

INFERNO!



TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE

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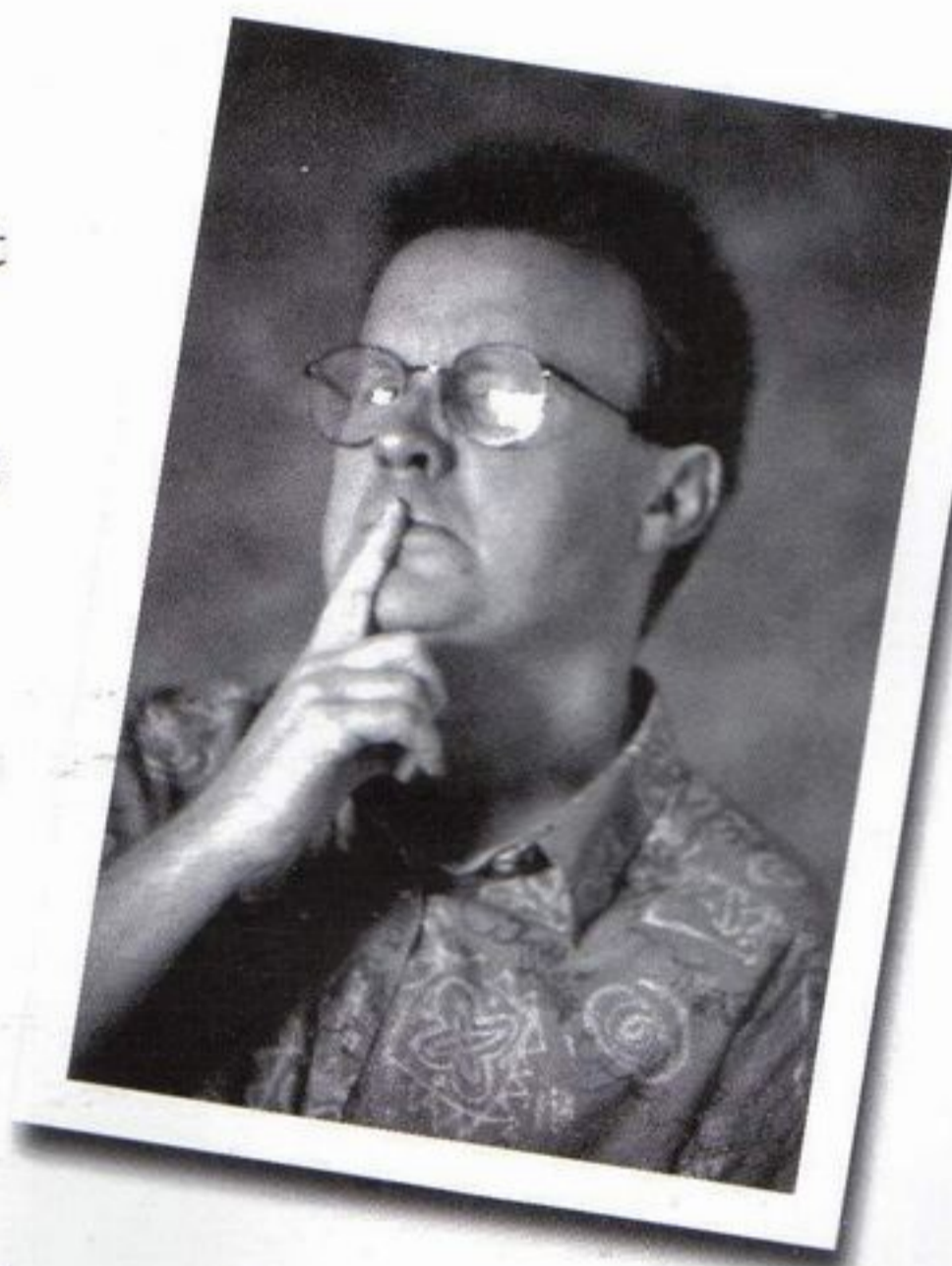
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THIS ISSUE of Inferno we're doing something special. As even the most cursory glance at the contents list opposite will tell you, it has something of a Warhammer 40,000 theme throughout. Now some of our dedicated readers might shake their heads sagely and make disparaging remarks about terribly bad planning, an unbalanced issue, what were they thinking of, that sort of thing. Well, if you were to ask *us*, we'd much prefer to say that such thinking is a load of old tosh. We always print the very best of what we have in the can. And this issue we had a veritable embarrassment of cool Warhammer 40,000 stories and strips. So what the heck, we said, let's publish and be damned! And very soon, the issue was full to bursting with action and adventure from the grim future, with no room even for one of Ralph Horsley's amazing cutaway illustrated features.

Now, this doesn't mean that every issue will be like that, no, no, not by a long chalk. Who knows, next issue might be very different. Maybe it will be packed full of Warhammer fantasy stories, or have an extra long comic strip, or a

mega-illustrated feature or two. Or something stranger still. If you've been following Inferno! for any length of time, the one thing you'll know is that you never know



what great stuff you'll get in the next exciting issue. So watch this space!

FOR NOW, though, this issue sees the final climactic episode of *Obvious Tactics* (shame!).

