel vanish into the storm, and headed deeper into the fray, trying to locate others. He arrived in time to see an energised plasma shot splatter against another Sentinel. The plasma salted the pilot and bored holes into his chest, before the superheated material ate through the promethium tanks. The fiery explosion devoured Sentinel and tyranid alike, while the concussion wave toppled Iath's Sentinel. Iath screamed, the blistering heat and flame of the explosion flash-searing his exposed flesh and melting cloth to skin. It instantly fused his rubber-rimmed oculars to his face.

The agony overrode reason, and Iath fumbled for the cockpit's med-kit. It didn't matter that he was surrounded by tyranids; it only mattered that he reach the pain killers, that he numb the excruciating agony that lanced him. His nerves felt devoured by flame and his skin screamed its anguish into his brain. It killed him to move, his clothing melted into his flesh; every little movement pulled at the doth, tore open a fresh wound and exposed him to some new profound torture.

Iath couldn't grab the med-kit, his gnarled hands burned into fleshy knots. He cried in agony, until he saw centipede tyranids snaking towards him, their thorny feelers twitching in anticipation, their hundred legs moving like waves underneath their bodies, their mandibles clacking. Iath watched them approach and screamed at them to kill him.

He never thought the tyranids would be his measure of mercy.

AUSPEX DIDN'T LIE, and it was telling him he was surrounded. "Mad" Maraibeh could see the pockets of tyranids moving through the dust storm, some towards him and others in different directions. They were organised, each one to its purpose, and none deviated from its course. The Sentinels he could see on scope had either stopped moving or vanished from the plate altogether. Only one Sentinel appeared to have escaped the massacre, but it was a wounded bird and limped along at half-speed.

He was alone in the fight, but the thought did not bother him. He would die serving the Emperor, and the notion of that glory emboldened him further. Maraibeh opened the micro-bead channel with its dying voices and began to sing, not of the Emperor and not of his own children, but a popular melody back home. It was a song sung at the campfires, of men and the pretty women they loved. Maraibeh smiled at the memory of his wife, feeling her jab him in the ribs, indignant. And, for that, he loved her all the more.

A superior, Sergeant Hadoori perhaps, yelled at him to clear the micro-bead, but Maraibeh was too jubilant to comply. There was nothing interesting to hear on the channels... only cries of help and orders to retreat. So he sang, and opened the nozzles on his flamer to full. He headed to the largest mob, clearing a path before him by washing the desert with bright promethium flame. A series of handwritten runes on his auspex marked the different distances and the times to reach them. Maraibeh pulled out one of his pipe bombs. When a large tyranid mob on auspex reached the sixty second mark written on his display plate, Maraibeh cranked his tube charge to seventy seconds. He dropped the explosive into the satchel resting in the cockpit's foot well and jammed his lit cigar into his mouth.

A minute later, he ploughed straight through the mob of tyranids, dancing his Sentinel in a circle and washing everything he could see in flame. The tyranids were a sea of screeching beasts that surrounded his bird for as far as he could see, and auspex said they stretched out further than that. They jumped up on the frame of his exposed cockpit, but he managed to fling them off with crazy spins that would have thrown most Sentinels on their sides. Shots whizzed by him, but they struck either air or thick metal. Finally, one of the creatures with scythe arms and clawing arms managed to latch on to the Sentinel and pull its head up to the cockpit. Maraibeh laughed and jammed his lit cigar into its eye.

The creature screeched and raised its cutting arms to kill Maraibeh.

'Too late,' the madman said.

The pipe bomb exploded and detonated the remaining charges in the satchel. The explosion engulfed the promethium in the tanks and turned the Sentinel into a massive fireball of sticky flame and shrapnel. Dozens of screaming tyranids were caught in the deadly blossom, and dozens more severely wounded.

HUSSARI'S SENTINEL WAS badly damaged and limping. The lights on his control panel fluttered, while alarms warned him of catastrophic failures and of the fuel leaks that had all but crippled his bird. He was also bleeding from a forehead gash, opened up by a creature that had got far too close to him before he shot it off. Still, he wasn't out of the danger yet. He'd managed to escape the battlefield through the confusion, the dust storm and the massive explosion that rattled the desert, but not without picking up a tail or two. Three runners, skipping across the sand with their six legs each, were overtaking his bird quickly. Hussari, however, wasn't toothless yet. He pivoted towards them and fired his autocannon, raking the sand. The hound-like runners were quick, dodging as best they could, but the major was faster on the trigger. He caught each one in a hailstorm of steel-jacketed rounds, and cut them down well short of his bird.

On the last shot, his cannon clicked and whined as the empty barrels spun. He had expended the last of his ammunition.

Hussari continued on his path. From auspex, he was glad to see the distance between his bird and the tyranids grow wider. He'd escaped for the moment, but there were a couple of things still left to do. Hussari flipped through the comm-channels, trying to raise his squadrons. No answers. He was the only one left.

'Home base, this is Runner One, respond.'

There was a pause, followed by Nisri's voice. 'This is home base. Report.'

'My men are all dead. We did all we could.'

'Confirm that,' followed by another pause. 'Did you manage to thin their numbers?'

'We pinched them,' Hussari answered. 'That's about it. I hope we bought you the time you needed, because auspex says they're heading your way.'

'Roger that,' Nisri responded, his voice strangely vacant. 'Can you make it back?'

'Not with this bird, sir. She's badly hurt. But we hid Private Damask's Sentinel after he died. I can reach it.'

'Get back with all due haste, major. We'll need you here. Colonel Nisri out.'

Hussari clicked the handset back into the locking cradle and swore under his breath. He pushed his Sentinel as fast as she would go and headed for Damask's bird. No tyranids followed him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'The mind is for seeing, but it is the heart that listens.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

TURK LISTENED AS Hussari gave his report and signed off. The command bunker returned to its tomb-like quiet. After a moment, Nisri studied the tactical plate and issued terse orders to the operators, Major Dashour and himself. Commissar Rezail and his adjutant finally left the room to examine the abatis spear trench laid at the foot of the outside wall using strips of metal from the drop containers.

When Dashour left, Turk walked up to Nisri and made sure to remain absolutely calm throughout whatever would happen next. He couldn't get angry. All their lives pivoted on his ability to remain calm. Tyrell's advice was still fresh in his mind and he knew that this was the right course for both men, despite what it meant to their egos.

'I would speak with you as an equal, one prince to another... alone,' Turk said quietly enough for his words to pass only between him and Nisri, 'but I will obey your decision as one soldier to his superior officer.'

Nisri looked up, a flash of annoyance burning on his face, but Turk would not back down. This was a matter between two princes and the tribes they commanded.

'Now's not the time, lieutenant-colonel.'

Turk sat down in front of Nisri and continued whispering, low enough not to draw the attention of the operators. 'I believe it is. You can court-martial me, and you can execute me, but Commissar Rezail is not here. This is a matter between two tribesmen and not soldiers. Give me a minute. After that, I will follow your direction as your subordinate, praise the Emperor in all things.'

Nisri sighed and finally stared Turk straight in the eyes. The colonel looked fatigued, the weight of his decisions and the inevitability of their fate a sure toll on his spirit. 'Fine... as one prince to another, what is it?'

'The caves,' Turk whispered, 'you wish them to be a gift to your tribe, correct?'

'Not according to your views,' Nisri responded.

'What I think of the caves is not in question, is it, Prince Dakar? What matters is what the caves mean to you.'

Nisri thought about it for a moment. 'Yes,' he said, finally, 'very well. The caves are for my tribe... for staying true to our faith,' he added as a small jab.

Turk bit down on his words and allowed Nisri his petty moment. 'What, then, if you're being tested?' Turk asked. 'What if this is another ordeal? Choose between your duty to the Emperor or the gift He bestows? Which is more important?'

Nisri straightened, instantly aware of the argument's implications. 'It is no such thing, Prince Iban Salid. We have found a paradise worthy of the Turenag, and I will not be the ruin of it.'

Turk leaned forward. 'The Aba Aba Mushira would not give you a paradise, just to fill it with scorpions. He would not offer you an oasis, just to poison it.'

'What if it is a test to see if we are truly worthy of keeping it?'

'And what if it's a test to see whether it is greed or faith that drives you? Think, Prince Dakar, imagine the glory that would be promised to your tribe if you turned your back on paradise to fight His enemies.'

'A paradise neither you nor Rezail believes to be ours.'

'Did it ever matter to you what we believed?' Turk asked.

'No,' Nisri admitted.

'I know you Prince Dakar, and you know me. You do not spend this much time hating someone without knowing the truth of them. I am not asking you to surrender your garden of delights. If the

Emperor truly meant for you to have it, then nothing can stand in the way of providence. If this isn't providence, then nothing can save it. In either case, our remaining here, on this plateau, is certain suicide. It is a waste of our duty to the Emperor.' And with that, Turk shut his mouth.

If Tyrell was speaking the truth, and Turk believed he was, then Nisri already knew the caves were their only hope. He'd fought the tyranids before, and he understood the dangers of remaining exposed on all sides. The trouble was, as in all things that afflicted the two tribal alliances throughout this civil war, Nisri needed a reason to change his mind without appearing weak or betraying his people. He needed a reason to retreat to the caves without appearing indecisive. He needed someone else to state the truth for him.

Nisri appeared to have a burden lifted from his shoulders, as though he were no longer shouldering them alone. He straightened. 'I hear paradise can be fattening.'

Turk smiled. 'Only when it prepares you for the slaughter.'

'Emergency council, all command staff and every officer,' Nisri said.

'Yes, sir,' Turk replied, snapping up to salute before he transmitted the order over his micro-bead.

2

THE COMMAND BUNKER sweltered with officers, everyone quietly listening to Turk speak as they stood surrounding him.

'We lack the firepower to protect us from an all-out attack on all sides, and once the tyranids swarm us, we'll be cut off from our supplies of food and water. We will not last the night,' Turk concluded. The officers listened, some nodding their heads, while others shook theirs, and looked to Nisri for support.

'We'd be leading the tyranids straight to the caverns,' Captain Abantu said, speaking directly to Colonel Nisri, 'to the future home of our—'

'They'll find the caves with or without our help,' Captain Toria responded, interrupting. 'Is that not true of the tyranids? They possess an unerring skill in tracking down bio-matter to consume.'

'They do,' Dashour responded, 'but I say we keep them as far from the caves as we can for as long as possible.'

'This isn't a discussion,' Nisri said, 'it is an order. The caves do not belong to us unless the will of the High Lords of Terra are in our favour. If the caves truly belong to the Turenag, then the Emperor fights with us, and the Banna, in protecting them. Let any man who doubts that speak.' Nobody spoke; the root of the dissension between the soldiers was tribal in nature, but with Nisri and Turk supporting one another's decisions, nobody dared offer a dissenting voice.

'There is one thing,' a rough voice said. Everyone turned to discover Nubis standing up to speak.

Turk groaned inwardly, praying that Nubis understood the delicate balance they'd achieved. 'If we are going to make our stand at the caves, then we should mine the entry tunnels and collapse—'

The Turenag officers exploded into argument, and even Nisri was vehement in his refusals. To despoil paradise with their fight was one thing, but to begin destroying the tunnels was too much to bear. Nubis, however, was never one to be cowed by officers screaming at him, and he effectively raised his voice to cut through the wash.

'If!' he barked, loud enough to be heard. 'If we collapse the larger passages, we force the tyranids through smaller chokepoints. We conserve ammunition that way, and if we're in danger of being swarmed, we can collapse the tunnels completely and seal ourselves inside the caves... with no damage to them. We save *your* paradise!'

The voices lessened in pitch, enough for Nubis to speak normally. 'If we collapse the tunnels, the tyranids would have to dig far and long to reach us, and even then, we could continue to mount a defence, perhaps for long enough to be rescued, if the Emperor so wishes it.'

The room was quiet before Nisri spoke. 'Very well... we collapse specific tunnels to funnel the enemy, and we mine the others. If we must, and only on *my* word, then we collapse the others to save ourselves... and to save our paradise.'

Turk allowed the order to sink in before he moved on to the next matter, one most terrible to ask, but crucial to their survival nonetheless.

'What I am about to ask,' Turk said, 'will require a great sacrifice from some of you. Major Hussari reports that the tyranids will be here in about seven hours.'

Turk paused for a moment, allowing the statement to sink in. He could see the officers glancing around. They knew what was coming, what was being asked. Some officers could not meet Turk's eyes, and their gaze fell to the floor.

'If they find nothing here and follow us directly to the caves, they will catch us before we can prepare an adequate defence,' Turk said. Each word felt bitter in his mouth, a poison that would surely kill him for speaking it. He continued nonetheless. 'We need volunteers to remain behind to man the fort and engage the tyranids. We need volunteers to buy the regiment more time to prepare.'

Major Hussari is already aware of the situation. He'll arrive before the tyrannid assault and engage the horde with the remaining squadrons in the open desert.'

The room was uncomfortably quiet. Commissar Rezail rose to his feet, about to challenge the men to rise to the occasion. Turk caught the commissar's eye, however, and gently shook his head.

Rezail looked shocked, but he held his tongue.

Finally, Major Dashour stood. 'I hate caves,' he said. 'Confined spaces bother me. I'll stay and fight beneath the open sky.'

Another moment passed, everyone's breath held hostage in that moment between waiting and acting.

'I'll stay as well,' Captain Abantu replied at last. 'You'll need a gunnery crew operating the Basilisk, and who knows, perhaps our sacrifice will move the High Lords of Terra to give our people this planet.'

'Thank you,' Nisri said.

Then, to everyone's surprise, Quartermaster Kortan stood as well, his eyes dark and haunted, the long scab of the fight still fresh on his face. 'I wish to stay,' he said, nodding. Everyone was taken aback; Kortan's gift for selfish action was legendary. At first they thought it was another joke, and someone chuckled needlessly, but Kortan neither cracked his customary grin nor laughed. The room went quiet.

'Thank you, quartermaster,' Nisri replied, 'but your expertise will be needed at the caves.'

'Actually, sir,' Kortan said, 'Private Sabaak is more than capable of managing the supplies. I recommend him for a field promotion, sir, and, truthfully, I... can't let the Turenag stay behind alone. Someone has to bring the Banna glory,' he said through a weak smile.

Several of the officers chuckled, and Toria patted him on the shoulder.

'Very well,' Turk said, 'and thank you. I want the remaining officers to seek out volunteers to man the base. We can't spare more than fifty men.'

'Dismissed,' Nisri said. 'Begin evacuations.'

3

KORTAN WAS SHAKING as he walked back to the supply shed. He stared at the bloodstained rock where two soldiers had died, and fought to stomach the queasiness that made his intestines and guts feel slippery. Officers were already barking orders to their soldiers, and everyone was getting ready to pull out with emergency provisions only. Their personal items would remain behind until they could return to retrieve them.

There was a line of soldiers already at the supply shed, with Sabaak trying to handle the flood of requests for survival gear. Kortan was about to make his way inside when a rough hand grabbed him and pulled him to the side of the shed. A few soldiers saw and watched, but nobody interfered. Kortan met Nubis's piercing black eyes; the scar patterns accentuated his angry scowl. Kortan knew what was coming.

'Make sure you don't survive,' Nubis whispered. 'There is no home for you at the caves, I promise you that.'

'Why? Because I killed two of Anuman's men... who were trying to kill me?'

'You murdered two men of the Banna Alliance, two men of the Nasandi! My tribe!'

Kortan pushed Nubis back. 'I saw no men of the Nasandi... only jackals who set their teeth at my throat! And so, I shot them like jackals.'

Nubis reared back with his fist, but Kortan didn't flinch.

'Tell me, master gunner,' Kortan said, a crooked smirk on his lips. 'Is the Nasandi tribe a kennel these days? Strike me if you truly believe I killed two of your kinsmen that day, and not dogs.'

Nubis did not strike, but his fist wavered.

'I thought so,' Kortan said. He turned and headed for the supply shed, half expecting to get beaten. No blows arrived. The other soldiers parted way for him and he entered unmolested.

4

THE CAMP SEEMED to be in staggered uproar. The Chimeras were leaving the compound with soldiers packed inside and atop the vehicles. Friends wore sombre expressions as they shook hands, embraced and kissed the cheeks of those staying behind. They clasped arms and exchanged data-slates holding farewell letters written to loved ones. Others traded pieces of jewellery: devotion chains, locketts with pictures of their wives and medallions of saints. None of those staying behind said it was so their comrades would remember them. It was always "for safekeeping". The Guardsmen spoke quietly, the air filled with the noise of machines.

The Chimeras would make a couple of trips to get everyone, but the soldiers involved in cementing the defence of the caves went first; they knew this would be the last time they would see one

another. The Guardsmen were dog-tired, their efforts spent over the last day on fortifying the base camp. Now they were expected to lay explosives throughout the cavern's tunnels and secure the choke points.

Worse, perhaps, was that with the shift of attention from fortifying base camp to fortifying the caves, the men leaving felt a renewed sense of hope. They could collapse the tunnels and seal the tyranids out. That hope, Turk knew, also tore them apart with guilt. That hope came at the expense of the men they left behind, and more than a few wept quietly, shuddering to contain their grief as they left.

Turk watched as a squadron of Sentinels headed for the main gate carrying men on their open frame roofs. It was far from an ideal ride, but Captain Toria and his men were urgently needed to scout the remainder of the caverns, to uncover any additional passages leading underground: anything that the tyranids might use to bypass their defences. Already there was the worry of burrowing tyranids, but Nisri had expressed doubt that the diggers could create traversable tunnels for their allies to use.

Whether he was lying to offer a glimmer of hope, Turk knew not. But, he noticed that Nisri spoke through clenched teeth, and that was enough to worry Turk.

Shaking the many thoughts from his head, Turk briefly watched two Guardsmen lower the regiment's double eagle banner and roll it up reverently. The 892nd, such as it was, was already home to them. He ducked inside Kamala's tent. Her kit had been packed and she appeared ready to leave, despite sitting on her bed and staring at the wall in a daze. Turk took her hands and knelt before her.

'My love,' he said, 'wherever you are, come to me.'

Her tired eyes riveted on him, her expression almost wild and panicked. 'Did - did I leave you?' she asked, frantically.

'What's the matter?' he asked.

'When I first arrived,' she replied, 'I was sure there had been no massacre on this world, no Imperial presence. Now I'm certain of the opposite. There were Imperials here, some forgotten expedition, and they died, cruelly.'

'The sands have claimed them now, but they were here. Their ghosts cry out to be remembered, and I can't stop hearing them.'

Turk nodded. He asked the question, despite his discomfort. 'Can you hear them now?'

'Not clearly, but the tyranids have awakened their memories and given them voices again. It's hard to tell... the tyranids skew my perception of things. Silence them. Smother,' she said, touching her lips. 'It was the tyranids who killed them.'

'That no longer matters,' Turk said. 'What matters is that we survive. I secured your transport.'

'Yes,' she said, standing, dazed, 'I was about to... go? Is that where I went?'

Turk stood with her and cupped her face in his hands. 'My cherished, I couldn't let you leave without a suitable goodbye.'

Kamala focused on his smile, and smiled in return. She leaned into his kiss and seemed anchored to it. They relished the tenderness of one another for a long, lingering moment, before Kamala's smile faded. She broke away reluctantly, apparently lost. She grabbed her kit and headed for the door.

Turk stayed inside the tent for a moment longer, absorbing the jasmine ghost of her scent, troubled by her visions. He could not help his thoughts, could not help the primal fear that something was eating her mind. But no... the tyranids, and the ghosts they brought with them, were troubling her. That was all. He walked back out into the wild bustle of the camp, fully confident that in the chaos of the moment, nobody would see him leaving Kamala's tent.

5

IT WAS DARK when the main gates swung open and Major Hussari's Sentinel strode into camp. He was shocked by the ghostly state of it, the fifty-odd soldiers rattling around inside a compound like a handful of loose coins in a large jug. The other Sentinel squadrons were already on picket duty, with instructions to help base camp for as long as they could before falling back to the caves. Major Hussari, however, had sworn to remain and help the defences. This was no time to hide behind rank, not that he ever had.

Major Dashour jogged up to the Sentinel as Major Hussari turned the engine off and dismounted. He offered a sharp salute before asking the question everyone was too afraid to ask.

'How far behind are they?'

'An hour,' Hussari replied, casually. He handed Dashour a data-slate. 'Their direction hasn't changed from the information here. They're coming straight for us.'

Dashour nodded. 'Yes, sir. The Fire Direction Centre team can put this intelligence to use. We should be able to drop a few shells on them before they get in range of the wall emplacements and mortars.'

'Good,' Hussari replied. 'We'll have plenty to shoot at when the time comes.'

THE FIRST SIGN of their arrival was the dust cloud that slowly devoured the horizon. Long-range auspex picked up the tyranids next, the approaching horde like a solid storm front. If they didn't know what they were facing, the operators might have mistaken it for a thick storm, but they knew what was coming, and they trembled at the magnitude of the signal.

That's when the Basilisk began to thunder, firing off a deuterium macro-shell every few seconds, the sweats crew working feverishly to shove shells into the loader that automatically fed the breach. Each shot shook the courtyard and buildings, and sent out a Shockwave of dust, but the soldiers ignored the deafening crump of artillery fire. They all wore ear-guards fitted with micro-beads to hear and relay orders, though this was a weak rejoinder compared to the artillery fielded in most other engagements.