There's also a wonderful Orky comic strip from Gordon and Paul featuring some characters you may just recognise (and if not, get on the phone to our Back Issues boys and snap up an Inferno! #10 right away!). And as if that wasn't enough, our Gordon also penned a splendid Battlefleet Gothic-set epic for this issue. And there are two of the grittiest Warhammer 40,000 stories yet, marking the very welcome return of Messers Farrer and Jowett.

Oh, and I almost forgot. The single Warhammer fantasy story just happens to be from none other than Bill 'Gotrek and Felix' King, so that's a fairly heavyweight Warhammer fantasy story to get your teeth into. And does it cross the boundary to Warhammer 40,000? Really? Read on and be shocked!

We are just too good to you, we really are.

Andy Jones
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INSIDE...

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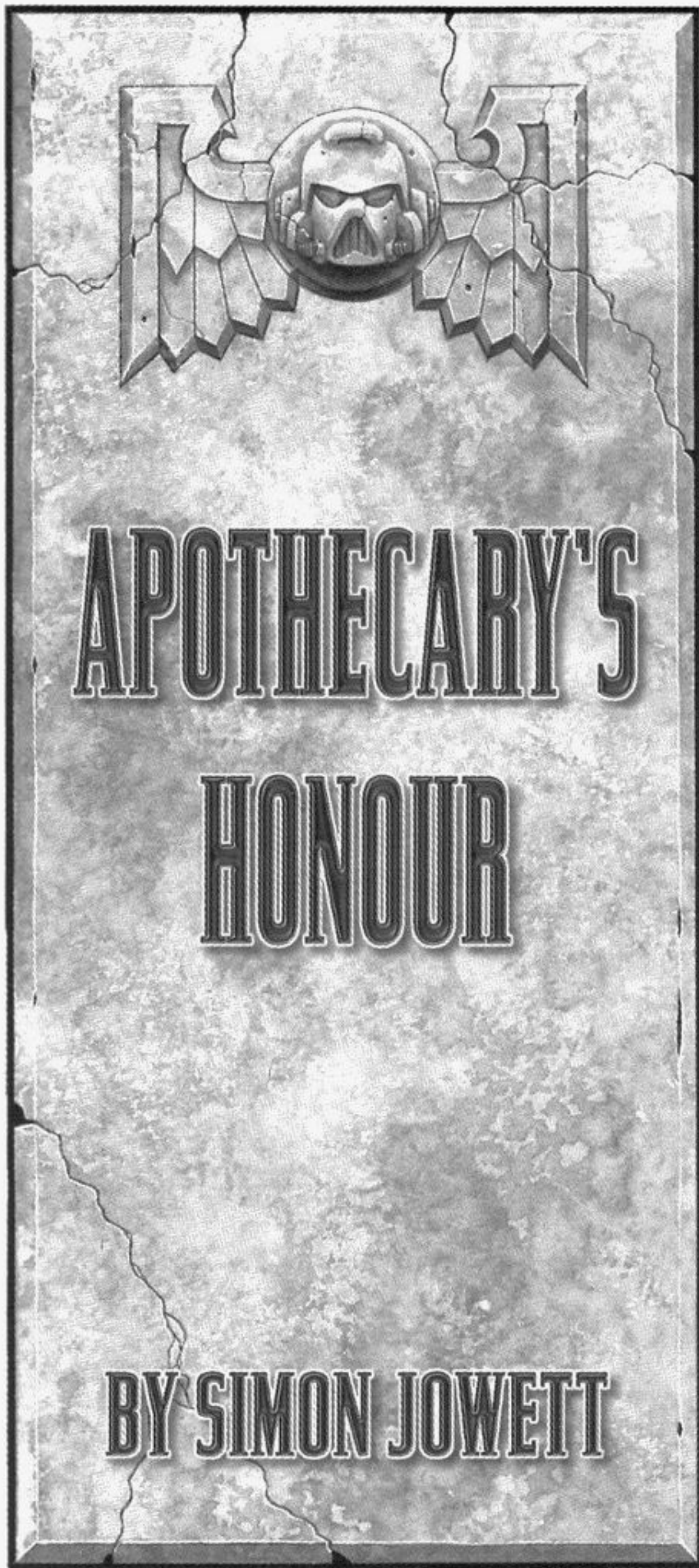
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APOTHECARY!' The cry crackled over the transceiver in Korpus's battered helmet, then vanished beneath a searing wave of static. Mid-stride, Korpus paused. A wheeze escaped from the joints of his armour, as if the suit he had worn since planetfall on Antillis IV was itself grateful for a moment's respite. The craggy uplands upon which the Avenging Sons had set their base camp were unforgiving of flesh and bone and power-assisted ceramite alike.

Korpus turned one way then the other, searching for the signal. The wind had changed direction and with it the currents of unholy energy which had been unleashed upon the planet, casting a blanket of infuriating static across every

transmission. The last communication from the Scout Squad that had accompanied the Avenging Sons' Second Company onto Antillis IV had been swamped by one such obliterating wave. Nothing more had been heard from the squad in almost thirty hours. Every remaining Space Marine silently commended their souls to the Emperor.

Eddies of pale grey ash swirled about Korpus as he continued his sweep. The remains of much of Antillis IV's civilian population, it clogged the joints of every Space Marine's armour and cast a dense pall across his visor. Korpus automatically ran a gloved hand across his eye-plates, clearing away the soft, greasy veil which had collected there. The mud and ash swathed landscape around him jumped into sharper focus. Dispatched to support the beleaguered Imperial Garrison, the Avenging Sons had found themselves immured in a daemon's dream of winter: blizzards of human ash driven by winds that howled with the voices of souls lost to Chaos.

'Apothecary!'

The signal broke through the wail and hiss of static, stronger and more urgent than before. Korpus turned his face away from the steep, broken incline he had been climbing and began to negotiate a downwards path. Automatically, he checked the load in his bolt pistol and activated his Power Fist. In his heart he would rather have continued upwards, in order to stand beside his commander in the vanguard of the next assault. But he was an Apothecary, and not once in the years since he had first donned the white armour had he ever ignored the call of an injured Space Marine.

It was a matter of pride. It was a matter of honour.



AVENGING SON!' Korpus prayed that his own transmission was able to pierce the blizzard of ash and static.

He stepped over the last of the trail of black-armoured corpses that had led him down this narrow defile. Though of similar design to the armour worn by the Avenging Sons, the garish sigils scrawled across its

midnight-black surface declared its wearer's true allegiance: to the Dark Gods of the Warp. To Chaos.

He kicked aside an abandoned skull-helm and noticed with grim satisfaction the bloody stump of a truncated neck which lolled into view as it rolled away. Among the scattered corpses and their now-redundant weaponry, Korpus had noted the presence of a boltgun and bolt pistol, both sanctified with the sigil of the Avenging Sons, both discarded. Both empty.

'Apothecary?'

The strained query came from an inky, shadow-cast niche in the gully wall. Korpus restrained his desire to hurry into the darkness, well aware of the tricks that the servants of the Warp could play on a man's mind, and edged forward.

The Space Marine lay propped against the rear of the niche, his lower body obscured by what Korpus thought, at first, to be an errant shadow, but quickly realised was another corpse. The Avenging Son's breastplate was scorched by bolter fire and cracked in several places. The blood of his many victims shone blackly in the dim light. One of his arms hung loosely to the side, the elbow bent at an unnatural angle. The other still clutched the handle of the chainsword he had driven between the plates of his opponent's armour.

'It's me, Korpus.' Holstering his bolt pistol and disconnecting his Power Fist, the Apothecary knelt beside his battle-brother. With practised ease he released the catches of the cracked and dented helmet, lifted it away.

'Pereus!' Korpus had stood beside the veteran sergeant on many worlds. 'You must have killed a battalion of the daemon-spawn.'

'And they me,' Pereus's words came in gasps, his normally rich, deep voice cracking with the effort. He glanced downwards, indicating something. Korpus followed his gaze, then rolled away the body of the sergeant's last kill.

The Warp-forged chainsword had been driven through the lower plates of Pereus's armour, deep enough so that only its hilt remained visible, perhaps at the same moment that Pereus had struck his own fatal blow.

'Legs gone. No feeling,' Pereus croaked. 'My service to the Emperor ends here.'

As Pereus spoke, Korpus swiftly removed his own helmet. The ritual he was about to perform did not require that both participants be bare-headed, but Korpus believed it to be more fitting.

'Man is born alone,' Korpus intoned, removing his armoured gloves. The wind struck cold against his exposed, sweat-slickened hands.

'And so he dies,' Pereus answered in a halting voice. Reaching forward, Korpus began to release the catches of the sergeant's upper armour.

'You serve the Emperor?' Korpus continued, stripping the plates from Pereus's body, exposing the blood-soaked robe beneath.

'And I die in his service.' Pereus shuddered at the wind's chill kiss.

'You are content?' Korpus asked. In a single swift motion, Korpus sliced through the sodden, sticky robe, using a scalpel he had drawn from an instrument pack bolted to his forearm.

'I am content,' Pereus gave the final answer, his voice barely a whisper. Korpus parted the fabric to lay Pereus bare from waist to throat. 'Work fast, Apothecary,' Pereus whispered. 'There will more of these Warp-spawned whoresons come to avenge their brothers.' His face and throat convulsed, as if he was trying to swallow an unpalatable morsel. His head rocked forward and his jaw dropped slackly open. A thick stream of blood ran over his lower lip.

Placing a hand under Pereus's chin, Korpus tilted it back upon the now nerveless neck, exposing the full length of the throat. There: a slight bulge resting atop the sternum. Korpus's first target. Replacing the first scalpel in the instrument pack, he selected a second, whose tapered, hair-thin blade was intended for one purpose only: the excision of a Space Marine's progenoid glands.

'When they come, I pray that I will face them as bravely as you,' Korpus told the unhearing sergeant. He watched as a flake of pale ash settled slowly on the pupil of Pereus's unseeing right eye, then set to work.



THE PROGENOID GLANDS are the future of our Chapter!' Apothecary Lorus's barking tone echoed around the small room set at the centre of the Apothecarion. The tang of chemical preservatives hung in the air. Seated before him in the cold room, banked with glass phials and porcelain specimen dishes, sat the five candidates chosen to undergo training in the sacred rituals and duties of a Space Marine Medic.