Guardsmen gathered along the northern wall and watched as the distant desert grew dark with bodies. The Basilisk's shells registered in the approaching mass as impact clouds that flung pinprick bodies into the air and darkened the mass with plumes of black smoke. Only later, what felt like an eternity afterwards, did the air echo back the hint of soft impacts. But, the fire seemed inconsequential compared to the approaching mass, like using a pin to stab at the body of a wolf. Dashour let the men watch for a moment before sending them back to their positions. The heaviest defences were along the western wall, where a dune created a natural ramp to the plateau and the main gate. While it did not face the approaching tyranids, it would probably be the most heavily exploited avenue up to the walls. Dashour also placed men along the other walls to handle the tyranids that scaled the plateau. But, between the abatis thicket of metal lances and the thin lip of plateau between the compounds walls and the cliffs, Dashour hoped fewer men would be needed to hold those positions.

Major Hussari was in the command bunker, instructing the squadrons engaging the edges of the tyranid legions. Nobody was to venture closer than autocannon range; the tyranids reacted too quickly to risk sending them in closer. As it was, the enemy was sending out harrying parties to go after the squadrons, overtaking some and scattering others. This was a flood, and they were but a lone rock hoping to break the back of the storm, but Hussari continued to direct his squadrons, hearing them die one at a time. He doubted whether more than a handful of birds would ever reach the caves.

Kortan, meanwhile, was regretting his decision with every fibre of his being, but he stood his ground along the northern wall. He tried to ignore the thunder of the approaching mob, the undulating sea of bone-grey, turquoise, blood-red and black carapaces. The pressure of them seemed immense. How they didn't crush one another with their bodies, Kortan did not know. For each artillery shell that cratered a hole in their ranks, the horde surged to fill it again; there was no sign of their numbers thinning. They were endless. Kortan was on the verge of collapse when a steady hand found his shoulder. It was Dashour. He handed him a remote device with a single switch mounted on its face.

'Is this the magic button to make them go away?' Kortan shouted, nodding to the tyranids.

'In a manner of speaking,' Dashour said, missing the joke. He said something else that was swallowed by the explosive artillery shot. The air was already thick with the smell of cordite from the propellants. 'I said, once the tyranids draw in close, the Basilisk will be useless. This is one of four triggers to detonate the ammo sheds that are filled with deuterium shells.' He paused, waiting for another salvo to be fired. 'When the camp is overrun—'

'Don't you mean "if",' Kortan said, half in jest and all in hope.

'When,' Dashour said. 'It will be up to Major Hussari, Captain Abantu, me or you to detonate the ammo sheds and take as many of these bastards with us as we can.'

Kortan nodded, his head swimming with the truth of their situation. In most operations, he was well behind the front lines. He saw combat rarely, if ever. Today, however, was another matter entirely. The Basilisk fired again. This time, it was joined by mortar fire from the trench below, and by the gun emplacements on the wall.

The tyranids had reached the base of the plateau.

THE BATTLE WAS an ugly, desperate thing. The tyranids struck the base of the plateau and melted around it, the way water flows to find cracks. They surged up the ramp, the air filled with their insect-like chatter and their war howls. In moments, the base camp stood alone in a living sea of enemies, the desert forgotten. The tyranids nimbly scaled the cliff sides, using one another for purchase before leaping up higher, their claws and blade arms sinking into the rock wall. Others, reminiscent of centipedes and cockroaches with faces, scurried up the cliff and defied gravity with no effort. A few fired up at the Guardsmen, but they seemed frantic, eager to reach the humans within and kill them with their bare hands.

The swell of tyranids reached the compound's walls. The first wave crashed into the abatis spikes and skewered themselves deliberately. The almost suicidal run caught the Guardsmen off kilter, until they realised that the tyranids were using their bodies to cork the spikes. Others used the dead to scramble higher up the wall, but the Guardsmen fired down into the mob. The skirmish was in desperate and full swing. The whistle of mortars was as constant as the weapons fire, and every shot was promised a hit.

DASHOUR STOOD WITH his men on the western wall, certainly more composed than they with their desperate battle cries, but fighting just the same. With bolt pistol in hand, he chose his shots, aimed and fired. The mob on the ramp below was packed together and blinding in their uniformity, but Dashour fancied he understood the tyranid... respected their strengths, and capitalised on their perceived weakness. The tyranids were hive-minded, and each pack possessed an anchor to that unifying intellect. It was usually a larger beast, better armed and armoured than the rest. Dashour sought them out with his sharp eyes, firing grenade shell rounds into their bodies. The rounds detonated inside them and sent out a hail of shredding fragments into their closest allies.

KORTAN KEPT HIS head low as he ran along the various walls. The oversized packs strapped over both his shoulders were heavy, but were quickly becoming lighter as soldiers grabbed frag and krak grenades from him. The grenades went over the walls quickly, and detonated with muted whumps somewhere below. Kortan did not linger, however, and focused on keeping his head down.

HUSSARI WAS ON the eastern wall, the one with the highest cliffs. The tyranids were clustered far below, with swarms of them trying to scale the rocks. He aimed down the scope of his M-Galaxy lasgun, picking off the highest climbers with a mid-range charge setting. Too little power and the shot might bounce off the carapace, but too strong a charge would deplete the power pack.

The major sighted, and sliced through the tentacle arm of a climbing beast with a mouth set in its chest, when someone next to him screamed. Hussari turned in time to see the man on the ground, writhing in agony, his shirt torn open, and the blood blisters on his chest exploding; beetle rounds were burrowing into his skin. Nothing could be done for him. The major turned the lasgun on the poor soldier and shot him through the head. That was the only triage any of them could expect today.

He was about to fire at another enemy when another soldier was hit: a shot to the face that rocked him off his feet and sent pin-sized beetles running in and out of the crater-like wound.

Sniper, Hussari realised. They have a sniper.

Hussari peered over the edge of the wall for a one-second count and whipped his head back again. A shot screamed past him, the sniper quick with his aim. Unfortunately, there were too many opponents below for him to see the sniper, but that didn't matter to Hussari. He pulled three frag grenades from his webbing, adjusted them to a short fuse, pulled the pin on each and dropped them in different directions. The grenades exploded above the tyranids, the shrapnel dispersing over a wide area. Hussari moved to a different spot on the wall and peered over again for a one second-count. The mob below was devastated: carapaces split open, bodies spitting jets of ichor and yellow and red organs unravelling from bodies. No shots followed, but Hussari could also see the press of tyranids rushing in to fill the gaps and devour their own dead.

BACK ALONG THE western wall, over the main gate, the fighting grew more intense. With no cliffs to scale, the tyranids were at the compound's walls. Soldiers along the battlements fired directly down into the mob below them. The Guardsmen were efficient in their killing, but, unfortunately, were stacking a wall of corpses for the others to climb. Dashour continued to pick his shots, aiming at those tyranids that seemed unique among the throng of runners, leapers and warriors. He wasn't sure if his plan was working, but he liked to pretend it was.

Suddenly, something caught Dashour's eye: a row of simian-like tyranids. They were well armoured, with long, muscular arms and giant, clawed fists, the sharp knuckles of which they used to drag themselves forward. Biomechanical cannons grew from their backs, while under each body was the weighted udder of their ammo sac. Dashour's eyes widened; he remembered these creatures, remembered the horrors they could inflict within the ranks of their enemies.

'Gunbeasts! Shoot them!' he cried, pointing. A few of the soldiers looked confused, unable to distinguish one tyranid from another in these conditions. Those that understood Dashour's orders aimed and fired, but their shots fell short.

Dashour ran up to the autocannon gunner sheltered behind sandbags and pulled him off the weapon. He planted his shoulders into the recoil braces and fired at the tyranids, stitching round after round into the targets. Shots bounced off the heavy bone moulding of the cannon mounts and the heavily plated arms and legs, but Dashour kept his finger heavy on the trigger, his tracer rounds bringing all

ranged fire along the wall to bear against the gunbeasts. Two went down, telling hits scored along the creatures' necks and heads.

It was too late. Three gunbeasts strained, their cannons flaring with electric sparks and heavy muscle contracting. They fired their spore clusters.

The first cluster sailed over the wall and struck the mortar trench. The spore exploded on impact, generating a cloud that engulfed four mortar crews and sent the others scrambling from the pits. They screamed, their pained howls a piercing cry that stabbed the heart. Dashour knew the effects: instant haemorrhaging, destruction of the soft connective tissues, disintegration of the internal organs. They died as their organs and arteries melted into pudding, and their skin, muscles, bones and tendons detached from one another. They turned people into bags of soup and bone.

The second spore struck the wall and caught two Guardsmen in the splatter. They didn't even have time to scream as the liquid melted their heads and upper bodies. They fell to the ground, their organs spilling out of the exposed cups of their chests. The fast acting molecular acids also ate through the wall, opening a large crater, but not eating its way through.

The third spore struck the upper wall, this time exploding out in a web of filament threads covered in filleting micro-hooks. The threads wrapped around three men and instantly contracted. They tore through their clothing and sunk into their flesh until stopped by bone. One soldier died with a gurgle on his lips, the threads having cut through his throat and wrapped around his spinal column. The other two cried out for help, the wires embedded half-way through their stomachs, arms and thighs. Dashour ignored the screams for help and the pandemonium. He continued firing at the gunbeasts, raking them with the autocannon to stop them from firing again.

'Major!' he cried into his micro-bead, 'watch out for gunbeasts... the ones with the cannons on their back. Take them out first.'

'Will do,' Hussari cried back, 'but we have our own problems.'

QUICKLY SWITCHING CHANNELS, the major backed away from the ledge of the battlements and contacted fire-direction centre while staring through his magnoculars.

'They're approaching from the north-east. They're the only things in the air,' Hussari said. He was staring at what appeared to be several flights of the creatures, what Dashour had called fliers.

'I see 'em,' Captain Abantu reported.

'Take them out. We can't afford to have them drop in our laps or skip us and find the caves before the others are ready.'

'Yes, sir,' Abantu replied.

ABANTU WAS RELATIVELY safe inside the fire-direction centre, but the action was no less heated.

They held a commanding view of the western slope and the base of the northern wall, while anything they saw to the east was out of range of their autocannons. Still, gunners waited at the three gun mounts that lined each of the four walls, either firing at the enemy they could see and reach, or waiting to fire at their own battlements the moment the tyranids began scaling the walls.

'Sir,' the forward observer said. He was a nervous looking boy who had been steady and clear in his instructions throughout the engagement. 'Those gun-beasts that the major warned us about, I see more of them approaching from the east. I also see something the size of a small building. It's moving around us with a sizeable contingent.'

'Is it now?' Abantu asked. 'Moving around us? To flank us, perhaps?'

'Sir, I think that group's avoiding the battle deliberately. I think they're heading to the caves.'

Abantu sighed. How the creatures knew about the caves, he didn't know, but if they managed to get inside, they could build a brand new army with all that rich bio-matter, and he doubted the others could do anything to stop them. They needed more time.

'Direct the Basilisk's fire against that large creature and his group. Alert Major Hussari to the approaching gunbeasts, and tell the heavy gunners to fire on the fliers when they get within range.'

'Yes, sir.'

THE FIRST TYRANIDS made it over the south wall at the same time the fliers swooped into the fray.

All twelve ball-mounted guns over the command bunker began chattering at that moment, in between the heavy artillery salvos aimed at the large tyranid force that was north of the compound. It was nothing short of spectacular chaos, with the fight disintegrating into a three hundred and sixty degree free-for-all. A bipedal tyranid with a scorpion's tail mounted the southern battlement and swung its scythe blades, disembowelling one Guardsman and amputating the arm of another. Two ball mounts above the command bunker swung towards the warrior and unleashed a fusillade of shots that dismembered it and chewed through the ichor and blood-soaked duckboards, before blasting chunks off the walls.

FLIERS SWOOPED DOWN at the Guardsmen on the battlements. Kortan barely managed to duck as the blade-tail of one sliced at him. Laspistol in hand, he fired at it as it swooped skyward again, but it moved too fast. Kortan checked the sky and headed for a group of soldiers shouting for more ammunition.

MAIOR HUSSARI WATCHED as a flyer with insect-like wings skewered a tripod gunner on its lance arms and raised him into the air. The man screamed as the tyranid lifted him up and sank his teeth around the man's face. There was a brilliant explosion of red as the creature's cartilage tongue burst out through the back of his skull. Hussari screamed in anger and fired his lasgun. Crackling shots tore through the creature's wings, and both it and its prey dropped into the compound below. The surviving mortar crews shot the creature with their laspistols until it stopped jerking. Grim-faced, they returned to their steady salvos.

Hussari ran to an abandoned tripod mounted cannon and fired into the unending sea of enemies that was scaling the battlement's walls. The cliffs were thick with tyranids.

DASHOUR BRIEFLY TOOK note of the chaos around him. The ball-mounted guns were filling the sky with tracer fire, felling several of the fliers, and doing their best to keep them away from the wall crews. One occasionally managed to dart past the screen of fire, however, impaling a Guardsman or knocking him off his perch into the forest of claws and stingers below.

We're losing through attrition, Dashour thought, before turning his attentions back to the west wall. Here, the litter of corpses served as a ramp for their compatriots, and the tyranids were getting close enough to swing their bladed arms at the Guardsmen. To Dashour's right, a trooper wielding a melta gun fired a hissing thermal blast of ignited gases, striking a frog-like creature with powerful leaping legs and hooks for arms. The blast vaporised it and flash burned several leapers around him. Before he could fire again, a dozen small tyranids, each with four clawing arms and reverse joint legs, managed to bound up from the ramp, to the backs of their dead companions and over the walls. One tackled the Guardsman with the melta gun and pushed him off the wall. As they fell, the leaper slashed at the soldier, shredding the man before either of them hit the ground.

The tyranids scattered through the compound like a small plague, going after mortar crews and lone Guardsmen.

'The walls are breached!' someone yelled over the micro-bead.

'The northern tyranid mass is inbound,' Abantu said over the channel.

Dashour realised they were being overrun, the western wall moments away from being swarmed. The mortar and artillery crews stopped firing as they dealt with the leapers that were tearing into them. Another soldier on the southern wall was impaled on the scythe blade of a large bipedal tyranid that reached the battlements. The creature pulled him over the side before anyone could react.

Dashour scrambled to grab the dropped melta gun and brought it to bear. He fired thermal blasts at the enemies, vaporising those about to scale the walls. Another one of his men simply toppled over, a buzzing tyranid round leaving a hole through the chest.

'Prepare to retreat to the fire-direction centre,' Major Hussari yelled into the micro-bead. 'We'll make our last stand there! Emperor love you all for your bravery!'

KORTAN BACK-PEDALLED along the wall, his bags empty of munitions and grenades, his laspistol depleted, though he was hard pressed to remember when he'd fired it and what he'd hit. He jammed in another power core, his last, and began firing to cover the retreat of the other men. Any notion of saving himself was somehow distant, and he felt invigorated by his actions.

He fired shot after shot, as tyranids scaled the battlements and threw Guardsmen to the ravaging hordes below. All their screams melted together until they sounded like one unending cry that never drew breath. Kortan continued backing towards the fire-direction centre as men ran past him.

TYRANIDS OVERTOOK THE southern wall entirely, the last soldier torn in half between two snake-like beasts with four arms apiece. They slithered along the battlements and on the wall, clinging like spiders, as they rushed the other positions. Men leapt to the courtyard below, to escape the attack. The mortar and Basilisk crews, and other Guardsmen were fighting back to back in small clusters, shooting up at the walls as leapers and runners cleared the parapets.

'Retreat!' Dashour cried, though he had no intention of surrendering his position along the west wall. Men ran past him, some cut down by bone rounds or grabbed off the walls by harpoon lines. He continued firing his melta gun, even after tyranids scaled the walls on either side of him. He was determined to stand his ground, to match his faith against theirs. He knew he was dead... there was no other end today but death. But he wanted to die facing them. He wanted them to see the same conviction of purpose that he saw and so feared in them.

'Come on!' he screamed, his controlled then finally broken on the back of his bloodlust. As he fought, the last man at the western wall, a pack of small, dog-sized tyranids leapt at him. They seemed to be comprised mostly of a large head with overly-developed fangs, a long skull crest of bone plates and six legs to scuttle about on. They bit and latched on to the meat of his arms, thighs, back and neck. Dashour screamed in pain, trying to whip them off, but more of the creatures leapt at him, biting whatever remained exposed.

Dashour fired a melta round at his feet, his last act of spite for an enemy twice faced and twice feared. The blast vaporised his lower body along with his attackers, and his lifeless torso fell off the wall into the courtyard below.

MAJOR HUSSARI SAW Dashour plummet from the walls, and wished him peace in the Emperor's care. Hussari was one of the last Guardsmen left on the wall, with Kortan standing at the entrance to the fire-direction centre, trying to get the remaining men inside. The Guardsmen trapped in the courtyard skirmish circles were stranded, the tyranids pouring into the compound and cutting them off from retreat. One soldier pressed his laspistol to his temple and fired, dropping immediately. The others continued firing at anything that approached them. Runners, centipede floor skimmers and frog-like leapers rushed a smaller skirmish circle of three men, and dragged them down with claw swipes and tail stings.

'Go inside and close that door!' Hussari cried into his micro-bead. Kortan saw him and motioned him over, but it was too late, there were too many tyranids on the wall between him and sanctuary. He waved Kortan off and continued firing his lasgun. 'Go! That's an order!'

Not waiting to see if Kortan obeyed, Hussari made a run for the nearby roof of the vehicle stable. He'd planned this route out a few hours ago, not to save himself, but to inflict as much punishment on his foes as possible. He landed on the metal roof, a storey below the battlements, and continued running for the edge. He felt the roof shake and the metal groan as tyranids leapt after him. He didn't bother looking behind. Either he'd make it or he wouldn't.

Hussari glanced up once and was glad to see the door to the fire-direction centre close, the FDC's ball-mounted guns still blazing. He leapt off the roof and onto the metal frame of Damask's idling Sentinel, left next to the vehicle stable. With practiced ease, he slipped into the cockpit and revved the engine. The barrel of the multi-laser began spinning, and within seconds, unleashed a steady torrent of electrified las-fire. Hussari strode into the courtyard, crushing smaller tyranids underfoot, while raking the area with crackling blasts. For the first time, the tyranids scattered, the Sentinel a surprising arrival.

The Sentinel continued moving around, trying to help the three or four skirmish circles fighting for dear life. They fought with renewed vigour at the sign of the bird, its gun blazing, but the tyranids showed no hesitation as they clambered over the walls. Several leapt for the Sentinel's cockpit, but Hussari was faster. He sidestepped them entirely, or blasted them from the air. Still, it was growing more difficult to move, the tyranids swamping at his feet, many of them trying to clamber up the moving legs.

Hussari saw one skirmish circle overran, a brood of tyranids breaking through the soldiers and cutting them down with their scythes and sprays of acid. The circle crumbled. There was nothing he could do, except continue holding down the trigger and obliterating as many of them as he could. He squeezed the trigger hard, his fingers aching. He squeezed it after his Sentinel could no longer move through the bodies of the enemies; he squeezed it as a half-snake tyranid pulled itself up to eye level with him, its pincer tail poised above its head; he squeezed it as the tail slammed into his chest, and broke through his sternum and spine with a loud crack.

Still the multi-laser fired as the Sentinel pivoted, Hussari's dead fingers unwilling to release the trigger or the pivot lever. The tyranids had to rip him out of the cockpit, before the laser whined to a stop and the Sentinel stopped turning.

FIFTEEN GUARDSMEN, INCLUDING Abantu, were inside the centre when Kortan shut the doors. Several men, with nothing left to hold the strength in their legs, collapsed to the ground, exhausted. The gunners on the ball mounts continued firing at the enemy below. They were safe for the moment, but this was their end. Everyone knew it.

'The charges,' Kortan said, stumbling over to Captain Abantu.

'Not yet,' Abantu said. He pointed to the periscope at the centre of the room. Kortan stared through the rubber-ribbed eyepiece, and was startled by the giant tyranid that seemed to engulf the magnocular enhanced view. At first, he thought he was staring at something standing right in front of the hooded prism on the rooftop, but then he realised that he was staring at something that measured the plateau in height, something that was lumbering straight for them like some unstoppable juggernaut.

'We cannot detonate the charges yet,' Abantu said. 'We must wait.'

The creature was huge, its head topped with the wicked spike of a ramming horn. Rows of sharp teeth, each the size of a man, filled its distended mouth, while a thick shell from which protruded an assortment of bone ridges protected its back. It walked hunched over, two gigantic scythes of its upper arms capable of splitting a tank in two. Wicked-looking claws stretched out from its lower hands, which were opening and closing in anticipation of the slaughter. Tentacles writhed from the gaps in its armour.

Kortan's throat went dry, the hope sucked out of him. He stepped away from the periscope. 'How long?' he asked.

'A few minutes longer,' Abantu said, 'and then paradise awaits us for our great deeds.'

Kortan nodded and silently prayed that he was indeed meant for such a place. Unfortunately, the tyranids had other plans.

The ground shook and rumbled. Suddenly, the floor ruptured. Half-snake tyranids had bored through the rockcrete floor from the lower levels, and burst up to grab anyone close to them. Captain Abantu and two others vanished into the large hole, pulled down by long claws and scythes that skewered them through. The men resting on the floor scrambled to their feet, and opened fire on the tyranid centipedes skittering up through the hole. The ball mount gunners abandoned their position and followed suit. They pumped round after round of las-shot and bolter fire at whatever horror tried crawling up. Everyone was screaming, venting their anger and fury at what they knew to be their last stand.