'The Avenging Sons' survival as an arm of the Emperor's will is dependent upon the survival of the glands,' Lorus continued. 'And the survival of the glands will depend upon you.'

Lorus stood behind a gurney which had been wheeled into the room by a Servitor, one of the small army of the mechanically enhanced wretches who moved tirelessly through the corridors of the Apothecarion, ferrying wounded Space Marines between wards, preparing beds for new occupants or removing the dead to the Chapel of Martyrs. The gurney's cargo was covered by a grey sheet.

Korpus's eyes kept flickering impatiently between the sallow, sharp-featured face of the instructor and the shape under the sheet. Neither he nor any of his fellow candidates were under any illusion about what lay under there. Their instruction in the other aspects of battlefield medicine was already well under way. Now they were to receive induction into the last and most vital of the Apothecarion's mysteries.

'All men die,' Lorus's tone had taken on a flat, liturgical air, his words echoing the Rite of Extreme Unction that Korpus and his fellows had already committed to memory and upon which they were expected to meditate each night before retiring. 'But, in death, an Avenging Son carries within him the means of ensuring that the Emperor's crusade against the tide of Chaos continues.'

'Each gland is grown from the seed provided by the gland that came before it and that gland from a similar seed, in an unbroken chain which lies within every Space Marine of the Adeptus Astartes, until the point of death. At the end of a Space Marine's life, it is the duty of an Apothecary to remove the glands and see that they return here to provide seed for the future.'

'Without it, there can be no more of us. Without it, the Emperor's crusade ends.'

Without it, Chaos has free rein.'

Lorus drew back the sheet, revealing the naked corpse of an Avenging Son, whose journey to the Chapel of Martyrs had been delayed for the sake of this demonstration. Korpus's gaze lingered for a moment on the dead man's face as he wondered what battles he had seen in the life of righteous conflict that had led him here. By the time the young apprentice medic looked back at his instructor, the old man had drawn a scalpel, longer and much thinner than those Korpus had seen thus far, from a stiff leather pouch strapped to his forearm. Lorus cast his eyes across the five who sat before him.

'Now you will learn what it truly means to be an Apothecary.'



THE LONG-DEAD instructor's words always echoed in Korpus's memory while performing an Excision. The ghost of the preservatives' tang pricked the back of his throat as he carved the tiny, delicate vesicles from the base of the throat and deep within the chest. Had the wind that howled along the gully not increased while he worked on Pereus, the scent memory would have been augmented by the more powerful odour of the fresh fluid in the phials he unlatched from the storage bays set beneath his armour's thigh-plates. Each of the pair of glands was deposited in a phial, their tops sealed and then replaced in their sheaths.

Korpus secured the catches on the plates of double-thickness ceramite, intended to shield the precious cargo from damage that would doubtless blow the rest of Korpus to the winds of space. Replacing the scalpel in the instrument pack and donning his gloves, he prepared to leave. But there was one last ritual to perform.

'You are a martyr to the Emperor's will,' he intoned over Pereus's eviscerated remains.

The dead man would have met the Apothecary's gaze, had not a dense layer of ash settled across his face, covering it completely.

'You shall be remembered. You shall be avenged.'

APOTHECARY!' Commander Selleus's voice rang in Korpus's ears during a sudden lull in the static.

'Apothecary Korpus reporting, praise His name,' he replied. Having worked his way out of the defile, Korpus was retracing his steps up the long, rocky incline, heading once more towards the base camp. The number of loaded phials he had been carrying, excised from the bodies of Avenging Sons who had fallen in the battle to hold the perimeter, had prompted his initial decision to return, to place the glands in more permanent storage to be returned via Thunderhawk to the Avenging Son's Chapter Ship. Pereus's glands had filled the last of the bays and made his return all the more imperative.

'The order to regroup went out an hour past,' Selleus said. 'Where are you?'

'Incoming, my lord.' Korpus lifted his visored gaze. There, visible through the ash-storm, sat the fortified chateau from which Selleus spoke. In his mind's eye, he saw the remaining Avenging Sons, gathered around their commander, preparing themselves for the assault that would inevitably follow the regrouping. Longing to join them, to feel the holy fire of battle leap within him, he increased his pace over the uneven ground.

'Pereus fell. Excision was required,' he continued. 'Your order did not reach me. This damnable static...'

As if summoned by his words, a fresh wave of storm-generated interference engulfed much of Selleus's reply.

'...new incursion...'

Korpus slammed an armoured fist against the side of his helmet. As if mocking his frustration, the static rose in volume. The import of the commander's words was not lost on Korpus: yet more Chaos Marines had landed on Antillis IV.

'Cognis dead...'

The glands which resided within the Company Librarian were of especial value. Implanted in the correct candidate, they would provide the Chapter with a replacement for the veteran psyker, whose reading of the Emperor's Tarot and subtle awareness of the aetheric shifts that heralded the arrival of Daemoniac forces had turned the tide of battle against greater numbers than had thus far been encountered on Antillis IV. However, the idea of a psychic shock wave powerful

enough to end Cognis's long and loyal service almost beggared the imagination. The odds against the Avenging Sons had, it seemed, become much worse.

The hiss and crackle faded and Korpus grabbed the opportunity to reply. 'I am almost with you, sir. I will perform the excision on Cognis and be ready to stand with you...'

'NO!' Selleus cut vehemently across his Apothecary's transmission. He spoke quickly, obviously mindful of possible interference. 'Your orders are to quit the planet, taking all Excised glands with you. If that proves to be impossible, you are to destroy them all, including your own. Do you understand?'

For a heartbeat, Korpus struggled to digest the message. Quit the planet? That was not the way of the Avenging Sons. Fight, yes. Die, if necessary. But run?

'Apothecary, respond,' came Selleus's voice. 'Did you receive my last transmission?' A faint crackle had begun to edge his words.

'Transmission received, commander.' Korpus forced his reply from between numb lips. 'But not understood. I can store the glands on my return to base. Surely we can fight on?' Korpus glanced up at the chateau, still maddeningly far above him.

'Negative.' A susurrating hiss washed over Selleus's words, growing steadily in volume. 'Cognis's last message was clear... Outer wall breached... compound overrun... Imperative... all viable glands... out of enemy hands... Imperative!... We embrace... Mercy's Kiss.'

Mercy's Kiss: the name given to the small pistol which hung at Korpus's belt – and the belt of every Apothecary. With it, Korpus would ease the pain of the fatally wounded, thus buying his patient an easier demise and himself more time to perform an Excision. The message in Selleus's use of the name was clear.

The Commander's voice erupted into a series of howling whoops and squeals – interference caused by the close proximity of a large concentration of Warp energy. The picture in Korpus's mind's eye changed from one of his Company preparing to take the war to the enemy, to one of a beleaguered outpost fighting a last-ditch battle against the Warp hordes.

'Message received and understood!' Korpus shouted his reply in the hope that

it might reach his commander. 'You shall be remem—'

Before he could complete the litany, the distant chateau dissolved in a series of explosions. Gouts of rock and ash flew into the air. A multiple concussion swept down the hillside, pushing a roiling cloud of ash before it. Korpus dropped to the ground, curled so as to present his back to the avalanche and protect the phials loaded in his thigh-packs.

For what seemed like an eternity, the falling debris beat a relentless tattoo against Korpus's ceramite carapace. As he lay there, his commander's last words rang in his ears – and with it, the questions he longed to ask: how had the situation become so dire that his entire company would choose suicide over continued resistance? Why was it so important for the glands in his care to be taken off-world or destroyed?

Eventually rock fall subsided and Korpus climbed to his feet, ash falling from his shoulders like snow. Looking up at the smoking remains of the chateau, reduced to a ragged collection of charred fragments by the detonation of the company's entire store of munitions, he completed the ritual. Never before had he said the words with such fury and such determination: 'You shall be avenged!'



GUIDED BY THE ADVICE of Tiresias, the Company Astropath, Selleus had ordered the Avenging Sons' Thunderhawk gunships to make landfall at the edge of the greatest concentration of Warp energy. Never one to waste time picking a way through the opposition's perimeter, he preferred to strike at the enemy's heart. The reports received from Antillis IV's Imperial Garrison upon their Company Ship's shift out of Warp made it clear that any such tactical niceties were already redundant. The planet's Imperial Governor had waited too long before sending a request for help – whether this was due to misplaced confidence or sheer incompetence no longer mattered. The Avenging Sons would have to drive straight for the centre of the enemy's forces, or all was lost.

But all, it seemed, *was* lost. Korpus's mind nagged at the fact as he made his way towards the drop zone: a garrison airfield still several hours distant. Defended by a unit of Imperial Guardsmen, the Thunderhawks offered his only chance of obeying his commander's final order.

Turning his back on the rocky outcrop which now bore only the smouldering remains of his brothers, Korpus forged across a landscape littered with evidence of Antillis IV's damnation: shattered hulks of Chimera troop carriers, their tracks blown from under them while attempting a strategic withdrawal. A Leman Russ tank, presumably the troops carriers' escort, had been tossed aside like a discarded toy, its armour plating shredded, its crew reduced to bloody daubs. Korpus picked his way between the hulks, wary in case the Chaos-inspired troops that had inflicted such damage had posted a rearguard.

'Apothecary!' The faint plea drifted across the field of static that filled his transceiver's earplug and was gone so quickly that Korpus couldn't be sure it had come from beyond the confines of his own skull. Perhaps it was just a memory of cries he had heard on many battlefields on many worlds. He shivered, then picked up his pace, heading for a stand of flash-blasted trees, the ash-blizzard howling at his back.

Just inside the tree line, Korpus found more wreckage: a battery of Basilisks, reduced to so much scrap, their crews torn to pieces. As he surveyed the organic detritus that lay, draped across the remains of the artillery pieces, the cry came again!

'Apothecary!'

'An echo, nothing more,' he told himself, though he could not suppress the shiver that ran through him. The call of a wounded Space Marine, broadcast hours ago, bouncing back to the planet's surface from the Warp-clogged troposphere. The rest of his Company had answered the order to regroup and died beside their commander. Korpus was the last of them.

'And you have your orders,' he reminded himself, his voice sounding dead and flat inside his helmet. He should have been with them to meet that last assault. Selleus's last transmission made no sense. The righteous determination with which he had promised his commander vengeance had faded, leaving only questions and confusion.