Kortan backed up against the wall, his left hand with his thumb poised over the detonator and his right firing his laspistol. One of the walls simply melted, its edges gummed by some substance that hissed and popped, and several of the smaller tyranids dragged another soldier out. The room seemed to be haemorrhaging monsters from the floor, walls and finally, the ceiling.

Guardsmen died quickly. Several dog-like hunters ran for Kortan's corner. He fired his last-shot, bringing one down, before he brought the switch up, ready to flip it.

The floor evaporated from beneath him before he could, however, and something pulled him down with its sharp claws.

Kortan was dazed. He was distantly aware of some sharp, intense pain at his feet and a horrid shucking noise. Something was stabbing his legs with millions of needles, each one tipped white hot. His mouth opened to scream, but nothing came out. He squeezed his fingers, desperately trying to flick the detonator switch, but his hand was empty. The sickening realisation hit him, and the pain at his feet turned into searing agony. He looked, and through the wash of tears, realised that a giant slug-like creature with plated armour had devoured his legs up to his knees. Articulated lobster arms ringed the creature's head and slowly fed Kortan's body into its maw, piercing and pulling, piercing and pulling.

Through the haze of pain, Kortan could see large leathery pouches lining the creature's flanks. The pouches undulated and writhed, and Kortan saw the acid-eaten hands and faces of his fellow soldiers pressed against the skin. They were being devoured slowly while the other tyranids watched.

Kortan screamed and fought the blackness that tried to claim his senses. Something caught his eye, something familiar, in the rubble next to him. He grabbed for it, unable to remember through the pain what it did. A switch gleamed on the box. There was a loud rumble outside, the foot tremors of something huge.

Kortan remembered and forgot, and then remembered again through the fire that ate at his every nerve.

He flipped the switch, and saw the first explosion blossom. It seemed to erupt in silence, the light and heat driven through him, pushing away all sound. The bow-wave of air broke him; the fire consumed him; everything went black and mercifully cool.

CHAPTER NINE

'Write your misery in sand, but carve your blessings in marble.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

TURK AND NISRI waited in the command Chimera, which sat inside the mouth of Cavern Apostle, alongside a handful of other vehicles. Two Sentinels stood guard over them, ready to provide heavy fire support when the time came. Drums of fuel stood nearby, alongside ammo crates, explosives and any other supplies deemed necessary to the defence of the caverns.

The two men listened to the vox-chatter coming from the Sentinel pilots still outside the caves. The explosion that engulfed the compound was massive, the stock of artillery shells enough to prove devastating. The top of the plateau looked like a burnt cigar, ash, smoke and all.

'What of the tyranids?' Nisri asked.

'They were dealt a heavy blow,' the pilot reported. 'Major Hussari and the others managed to anger a second group heading your way. The explosion destroyed over a quarter of their forces along with a giant beast that measured the plateau's height.'

Nisri and Turk exchanged glances, but Nisri nodded. Yes, he had heard of tyranids growing to such proportions.

'They're more siege engine than beast. It's good the creature was never allowed to reach us, or it would have peeled open this mountain.'

Turk nodded. 'What are the tyranids doing now?' Turk asked, speaking into the vox.

'Regrouping, by the looks of it, but it's slow going. They seem... sluggish.'

Nisri cupped the mouthpiece of the vox-caster. A smile crept across his face, some of the tension evaporating. This was a reprieve, a small one at best, but a reprieve nonetheless. 'The major must have dealt a blow to the tyranids' hive-mind by killing some of the lynchpins,' he told Turk. 'They are trying to reorganise, but it's bought us the time we need.'

Turk understood. 'I'll tell the men that the sacrifice was not in vain.' With that, he headed out of the Chimera and raced off to pass the word around.

'Let me know the minute they begin moving. Are you or your men in any danger?'

'Negative, sir. We're far enough away so that, even if they give chase, we'll reach the caves before they do.'

'Even from the flyers?' Nisri asked. He remembered the gargoyle-like tyranids, their quick strikes lightning fast and more than enough to scatter a properly mounted defence.

'Most of the flyers died in the explosion. We're more than a match for the handful we can see.'

'Very well. Keep your eyes and vox-channel open. Nisri out.'

He patted the vox-operator on the shoulder and instructed him to report every bit of data that came over the line. Nisri then left the Chimera to oversee the cave's defences. At the very least, a glimmer of hope was peaking through the storm of recent events. The base camp had given them breathing space to prepare, and they proved that the tyranids were not limitless. The regiment was fortunate that only one ship landed, and Nisri hoped that whatever battle had forced them to make planetfall alone, would also be the source of their rescue.

2

TURK MOVED PAST the men laying down another bundle of explosives, through to the tunnel where Nubis was briefing the squad leaders on the planned defences for the cave, while sixteen Guardsmen milled about. Nearby, a group of men was sandbagging a gunnery nest pointing down the throat of a chokepoint. The new quartermaster, Sabaak, was moving past them when he spotted Turk.

'Sir,' Sabaak said, tapping the rolled up cloth tied to his back on Y-ring straps. 'I was given the 892nd's banner. Should I hang it in the cavern? You know, to inspire the men?'

'Killing your share of tyranids will inspire the men. We'll fly the banner when the time comes.' With that, he moved further down the corridor.

The tunnel was wide enough to fit a Chimera through, though the twists and turns, rise and fall of the passage would have prevented most vehicles from successfully navigating it. The chokepoint was a straight way that ended at an intersection. Turk knew, from the initial briefing, that this corridor and the one to the left of them branched away from the main passage. It was a "Y" intersection with each side tunnel sandbagged, mined and protected by two tripod-mounted stub cannons. Any creature entering the junction would be caught in a lethal crossfire with no cover. Nubis paused, but Turk nodded for him to continue his briefing. He was quite curious as to the defences Nubis's men emplaced. Nubis returned to the wall, where he'd painted a crude schematic to the tunnels in lume-paint.

'We know the tyranids have a sharp sense of smell, so we've slaughtered some of the dromad and muukali and left them in the dead-ends,' he said, pointing to several tunnels that simply stopped. 'Anything that goes after the carcasses will trip the explosives and collapse the caves on top of them.'

'Wouldn't it be easier to simply collapse all the tunnels before they get here and wait for rescue?' Captain Lakoom Nehari asked. He was a slight man with ebony-skin, his frame more suited to keeping ledgers than fighting wars.

'Strange question coming from a Turenag officer,' Nubis said. 'I'm being practical.'

Nubis sighed. The tyranids have diggers? Collapse the tunnels and they'll dig us out. Only... we won't know where they'll be coming from. Which tunnel? Above us from the roof? Below us from

the ground? This way, we control the fight for as long as possible, kill as many as we can in the collapse, and hope it's enough to frighten them off.

'Now, speaking of explosives,' Nubis continued, 'each of the four skirmish tunnels are marked at intervals. Look,' he said, shutting off the light perched on the sandbags next to him. Darkness fell across the corridor, the walls illuminated by green patches of lume-paint. Further down the tunnel, however, at intervals of ten metres or so, were painted rings. 'We've placed explosive charges at each interval. Two of my men will be with each platoon, to trigger the explosives if... when the tyranids advance that far.'

'Won't the tunnels collapse?' Captain Toria asked.

'Only if I want them to,' Nubis snapped. 'The charges are shaped fragmentation charges, designed to kill anything in their path. They have nothing to do with the charges that we drilled into the walls.'

'And the last circle?' Toria asked, undeterred and pointing to the ring a few metres from them.

'That's your signal to make your peace with the Emperor.'

Nubis dismissed the other officers with a nod, but held back the group of sixteen soldiers. Turk did not know them by name, but he knew them to be Nubis's anti-armour and mortar support squads, men whose expertise in the caves was practically useless.

'You know what is expected of you?' Nubis asked.

The men nodded.

'I want you to operate in crews of two. Once the explosives detonate, you'll be trapped outside with them... or worse.'

'We war for the Emperor,' one said. 'We understand.'

'Aya,' the others said quietly, almost as if they were sharing a joke.

'Good. Grab your gear and find somewhere to hide.'

Nubis dismissed the men and caught Turk's eye. He glanced away, his eyes barely hiding the storm of his thoughts. He removed his shirt and went to help the Guardsmen add more sandbags to the heavy stubber nest.

'I heard,' Nubis said, adding a sandbag to the wall. Shirtless, his ebony black skin glistened, and the old lash scars on his back stood out like rough ropes. 'The camp bought us more time. Hussari and the others are heroes to the Emperor.'

'Yes,' Turk said. 'Stop a moment. Let me see your eyes when you speak.'

Nubis sat against the sandbags, his fierce black eyes glittering. Turk knew that there was no animosity in them, at least none towards him, but he knew when the Master Gunnery Sergeant was angry or on the warpath. His eyes shone with a fierce determination to get the job done right, and to inflict as much pain as possible whilst-doing it.

'What passed between Kortan and you?' Turk asked. 'Did it have anything to do with that night? When Anuman and the others died?'

'Sir,' Nubis replied, 'the quartermaster died a hero to the regiment, and I am the last one who speaks ill of the dead. It invites bad luck.'

Turk nodded. 'I understand, my friend.' He sat down beside Nubis and dismissed the other Guardsmen with a nod. After they'd left, he fished a worn metal container out of a pouch on his belt, rigging and flipped it open. Three hand-rolled, brown ash sticks were tucked under an elastic band. Nubis smiled. 'You've been holding out on me, Iban Salid,' he said, slipping out one of the offered sticks. 'Thank you. From that old man in the Kufai bazaar?'

'He hand-rolled them just for me,' Turk said. He pulled out a small box of matchsticks.

'Ah,' Nubis said with an appreciative smile.

'The old man was specific,' Turk said, striking a long match, and letting it burn a moment. He cupped it and offered it to Nubis, who dipped his stick in the flame. 'Let the cedar-rose match burn for two seconds to draw out the flavour,' he said before bringing the match to his own stick.

'Mmm,' Nubis replied, drawing in a long drag of the rich flavour, and letting the smoke curl away.

'This is good. It tastes like—'

'Home,' Turk replied. 'I know... I miss it too.'

They smoked for a while, each man lost to his private thoughts, the smoky haze a pleasant diversion, and an even more pleasant reminder of better days. Finally, as their sticks approached that last pinch of breath, Turk said, 'I wanted to thank you, my friend.'

'For what?'

'For keeping your word, for stopping Anuman from shooting more of Nisri's men, for being a soldier I could rely upon and a man whose word I could trust.'

Nubis nodded and then slipped his hand over Turk's. 'You're welcome, but I could never marry you. You're just... too ugly for my tastes.'

Turk pulled his hand away. 'Bastard,' he said, laughing.

COMMISSAR REZAIL TOOK a deep breath of the limestone and jungle flavoured air, hoping to remember it forever before the smell of blood and cordite painted its stench over everything. Apostle was busy with the rumble of idling engines and men shouting orders to one another, but a few steps into the jungle, and all the noise seemed to evaporate. For a moment, just one tranquil moment, Rezail could imagine he was, in fact, enjoying paradise.

'Let me ask you something,' Rezail said, hating to break the silence. He faced his adjutant, a look of utmost gravity in his expression. 'Did you offer Lieutenant Colonel Iban Salid advice on how to address and approach Colonel Dakar. Their... understanding was too sudden given their history.' Tyrell hesitated for a moment before looking down at his feet. He nodded. 'I am sorry, commissar, but I saw a way out of the predicament.'

'And you didn't trust me enough to speak with me first?'

'No no, commissar,' Tyrell responded, immediately panicked. 'It is only that... the advice I offered is from one tribesmen to another. I would never go behind your back... I swear.'

Rezail shook his head. 'Never again, understood? If I was a lesser commissar, I would have shot you on the spot for toying with my trust.'

'No, commissar, thank you. I never intended to be disloyal.'

'Very well,' Rezail said. 'Apology accepted, on condition that this is the last time.'

'Yes, commissar.'

They walked further into the jungle, brushing aside the growth.

'But I am curious... what is it you told the lieutenant-colonel that you didn't think you could trust me with?'

'It is not that I didn't trust you, commissar,' Tyrell explained. 'It's just hard to explain.'

'Try,' Rezail said, stopping to face Tyrell. 'Take your time.'

Tyrell thought it through for a moment, trying to plot out the best way to address the matter. Finally, he took a deep breath and allowed the explanation to flow of its own accord.

'Understand, commissar, that for Tallarn tribesmen, whatever is learnt in the cradle is carried with them to the grave.'

'Go on.'

'The first lesson learnt by someone like Iban Salid, a Banna, is that the Aba Aba Mushira is the supreme ruler of all. Service to him is absolute. The second thing he learns is that the word of the Orakle is absolute, for he carries the word of the Emperor. The third thing he learns is that he must avenge any wrongs against his tribe.'

'That has been this regiment's problem from the beginning,' Rezail said with a sigh. 'They should remember their duty to the Emperor first and foremost.' The entire matter bothered him, and he felt like he was presiding over a family squabble rather than a regiment.

'Yes, commissar, but if I may speak frankly?'

'Go on.'

'Please don't shoot me.'

'Go on!'

'Yes, commissar,' Tyrell said, clearly nervous. 'You do not... appreciate the problem. You think that you can execute a few men to bring about discipline, but what are a few executions to a band of men who are willing to become martyrs. Hate your tribe's enemies from the cradle to the grave. That is what they know. It is the absolute law of their lives, handed to them alongside an imperative that rightly says they must remain loyal to the Emperor. They carry their blood feud with the same conviction that they must obey the Emperor. They could no sooner disobey one imperative than they could turn their back on the most Munificent Golden Throne of Terra.'

'Damn,' Rezail replied. 'Why didn't you tell me this before?'

'Because before today, commissar, you wouldn't have understood, or perhaps you wouldn't have listened.'

Rezail nodded; the implication of this was a devastating blow to the regiment's survival prospects. If they survived the tyrannids, could they survive one another? Rezail wasn't sure and, frankly, he was facing larger concerns. There was, however, one last concern on his mind, a simple question really. 'So what did you tell the lieutenant-colonel? How did he sway Colonel Dakar's decision?'

'I told him to understand the truths of the Turenag, the convictions that drive them: Serve the Aba Aba Mushira, fight your enemies and struggle for the purity of your faith, and for this you will be rewarded. Perhaps the Turenag will not openly say this world is their reward for their service to the Emperor, but they want to believe it is. I told the lieutenant-colonel to treat this place as Colonel Dakar's garden of delights, and to be the voice of those concerns he dared not utter. I told him not to be the enemy or the rival, but to be the advisor.'

Rezail noticed the sadness in Tyrell's eyes. 'And that's it?'

'No,' Tyrell admitted ruefully. 'I told him the chances of the Turenag settling this world were impossible, and since that is the case, why argue over who is going to inherit something that neither is bound to receive.'

'Sage advice, but you don't appear happy for bringing the two sides to an accord.'

Tyrell offered a wistful sigh and a half-hearted smile. 'I have brought both tribes closer to any peace they've known, closer than the wisest men of my tribe could do, and there is nobody to see my small victory.'

'Come,' Rezail said, sitting upon the root of a large jungle tree. 'We'll celebrate your victory together.'

Tyrell sat down with the commissar and groaned at the pleasure of sitting and relaxing, if only for a moment.

'To the small victories,' the commissar said.

'May they be many.'

4

TURK MOVED THROUGH the jungle, pushing giant fronds and glowing bulbs aside, and nearly stumbling over the roots of trees in his rush. He finally reached a small stream, no more than a few metres across, cut into the rock, and edged with plant rich soil. A shirtless Nisri, his emaciated body pushing his ribs through his onyx skin, washed his upper body in ritual preparation for the battle to come. A rich tapestry of tribal scars laced his back.

'What was so important that it couldn't be said over the vox?' Nisri asked, dipping his wash cloth in the stream and passing it over his arm.

'I spoke with Captain Toria. He's currently assisting Sergeant Ballasra in finding surface tunnels.' 'And?'

'Captain Toria suggested a plan that I think holds merit.'

'So you came to plead your case in person... I'm not going to like it, am I?'

'No, sir, but I ask you hear my argument through.'

Nisri sighed and set the wash cloth down. He motioned for Turk to sit opposite him, and waited patiently as the lieutenant-colonel knelt.

'We know the tyranids are heading for these caves,' Turk said. 'Perhaps they were heading here from the beginning and we were simply in the way.' He waited to see if Nisri was following him. Nisri sighed and motioned for him to continue.

'If the tyranids entered the caves, they would add considerable biomass to their existing army, perhaps enough to launch an invasion of the neighbouring systems. We cannot let them have what is here.'

'I'm not sure I like where you're going with this, lieutenant-colonel.'

'Please... hear me. I am only talking about preparing for a possibility.'

'You're talking about collapsing the caverns!'

'If it came to that, yes, sir, I am.'

'Out of the question!' Nisri replied.

'Sir, we're already committed to a course that we can't control—'

'I will not gamble with—'

'Please, sir, let me finish,' Turk said, feeling brave enough to interrupt, 'and then the decision is yours. We cannot control our outcome, but, by the Emperor, we can control the tyranids' fate. I'm not talking about destroying the caves if we don't have to. I'm talking about sparing your virgin paradise from the tyranids' ravages, should our defences fail.'

'You're asking me to destroy my tribe's future.'

'No sir, I am putting the fate of that hope in your hands. You alone dictate what happens here...'

you, sir, not the tyranids. What would be the greater travesty here, today? That you surrendered paradise to save the Emperor's subjects? Or that you let the enemy despoil the Emperor's blessings?' Nisri said nothing. He picked up the wash cloth and dipped it in the river again. For a quiet moment, he washed his hands and scrubbed his face clean. He was clearly in turmoil over the decision, his brows knotted by the decisions weighing him down.

'I'm not agreeing with you, yet,' Nisri said, finally putting down the wash cloth. 'What is Captain Toria's suggestion?'

'We call in the remaining Sentinels. We pack them with explosives and fuel drums, and send them to the cavern's weak points. Captain Toria believes that by detonating the Sentinels at these spots, we can trigger a chain reaction. The caverns will collapse with the weight, and those adjacent will fall with the shifting rock. At least, that's how he explained it.'

'Has he located these weak points?'

'Two so far, but he's keeping his eyes open.'

Nisri stood and donned his shirt and kafiya. He dressed slowly, considering the matter. Turk stood as well, and wondered what must be going through Nisri's mind. Both men considered themselves pious, both with regard to their tribe's needs and their devotion to the Emperor. He couldn't fathom what it felt like to hold the promise of the tribe's future in the palm of one hand, and to be the

instrument of its destruction in the other He didn't believe this to be a Turenag paradise, or even that the Turenags deserved one, but he did understand the hardship associated with making such important decisions. He was glad he wasn't the one making that choice. He wasn't even sure he could make the right one.

'Lieutenant-Colonel Iban Salid,' Nisri said, 'tell the Sentinel scouts to make haste for the caverns as soon as the tyranids begin moving towards us. Use the explosives and fuel drums to generate a maximum kill yield, but I alone will hold the trigger.'

'Permission to pull Captain Toria from exploration duty.'

'Granted, but keep word of this quiet for now. There's no reason for the men to think we've lost hope.'

'Yes, sir,' Turk said, snapping off a salute before heading back to the command Chimera.

CHAPTER TEN

'A house divided cannot stand.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

FOUR HOURS AGO...

The mass of tyranids began moving again, heading towards the caverns with sudden purpose. They'd been feeding on the dead and fallen for the better part of the day, reclaiming precious bio-matter for their ship's organic factorums. The swarms within the horde redistributed themselves according to the new hierarchy, their numbers strengthened by those that had lagged behind, their lynchpins bringing order to the mental chaos, and bearing to the inevitable flood. The Sentinels signalled the tyranid advance and their direction, which remained unchanged, before heading to the caverns as ordered. None of the tyranids broke formation to give chase. They moved as a single mob.

2

TWO HOURS AGO...

The seven surviving Sentinels cleared the mobile picket of fourteen vehicles, Chimeras and Hellhounds, and arrived shortly afterwards at the caves. They were ushered through the main passage and parked in front of Nubis's demolitions squad. Members of Nubis's squad then began wiring explosives and attaching fuel drums to the Sentinels via a makeshift cradle. It would take a few hours to complete the task, but as each was finished, a member of Captain Toria's group escorted the Sentinels to their positions in the caverns.

3

ONE HOUR AGO...

The charges were laid and the tunnels cleared of personnel. Colonel Nisri Dakar and the other officers watched quietly, as Nubis hooked the last wire lead to a main terminal box, offered a quick prayer to the Emperor and yelled, 'Fire in the hole!'

One by one, he detonated the explosives, leaving several switches untouched.

The caverns shook with the force of the explosions and the resulting cave-ins. Tons of rock and sand filled the larger tunnels that the vehicles had used to enter the caverns. The small passages were likewise collapsed, their numbers too great to defend adequately. It took fifteen minutes for the dust to settle and the teams to report back in, but Nubis's squad had done its job well. The tunnels that were meant to collapse had collapsed, and those that were meant to channel the enemy into deadly chokepoints remained untouched. He had the master artisan's touch for demolitions, and even Nisri gave a sombre nod of appreciation, high praise indeed, especially given that it was for Nubis.

Nubis's squad quickly mined some of the larger passages and the rock heaps, to deter any tyranids from burrowing through. The remaining Guardsmen manned their positions at the four chokepoints, their positions heavily sandbagged and supplied with ammo crates. A regimental priest passed at each location, offering prayers and benedictions to the Guardsmen.