'Confusion is the seed-bed of Chaos,' Korpus intoned, remembering an aphorism from the Avenging Sons' Chapter Book as he marched on through the trees. Their branches had been stripped and blackened in the wake of the Chaos army's progress. Massive boles had been overturned; wind-blown ash now gathered among their roots.

'Uproot it, in the Emperor's name,' he continued. *If only it were that simple.*



HOURS PASSED, every one of them heating up the distance between Korpus and the airfield. Rugged, mountainous countryside gave way to flat plains and occasional patches of woodland. By nightfall, the Apothecary could see the gap-toothed outline of a city on the horizon, backlit by a dull reddish glow, which could mean only one thing: the forces of Chaos had reached the city. The firelight would be the result of the massive pyres built from the corpses of the city's inhabitants, gouting oily smoke and adding to the ash storms which continued to swirl about him as he marched.

The Thunderhawks' drop zone was located on the outskirts of the city. Had the Imperial troops left to guard the attack ships been able to hold off their attackers, then Korpus would be able to fulfil his Commander's orders. If not...

'We may yet meet in the Book of Martyrs, Pereus,' Korpus muttered grimly as he strode on, step after tireless, servo-assisted step.

The night passed in a barely-remembered monotony of motion. Implanted in the early stages of a Space Marine's genetic conditioning, the Catalepsian Node allowed such a warrior to reduce all non-essential mental processes to a minimum, mimicking the effects of sleep, yet retain full awareness of his surroundings and objectives.

Korpus returned to full wakefulness as the first rays of the Antillis system's bloated sun rose between the buildings that now towered above him. He had reached the outskirts of the city and now marched along its cracked and buckled highways, still heading towards the airstrip. The ruins of what had once been an industrial area

flanked the highway with shattered factories and storage yards.

As he marched, Korpus recited the Morning Prayer of the Avenging Sons: 'If this day be my last, I shall spend it in the service of your will, Emperor, Saviour, Last Hope of Mankind.' Light years away, aboard the vast, cathedral-like Chapter Ship that was the home of the Avenging Sons, the morning bell would be tolling. Every Avenging Son not on assignment would be gathered in the Great Chapel, reciting the same prayer as if with one voice. 'For I am an instrument of your will, a scourge of your enemies. I am an...'

The voice that burst from his transceiver stopped Korpus in his tracks, the remainder of the Morning Prayer unspoken. The voice was high and clear, uttering a battle cry he never expected to hear again.

'Avenging Sons!'



'AVENGING SONS!' Scout Vaelus swung his bolter left and right, pumping bolt after bolt into the Traitor Marines which advanced towards him between the high towers of containerised foodstuffs that would now never leave this storage yard for other star systems.

'Avenging Sons!' Scout Salvus, to Vaelus's right, took up the war cry, as did Scout Marus, to his left. Their bolters spat explosive death into the faces of the servants of the Warp, vaporising heads, severing limbs – but it was not enough. Their black-armoured opponents seemed not to feel the pain of their injuries. Shrieking with daemoniac laughter and crying, 'Khorne! Khorne!' even as another bolt detonated against their armour, they pressed forward. And there were so many of them, jostling with one another to be the first to taste the flesh of a fledgling Space Marine. So many...

Something slammed against Vaelus's back. Scout Tallis, flanked by Scouts Orris and Flavus, forced back by the Khorne-inspired berserkers that advanced towards them, equally as heedless of the cannonade of bolter fire that was being pumped into their midst, now stood back-to-back with their battle-brothers.

'For the Emperor!' Vaelus cried. They might fall here today, but their enemy would know in whose name they died.

'For the Emperor!' came the unexpected reply, moments before Vaelus heard the muffled crack of a bolt pistol being discharged against an armoured body from closer than the two arms-lengths which separated the Scouts and their attackers. The concussive report sounded again and again, counterpointed by the high-pitched crackling whine of a Power Fist at full charge. High-voltage detonations punctuated the whine as it connected with armour. The copper tang of boiling blood reached Vaelus as he caught his first glimpse of the figure that was cutting a swathe through the berserkers, fighting with an almost equally mindless fury: a figure whose armour bore the insignia of the Avenging Sons. A figure in white.



FOR THE EMPEROR!' Korpus's blood sang as he parried the downward sweep of a chainsword with his Power Fist. The whirring blade shattered against the glove's energy field. Korpus slammed his bolt pistol against the black, sigil-etched breastplate of his attacker and pulled the trigger twice. Still laughing, the berserker fell back, his chest a smoking ruin. Stepping past him, Korpus placed the open palm of his Power Fist against the back of another skull-helmeted traitor. The Chaos Marine, still too mindlessly intent on reaching the Scouts to react to the new threat, stiffened as his armour's servos went into spasm.

'Vengeance!' Korpus breathed, and he closed his fist.



MINDS LOST TO the berserker fury of the Blood God, the Chaos Marines reacted with fatal slowness to the whirlwind of death that had appeared in their midst. Pressed close in their desire to reach the Scouts, they found turning to meet the white-armoured killer difficult: ablative plates snagged and took valuable

seconds to disengage, seconds that allowed Korpus to step close, press the muzzle of his bolt pistol against the grinning, fanged skull of a face plate and pull the trigger.

Seeing this, Vaelus closed the gap between himself and the nearest Chaos Marine – and was almost decapitated by his intended target's chainsword. Dropping to one knee to avoid the chattering blade, the Scout pressed his bolter against the nearest of the Chaos Marine's knee joints and fired. Rising as the crippled berserker fell, Vaelus fired again, three times, vaporising the traitor's head.

'Forward, Avenging Sons!' Vaelus cried. 'The day can still be ours!' He turned, searching for a new target, and found himself visor-to-visor with the Scouts' white-armoured saviour. Without a word, the Apothecary stepped past him, heading for the line of Chaos Marines which had closed upon the three Scouts at Vaelus's back and now threatened to overwhelm them.

Before turning to follow Korpus, Vaelus glanced along the narrow passageway between the containers. Moments before, there had been a seething mass of black armour and grinning skulls. Now a tangled carpet of shattered, smoking corpses lay before him.

'Emperor be praised. He has delivered us!' Vaelus breathed, then hurried to join the battle that still raged.



ALL OF THEM?' Salvus's voice betrayed the mixture of disbelief, confusion and fear felt by all of the Scouts as they listened to Korpus's account of the last hours of the Second Company.

'The entire Second Company, yes,' Korpus, helmetless, replied as he worked on the stump of Marus's right arm, using a long-needled syringe to inject unguents into the raw pink flesh. The Scout's genetically-altered blood had already clotted, sealing the wound, but necrotising infections were still a risk to one who had yet to complete the full course of enhancements that would elevate him to Space Marine status.

'Time is a factor here,' Korpus said, after binding Marus's arm and re-securing his

helmet. 'This world is lost. My orders are to save the glands in my keeping. There will be other traitorous abominations such as these who will try to stop me. I may require an escort.'

'We stand ready,' Vaelus declared. At his words, the Scouts snapped to attention. Korpus surveyed them and nodded approvingly. Of the five survivors who stood before him, only Marus had suffered serious injury.

'Then we move,' he said. 'Bring his weapons.' He gestured to the body which lay against one wall of the container-canyon – Flavius, his torso all-but bisected by a berserker's chain-axe – then stabbed a finger first at Salvus, then Tallis, both busily donning their helmets while Orris clipped Flavius's bolt pistol and chainsword to his equipment belt. 'You take point. You guard the rear.'

As Korpus expected, decisive orders served to ease the Scouts' disquiet. Since the death of their Sergeant, incinerated by a Chaos Marine's melta while leading them in a probing mission beyond the Avenging Sons' former perimeter, the Scouts had been playing a deadly game of cat-and-mouse with the enemy, zig-zagging across the battlefield in the hope of re-locating the Second Company. Bearings lost, communications frustrated by the blizzard of ash and static, they had sought shelter in this vast container yard, believing that they had shaken off their pursuers, only to find themselves trapped by a pincer attack.

'The Emperor sent you,' Vaelus had told Korpus. 'We were Daemon-fodder, but for your arrival.'

'The Emperor watches over us all,' Korpus had replied automatically. His blood was still singing in his ears, the urge to rend and kill without thought, without emotion had yet to subside – and, in truth, he wished that it never would. The killing rage – the 'Vengeful Heart' as it had been dubbed, centuries ago – was the state aspired to by every Avenging Son. A unit of Avenging Sons in such a condition were all but unstoppable on the battlefield; their only desire was to move forward through whatever enemy stood before them, their only desire to kill.

Which is what made Selleus's last act so incomprehensible. As an Apothecary, Korpus understood that he should temper his own Vengeful Heart in order to perform

his duties. It was an honour and he accepted it as the Emperor's will. But for Selleus to deliberately extinguish the hearts of his entire Company...

Such doubts had crept back as the killing rage subsided. To quiet them once again, Korpus turned his mind to his new role as leader of the Scout Squad. But deep within the cage of his soul, his Vengeful Heart beat strong, demanding to be heard.



'THERE'S MOVEMENT,' Vaelus reported as he peered through the ocularius. He adjusted the focusing dials. Lenses spun within the brass casing, allowing him a greater depth of field. 'Possibly human.'

'Doubtful,' Korpus said. He and the Scout crouched behind a pile of discarded aero-engines at the edge of the airfield. Warehouses and hangars curved away to either side, many of them punctured by heavy cannon and las-fire. The field itself was pock-marked with craters, dotted with the remains of commercial and military aircraft. When their drop-ships had landed, both the aircraft and the buildings had been intact.

'The Thunderhawks?' he asked. Vaelus adjusted the dials again.

'Not good,' the Scout reported. 'Two are complete wrecks. The other three have all taken a pounding. There's no way to tell if any can fly.'

'We only need one,' Korpus replied, all too aware of the irony of his words, but determined to remain focused on the mission.

The sudden cough of bolter fire from the rear drew their attention from the attack ships. Vaelus stowed the ocularius and followed Korpus, who was already running towards the nearest hangar.

They arrived to find the other Scouts standing over the bodies of three Imperial Guardsman, members of the unit assigned to guard the Thunderhawks. Their bodies bore the marks of impacts both old and new, but also the buboes and other malformations that spoke of only one thing.

'Necromancy,' Korpus stated flatly. 'This world is now securely in Chaos's grasp.'

Time is short. Soon even the living will be unable to resist its influence.'