4

FIFTEEN MINUTES AGO...

The mobile picket line reported the approach of the tyranids. They were no longer moving slowly, but running at full pitch. The sound of weapons' fire clattered across the desert. Chaser Chimeras, stripped for speed and armed only with pintle heavy stubbers, strafed the flanks of the tyranid surge. They managed to pull smaller broods away from the main force and draw them within range of waiting Hellhound squadrons. The ploy was working on too small a scale, however, and for all their tactics, the Guardsmen were essentially killing the enemy tank by peeling paint flakes off its armour.

5

NOW...

Thick black smoke from smoke grenades covered the battlefield and mixed with the dust storm to further muddy everyone's vision. The tyranids were everywhere, either trying to avoid the fast-moving vehicles or to attack them. The Hellhounds and Chimeras broke through the enemy line in wedge formation, and then proceeded to spin, weave and drive erratically through the combat zone, their treads spitting up sand and the innards of their crushed enemies. The Chimeras used their front-mounted shovel plates to shield themselves against enemy fire, before barrelling into tyranid formations. The Hellhounds did what they did best and washed everything with fire.

'Squadron Three has picked up a tail of fast-moving tyranids,' the tactical cogitator yelled.

Corporal Bathras Euphrates sat in the commander's chair below the Hellhound's turret, just inside the cupola with its protected vision slits. He checked auspex and saw the marker runes of Squadron Three blinking.

'Tell them to shift to a bearing of forty-seven degrees,' Euphrates said. 'When we cross paths, we'll shear off anything chasing them.'

'Yes, sir!'

'Sarrin,' Euphrates said, 'head for them and be ready to evade.'

'Yes, sir,' Private Ibad Sarrin shouted, and he tugged the vehicle's steering levers hard, bringing it back around.

A moment later, Euphrates and the two surviving vehicles of Squadron Three were heading straight for one another. They couldn't see each other through the dust and smoke, but their identification runes on auspex were pinging loudly as they approached.

'Now,' Euphrates shouted, and grimaced as Squadron Three's Hellhound and Chimera passed on either side of him, almost rattling his teeth loose. Private Darha Lumak, the gunner seated below him, unleashed tendrils of flame into the dust storm on faith alone. A swarm of scorpion and centipede tyranids ran straight into the blaze. They bolted off in different directions, some aflame and others merely singed. The Hellhound drove over the badly injured with an audible pop as their carapaces shattered.

Despite being outnumbered, the Hellhounds wreaked havoc with the tyranid lines. The vehicles were too few to be in any danger of colliding with one another, while the tyranids were practically tripping over each other trying to get at their adversaries.

'Lost contact with Squadron Six command tank! Chimera two is in trouble,' the tactical cogitator yelled, half turning in his seat. 'He's getting swarmed!'

Euphrates stared through the shielded visors for a second, and spotted the Chimera through the smoke and tyranid bodies. It was driving erratically, trying to throw off the bipedal scythers, leapers and other myriad beasts that were climbing the transport. They were trying to pry the personnel and equipment hatches open.

The Chimera's heavy bolter still blazed, however, obliterating tyranids with each shot. Four of the six lasguns sticking out of her side were also spitting out a steady stream of crackling energy. The tyranids, however, were quickly damaging the lasguns, de-fanging their opponent one tooth at a time.

'I see it!' Euphrates yelled.

'Auspex is dying out on us... damn storm!' the tactical cogitator yelled.

'Warn the gunners on Chimera Two to close their gun ports now!' Euphrates tapped Lumak on the shoulder. 'Give her a kiss! Not enough to cook the hull, but bake whatever shouldn't be there!'

Sarrin,' he yelled, 'get us closer!'

Sarrin jammed the steering levers with little grace, throwing everyone to the side and pushing the Hellhound in a new direction. Static electricity sparked off its hull. The tactical cogitator, Private Trask Aba Manar, fired the hull-mounted heavy bolter into a group of tyranids that swung into view.

'Chimera Two is ready for its bath!' Aba Manar yelled.

'In range now!' Lumak said, spinning the turret's hand-wheels and swivelling the turret in the direction of Chimera Two. The promethium tanks in the rear of the Hellhound gurgled as the main

cannon belched a thick spray of flame. The blast was just enough to lick the tyranids on the hull and paint them with sticky fire. Many leapt off, screaming and ablaze.

Chimera Two opened her gun ports and began firing with her three remaining lasguns.

'Sir,' Aba Manar yelled, 'we just lost Hellhound Four and Chimera Six from Squadron Five! The storm is also hampering auspex and vox!'

'How many left?' Euphrates asked. 'At last count, five Chimera and three Hellhounds, excluding us.'

'Sir?' Sarrin said. 'Our pocket is collapsing. We're surrounded!'

'All remaining units,' Euphrates yelled into his micro-bead, fighting to make himself heard, 'form up. We're going to try to punch our way out of this swarm... see if we can't shatter it!'

'Sir, Chimera Two!' Lumak yelled.

Euphrates managed to catch the Chimera through the cupola's visors. A large hole, melted into the armour plate, had opened up the Chimera's port side. Tyranids were pouring in, and filling the micro-bead with the screams of the dying crew.

'Burn her!' Euphrates said.

Lumak opened the flamer's nozzles on full, washing the Chimera in a blistering stream of ignited promethium. The screams ended. The Chimera slowed to a stop, her features melted. Internal explosions rocked her frame, her ammo bins ignited.

'What did that?' Euphrates demanded.

'A beast wielding a cannon on its back,' Aba Manar reported. He aimed and fired the heavy bolter. It struck the simian-like creature as it prepared to fire at Euphrates's Hellhound. The round detonated inside it, cracking its carapace out and flowering the beast like a bloom of flesh and muscle.

'Form up on me,' Euphrates said.

He received crackling acknowledgement from the various commanders, and within moments, three Chimera and another Hellhound had joined his ranks. The other vehicles were too heavily engrossed in combat, encountering heavier resistance in the form of larger beasts armed with scythes and bio-cannons capable of splitting their armour plating.

Driving in wedge formation, Euphrates and his allies cut a path straight through the horde. The three Chimeras broke the crest of enemies, using their heavy shovels to deflect incoming fire, while the two Hellhounds ran at their wings and used their flamers to protect the wedge's flanks. The Chimeras' rear gunners were firing on anything that gave chase, while the storm generated licks of electricity that shot and played off their armour.

The tyranids were blistering the Chimeras' shovel shields, however, unleashing diamond-hard rounds and acid bolts that weakened the plating or punched through entirely. Three cannon-backed beasts stood in the way of the wedge.

'Cannon beasts!' Aba Manar cried.

'Shoot them, before they fire!' Euphrates said over the vox.

Bolter fire peppered the ground around the three tyranids as they took aim. One exploded from a shell that pierced its back-mounted cannon, but the other two fired before the Chimeras piled into them, shattering carapace and splattering viscera and bio-fluid across the desert. Their salvos, however, struck two Chimeras, melting the shovel off one and the forward superstructure armour plating off the second.

The driver of the first Chimera screamed over the micro-bead, the spray from an acid round melting the windshields and spilling a drizzle of lethal droplets through. The vehicle jerked out of control and slammed into the Hellhound next to it, their treads biting into one another, their links unravelling in a hail of sparks and rent metal. Both vehicles ground to a halt, and the tyranids swept over them.

'Close up formation,' Euphrates ordered, watching both vehicles vanish under a mountain of enemies, 'and barrel through them.'

The vehicles did as ordered, with two Chimeras and the Hellhound trying to drive their spear into the breast of the swarm. More shots whizzed past, this time from the rear: a group of bipedal tyranids armed with bio-cannons. Auspex sputtered and flared, the air electrified by the storm of movement.

More acid rounds struck the rear of one Chimera. While they did not eat through completely, they weakened the rear plating enough for the next solid-mass rounds to penetrate the troop cabin.

Euphrates could hear the shots ricocheting inside the vehicle over an open vox channel, the Guardsmen screaming in pain or gurgling their last breaths. The Chimera slowed to a stop, and Euphrates watched helplessly as tyranids rushed the vehicle.

Euphrates turned in time for a large tyranid to loom into view. It towered over the vehicles, its four spiked arms spread in what seemed like preparation for a lethal embrace, and its mouth opened in a deafening roar that shook Euphrates. It lowered its head, its turtle-like shell absorbing cratering cannon fire, and rammed its bony horn through the front plate of the last Chimera. The Chimera bucked upwards, its forward momentum brought to an abrupt end, and the treads lifted high into the air before it came crashing down. The creature's four arms lanced into the vehicle, buckling the

plate under the tortured cry of wrenched metal. With a flick of its mighty neck, it lifted and flipped the vehicle over on its back.

Euphrates's Hellhound speeded past, its flame cannon spinning to douse the great monster in thick coats of fire. The enraged beast spun and followed the Hellhound, its blows missing the tank. It flailed, trying to put out the flames, and Euphrates lost sight of it in the thickening dust cloud.

'What in the Emperor's name?' Aba Manar said, forcing Euphrates to turn back around. Directly in front of them, the tyranids parted to reveal a creature the crew had never seen before, not even during the Absolomay Crush campaign against the tyranid splinter fleet.

The tyranid that floated into the Hellhound's path appeared frail, its limbs vestigial-looking, its long tail like a withered spine and its large, elongated head swept back with plate ridges that protected an enlarged brain sac. It hovered above the battlefield, bluish tendrils of lightning snaking off its body and striking the ground. The storm's electricity seemed to dance around it, lending it a halo of static fire.

Something opened in Euphrates's mind, some protective cobwebs meant to shelter him from the horrors of the universe, brushed aside. He shrieked, his voice echoing in the screams of his crew. Euphrates found himself hanging over some unimaginable gulf of time and space, a point where sense of self is obliterated and scattered across the endless darkness. They all stared at something ancient, something whose very being opened their perceptions to the great devouring infinity of the hive-mind. It dwarfed them and held their speck-like intellects between the claws of its forefinger and thumb. It drowned them out the same way an ocean might drown one's thirst.

Sarrin jammed the steering levers in an attempt to escape the presence of the hive brain. Aba Manar and Lumak were pushing themselves away from their stations and writhing on the floor, crying.

Only Euphrates continued staring at the creature through the cupola's visor slits, unable to shear his gaze or his thoughts away from it. Mind lightning slithered around the creature's body, building to a crescendo. It unleashed a coruscating blast from its forehead that ripped through the Hellhound's armour, and vaporised Euphrates and his men where they lay.

The blast dissipated, and all that remained of Euphrates was the lingering psychic scream that lay trapped in the ash shadow that had been scorched into his armour.

KAMALA NOORE WAS trying to hear the ghosts of the lost expedition, when fresh screams erupted in her mind, tearing through the veil of mental silence that suffocated her. She drew in a sharp gasp, the full breath of the drowning swimmer upon reaching the ocean's surface. Her mind was finally clear for a moment. She knew the voices that screamed, and saw their terror in the seconds before something obliterated them from reality and imprinted their thoughts into the debris of their vehicle. She caught the lingering image of what killed them, an apparently frail creature whose warped body contained unimagined power. She'd heard about tyranid psykers before, heard they were terrible foes, but this was her first brush with one.

She recognised nothing human in its thoughts, nothing familiar. It was an alphabet of xenos thought and words, something that would drive her insane for even uttering their tongue. The psychic scream dissipated and the images faded, the psychic veil pushed back in place. But she felt focused, no longer distracted by the maddening elusive songs of the expedition's ghosts. She was grateful for the reprieve, and vowed to thank the creature personally. She donned her psyker hood and prepared for its arrival, eager to stretch her mind to this lethal exercise.

6

THE LAST SURVIVING Chimera crew, commanded by Sergeant Abasra Doori, careened off one of the limestone pillars at the mouth of the cave network. The pillar flaked and threatened to topple, but remained standing.

The Chimera was still rolling when the rear door popped open and the crew jumped out. Several soldiers looked back into the vehicle cabin, but the white-haired, white-bearded Doori waved them off. 'Go!' he shouted, 'I'm behind you.'

Doori turned, trying to help the driver, Private Apaul Wariby, from his seat. Wariby was a light-skinned man in his thirties, and his stomach was wet with blood.

'I can feel it inside me,' Wariby gasped. 'It's moving.'

'We'll get you to a medicae!' Doori said, trying to pull him.

'I won't make it,' he said, 'and neither will you if you try. Go, you stupid old man. You were a lousy commander.'

Doori grunted. 'Fine, but if you're going to die, then you might as well die useful.' Doori grabbed and pulled Wariby from his seat, dropping him into the cogitator chair next to him. Wariby grunted in pain, his breathing fluttering in rapid strokes.

'You know how to use this?' Doori said, slapping the textured grips of the Chimera's heavy bolter.

'Yes, sir.'

'Good... shoot at everything coming your way.'

Wariby grabbed the bolter's grips and stared out through the armoured visors, towards the approaching sandstorm. He was breathing hard, his eyes fighting for focus. 'Run, sir.'

'Die well,' Doori said. 'Emperor knows you've earned the rest.'

Doori ran stumbling for the tunnels when heavy bolter fire rang out across the desert. Three men were waiting for Doori at the mouth of the tunnel and picking off the tyranids that had pulled ahead of the packs with their lasrifles.

'Emperor take you for fools,' Doori barked. 'Run!' A dozen metres or so inside the tunnel, the sand petered away, leaving uneven but solid limestone underfoot. Hot on their heels, screaming in hungered fury, were the waves of tyranids that had followed Doori and his men. They were minutes behind, their screeches echoing off the rock walls, but somehow seemed much closer than that. The tunnels were dark, the only illumination the bright stripes of lume-paint that guided them. Doori pushed his men in the back, forcing them to run faster. They followed the glowing stripes until they hit a painted rune on the wall denoting "one".

'Base, this is Chimera Five. We're the last ones through! Passing marker one!'

'Understood,' the voice said. 'Marker one is primed.'

The men continued running, the sound of the tyranids growing louder and drawing closer.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked the network and shook the heavens of all their dust. Doori and his men stumbled against the walls. Bits of rock and limestone fell, but the roof held.

'Go, go!' Doori rasped, pushing his men along. They followed the turning, winding strips of paint, feeling as though they were doubling back on themselves... until the passage split again. This time, the lume-paint marked a second path. Doori pointed to the passage and pushed two of his men down the second corridor. 'Draw them after you and vox in the markers!'

The two soldiers nodded as they vanished down the tunnel. The shrieks of the tyranids, quieter for the moment, increased in pitch again.

A moment later, one of the soldiers shouted, 'Marker three!' on vox.

'Marker two!' Doori rasped with his dry throat, followed by the confirmation that the explosives were primed. Moments later, one explosion rippled through the caverns, followed by a second and then a third. More dust poured from the ceiling, while flakes of limestone fell and shattered on the floor.

'That's one of the dead-end tunnels,' a voice said triumphantly over the vox.

Doori could only grunt his acknowledgement, his breathing turning into burning ragged shreds, his sides aching and his head swimming. He could hear the tyranids' shrieks over the thundering in his ears. He could feel them behind him, but he dared not turn around. The passageway split again, with paint stripes heading in either direction. Silently, Doori pushed the other soldier down the second passage. The man complied, too exhausted to argue.

He was alone, now, not that it bothered him. Doori continued running, despite two more explosions that rattled the walls and ground. He was slowing, his chest in aching pain and his sides stitched with hot needles. The tyranids were gaining, how could they not? He turned around, and saw nothing at first, but then the lume-paint further down the tunnel was flickering. They were coming. Doori looked ahead and saw another marker on the wall. It was half a dozen metres away. It was a finish line he would never reach. That realisation drew its surrender from his body, and Doori stumbled to one knee, unable to move any further.

'Marker Five and every marker along this path,' Doori said.

'Un-understood,' the voice replied.

'Stupid old man,' Doori said, chuckling, falling to all fours. The rush of tyranids behind him drowned out the beating thunder in his ears. There was no reason to turn around any more.

THE TUNNELS ROCKED and shook at the explosions meant to winnow the tyranids' advance, but with each step, they grew louder and more frightening. It seemed like nothing could hold back their flood.

Two of the Guardsmen barely made it behind the barricades of Tunnel One before the firing started. The third Guardsman was cut down by Captain Toria's men in Tunnel Three, because the tyranids were too close at his back. He died screaming at the Guardsmen to wait, never realising that his execution saved him from a more brutal demise.

Suddenly, the four chokepoints erupted in simultaneous firefights, the screams and reports peppering the vox-comm channels.

The tyranids jammed into the tunnels, and into the line of fire of autocannon and heavy stubber nests, and the las discharges of staggered firing lines. When one soldier depleted all his magazines, he tapped the leg of the man standing behind him, or the shoulder of the man kneeling before him. He then swapped out of the line with a fresh soldier, while he rearmed himself.

At every tunnel, there was at least one heavy gunner, a member of Nubis's squad with a flame thrower, melta gun or plasma gun, vaporising any of the fast runners that managed to close the gap

quickly. Elsewhere, the dull thud of detonating mines reverberated, claiming a snake or large tyranid that thought of burrowing through the collapsed tunnels. Still, while the chokepoints poured on a steady stream of fire, they realised they were losing through the attrition of centimetres. The tyranids weren't merely suicidal, they continued throwing every breed and type of tyranid at the chokepoints, providing just enough cover to drive forward by the barest of margins. Even when they approached the lume-circle marks on the walls and Nubis's men triggered the shaped charges, the tyranids filled the holes in their ranks within seconds. Nisri's men had seen the tyranids attack and regroup before, but the prize of the cave drove them forward with unparalleled frenzy. They had an objective in mind, and nothing would deter them from that goal. The Guardsmen weren't the goal, they were the obstacle. Occasionally, an armed tyranid survived long enough to fire back with its bio-weapon. Sometimes the round splattered against the tunnel wall or the sand bags, and sometimes the shot struck a Guardsman. When that happened, the wounded Guardsman was pulled from the line and replaced, while medicae did their best to stabilise the patient. Unfortunately, most tyranid ammunition continued inflicting pain and incapacitating their targets, and the medicae could do nothing for the screaming soldiers that bucked and writhed in the crippling throes of agony.

NISRI KNELT ON the front line, shoulder to shoulder with his best Guardsmen, the ably trained men of E Platoon and the orphaned soldiers of Sergeant Raham. Corporal Magdi Demar now led the platoon that was assigned to protect Tunnel One. But only he felt like he was filling Raham's large shoes until someone better came along. Still, Raham had drilled his men well, and E Platoon fought with the same ferocity as though their beloved sergeant stood behind them, shouting orders in their ears.

'For Raham!' someone shouted for the fiftieth time, and for the fiftieth time, the squad responded with renewed fervour, filling every centimetre of the tunnel with punishing fire. The tyranids seemed to be growing smarter with each salvo, however, and they skewered their own dead on their talons, scythes and spike-claws, propping up the injured and dying to act as shields. As they passed one of the lume-rings indicating where the shaped charges were hidden, Nisri shouted, 'Blow them apart!' The shaped charges, angled away from the Imperial skirmish lines, exploded, shredding the shield wall and forward lines of tyranids. The heavy stubbers opened fire and flamer units followed up the attack, washing the exposed corridor with generous gouts of flame. The tyranids shrieked under the promethium blast, their exposed flesh wilting, and their carapace armour blackening. Their numbers seemed to dwindle for a moment, before they swelled forward on another suicidal surge.

It was just enough for Nisri to see what was happening. The chokepoint was a stoopway, which forced the tyranids through on their stomachs. It was narrow enough for some bipedal tyranids to get stuck as they squeezed under. After a while, only runners and leapers ran through, and they pressed forward, obscuring the chokepoint. For a brief instant, however, Nisri could see the stoopway again. Snake tyranids were eating through the rock, widening it and allowing more creatures to stream underneath it.

'For Raham!' Nisri shouted, and the volley of fire intensified. Nisri tapped the puttee wrapped leg of the soldier behind him and swapped out. He moved down the rough-surfaced tunnel, past soldiers waiting for their turn at the firing line, and around a turn in the corridor. The noise was staggering, the tunnels amplifying the thunder of weapons dozens of times over. Nisri activated the noise filters on his micro-bead and switched to the command channel.

'Lieutenant-Colonel Iban Salid, respond!'

TURK MANNED TUNNEL Four alongside B Platoon, one of several orphaned platoons, the one that had answered to Captain Anuman. Like Anuman, his men were gamblers, and quick with their knives. They were rough in an urban sense, loud drinkers and brawlers, and they loved getting their hands dirty by jumping into the middle of fights. They were perfect for the close quarter, execution style action of their chokepoint.

B Platoon protected what Captain Toria had referred to as a chimney. It was a vertical cut in the rock between two tunnels. In the tunnel above, the floors had partially collapsed, revealing the corridor several metres below. Nubis had used explosives to seal one end of the lower tunnel, funnelling the tyranids into a dead end.

Turk and B Platoon stood on the ledge above, firing down at the tyranids as they streamed into the pit. The fighting was intense, the fast-moving enemy often got through the tunnel passage and scaled the walls before anyone managed to draw a bead on them. Regardless, Anuman's men did their work with ruthless efficiency, standing firm, wearing their best scowls, and firing down a steady hail of punishment.

'Lieutenant-Colonel Iban Salid, respond!' Nisri's voice called over the micro-bead.

Turk stepped back from the ledge and let another Guardsman slip into his spot. 'Yes, sir,' Turk responded, cupping one hand over his ear to hear better.

'What's your situation?'

'Tunnel Four is secure for the moment. We'll run out of ammo before they gain any real advantage.'

'Don't underestimate them,' Nisri said. 'They're widening the chokepoint. I'm not sure how much longer we can last after that. Make sure they don't find a way around you!'

'Understood!' Turk turned in time to hear the screams. A leaper managed to leap up to the ledge and grab a soldier's leg. It pulled him down into the pit. The platoon killed the tyranid under a pounding onslaught, but the Guardsman was already dead, impaled through the chest, stomach and neck on the spiked backs of the enemies.

'Fill that gap!' Turk ordered, but a fresh soldier was already on it. He took his place at the ledge and began firing down with his lasgun.

'Captain Nehari,' Nisri said over the micro-bead, 'respond.'

CAPTAIN LAKOOM NEHARI and F Platoon protected the chokepoint of Tunnel Two. It was supposed to be the easiest job of the lot, the chokepoint a "squeeze", a tight tunnel that the Guardsmen jokingly called "the birth hole". At least they thought it was funny, until the tight hole birthed a steady stream of small tyranids, leapers and runners mostly. Nehari and his men thought they had a handle on the situation up to a moment ago, when snake tyranids tunnelled through and suddenly, two more "birth holes" opened in the wall.

Now the horde was squeezing through three holes, and Nehari wasn't blind to the steady pounding of heavy stubbers and las-fire that further chipped at the walls surrounding the chokepoint.

'Captain Nehari, respond,' Nisri demanded.

'I heard, sir. The snakes are widening the chokepoint here as well. We now have three - damn it, four, four holes!' Nehari screamed as a snake smashed through another portion of the wall and scrambled up the tunnel towards them. The hail of blasts tore it to shreds, but it was too late. The damage to the chokepoint was done, the rock peeling away in large chunks.

'Our chokepoint won't last much longer,' Nehari responded into the micro-bead.

'Hold your position for as long as you can,' Nisri responded. 'Commissar Rezail, are you listening?'

Nehari returned his attention to the fight. It was becoming frantic. The Guardsmen of F Platoon realised they would be swarmed the moment the chokepoint collapsed.

'Blow the third and fourth rings of shaped charges!' Nehari shouted.

'...ARE YOU LISTENING?'

'Can barely hear you,' Rezail responded. He fired a bolt pistol, having swapped out his laspistol in favour of something with more kick. The tunnels shook from two distant explosions rattled off in quick succession.

'For the Emperor!' Rezail shouted in Tallarn.

The forces of Captain Toria's C Platoon and Sergeant Nubis's A Platoon shouted out a cheer at the commissar's near-fluent mastery of their tongue. Tunnel Three was, by far, the most heavily contested section. It was wider and higher than the others, with a chokepoint that split the passageway to the left, towards Toria's Platoon or to the right towards Nubis. The crossfire was whittling the tyranids down considerably, but the passages were clogged with their bodies.

Unfortunately, after an hour of fighting, the tyranids had managed to break down part of the wall between the two split tunnels that formed the in seam of the chokepoint, widening it considerably. Now tyranids filled the tunnel like a living plug, their numbers scrambling on the floor, scurrying on the walls and scampering along the ceilings.

While the creatures were no longer caught in the crossfire, the two passages were wide enough for the four heavy stubber nests to spit out thick ropes of tracer fire, while the firing lines of Guardsmen were staggered three deep. One group was on their stomachs, the second on their knees, and the third standing. Occasionally, the sharp *crack* of an explosion filled the corridor with a deafening snap, pasting tyranids against the wall and splattering viscera on the men. How many explosives Nubis had planted played on everyone's curiosity, but they were definitely taking their toll on the enemy, and adding the stench of fyceline to the already heavy aroma of ozone, cordite and tyranid entrails.

Commissar Rezail and Tyrell stood with the men of the last row, firing their bolt pistols and shouting encouragements at the troops. The commissar also carried his chainsword, waiting for the moment when he would need it in close quarters combat. Nubis also took his share of the line, firing a heavy stubber with cycling barrels, and an ammunition chain fed from the pack mounted on his back. He cycled through his store of hollow points, delighting in the shrieks of his enemies, the near solid stream of tracers cutting the enemy in half.

Kamala Noore stood behind the left stubber nest, biding her time, which naturally set the gunnery crew on edge. She appeared dazed, unfocused as though the battle was an echo to some greater

truth. She was waiting for something, her fist clenching and releasing, the small sparks of bio-electricity sheathing her wrist with each flex. That small display of power occasionally found release when a tyranid ventured too close to the skirmish line. Kamala's attention found focus, and she lashed out with her mind, a flare of psychic electricity slamming into the beast and bursting it open. Then she returned to waiting.

THE DESERT SEEMED empty again, the sand scored by millions of tracks. The sound of screeching tyranids was loud, the host of beasts clustered at the cave mouth, eager to get inside. A brood of tyranids each with four legs, a scorpion's tails and the armoured snout of a war hound, ventured out further, sniffing about here and there, but the fighting quickly drew them back to the tunnels. On a ridge of dunes that overlooked the surrounding desert and the pillars of rock, a small section of sand shifted and spilled away. Two Guardsmen, members of Nubis's anti-armour squad, quietly crawled out from under their blankets. They'd been watching everything, waiting for their time to strike.

One of the soldiers pressed his micro-bead twice, generating a burst of static that squawked in his earpiece. A moment later more static bursts rang back, each unit reporting its readiness, seven in total. Everyone was in place.

The soldiers retrieved their portable missile launcher from the pit and unwrapped it from its swaddling cloth. It was a heavy device, a shoulder mounted weapon that required a gunner to handle the tube-like launcher, and a loader to carry three spare missiles strapped to his chest via a weight distribution rigging. Both men belly crawled to the lip of the dune and gazed down at the cave entrance.

The swell of tyranids was staggering. They seemed to number in the thousands, the swarms restless and eager to get inside. Some were huge, larger than the smoking ruin of a Chimera that had been flipped over near the tunnel mouth, apparently larger even than the tunnels. The two soldiers exchanged glances, but said nothing. Instead, they quickly searched the desert for the three other anti-armour crews, but with their tan and orange uniforms and camo-painted launchers, they would be difficult to spot. That was for the best.

Both men quickly shook hands and embraced. There was never any illusion that they would survive this thing, and there was no lingering on their fate. What came, came. The gunner set about making himself comfortable and acquiring targets through the launcher's scope. The loader removed two pressure plate mines from his rucksack and buried them on side of him and the gunner. He planted a small twig to mark their positions. At no time did he stand, instead shifting around on his belly like a snake, careful to avoid being seen over the dune's crest.

A static squawk sounded over the micro-bead. Slowly, over a matter of minutes, seven static bursts filled their earpieces. The two Guardsmen were the last to sound theirs. They followed it up with a four burst squawk. Nobody replied. They didn't need to. They were too busy firing at will.

The metallic whump and whistle of mortar shells sounded first, four shots in all. From nearby crests, the thunder and rush of two missiles streaked a smoky path to the cave mouth. The tyranids barely had time to acknowledge the attack, the explosions of fire, smoke and sand bursting in the thick of them. The blasts flung tyranids and body parts through the air.

By the time the gunner fired his missile down at the mob, a second flight of mortar shells pierced the air with their shrill keening. A terrible roar followed and the projectile curled, careening towards one of the pillars. The explosion devastated the thirty metre high stack of limestone, bringing it crashing down across at the entrance, crushing more beasts under its weight.

The two men swore they could hear the other crews cheer, and allowed themselves a smile. The loader mounted another missile into the launcher and tapped the gunner's head. He fired again, his missile joining the other projectiles as they devastated the hordes of tyranids, sending more dismembered beasts flying. Instead of being frightened or cowed, however, the tyranids surged outwards, splitting into smaller swarms, each unerringly homing in on the different crews. Each knew its place, each its duty. And, they were bridging the gaps fast. Time for one more, the two men realised. The loader popped another missile into the launcher and tapped the gunner on the head before dropping down next to him and covering his ears. The tyranids were scaling the dune to reach them, but the gunner took his time aiming. His next shot, his last shot, arced over the heads of his attacker, towards the tunnel entrance, and a second missile rocketed down from another angle, the mortar shells raining down hard and persistent. Both missiles slammed into the cave mouth, blossoming into hellish explosions that caught the beasts trying to escape further into the tunnels. The entrance collapsed at the same time as the first tyranids, bipedal creatures wielding scythes, reached them. One inadvertently stepped on a pressure plate mine, adding to the thunder of the explosions.

'COMMISSAR REZAIL,' NISRI repeated over the micro-bead. 'Are you there?'

'I'm here, I'm here!' Rezail yelled back. 'We're holding our...' He stopped, his voice deafening in the cavern. The tyranid swarm had stopped advancing, the corridor filled only with their dead. The Guardsmen hesitated for a moment, terrified of the sudden calm, before they scrambled to reload their weapons. Rezail could see the fear on their faces. They could still hear the distant echoes of gunfire in the other caverns, but the deathly silence in Tunnel Three seemed oppressive.

Nubis flicked on his micro-bead and contacted C Platoon in the neighbouring tunnel, but they could see nothing either. Everyone exchanged quick, panicked glances, but mostly, they couldn't tear their eyes away from the chokepoint with its carpet of dead tyranids. Something was happening, and they were more afraid of what they couldn't see than of what they could.

'Steady, men,' Rezail said. 'Remain strong and the Emperor's light will shield you.'

'What's happening?' Nisri asked over the micro-bead.

'The tyranids,' Rezail said more quietly, 'they've stopped attacking.'

'Not here they haven't,' Nisri replied. 'All tunnels, what is your situation?'

'Tunnel Two... we're still getting swarmed,' Captain Nehari replied, his voice almost panicked. 'All shaped charges expended!'

'Tunnel Four... they're trying here, but we hold the advantage,' Turk replied.

'Same for Tunnel One,' Nisri said. 'Commissar, be on your guard!'

'Depend upon it,' he said. Rezail glanced away from the tunnel long enough to address Kamala Noore. She was standing straighter, her battle-hood with its cyclops-like eye piece and power cables crackling with psyker energy. She almost appeared to be standing on her toes, her powers levitating her from the ground.

'What is it?' Rezail asked.

'Something comes, something to surpass my prowess,' Kamala said simply, her voice echoing with a faint metallic ring, her head held aloft. 'You will quake in its presence, but whatever you do, do not flee. I will try to distract it and keep your minds free of its terror. Shoot when I tell you to shoot. I cannot kill it alone, and neither can you. We need each other in this. Together we have a chance. Now, steel yourselves for horror!'

The ghost flickers of blue bioelectric sparks leapt from the distant walls to the tyranid corpses. The air buzzed and hummed with power, and the lume-paint on the walls seemed to glow more brightly.

'The *Aba Aba Mushira's* light guides me,' Rezail said, trying to instil courage in his men. 'His beacon is the celestial chorus of the *Astronomicon*, and so long as they sing, I will always be close to His Grace. We war for the Emperor!'

'Aya!' a few men cried, their voices strangled by fear.

'Any man that runs will be executed,' Rezail concluded.

A shadow crossed the passage ahead, a shadow moving among shadows. It produced its own light, and it approached the chokepoint.

'We war for the Emperor!' Rezail repeated, his voice stronger, more demanding.

'Aya!' more voices cried out.

'We WAR for the EMPEROR!'

'AYA!' the platoons cried across the two tunnels.

A tyranid floated into view, lazy tendrils of electricity dancing off its atrophied spine and enlarged brain sac. Its mouth was pulled back in a perpetual scowl, revealing a row of bloody teeth, while from its back tube-vents leaked a greenish miasma. It was more than a linchpin of the hive-mind, it was one of the axles that guided the tyranids. The hive-mind's thoughts leaked out through its very being, stray images like bullets that wounded the mind and injured the Guardsmen. Some of the men cried out in terror. A few others sobbed. Even Rezail stopped speaking. He felt like he stood on the shores of an infinite, black ocean, able to see further across its vastness. Some unnamed horror rose from the waters, its tentacles raised so high as to brush away moons, its voice sending out ripples of tidal waves across the ocean's surface, so dwarfed were he and the others by the staggering monstrosity of the alien sea that drowned them.

They were all paralysed. They saw nothing but the beast, heard nothing but its terrible whispers.

'Do not drown,' a tiny voice said.

Rezail heard Kamala's voice, feeble against the roaring waves of the infinite seas. Like a man drowning, Rezail grasped at the lithe hand stretched out to pull him away. As he closed his hand around hers, he could feel others do the same.

Absently, almost subconsciously, a few of the gap-mouthed men tried to fire at it, but their bolt and las-rounds struck a bioelectric barrier surrounding the creature. Their shots ricocheted, and hope seemed to leave them again.

'Don't drown!' a voice shouted in their minds, and Rezail knew that Kamala was trying to buffer them from the worst of the attack.

Behind the creature, tyranids followed slowly, cautiously: the pack behind the hunter, waiting to be unleashed.

The creature seemed to scream, although its mouth never opened, and the full brunt of the hive-intellect blasted through the minds of the Guardsmen. A handful of soldiers scurried back, abandoning their positions and stumble fleeing down the corridor, their minds stripped down to their primordial terror. Rezail was too locked in his nightmare to even consider shooting them for cowardice. Instead, he stared at the creature, unable to take his eyes away from it. He was only distantly aware of a few men sobbing, and watched in horror as energy crackled and built in strength around the tyranid. He recognised the signs of an impending attack, the signs of death. 'Not this time,' a metallic voice called, cutting through Rezail's terror. 'In the Emperor's name, I smite thee!'

A hammer of bioelectric energy appeared in Kamala's hands, her hood crackling with an electrified halo. She motioned, and the hammer flew from her grasp, striking the creature's shields. Electricity sparked and showered everywhere. The tyranids screeched in anger, but did not rush forward. The blow, however, rocked the creature, and it blasted back with a braid of bio-energy that barely missed Kamala, and incinerated a nearby gunner.

Kamala fired back, her mental energies slamming into the creature's shields. Electricity flared and sparked across the entire chamber. The tyranid's and Kamala's powers snapped and danced against one another like two wild animals. Bolts struck the wall, and slammed one soldier in the chest, blowing his ribs open. Kamala almost buckled to her knee, but the creature's shield also seemed to dim.

Suddenly, it wasn't so invulnerable. Suddenly, it wasn't so untouchable. A crack was all it took for panicked hope to surge through, that last kick for the surface before drowning.

'Fire, damn you, fire!' Kamala screamed.

The Guardsmen, shaken awake from their fear and briefly shielded against the hive-mind, unleashed a sudden avalanche of rounds. Some shots whined and ricocheted off the creature's bio-shields, but many found their way through the weakened barrier, striking the tyranid horde.

It was growing difficult to see, Kamala's electric storm clashing with the creature's powers, the points of intersection flaring with brilliant explosions of light and peals of thunder, but the Guardsmen kept heavy fingers on their triggers. Another trooper rushed in to take the place of the fallen gunner, bringing the second heavy stubber to bear. Another soldier on the line fell, a blast of electricity shearing his shoulder off. The creature shrieked, the attacks overwhelming it, rounds skipping off its bone plates, shattering two of its limbs and destroying a segment of its tail.

Kamala doubled over in pain. Even with the amplifier, it was difficult maintaining her powers against the creature, but she seemed to redouble her efforts each second, pushing herself even after she collapsed to one knee, and then both. Her hand stretched out, trying to push against its thoughts. She was taking the brunt of its mental assaults. One of the fingers on her outstretched hand exploded from the lashing psyker energy. She screamed, but did not buckle. Another digit was obliterated soon after.

'C Platoon! Now!' Nubis screamed.

A second later, sporadic fire erupted from the adjoining tunnel, catching the tyranids and the creature in the crossfire. The hail of tracers and las-rounds increased with each passing second, the Guardsmen regaining ground.

The creature was buckling under the assault, its agony setting the tyranids behind it into an animal frenzy. Some raced into the killing fields, where incoming fire punctured and lacerated them to shreds. Others turned on one another, completely feral, and unable to distinguish friend from foe. Another soldier fell, a stray bolt obliterating his face. Nubis stepped into the gap, his war cry carried in the cycling whine of his heavy stub cannon. The creature screamed, round after round pounding through its protective field and shattering pieces of its body. Finally, Nubis delivered the killing shot, a stream of hollow points stitching the creature's face and blowing out chunks of greenish matter from its brain sac. It flared for a moment, a surge of bio-electrical energy and the hive-mind's psyker powers scorching rock and beast. Finally, it crumbled to the ground in a number of unceremonious heaps.

The tyranids were stunned by the creature's death, as were the Guardsmen, who were rendered senseless from the mental slap.

'Keep firing, keep firing!' Nubis cried at the same time the pack of tyranids went completely feral and began fighting anything they could see, each other and the Guardsmen.

On the vox, soldiers were reporting the same thing; the tyranids were lashing out at everything around them. But, this was not the moment to celebrate. The tyranids were turning into rabid berserkers, and some of them were reaching the firing lines before dropping, killing Guardsmen in their dervish dance of claws and scythes. More explosions rocked the tunnels; the shaped charges were being expended quickly.

THE LARGE BIPEDAL tyranid continued stabbing the Guardsmen with its spiked limbs, chittering madly as the nearest soldiers screamed back and shot it at point-blank range. It eventually stumbled

back, its carapace cracked wide and a gut-wrenching miasma spraying the line of men. Captain Nehari continued firing at the tyranids charging the line, yelling to drown out their horrible, guttural screams. The tyranids fell metres from the skirmish line, and the chokepoint had partially collapsed, allowing more of the creatures to stream through.

The chatter over the vox was frenzied, the Imperial Guard losing control over the battles in three of the four tunnels. Only Turk and B Platoon were having any success in keeping the tyranids corralled.

A runner with tube-like protrusions on its back reached the Guardsmen. As it bit into the shin of a soldier, it blasted out a cloud of greenish gas from its tubes. The soldier screamed, his tibia shattered.

They shot the creature dead, and pulled the wounded soldier from the line, but not before everyone began coughing. The men closest to the wounded soldier fell out of line, vomit exploding past their lips, and many soiling themselves. More men took their places, but everyone was fighting violent stomach cramps and intestinal spasms; the smell of faeces in the air didn't help. Nehari wasn't a fool. He'd fought the tyranids before, and he understood what they were up against.

Nehari activated the command channel on his micro-bead. 'Colonel Dakar, we're about to be overrun! We can't hold the line much longer.'

NISRI HISSED A curse at Nehari's message. Nothing could be done about it, but fighting while retreating was no way to do battle the tyranids. Worse, Tunnel Two and Tunnel Three were connected further back. If Two fell, Commissar Rezail and the combined Platoons of C and A would be trapped. Moreover, the tyranids would then flood into the caverns.

'D Platoon will help you fall back,' Nisri responded, immediately switching channels and sending half of D Platoon to help Tunnel Two evacuate under bounding overwatch fire. The other half, minus Sergeant Ballasra's squad, which was still searching the caverns, was to remain in reserve in case any of the fighting spilled into Apostle.

'All tunnels, all tunnels, prepare for withdrawal on my mark. Blow the remaining shaped charges.'

'Confirmed,' Turk called back.

'Hurry,' Nehari yelled, the fight at his position obviously desperate. 'Ready!' Nubis said.

'C Platoon,' Nisri said. He paused as a roar of explosives filled the tunnels. 'On my mark, collapse your tunnel and shift around to help cover A Platoon's retreat!'

After receiving the confirmation reply, Nisri waited for a desperate moment that felt like an eternity. The fight in his tunnel was going badly. The tyranids had almost reached the skirmish line, and men were being cut down before his eyes. His men began backing away, the enemy close enough for them to spit on.

'D Platoon in position!' a voice said.

'Withdraw now. Go, go!'

On cue, the decibel levels in the caverns rose to deafening pitch and the caverns shuddered under multiple explosions.

'E Platoon, withdraw and provide overwatch!'

Dust and bits of rock rained from Tunnel One's ceiling, and the soldiers staggered their retreat, tossing grenades into the swarm to slow them down. The explosions ripped through the front lines, enabling the gunners and Guardsmen to pull out from their positions. The soldiers were back-peddalling, practically firing down at their feet as runners and dog tyranids raced towards them.

Corporal Demar, Raham's replacement, was on the last row, when one of the bipeds hit him and two other Guardsman with toxic rounds. All three men went down, their muscles tightening to the point of snapping tendons loose from the bones. Nisri, in grim horror, saw Demar's exposed bicep curl up into the flesh of his arm. Someone tried grabbing Demar to pull him along, but more muscles snapped loose from their bone moorings. The Guardsman let go in horror as Demar's muscles bulged grotesquely. Within seconds, the advancing enemy covered all three bodies, and E Platoon was fighting in full retreat.

IN TUNNEL THREE, the scene was much the same, the tyranids at the feet of the firing lines and the Guardsmen dying by the lashing death throes of their kills. Everyone was still rattled from the collapse of the neighbouring tunnel, but C Platoon was already providing covering fire for A Platoon's retreat.

When the order to withdraw came, Nubis cried: 'Go! We'll hold them back.'

The second gunner nodded and opened up with a full salvo, no longer caring whether or not his heavy stubber overheated.

'What about you?' Kamala cried. Her hood was off. She bled from the nose and mouth, her eyes scarlet from internal haemorrhages. Tyrell supported her, while Rezail used his chainsword to keep the odd tyranid at bay. He opened a runner with a disembowelling slice, but even fighting them one on one was too difficult, even for Rezail.

'Commissar,' Nubis pleaded, 'you'll be overrun if we don't cover your retreat. Go, damn you! Tell them to collapse the tunnels.'

Rezail nodded and backed out with the remaining men, firing at the tyranids to keep some of the pressure off Nubis and the second gunner.

TURK NODDED TO the Guardsmen to withdraw; three of them pulled frag grenades from their belts, yanked the pins, and simultaneously dropped them down the chimney. Turk withdrew from the ledge as the explosions rocked the tunnel below and the screams increased to frenzied pitch. The soldiers darted into the tunnel and continued glancing back the way they had come.

The lieutenant-colonel was among the last group of men to retreat, when a rumble shook the ground and pitched him against the wall. A flood of tyranids broke through the collapsed passage, crawled out of the smoking chimney and gave chase down the tunnel after them. Turk and the others opened fire, trying to stop the sudden onslaught, but the tyranids were on them fast.

'Collapse the tunnels!' Turk yelled into his micro-bead, firing into the snarling face of a bipedal creature with elongated snout and bone plating that was mere metres from him. Men screamed as the tyranids cut them down.

'Almost there,' a voice called back.

Turk continued firing his laspistol, watching as the number of men between him and the enemy dwindled with each second. There were six men between the swarm and him. The tyranids pulled one man to the ground, his head crushed under cloven hooves. Five men remained. A beast impaled two men on the same scythe, and then took a moment to shake them loose.

'Blow the tunnels!' Turk screamed.

This time another voice joined his. 'I'm being swarmed,' Nubis cried over the micro-bead.

Turk's heart sank when he realised that his friend was about to die, but he had to focus on his own survival. Three men remained. One man jerked and screamed as he spun, his face collapsing from an acid round. Turk shot him to spare him further agony. Two men remained. One convulsed as a hissing beetle round struck him in the chest and ate its way through his sternum.

One man remained. His body jerked and spasmed as a tyranid lance speared him, filling his body with carnivorous worms. Turk fired his last rounds into the man and into his attacker, killing them both.

'Detonate the explosives you Turenag sons of whores. Do it!' Nubis's voice cried over the micro-bead. He was obviously in pain.

'Charges are set!' a voice responded.

'Now, now!' Turk screamed.

'Fire-in-the-hole!'

The repeated crack of sharp thunder ran along the spine of the cave, shaking the very heavens. Turk watched in horror as the roof above his head broke and stone seemed to rush towards him. Before he could even shield his head from the falling debris, several sets of rough hands pulled him out of the way.

'That's it. We're sealed in,' a voice said over the micro-bead.

Coughing and lying on his back, Turk looked around at the dirty, exhausted faces of the men in B Platoon. He had never expected paradise to be his tomb.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

'Every day of your life is just another overlooked sentence in history.'

- The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault

1

CAVERN APOSTLE WAS filled with quiet bustle for the moment, the soldiers in shock over their ordeal. Everyone slowly filed out of the debris choked tunnels, covered in dust, viscera stains and the blood of their comrades. Some dragged their guns behind them, but the ever-sharp glare of Rezail snapped them back into discipline. Everyone headed to the edge of the jungle, where the loam was thin and the vehicles waited. The tyranids had proved themselves capable of many tricks, and the Guardsmen had little doubt that they still had quite a few more to unleash. Until that time, however, the soldiers needed a moment to catch their breaths, eat and see which of their friends had survived.

Turk dusted himself off as he headed for the command Chimera. He checked on the various squads resting on the ground. Nobody slept, the infusion of adrenaline and fear a powerful remedy against

sleep. Everyone had lost a friend in the skirmish, but for Turk, the most painful loss was Nubis. Nubis was a friend, stubborn and arrogant when he wanted to be, which was all the time, but true to his word. He was an honourable man, and Turk was proud that Nubis had proved to be the great Guardsman that Turk had always known him to be, saving the lives of the commissar and the men of his platoon.

That was all the thought Turk wished to indulge at the moment. He walked past the two sentry Sentinels, which were patrolling near the tunnels, waiting for the tyranids to bore through. Given the number of creatures they had slaughtered, Turk hoped it might take them a while to regroup. The tyranids were, literally, single-minded in their determination, but even they had to stop and recover from their battle wounds, right? Turk decided not to ask Nisri. He didn't want to know. Turk arrived at the command Chimera, which sat next to four waiting Sentinels and another Chimera being used by the medicae to perform triage on the injured. Corporal Adwan Neshadi, Nubis's protege for demolitions, was speaking with Rezail, Tyrell and Nisri. He appeared nervous, his youth betraying his confidence. Kamala stood nearby, her brow damp with sweat, and her eyes swimming in and out of focus. She smiled at Turk. He returned her smile, instantly concerned at her injuries and the blood in her eyes, but unable to show it in front of the others.

'It took longer to affix the drum cradles,' Neshadi said. 'We need half an hour to arm the Sentinels.' There was a pause. Turk realised that Nisri was starting at the cavern jungles; he almost appeared in shock that this so-called blessing might be lost to his tribe. Turk understood exactly what was happening. In his mind, it seemed incomprehensible to be surrendering this paradise, to believe it the salvation of your people, and then have it torn away. He was staring at the shredding of his convictions, the exodus of two million kilometres walked, and knowing that another two million were to come.

Unfortunately, if Nisri was distant, then everyone could see it plainly. Turk forced himself into the conversation.

'I'm sure Colonel Dakar would agree that the best course of action would be to send the Sentinels to their positions, and to equip them with their explosives there. We cannot afford for them to be caught in the fight when... if the tyranids attack.'

Nisri, who stirred at the mention of his name, nodded in agreement. 'Correct, Lieutenant-Colonel Iban Salid. Send the Sentinels on their way along with members of Sergeant Nubis's platoon, whoever's best to arm the birds.'

'Speaking of Sergeant Nubis,' Rezail said, 'he was a hero today. He saved our lives.'

'Sergeant Raham also trained his men well,' Nisri said. 'They held their ground until the very end. Raham fought with us today. Every man here is a hero.'

'Most,' Rezail said, 'yes, but some men fled from the enemy. I'll be dispensing discipline shortly. Unfortunately, the men who fled may have already hidden in these caves.'

Nisri removed his kafiya and ran his fingers through his puffy afro. 'Commissar, if you would offer the men encouragement, I'd appreciate it.'

'Of course.' Rezail and Tyrell walked away, making their rounds to various groups of men.

Nisri turned to Corporal Neshadi. 'Get these birds out of here and prepare the explosives.'

Neshadi saluted and spun around to organise the work details. There would be no respite for any of them today, Turk thought wearily.

'Situation report, lieutenant-colonel,' Nisri said, moving into the jungle.

Turk nodded. 'F Platoon took the heaviest casualties: twenty-eight men killed. The survivors, eleven of them, including Captain Nehari, were exposed to toxic fumes. Six of them won't make it through the day. The rest can barely stand.'

'Unfortunate,' Nisri said. 'And the others?'

'A Platoon and C Platoon lost half their men in the Tunnel Three skirmish. I suggest merging them into A Platoon and putting Captain Toria in charge.'

'Agreed.'

'B Platoon only lost seven men; they're still able to fight, as is D Platoon, which didn't lose any of its forty men. Sergeant Ballasra's squad is still on patrol.'

'We'll fold the survivors from F Platoon in with E Platoon. Even then,' he sighed, 'Sergeant Raham's squad was almost picked clean. They won't be at full strength until we receive reinforcements.'

Turk nodded and waited until the silence seemed almost unbearable. Nisri appeared to be lost in thought, again, and horribly morose. 'Sir?' Turk said, 'Shall I oversee preparations for the next attack?'

Nisri nodded, half-distracted by his surroundings. 'Hmm? Oh, of course... yes. See to it, will you?'

Turk offered a crisp salute, not that he thought Nisri noticed, and was about to leave when their micro-beads clicked on.

'Colonel Dakar,' said Sergeant Ballasra, 'I have found it. Thank the Aba Aba Mushira for his good humour today.'

'Found it?' Nisri asked. 'Found what? A way out?'

'Yes, sir. It's a bit of a walk, but I found our escape, and it's free of the tyranids.'
Nisri nodded to Turk. 'Get the men ready. We're withdrawing to the exit point.'

2

IT TOOK A couple of hours before Ballasra's squad returned and briefed the men of their escape route. The cavern designated Halo of Purity, which Ballasra had named, was a small cave overlooked in their initial search of the Golden Throne cavern. Ballasra's men managed to burn a path through the jungle for easier access, news that brought a pained grimace to Nisri's face. Ballasra, however, promised that when they emerged from this ordeal, he would personally replant those destroyed trees in atonement. That, at least, drew a half-hearted smile from the colonel. With the platoons redistributed, Toria was organising his squads to accommodate Sergeant Nubis's demolitions experts. Their role was to arm the four Sentinels. He also found additional weak points that he thought could be destroyed with simple explosives, of which the squads had plenty. Meanwhile, the vehicles revved their engines, preparing for departure. The four remaining booby-trapped Sentinels were already on their way to the various weak points, which left the command Chimera, and the triage Chimera conscripted by the medicae. The latter was to transport the injured inside and on its rooftops for as far as they could go. Nobody wanted to consider what they'd do if the jungle grew too thick or too rocky to navigate.

Toria was checking the squads, ensuring they had all the necessary supplies, when one of his men, Private Lebbos Lassa, tapped him gently on the shoulder. Lassa, a young tribesman with sun-browned skin, was staring at a section of jungle, his eyes widened by fear, his hand slowly pulling his bolt pistol from its holster. The leaves are moving,' he whispered.

The men in the squad noticed the furtive glances of their compatriots, and slowly unholstered their weapons, switching off their safeties in the process. Toria followed Lassa's gaze and saw the fronds and their glowing yellow bulbs swing gently back in place. He activated his micro-bead, switching to the command channel.

'Colonel Dakar, can any tyranids become invisible?' he asked, almost whispering.

'Yes, they have chameleons.'

'In that case we have company, and they're in the jungle.'

'Chimera gunners! Open fire on Captain Toria's target,' Nisri said over the open channel. 'All units... tyranids!'

Toria and Lassa fired the first volley, the second volley unleashed by their men. A moment later, the heavy bolter on the command Chimera opened up, spitting out a pummelling salvo of explosive rounds.

The barrage of shots peppered a section of trees where the fronds had moved, exploding entire tree trunks and shredding giant leaves. The rounds also punctured the air, slamming into something before the bolter rounds detonated. The creature only appeared as it detonated and sent out a blossom of chitin, yellow viscera and body parts. Other soldiers were already leaping to their feet and arming themselves, but it was too late; two more chameleons appeared out of thin air.

Their forms were terrifying. Long, undulating tentacles covered their mouths, rows of sharp pereopods ringed with spikes and hooks arched from their backs and around their bodies, sharp, extended claws adorned their lower arms, while their tails ended in hooded stingers. And, they were fast. One struck a nearby Guardsman in the thigh with its stinger, sending him into apoplectic seizures before his heart exploded inside his chest. The other one struck repeatedly with both pereopod spikes in lightning fast stabs that gutted another Guardsman in a matter of seconds.

Then, as quickly as they appeared, both chameleons vanished, before either man hit the ground. The Guardsmen swung their guns, trying to find their targets, but the chameleons appeared intelligent. They attacked in the thick of the enemy, and soldiers couldn't open fire on them without shooting one another. Panic spread through the Guardsmen, the swiftness of the attack blinding and shocking. Cries of "Where are they?" and "Where did they go?" abounded.

'Skirmish circles!' Toria shouted. His men immediately fell into tight circles, back to back, weapons pointed out.

'Get into skirmish circles,' the cry carried.

Toria watched as Guardsmen scrambled to protect one another and formed rapidly expanding huddles. He saw Turk pull Kamala into one, while the commissar, Tyrell and Nisri entered another. A chameleon appeared, but whether it was a third creature or one of the first two, Toria didn't know. It didn't matter; the beast charged into a skirmish circle formed by Anuman's B Platoon, swinging its claws and stabbing with its pereopods. Five men were caught in its onslaught, their bodies cut to ribbons and vital organs slipping through their fingers. One man managed to fire his lasgun into the creature's torso at point-blank range. That single catalyst brought the other guns to bear, and Anuman's men opened fire.

The chameleon vanished, but it could not escape the indiscriminate rounds. Ichor and carapace fragments appeared in mid-air, and with a knifing shriek, it reappeared. It stumbled back under the weight of the attack and fell, its chest cavity open, its raw organs spilling out on the grass.

As one died, another made its presence known. It moved past two men, shredding the meat and muscle of their thighs with a single swing of its claws, before vanishing. Both men hit the ground, crippled by the attack and screaming for help. Nobody had a chance to fire. It was so fast, it left Toria breathless. Guardsmen broke from their skirmish circles to help, but Rezail fired his bolt pistol in the air.

'No!' he shouted. 'That's what it wants you to do.' With a coldness that always seemed to exemplify the commissars, Rezail grabbed Tyrell's laspistol, turned it on both wounded men and fired, executing them with precision shots to their chests. He turned the pistol back over to Tyrell and ignored the harsh, silent glares. Toria half expected someone to push him out of the circle.

The chameleon attacked again, this time on the other side of the groups. Toria turned in time to see it run through six Guardsmen of a skirmish circle who were too busy staring at the commissar to protect one another. Again, the chameleon's movements were a dizzying blur of claw swipes and the piston-like speed of its stabbing spikes. In an instant, it managed to trample, eviscerate and impale all six men before it tried to vanish.

A curl of lightning arched out of nowhere, and struck the beast. Toria barely had time to register Kamala Noore standing there, arms outstretched. Electricity curled around her body, and as quick as it takes the mind to realise a thought, she struck it again. The blows weren't intended to kill it, just to daze it.

Sure enough, the chameleon reappeared, just long enough for the closest Guardsmen to fill it with las-fire. The creature screeched its dying gasp.

The screech was answered by the angry cries of its kin.

'There're more in the caverns already?' Lassa asked. 'Merciful Emperor,' Toria said. 'Up! Above us!' he shouted.

Everyone looked up in time to see the holes appear in the cavern's ceilings. Waterfalls of sand cascaded down in thick pillars, but the holes also bled swarms of tyranids that dropped to the jungle below or began crawling along the ceiling. In seconds, it was raining death.

3

NISRI STARED, DUMBFOUNDED at the scene before him, struck senseless by the death of paradise. The walls opened up, disgorging tyranids into the caverns, while more dropped into the jungle. The tyranids attacked anything and everything that wasn't of their species, from the fleeing, scurrying animals to the vegetation, to the panicking Guardsmen. They were a devouring swarm of locusts, eating everything they came upon and fuelling the engine of their bio-factorums. With this prize, they could raise another army, invade more worlds. With this prize, it was conceivable they would no longer be just the splinter of a splinter fleet.

Turk slapped Nisri again, trying to get him to focus. It was an absurd moment, him striking a superior officer, a man he was much more comfortable killing in the midst of all their chaos. The Guardsmen fought a losing battle trying to stave off the tyranids that had taken an interest in them, but at least three squads were protecting Turk, Nisri, Rezail and Tyrell. Turk wanted to make sure that nobody died in vain.

Throughout the jungle, men screamed. They fell to scythes, claws, teeth and acid wombs. The command Chimera drove into the jungle to escape, the driver not realising or caring that he was shearing off wounded soldiers that were still on his roof. The medicae Chimera was only firing its lasguns on tyranids or Guardsmen that approached it. After a moment, it too roared away into the jungle under the control of its panicked crew, but there were already runners and dog-creatures on its roof, killing the hapless injured.

Duf adar Sarish, rather than allowing his remaining camels to die in the slaughter, was shooting them in the head with his laspistols, and firing at any tyranid that ventured too close to their bodies. At this moment, Turk understood what it meant to have looked into the mouth of the abyss and found madness there.

'Leave me,' Nisri whispered, his heart broken of its faith. 'Let me die here.'

'Coward!' Commissar Rezail said with a snarl. He raised his bolt pistol to fire, but Turk slapped it away and stared up into the face of the taller man.

'No!' Turk shouted. 'If he stays, his men will too. We need all the help we can get in escaping and collapsing the caverns! Shoot me later if you must, but I'm assuming command.' Turk and Rezail locked eyes, the message understood. The commissar wouldn't labour the point, but when this was over, Rezail would have his reckoning.

Rezail stepped back. 'You're in charge,' he said. 'What is your first order?' Everyone flinched as a Sentinel moved past them, firing its autocannon on a pack of runners trying to advance on the

group. Three of the beasts exploded under the hammering blows, while the remaining four darted away into the jungle's underbrush.

'Better hurry, sir,' the Sentinel called over the micro-bead. 'I can't keep the tyranids off you for much longer!'

Turk looked at Nisri for a moment. He expected to see fire in Colonel Dakar's eyes, the indignation of having a Banna steal away his command, but Nisri merely nodded his assent.

'Captain Nehari!' Turk shouted, calling over F Platoon's commander.

Nehari, still coughing, ran up to Turk and saluted. He was pale, his eyes half-lidded and jaundiced.

'Protect Colonel Dakar. I'm in command until he's in a right frame of mind. Move out to Basilica!'

Nehari nodded and took Nisri by the arm. Immediately, a squad of Turenag Guardsmen surrounded the colonel and captain, and escorted them into the jungle under suppressing fire. The Sentinel fired another stuttering salvo before moving past a thicket of trees. It vanished from sight, but they could still hear it unloading its main gun.

'All units,' Turk said into his micro-bead. 'Withdraw to the first rally point at Basilica.'

4

THE RETREAT WAS anything but orderly. The soldiers moved through the jungle in rough groups, losing men to their wounds or to tyranid ambushes. The Tallarn were not accustomed to jungle warfare. It was claustrophobic for soldiers used to fighting and manoeuvring in the open desert. The jungle carried sounds differently, the ground was rough and filled with treacherous pitfalls, and the sightlines made it impossible to determine what lay mere metres ahead.

There was only one salvation, and that was the rich biomass of the caverns. The tyranids were following racial imperative, and the imperative of their species demanded they consume everything in their path. They still sent out skirmish packs to hunt the humans, but that was no longer the sole focus of the horde. Consuming this world beneath the world was. The caverns represented a far richer resource of organic material than the Guardsmen could ever provide. They were but table condiments for the feast.

Turk and the others moved through the strange world gripped in yellow twilight, trying to remain quiet while pandemonium howled around them. It soon grew difficult to distinguish between the screams of the dying animals and those of the conquering tyranids. The only familiar sounds that reached them were the cries of their own men, the chatter of Imperial Guard weapons, and the reassuring thunder of the two active Sentinels as they ran through the underbrush, autocannons blazing to assist the different groups. After a while, the gunfire grew more and more sporadic, and, finally, the Sentinels were heard no more.

A group consisting of Turk, Rezail, Tyrell, Sarish, Quartermaster Sabaak and a handful of survivors from the various squads reached the limestone ramp and grand jagged awning that separated Apostle from Basilica. A handful of soldiers manning three heavy stubbers waved them through, while the broken bodies of Guardsmen and over fifty tyranids littered the entrance. Turk found himself studying the faces of the fallen, and recognised two Banna tribesmen by name. They hurried up the ramps, their advance covered by Captain Toria's and Nehari's men.

'Are you the last ones?' one of the Guardsmen asked.

'By the Emperor I hope not,' Turk said. 'Booby trap the entrance just in case, frag charges and wires, but don't leave until you can't hold this position any longer.'

The men nodded. This was no longer a matter of military feints and tactics. This was adrenaline-fuelled survival, and decorum had fallen to the wayside.

A handful of squads sat resting on a small patch of rock between the jungle of Basilica and the cavern's wall, among them, Colonel Dakar. Kamala Noore stood off to the side, her hood crackling and her attention distant. Turk was glad to see her. He offered her a quick smile, but could not tell if she was with them enough to recognise the gesture. He turned and addressed Captains Nehari and Toria. Nisri quietly joined them, listening instead of leading, as did the commissar. Rezail did not seem fond of either Turk or Nisri, but Turk could have cared less.

'How many reached the rally point?' Turk asked.

'Not nearly enough,' Nehari said before coughing. He was sweating, the toxins taking their toll. 'Not counting the two Chimera that barrelled through here, fifty-two men, and the mind-witch.'

Turk swallowed the insult; now was not the time to defend his beloved's honour. 'Are the explosives set?' he asked Toria.

'Three are set. Four remain. I'm sorry, sir... with everything that happened, there wasn't time.'

'You did well,' Nisri said. 'You did nothing shameful.'

Toria offered his gratitude with a head nod, but he was discomfited by the compliment and by the Colonel's apparently softened temper.

'You still have the explosives?' Turk asked.

'Yes, sir,' Toria replied, 'and we have the men for it, but there's something else. The tyranids are in the other caverns as well. They've dug in from every direction. We still can't be sure if Sergeant Ballasra's escape route is secure.'

'And where is the sergeant?' Nisri asked.

'Making his way to the entrance of the Golden Throne,' Nehari responded. 'He's awaiting our arrival.'

A high-pitched shriek from the jungles behind them startled the six men. Everyone heard it, and anyone sitting down was rising to his feet. Turk could see the leaves of the jungle canopy in Apostle swaying.

'Captain Toria, the burden of our survival falls on your shoulders,' lurk said quickly. 'I need those Sentinels armed.'

'My men would like to help,' Nehari said. 'We have a demolitions specialist with us, and we know where the Sentinels are.'

'Very well,' Turk replied. 'Each of you take your best squad and get to those Sentinels. Make sure you coordinate your targets. Captain Toria, we need a tracker to guide us to the Golden Throne and I need a satchel of explosives.'

'Yes, sir, but may I ask why?'

'I need to collapse the last cavern to make sure nothing follows us. Now both of you, go!'

Both captains answered in the affirmative before running off in different directions. Likewise, Nisri, Rezaïl and Tyrell drifted away, making ready their escape.

'Everybody! They're coming,' one of the Guardsmen at the entrance to Apostle shouted.

'Prepare to withdraw to the Golden Throne cavern,' Turk instructed.

The squads prepared to leave, helping one another to their feet, the line between Turenag and Banna lost in the ordeal. Kamala walked up to Turk and removed her hood. Dried blood clotted her nostrils, and her eyes were swimming in seas of red. Nevertheless, she appeared focused, intensely so. She stared at Turk, her last anchor in her sea of thoughts. She needed him, he could feel it pulsing off her skin in waves. Though they wanted to touch one another, embrace each other, they could not. Instead, they merely exchanged the briefest of smiles, his loving and encouraging, hers a terrible sadness, contained.

'Sir,' Captain Toria said, returning to Turk. He handed him a satchel and motioned to a well-muscled man, his face covered by his kafiya and the oculars over his eyes. 'Private First Class Venakh Mousar will be your scout. You'll also need this,' he said, handing over a black metal vox. 'It's keyed to the explosives. Send the signal and they all blow up, including the one you're holding... just in case we don't make it.'

'Understood. Good luck.'

Toria offered a smart snap of a salute before rejoining his squad. The survivors then split into two groups, with Toria's squad heading off towards Cavern Cathedral, and the main cluster of Guardsmen and Nehari's squad travelling towards Devotion.

5

JUNGLE OR NOT, alien world or not, the scouts of Toria's group were good at their job, and right now, that was to move quickly and quietly. The Guardsmen double-timed it through the clusters of trees, over root tangles and under nets of hanging vines. They did not speak; they motioned to one another through hand signals, and the loudest things from their mouths were their breaths. Even the demo expert, Neshadi, from Nubis's old platoon, was fitting in like a seasoned pro.

Captain Toria held up a fist, bringing the squad to a quiet halt. On cue, the men ducked behind trees or went low to the ground. They were less than ten metres away from the Sentinel, which was hidden near a thick column. By the slant of the ceiling above, Toria had chosen this location, because the pillar bore the weight of the rocky sky. A large explosion would not only collapse this section of cave, but the chain reaction would destroy the floor beneath them as well, sending everything tumbling into the cavern below. Toria hoped that all that shifting rock would cave in this section of the network.

Unfortunately, the only thing between Toria's squad and the Sentinel in question was a small pack of five runners that were crawling over the vehicle. They were smelling the bird and deciding what to do about it.

Toria designated the targets with both fingers and, after ensuring everyone was ready to fire, made a low sweeping motion with his hand. The volley of las-shots was relatively quiet, precise and totally lethal. The tyranids dropped from the Sentinel with hardly a sound.

Toria and Neshadi ran up to the Sentinel to begin setting the explosives, while Lassa and the others took up defensive positions. 'We need to hurry,' Toria whispered. 'The tyranids share a hive-mind. They'll know something happened to their patrol.'

Neshadi nodded and continued working, rushing to lay the explosive charges without endangering their lives needlessly.

6

THE PACK OF four bipedal tyranids with their scythe arms and bone-plated head crests moved effortlessly through the trees towards the sound of coughing. Nehari wondered if he should admire their skill and lethal precision, but decided that the appreciation was misplaced. These were not trained soldiers; they were beasts, their murderous traits a birthright.

The tyranids found the Guardsman sitting with his back against the tree, coughing up a storm. Blood flecked his lips, and Nehari suppressed the rattling in his own chest. The creatures slouched low to the ground, and hissed as they approached. The ailing Guardsman saw them, his eyes wide in terror. He jerked, as if to move, but stopped himself. He lay absolutely still.

Nehari admired his courage, and drew a bead on one of the beasts. Someone else coughed, however, and the tyranids' heads snapped up in unison, it was too late. Nehari and the others opened fire from the surrounding brush, catching the tyranids in their snare of las-shots. The air smelled of ozone and entrails as the creatures screeched and died.

'IT'S GETTING... GETTING worse,' the Guardsman said. He was shaking as he stood, and coughing up blood.

'I know,' Nehari said, spitting his own blood on the dead tyranids. 'Whatever we inhaled—' he coughed, harder than before. It hurt like hell, and it was nestled somewhere deep inside his lungs. It felt like his joints would fly apart with each gasping rasp. 'Better get to that last bird,' he said. 'While we still... can.'

The Guardsmen nodded and, suppressing violent, shaking coughs, headed deeper into the jungle.

7

TURK FIRED HIS pistol straight into the outstretched mouth of the dog-like tyranid. It fell at his feet, dead, but the other beasts of the pack were certainly alive and unhappy, and they were many... at least twenty-odd of the small creatures. The branches and leaves rustled as they bounded through on their six legs, their sleekly armoured heads yelping and howling up a storm. Elsewhere in the tightly clustered jungle of Cathedral, another pack answered the call.

One of the beasts leapt for a Guardsman, braids of thorny tendrils unravelling from its open mouth. The tendrils wrapped around the soldier's throat and tightened, bringing him to the ground and making him easier prey for five other dogs. Blood flowed in thick rivulets over the thorns, and the Guardsman gasped for air as the tyranids dug into the soft parts of his body. Quartermaster Sabaak and Sarish managed to shoot two dogs off the soldier, but he was thrashing around too much.

Another beast leapt for the commissar, shrieking, and startling him so badly that he forgot to swing his chainsword. A bolter shot detonated it in mid-leap, spraying Rezail and Tyrell in gore and body parts. Nisri offered Rezail a shrug, his expression conveying the simple truth... *had you killed me; I couldn't have saved you.*

Kamala also stood her ground, sending out sharp tongues of electricity that fried two of the galloping dogs.

'Fire in the hole!' someone yelled, and Turk and the others managed to duck before a grenade detonated in the underbrush and took out half the advancing pack.

More las-shots and bolter fire erupted, and the Guardsmen shot the remaining tyranids that were reeling from the concussive force of the explosion. Nisri ran to the injured Guardsman, who was still alive despite his terrible wounds, and kicked one tyranid off him, while shooting the one with its thorn tongue wrapped around his neck. The booted tyranid landed with a yelp, and was instantly hammered with las-fire.

Nisri and Turk tried peeling off the creature's tongue, but when they pulled back one of the tendrils, they realised the hooked thorns had shredded the Guardsman's throat. There was nothing left for him to breathe through. The Guardsman's eyes rolled up as he continued choking and bleeding.

Nisri apologised to the soldier, offering a prayer, before Turk shot the Guardsman through the head. 'The packs know where we are,' Rezail said, looking at the bodies of three dead soldiers.

'We go,' Turk said. He held the vox detonator in one hand, just in case it came time to send the signal. They continued their exhausted trudge forward, a handful of hours behind them, and a handful more ahead of them.

8

'THAT DOES IT,' Neshadi whispered, jumping down from the cabin of the second Sentinel. 'We're done.'

'How many explosives do you have left?' Toria asked.

'A few krak charges and plenty of frag grenades.'

'Enough to rig a couple more surprises?'

'Yes, most certainly.'

Toria called his men in. They silently moved through the underbrush, alert for any unusual sounds, and knelt at the foot of the Sentinel.

'I say we plant the remaining explosives,' Toria said, 'finally bury the tyranids for certain. I know of a good fault-point that the Sentinels couldn't reach... but we could.'

'We won't make it out in time, will we?' Lassa asked. The rest of the dirty-faced men were silent.

They waited for Toria's answer, but he could already read their grim expressions. They didn't think they could make it out alive, regardless.

'I don't think so,' Toria whispered. 'The best we can hope for is to plant the explosives and head as deep as possible. Maybe we could find that lake that someone said they saw. If we're lucky, we'll find a cave with no tyranids, and plenty to eat and drink. Maybe the Emperor will let us retire there in peace.'

'Stuck in a cave for the rest of our lives,' Neshadi said, sighing. 'I knew I should have brought a book to read.'

The others grinned and patted Neshadi in the shoulder. With a quick glance, Toria tallied their votes by their nods. It was a unanimous "yes". As quietly as they had arrived, Toria's squad vanished back into the underbrush, and silently wished their compatriots and fallen comrades a safe journey, wherever that journey ended.

9

NEHARI AND HIS men heard the steady stream of crackling las-fire from a kilometre off. As they approached, wild shots flew high over their heads, scything through tree limbs and branches, and raining down leaves around them. They could see a smoke column rising in the air through the gaps in the canopy, and collecting at the ceiling, where it eclipsed the rock and fields of light string worms. The only other source of light came from the flashes of las-blasts, several trees that had been set aflame and the dimming glow of the tree bulbs. It was as if the jungle was dying.

Nehari, however, instantly realised that the shots belonged to a Chimera-mounted multi-laser.

Nothing else they had carried that firepower.

The squad broke into two groups of three men each. The heavy coughers, including the demolitions specialist, continued on their way to the last Sentinel. Nehari and two others crept through the forest, suppressing their coughs and hoping the continued las-fire would mask their approach. They were weakened by the toxins running through their veins, but their curiosity had been pinched, and that was enough of a motive.

The medicae Chimera was half-wedged in a crevice, a fissure that had opened up beneath it. Its nose was jammed in the crack and rested against the crevice wall, while its rear was angled upward in clumsy balance. It had shredded its treads trying to dislodge itself, and tyranids were crawling all over its hull. They were trying to peel away the access points to get to the meal inside, and were ignoring the futile lascannon that was desperately firing in different directions. The column of smoke was rising from a wider rip in the fissure, possibly where the command Chimera had fallen during the mad rush to escape.

Nehari could see the litters still strapped to the top of the vehicle, as well as the ripped bodies of men who were trapped and gutted when the Chimera fled. Nehari shook his head, and quietly filtered through the micro-bead's comm channels. He finally found the one with the panicked voice screeching for help.

'Hello?' Nehari whispered.

'Thank the Aba Aba Mushira!' the voice cried back. 'My vehicle is wedged. We're trapped in here. Please, get these things off of us.'

'You're trapped? Like the way you left those injured men to die on your roof?' Nehari said, coughing. 'Rot in the warp.'

Nehari shut off the screaming pleas for forgiveness, and motioned the squad to move away. The Chimera crew was earning its just fate.

10

THE JUNGLES OF Emperor were the thickest any of them had known, or ever seen. The trees seemed to merge into one another, their trunks braided and their branches intertwined. The loamy soil was thick and reeked of sodden earth. They followed Sergeant Ballasra's instructions, keeping to the

cavern walls where the vegetation was thinnest, but even this far removed from Apostle, the sound of hunting and devouring tyrannids seemed ever-present. How they managed to spread so far remained a mystery. All Turk cared about was staying ahead of them and steering clear of their appetites.

The scout Mousar swept aside his kafiya for long enough to gulp a drink of water; his lower face was covered in the thick, ropy scars of a promethium burn. After returning the kafiya to his face, he consulted the data-slate Ballasra had provided as a way of pathfinding, and motioned the others to continue following.

Turk stumbled a few more steps, before something pierced his fatigued mind, something he had seen a minute before, but did not register until now. He looked again to the vox detonator in his hand, to make sure that he actually saw its blinking light, and then groaned.

Nisri and Rezail noticed Turk standing, staring up at the canopy of jungle and cavern rock, and shaking his head. They motioned for the others to stop, and approached him as a fit of laughter overcame him. This was all too perfect, Turk thought. This was the perfect conclusion to their sad and sordid expedition.

'What's the matter?' Nisri asked.

Turk said nothing. He merely held up the vox detonator to show them the blinking light. Nisri straightened and let out a fatigued laugh. Turk shook his head and laughed even harder. Rezail simply looked confused.

'It's a warning light,' Turk finally managed to explain. 'It means that we're too deep inside the caverns. Any further, and the signal to detonate the explosives we already planted won't reach the bombs.'

'It means,' Nisri said, his voice soft, 'that someone has to stay behind and detonate the explosives from here.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

'Every sun must set.'

- *The Accounts of the Tallarn by Remembrancer Tremault*

1

NEHARI AND HIS two escorts reached the Sentinel as the others were finishing attaching the explosives to the fuel drums. Nobody was providing them with cover, nobody had the strength left to follow military procedure or even care. Instead, they finished with the Sentinel, and walked a few dozen metres away before one by one, they collapsed to their knees or fell on their arses, hacking and coughing loudly. Nehari tried to pull one man up, but he fell down next to him, completely spent and afflicted by a deep-seated exhaustion the likes of which he'd never known. His muscles felt like hard stone, numb and heavy.

The toxins deprived them of strength, leaving them weak and wracked with nausea. No, worse than that, Nehari realised, it ate at their wills, robbed them of the mental fortitude they needed to push forward. That they had made it this far was a testament to their characters, but they were done. They had completed their task, and thoughts of survival no longer ranked among them.

They sat where they collapsed in the underbrush, under the yellow glow of the overhanging bulbs. They pulled close to one another, hacking blood and black flecks of what they silently suspected were their lungs. Their stomachs hurt, the muscles taxed beyond exhaustion and feeling torn.

'How... how pitiful are we?' Nehari said, his voice raspy, 'Like old men.'

The others tried to laugh, but that only generated a new fit of coughing. They patted one another on the shoulders or grabbed each other's hands for support.

'So,' another man finally managed to say, 'this is paradise.'

Renewed laughter and renewed hacking followed. Nehari smiled and shook his head.

'No... never paradise,' he said in between coughs. 'Paradise was never... meant for the... the living. It's always been a promise for... the dead.'

The men grew quiet as Nehari spoke, comforted by the timbre of his voice and the certainty of their fate.

'Glory be... to the Emp-Emperor, and praise be to Colonel Dakar's wisdom... but we... we suffer through life so that our paradise is eternal. Paradise is earned... never given... never taken.'

The sound of hissing surrounded them, figures moving through the underbrush. The men could no longer stir, save to aim their weapons. Nehari quietly pulled the pin on his frag grenade and felt

someone's grip tighten around his arm. A pack of runners moved into the clearing, sniffing the air and picking their kills. Cartilage lined tongues licked the air in anticipation.

'There can be no... no death in paradise,' Nehari whispered. He opened his palm and watched the handle flick off and spin as it fell.

The tyranids reacted by trying to bolt back into the cover of the jungle. They weren't fast enough.

2

'I'LL STAY,' NISRI said, reaching for the vox detonator.

'No you will not,' Rezaïl said. 'I'll be staying.'

Turk shook his head. 'Commissar, this is a military officer's duty, not a polit—'

'Spare me,' Rezaïl laughed. 'This entire expedition has been anything but military in its timbre and demeanour so don't you dare use that on me now. Trust me, I don't wish to die here, but you said it earlier, lieutenant-colonel... if one of you dies, your men die with you. Besides,' he said, adjusting his uniform, 'it took the both of you three months to finally see eye to eye and put aside your tribal feuds, and it took the bloody tyranids to do it. If you make it out of here, I expect you to beat some bloody sense into your bloody tribes so that this bloody disgrace never happens again. Is that bloody understood, Prince Iban Salid and Prince Dakar?'

'Yes, commissar,' both men replied, trying to hide the hint of their smiles.

'Fine,' he said, taking the vox detonator from Turk.

Turk also fished out one of the explosives from his satchel. 'I suggest you find a nice place for this, commissar. I'll plant the other one at the escape tunnel.'

Rezaïl took the explosive and handed it to Tyrell without a second thought.

'Of course, I will be coming with you,' Tyrell said.

'Bloody well better,' Rezaïl said. 'I'll need an adjutant where I'm going.'

Tyrell smiled and left it at that.

Turk and Nisri returned to the group, which was watching the exchange with morbid interest. This time, it was Nisri who spoke, his command instinct slowly returning.

'I need five volunteers,' he said, 'to help protect the commissar and Sergeant Habass until it's time to detonate the explosives.'

There was a pause as the men exchanged glances, uncertain if they wanted to die so close to escaping.

'I'll stay,' Duf adar Sarish said, stepping forward. Two more Guardsmen stepped forward alongside him.

'I guess I'll stay as well,' Sabaak said. 'The only thing I'm protecting is this banner.' He stepped forward, and for a moment, Turk saw the same look in Sabaak's eyes as he'd seen in Kortan's. That resolute stare and grim hardness ready to face what came next. Sabaak fidgeted with his Y-Strap and pulled the rolled-up banner from it. He presented it to Turk, who nodded his thanks and handed it to another Guardsman for safekeeping.

When a fifth volunteer did not step forward, Turk whispered to Nisri. 'I think that's enough, don't you?'

Nisri nodded. 'Sarish fights like a devil with those two pistols; we'll count him twice.'

The Guardsmen paused long enough to bid one another goodbye. They were silent farewells, nothing to be said save for shaking one another's hands and squeezing each other's shoulders.

As Turk moved away from the men, Kamala drifted close to him. 'I would have stayed had you stayed,' she whispered.

'I know,' he replied. He watched Rezaïl and his five protectors turn back the way they had come, searching for some place to hide their explosives. He turned, shielding them from the others for long enough to squeeze her uninjured hand. With that, Mousar continued forward, guiding the remaining survivors to their anticipated rendezvous with Sergeant Ballasra's squad.

3

SERGEANT BALLASRA AND his four men were shocked by the sight that greeted them at the mouth of the jungle-rich Golden Throne.

'Is this it?' the young tracker, Chalfous, asked. 'Are you the only survivors?'

'Quiet, boy,' Ballasra said. 'You can see it in their eyes.'

Neither Nisri nor Turk had the strength left for words, they merely leaned their backs against the cool rock of the narrow fissure connecting Caverns Emperor and Golden Throne.

'Come... you don't have much further to go,' Ballasra said, offering a helping hand to Nisri. Nisri accepted and grunted heavily as he pulled himself up. He glanced at Ballasra and nodded to Turk.

'You too, sir,' Ballasra said, offering Turk a hand up.

'Thank you,' Turk replied. 'We need to move quickly, there's no telling when this explosive will blow up.'

Ballasra's eyes widened as he looked at the satchel being presented to him. 'Then we'd best move, sir.' He motioned for the others to follow him through a tight corridor in the bramble of jungle trees and the thick web of hanging vines. The corridor had been hacked and burnt through, its edges jagged and scarred, but by this point, Nisri no longer seemed to care.

Kamala paused and raised her head to the air, her hair hanging freely. She sighed, the weight of the world evaporating from her expression. Turk moved to her and whispered, 'What's wrong?'

'The ghosts,' Kamala said. 'They've gone quiet. We're almost at the truth of it, my love.' She sounded relieved, and truth be told, so was Turk.

He took her by the arm and guided her to the path, earning stares from the others in the process. He no longer cared; being charged for fraternising with an NCO seemed horribly trivial. Almost in response to his thoughts, Kamala smiled.

4

THE HOWLING SEEMED to be carried on many voices, all of which appeared to be approaching quickly. The jungle rustled and buzzed, as though someone were taking a chainsaw to the trees. The tyranids were drawing closer by the moment, and Rezail found his fingers nervously caressing the vox detonator.

Rezail watched as Sabaak scaled the giant stalagmite-toothed walls, some twenty metres off the ground, and shoved the explosive into a crevice shared by the wall of Devotion and Emperor. If anything, Rezail hoped, they could seal themselves off in Emperor and still escape. It was a thin expectation, admittedly, but it was always human nature to pray against all odds for the favourable outcome.

Rezail activated his micro-bead. 'We've planted the explosive. The tyranids are coming.' A wash of static greeted him in return. 'I suggest you get rid of your satchel.'

There was no response. Rezail sighed. The buzzing from the jungle was growing louder, and Rezail could see the trees quaking under some mysterious force. He held the vox-caster and revved his chainsword, spinning the teeth counter-clockwise for more cutting power. The other men pulled their weapons, and silently mouthed whatever prayers brought them the greatest solace. Each of them prepared in their own way, and then watched the wide tunnel leading to Devotion. The grinding, buzzing noise increased in pitch.

Sabaak clambered down and pulled out his bolt pistol and scimitar, while Sarish idly spun the two laspistols in his hands. The other Guardsmen pulled their lasguns and waited nervously.

'Well, commissar,' Tyrell whispered, 'any regrets?'

Rezail smiled, his attention focused on the tunnel and the jungle beyond. He revved his chainblade again. 'You're joking,' he said.

'Not at all. A burdened mind weighs us all down.'

'My burdens are inconsequential,' Rezail said with a smile, 'and nothing I can't shear away with my chainblade and my faith combined. Prepare yourself... here they come.'

'Hell!' Tyrell whispered, watching the tunnel suddenly fill with the enemy.

THE OTHERS WERE moving quickly along the cavern wall when Turk heard his micro-bead hiss.

'Hello?' he asked, but there was no response. There wasn't the need for one. 'We'd better hurry!' he shouted to the group ahead, pushing against their backs to move them more quickly.

Ballasra nodded and pointed to the end of their journey: a small fissure angled up into the wall.

They hurried into the high, narrow passage, racing against time that they knew was long past spent.

Turk dropped the satchel at the mouth of the corridor, and hurried after the others as they scaled the steep and rock strewn slope. He recited a prayer over and over again, in the back of his mind, hoping he wouldn't have his spine snapped in the inevitable explosion.

The tyranids screeched and chattered in the jungles behind them, and gave chase. The jungles were filled with them, probably thanks to the snake breeds that were digging tunnels through every metre of wall, trying to reach the biomass.

THE GUARDSMEN FIRED their boltguns as they backed away, trying to stem the wave of the dog-like beasts, small tyranids that attacked their targets in numbers. With enlarged heads and overly developed fangs, six spiked legs a piece, and elongated tails, they swarmed over two Guardsmen, biting and spitting out chunks of flesh and muscle. The sight sickened Rezail, but he'd heard of this in other furiously carnivorous species; it took longer to chew and swallow than to chew and spit, so the creatures had grown adept at stripping their targets first and eating later. Both soldiers succumbed in seconds, screaming and falling to the ground, where more dogs tore into their messy carcasses.

Sarish was firing both laspistols at the larger runners and centipedes that were heading for him and the others. With expert shots, Sarish felled them two at a time, while Sabaak finished off the injured. Tyrell tried intercepting those that slipped through by standing between the commissar and the tyranids, but the fight was already so wild and chaotic that it seemed as if they were under attack from all sides. The commissar was already brandishing his chainsword like a true battle-trained alumnus of the Schola Progenium, his blade revving and whining as it cut through the carapace of a simian-like creature with barbed arms.

A human cry pierced through the chainsaw's scream, and Rezail turned to see Sabaak drop his bolt pistol and stare down at his chest. A fist-sized alien seed had lodged inside his torso. It opened like a flower in bloom, further cracking the sternum apart, but instead of blossoming with petals, tiny black beetles poured forth. Sabaak couldn't scream, the agony so intense that he contorted into seizures. The bugs ran riot over his flesh, burrowing holes into his skin.

Sarish drew his aim and levelled four shots into the tyranid gunner that had fired the round. By the time he turned his guns on Sabaak, the young soldier was already falling face first into the jungle soil. Without a word, the Duf adar continued firing at the advancing tyranids.

Rezail, meanwhile, swung the chainsword into a runner, severing half its limbs. It convulsed on the ground, spraying yellow ichor on the commissar's boots. He grunted in disgust.

'Adjutant, shoot that thing, please!' he said.

Tyrell snap-fired a shot into the tyranid before firing on an advancing biped.

'Thank you!' Rezail said, deflecting the biped's scythe as it swung at Tyrell's neck, and opening its torso to Tyrell's laspistol.

The chameleon appeared out of nowhere, literally. Its two pereopods arched down and impaled Sarish through the chest, out through his back and into the soil. Sarish never said a word. He grunted in pain, and fired his two pistols into the chameleon's face before it could withdraw. Both he and the creature fell to the side, their mutual deaths equally silent.

'It's just you and me, commissar,' Tyrell yelled, firing at the incoming flood of dog-like biters. There must have been a hundred of them swarming towards the two men. 'Oh Holy Emperor!' he cried.

Rezail paused for long enough to cry over his micro-bead. 'Get out, get out!'

Then the tyranids swept over both men, sharp teeth biting through the muscles in Tyrell's and Rezail's legs. Both men toppled immediately, their voices shrieking in agony. The creatures tore into their faces, necks, arms and chests, never noticing Rezail's single arm held high above them; the one holding the vox detonator.

THE MICRO-BEAD clicked and hissed again, and Turk screamed for them to move. This was it, he knew it was. The tyranids behind him were closing fast, but the blinding sunlight above beckoned and promised safety. He couldn't see where they were going, but he pushed hard and dragged the stumbling Guardsman to his feet before he could fall. And then... cataclysm.

THE VOX-SIGNAL reached all the receivers almost simultaneously. The receivers primed the detonators and the detonators triggered the explosives. The three small explosions did little, other than to collapse some rock formations. The explosions from the seven Sentinels, however, combined with the fuel drums, turned the birds into massive frag bombs, incinerating nearby tyranids that were focused on their diet of the planet.

The pressure wave spread burning wreckage across the caverns, and hammered a mortal blow against the network. Giant slabs of rock tore away, shifting the weight above it. Limestone shattered and cracked for dozens of metres inside the rock strata. The tyranids heard the thunder rumble through the walls and tried to run... but there was nowhere left to go.

The walls could no longer support the weight of the desert above them, and the tyranids' network of tunnels had destabilised the area further. The caverns collapsed, bringing a fall of sand and giant limestone rocks plummeting into the jungle. The tyranids scrambled away from the falling sky and the cascading pillars of sand. The fall turned into an avalanche, and in moments, the ceilings over Apostle, Basilica, Cathedral and Devotion collapsed.

In turn, the weight of the buckling caverns cracked through the roofs of the many unexplored caves below. This precipitated a second cave-in that crushed the unexplored beauty of the lower network. Sand and debris rained into ancient underground seas, past kilometre high waterfalls, and onto fossilised jungles preserved and sparkling with mineral coats. The deep collapse acted like a drain, pulling at all the tunnels and connecting caves, until it tore the entire network down into ruin.

ONE MOMENT TURK was running, rumbling sand beneath his tired legs and the blue sun above his head, the next, he was falling, the world pulled out from beneath his feet. Turk slammed back into the sand after a terrible moment of freefalling, the drop a stomach-lurching ride, and then tumbled down the longest slope he'd ever experienced.

The ground levelled out, and Turk finally rolled to a stop. He was dizzy and sick, his senses reeling, unanchored. A dust cloud obscured everything around him, while static bursts discharged and dazzled him. Someone's scream forced him to focus; a Guardsman was being swallowed by a sinkhole in the sand, his hands frantically scrambling to find purchase. He was neck deep; nose deep a second later, his eyes impossibly wide in panic. Turk scrambled to grab him, but it was too late, he simply vanished.

The pull of the sand continued, and Turk felt the desert beneath his own feet drag him slowly to the same hole. The sand felt too liquid, robbed of its cohesion. More static discharged and flared against the choked air. Turk leapt to the side and crawled against the current, losing a metre to every one he gained. Finally, he dragged himself onto a stable patch, and turned to see sand spiralling around sand in a torpid whirlpool. There must have been an air pocket somewhere beneath him. Add the strange properties of the sand, and the drag was enough to pull men down to their doom.

Turk collapsed atop his small island, panting and exhausted. He felt like he'd been running for as long as he could remember being alive. He ached. He was tired in a way that made him dizzy. He wanted to sleep, but there was no promise that his ordeal was over. The tyranids, he realised, and that thought alone was enough to shock him with adrenaline.

He looked around in mad panic, trying to get his bearings, but saw nothing that made sense. A massive dust cloud hung in the air, slowly settling and sparking. The sand sloped upward and away into a massive dune that seemed to stretch to impossible heights. Streams of sand continued pouring down the slope. They were thick, at first, but thinned slowly to a trickle. The more the dust storm settled, and the more Turk could see, the higher the dune soared, until its stature proved too incredible to comprehend.

Turk's micro-bead crackled to life, the voice strained and broken by bursts of static. Others had survived, Turk realised, gratefully. Slowly, the survivors found one another and gathered together: Nisri, Turk, Ballasra and a handful of others. When Turk found Kamala, they embraced and kissed, ignoring decorum and scandal. They then found two more men, their bodies snapped and twisted by unkind falls, and another two with broken legs and arms. The scout Mousar was among the dead, his mouth and eyes caught in a gasp, his neck turned at an odd angle. Turk quietly covered his scarred face with his kafiya.

'Has anyone seen Chalfous?' Ballasra asked. They all shook their heads in quiet shock, although Turk suspected it was Chalfous he had seen drowning.

Turk claimed the 892nd's banner from one of the fallen Guardsmen, and then they waited for the dust to settle completely. As it did, what they saw made even less sense. The sand dune that stretched above their heads was at least a kilometre tall. They could finally see far enough to follow the dune's ridge by sight, before realising that it wasn't a dune, but the lip of a giant crater. It was dozens of kilometres in diameter, massive whirlpools of sand and giant daggers of upturned rock dotted across its surface. They were at the bottom of the giant bowl that had once been the caverns. As they explored their surroundings, Ballasra whistled them over. A claw had appeared in the sand, followed by the upper body of a wounded snake. Turk drew his pistol and killed the tyranid before it could crawl free.

Over the next hour, the survivors found refuge in the shade of a giant finger of rock that broke the skin of the desert. It was encrusted with mud, its water long past drunk by the desert. They buried the dead as best they could, tended to the wounded, killed the occasional injured tyranid that had somehow crawled its way out of the ground, and discussed ways of escaping the crater.

5

IT WAS NIGHT, and the air in the crater was deathly cold. The survivors huddled together to keep warm, and they covered the two injured men in the Imperial banner.

They'd found one brief hope in a small puddle of water that had trickled to the surface, but by the time dusk had arrived, the greedy desert had drunk the puddle back up. Now they slept the sleep of the dead, waiting for dawn before attempting to crawl up the crater's dune wall. Not that they believed they would have much success. The slope was too steep.

Turk started awake, Kamala's hand gently covering his mouth.

'What is it?' he said, instantly awake. The others did not stir, the deep chill of the early morning drawing them deeper into their exhausted lethargy.

Kamala's eyes were black under the night sky. Turk felt disquieted by the way her gaze seemed to reach and rifle through his very soul. She was searching for something, searching for an anchor.

Kamala knelt down next to him and waited for him to sit up.

'Beloved, what is it?' he asked.

'The stars are silent again,' she said.

'That's good, isn't it?' he asked, hoping no more would come of this.

'No,' she said, a sob escaping her lips. 'No it isn't. I always hear the stars... always... I hear them throb and ache. I hear the echoes of the Astronomicon, the whispers of the warp trying to eat its way into my head.' She thumped her temple with her palm. 'The Black Ships... the Black Ships find us and teach us how to ignore all but the Emperor's voice, but the noise is always there. It never leaves us. Never! Except....' Her gaze flitted back up to the stars, her eyes suddenly lost in the silent heavens.

Turk grabbed her shoulders gently, forcing her to focus on him again. 'Kamala, why are the stars silent? The tyranids?'

'We killed them,' she said, her voice broken. 'We killed one ship. One.'

'One?' Turk said, dread like cold water washing through his limbs and organs. 'There was more than one?'

'We killed scouts,' Kamala whispered. 'All that terror... all that horror for one scout ship.'

'More are coming?'

'No,' Kamala whispered, 'more are here.'

NISRI FELT THE low tremor move through the ground, building in strength. Streams, and then rivers, of sand bled from the dune wall. Entire sections hissed as they collapsed and slid. Everyone was awake and standing, their fatigue robbing them of the will to run, to cry, or to hide.

It was Ballasra who pointed to the distant wall, where the starry sky framed perfectly the lip of the crater. A dust cloud rose to blanket the crater's lip, and tyranids began pouring over the side and down the slope like the seething dark mass of a living shadow.

They numbered in the thousands. They numbered in the endless.

'They're coming from the south,' Ballasra said.

'There was another ship,' Nisri said. 'Merciful Emperor, there was another ship.'

'Make ready,' Turk said, simply. 'We have more left to kill.'

Slowly, silently, the Guardsmen prepared themselves. The tyranids were several minutes away, but gone was the anticipation of battle or the frayed nerves of eagerness. There was only the quiet determination borne of a bone-aching weariness and a desperate yawning to be done with it. They had fought, better than they had ever expected to fight, and they had won against incredible odds. Nisri watched them prepare. He was proud of them, despite their differences... even because of them. How different things might have been if he hadn't been so stubborn, if Turk and he hadn't fought. This was not the time for regrets.

He knew what he had to do, for himself, the Guard be damned, his tribe be equally cursed. He called Turk over, beckoning him to the other side of the rock to speak.

Both men walked quietly, Turk perhaps sensing what was to come. When, finally, they were out of earshot of the others, Nisri straightened and spoke.

'I just wanted to say... it was an honour, Prince Iban Salid,' Nisri said, quietly, 'and I ask you lead them into battle one last time.'

'I shall,' Turk replied, grasping Nisri's outstretched arm, 'and the honour was mine, Prince Dakar. Journey well.'

'I still fear I may not see you in my Paradise, son of the Banna,' Nisri said, pulling Turk into his embrace. 'I still will not shake my beliefs as a son of the Turenag, but I pray that the Aba Aba Mushira has a Paradise for soldiers, so that I might welcome you there as my brother.'

The men embraced for a moment longer and kissed one another twice on each cheek, as they might kiss old friends and beloved family. Then Turk turned around and walked away, leaving Nisri alone with his thoughts.

Nisri fell to his knees and offered his hands out in submission and prayer. 'Forgive me, oh Emperor,' he whispered. 'Forgive my hubris in believing I would be the one to find Paradise for my people. Forgive me for proving unworthy of Your gifts.' With that, Nisri pulled his laspistol from its holster.

TURK DIDN'T FLINCH at the discharge of the laspistol, even when everyone else jumped. 'Stay where you are,' he ordered, stopping Ballasra from investigating. 'Leave him his dignity.'

Ballasra hesitated, but said nothing. Like Turk, he understood the burden of leadership and the dangers of brandishing a keenedged faith. Sometimes it was a weapon to use against your enemies, and sometimes, it was the device of your downfall. No knife was ever crafted that could not defend you against all aggressors one moment, and then be held at your wrists the next. Turk did not blame Nisri for his actions; he wasn't sure if he could have stared into the face of paradise and hope, for so long, and then given the order to raze it. He understood the colonel's anguish, and he respected him for it.

Turk ensured everyone was ready for this last stand, and offered hushed words of encouragement, and words of thanks for their efforts. He even propped the two injured men up and armed them so that they could fight to the last. When he reached Ballasra, the two men merely clapped one another on the shoulder. They were soldiers, the oldest of the lot. Nothing needed to be said.

The tyranids were less than a minute away when Turk reached Kamala. They embraced and kissed more passionately than they had during their nights of furtive lovemaking. The ground shook beneath their feet.

'I can hear the ghosts again,' Kamala whispered, her forehead touching his. 'I can finally understand their words.'

'What are they saying?' Turk asked, curious.

'I love you,' she said, and kissed Turk on the lips. He looked confused, but the time for questions was over. The tyranid wave was almost upon them. 'Protect me to the last,' she said. 'I finally understand what I need to do.'

6

THE TYRANIDS SWARMED over the last survivors, ripping through them in a terrible collision. The Guardsmen fell, cut down one by one, by scythe, by claw or by bite. They died firing their pistols and swinging their blades, their last furious act to kill those that slaughtered them.

Ballasra and Turk protected Kamala as the energy crackled around her body, but she did not unleash it. It built up inside her, setting her nerves on fire and blistering her skin. Her nose and eyes bled, the blood cascading down past her psyker's hood and soaking her chest. She paused for long enough to watch Ballasra fall, a pack of ainners dragging him down into the sand and lacerating the flesh from his bones. She took strength from his death, and continued to bottle it up inside her.

Turk turned to save Ballasra, but a round of green bioplasm struck him in the back. She watched as he burned alive, the green fire devouring cloth, and burning away his hair. Their eyes locked, and she took strength from him, but there was no recognition left in his stare before the fire split them open. She shut her eyes. She'd seen this before without knowing it, had dreamt it without understanding it. The images rifled through her thoughts, threatening to overwhelm her and scatter her energies. The air was suffocated by the stench of ozone, cordite and discharged bowels, but she forced herself past the noise, past the smells.

Kamala saw the deathblow arrive before it landed, felt it coming with the certainty of providence. She sensed her end in the seconds before it struck. Her eyes flew open as a scythe struck her between the shoulder blades and sliced straight through her sternum. She stared at the blade for a moment, feeling no pain. It was exactly where it was supposed to be, exactly as the ghosts had shown her.

She focused on the tattered, blood-caked standard half buried in sand. The wind tore at its frayed edges, and the double-eagle emblem of the Imperium poked out from beneath the bodies of her friends. It was exactly as she'd seen it, overlaid each time a million times over with no discrepancy in how it unfolded. Every image she saw was the same, each one superimposed by repetition of this single event, over the last. All of them together burned into the fabric of her consciousness as the scene was somehow repeated again and again in history.

Nor *history*, she realised. *It is history only once.*

One point in time had become the fulcrum of her existence.

Bioelectricity surged out from every pore of her skin, electrocuting the tyranid beast that delivered the deathblow. It lit her body with a burning incandescence. Her thoughts flew towards the heavens, her fading consciousness propelled upward by her mortis-cry, a cry not even the tyranids could silence. She broke through the silence of the stars, shattering through the veil, and felt the noise flood back in. Kamala sent her thoughts home, back to where it all began. She knew this would work, because it had worked before. It was ordained.

As the light and suffering of the world closed, Kamala could see her thoughts twist and change as they flew through the distortions of Empyrean Space.

She did not fear where her cry would go, not when she already knew the "when" of it all.

This time, she prayed, let it turn out differently. Let me understand more quickly.

EPILOGUE

'How much does tonight resemble yesterday's night.'

- *The Accounts of the Tallarn* by Remembrancer Tremault

1

There was, there was not.

THE TRANSMISSION FELL like a carelessly discarded blade from the heavens, straight into his naked brain. The astropath's muscles seized into hard cords. His teeth snapped down, cracking the enamel. His skeletal hands gripped the cradle's iron grasp bars, cutting flesh with rust, and he bucked against the leather straps holding him fast. There wasn't enough time to mouth a litany of protection or to will a psychic bulwark into place against the buckshot rain of thoughts. From the heavens, tonight, fell death, and visions of history undone and ghosts unmade.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NEUTRALS

Commissar Torrent Rezail: Cadian native and commissar for the newly formed 892nd Tallarn Regiment.

Sergeant Tyrell Habaas: Hawadi tribesman and adjunct to Commissar Rezail.

TURENAG MEMBERS

Colonel Nisri Dakar: Regiment commander and leader of the Turenag contingent of the 892nd. Prince of the Turenag Tribal Alliance.

Major Ias'r Dashour: Commander of 1st Company.

Kamala Noore: The unit's only sanctioned psyker and female.

Captain Qal Abantu: In charge of the regiment's armored support and a D'Shouf tribesman, the largest tribe of the Turenag.

Captain Lakoom Nehari: F Platoon leader.

Sergeant Darik Ballasra: Squad sergeant and among the best trackers in the regiment. A member of the Ma'h'murra tribe within the Turenag Alliance.

Sergeant Abasra Doori: Chimera commander with armoured support.

Sergeant Saheen Raham: E Platoon's leader and Tallarn soldier of Cadian heritage; Cadians settled on Tallarn following the Iron Legion's attempts to invade the sulphur-laden world.

Duf adar Nab'l Sarish: Regiment pack master and a member of the Sen'tach tribe, who are known for their dromad riders.

Corporal Elaph Cartouk: Squadron leader for the Burning Falcons.

Corporal Magdi Demar: E Platoon leader.

Corporal Bathras Euphrates: Hellhound commander.

Corporal Kadi Y'dar: Sentinel squadron pilot.

Private Ignar Chalfous: Pathfinder in Sergeant Ballasra's squad.

Private Dubar Iban Dubar: Sentinel pilot with the Burning Falcons.

Private Darha Lumak: Hellhound flame gunner. Private Trask

Abu Manar: Hellhound cogitator.

Private Shanleel Qubak: A Sentinel squadron pilot. Private

Ibod Sarrin: Hellhound driver.

Private Apaul Wariby: Chimera driver.

BANNA MEMBERS

Batallion Commander Lieutenant Colonel Turk Iban Solid: Second-in-Command of the 892nd, Prince of the Banna Tribal Alliance and leader of the regiment's Banna contingent.

Major Wahid Anleel: Commander of 1st Company.

Major Alef Hussari: Hussari commands the 892nd's Sentinel squadrons.

Captain Lornis Anuman: Commander of B Platoon.

Captain Ural Kortan: Quartermaster of the 892nd.

Captain Ber'nam Toria: Commander of C Platoon.

Master Gunner Tembo Nubis: Nubis leads A Platoon, which handles fire support, heavy weapons and demolitions. He belongs to the Nasandi Tribe.

Sergeant Ilmar Hadoori: Squadron leader of the Heretic Slayers.

Sergeant Cortikas Iath: Squadron leader for the War Chasers.

Sergeant H'lal Odassa: Squadron leader of the Dust Marauders.

Sergeant A'rtar Shamas: Squadron leader of the Orakle's Apostles.

Corporal Tanis Maraibeh: Pilot in the Dust Runners.

Corporal Adwan Neshadi: Member of Nubis Platoon and demolitions expert.

Corporal Ziya Rawan: Squadron leader for the Holy Striders.

Private First Class Venakh Mousar: A scout serving under Captain Toria.

Private Amum Bak: A pilot in Major Hussari's Dust Runners Sentinel squadron.

Lucien Soulban «Desert Raiders»

Private Harros Damask: A Sentinel squadron pilot.

Private Lebbos Lassa: Private serving in Captain Toria's squad.

Private Deeter Mohar: Pilot in the War Chasers.

Private Damous Obasra: Pilot in the Holy Striders squadron.

Private Ahsra Sabaak: A soldier working for Quater-master Kortan.

Private Elma Taris: Pilot in the Holy Striders squadron.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucien Soulban has authored and co-written over 90 roleplay supplements, and has helped launch three roleplay games. He wrote the script for *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* and *Winter Assault* computer games. He currently works as a script writer for videogame giant Ubisoft Montreal.