As if to underline his words, one of the corpses began to twitch. Impossibly, it raised itself on one shattered arm, opened its exploded eyes...

Tallis's chainsword sliced through the ex-guard's head, rupturing it like an overripe fruit. Its brains, turned black and fluid by the same necromantic power which had re-animated its hours-dead corpse, splashed across the ground. A rank sewer-stench filled the air.

'Any sentient being in the vicinity will know we're here by now,' said Korpus. 'Make for the nearest Thunderhawk. Stay tight and stay alert.'

Korpus led the Scouts from the cover of the hangar, jogging swiftly across the open ground between it and the attack craft. The closer they got the worse the situation looked. Even the three Thunderhawks which remained upright on their landing skids looked ready for the Reclamation Plants of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

Bolter fire sounded from his left. He turned. Orris had dispatched another re-animated guardsmen.

'Head shots are not enough,' he reminded the Scout. 'Dismemberment is the only way to ensure they don't come after you again.'

'Understood,' Orris replied and set about the corpse with his chainsword. More gunfire erupted from the far side of the group of Thunderhawks. Tallis and Marus had encountered more of the foul things.

'Who here has received flight training?' Korpus demanded. 'I need someone to check the instrumentation.'

'Salvus!' Vaelus called. The Scout had stayed close to the Apothecary, adopting the role of aide-de-camp. Salvus ran back between two of the Thunderhawks, ducking to avoid the blackened and twisted remains of a sensor array.

'We need to know which of these can fly, if any,' Korpus told him. 'They may look like wrecks, but I've known them to take off in a worse state than this.' As Salvus ran up the ramp into the belly of the nearest craft, Korpus offered up a silent prayer that his words would prove to be more than a mere panacea.

The bark of Imperial-issue munitions echoed from the interior of the Thunderhawk. Both Korpus and Vaelus

turned, stepped onto the drop-ramp, then dodged the selection of body parts that flew from the hatch, accompanied by a chainsword's chattering.

'Best check the others,' Salvus called out from the belly of the ship. Before Korpus could issue an order, Vaelus was already halfway up the ramp of the neighbouring craft.

Good soldiers, Korpus thought. For the first time, he dared believe that they might escape this doomed world and reach the Chapter Ship, where the Scouts would undergo implantation of the gene seed from the glands that he carried in his armour. Perhaps they might form the basis for a new Second Company. If so, they would bring honour to the memory of the corpses they would leave on Antillis IV.



'PRESSURISING,' Salvus's voice crackled over Korpus's transceiver. He and Orris had spent the last hour jury-rigging the seal around the main hatch, using parts from interior hatches, making frequent reference to the Adeptus Mechanicus Prayer Book he had found in a locker on the flight deck.

Korpus stood outside the hatch, listening to the hiss and pop as the seal closed. After checking over each of the three Thunderhawks, Salvus had declared the first one to be the most spaceworthy. While he and Orris worked, the others continued to prowl the airfield, using bolter and chainsword to dispatch the necromantically resurrected.

On the flight deck, Salvus watched the icons on the control board. Several relating to non-essential systems were dead; others – including the weapons board – glowed red, indicating failure, but they too should not prevent spaceflight. Salvus narrowed his eyes, concentrated on the set of icons that related to the craft's internal environment. They showed green – for the moment.

Long moments passed. Through the gunship's view-screens, Korpus scanned the edge of the airfield. It was a miracle that they had been allowed so much time, that the Chaos Marines and the Daemons

that commanded them had not scented their presence here and closed in to finish them off.

'The Machine God is with us!' Salvus's relief-filled words jerked Korpus from his thoughts. Another hiss and pop, and the main hatch swung open. The smiling Scout stood in the doorway. 'With your permission, Apothecary, I could transfer the weapons system from Hawk Four...'

'No time,' Korpus interjected. 'Begin pre-flight rituals. We've been sitting around like targets on a shooting range for too long as it is.'

'Understood.' Salvus disappeared back into the craft.

Korpus strode up the ramp, following Salvus inside. While the Scout made for the raised flight deck, Korpus stooped to open a locker set into the wall beside the Navigator's chart table, which bore the seal of the Apothecarion. Removing his helmet and gloves, Korpus released the catches on the locker door and felt the gentle kiss of air as its vacuum seal was breached. The door swung open, revealing the racks of empty phial-holders within. Minutes later, all were full.

'Soon, my brothers. Be patient.' In his mind, Korpus addressed the Avenging Sons Scouts who, like those with him here on Antillis IV, were awaiting implantation of the gene-seed. The glands he had harvested – and which now floated before him, their preservative-filled phials nestling securely in the locker's racks – would help ensure that the Emperor's crusade would continue.

Korpus closed the locker door, secured its vacuum seal, then refastened the long ceramite thigh-plates over his suit's now-empty storage bays. As he had placed each phial into the locker, he had felt a weight lift from his shoulders. Though he had performed this act on countless other worlds, never had the special duty of an Apothecary weighed so heavily upon him, nor had he felt such relief at its completion.

'Apothecary!' Vaelus stood at the Thunderhawk's main hatch. Korpus hurried the length of the craft's interior, re-attaching his gloves, automatically checking the load in his bolt pistol's magazine and the charge in his Power Fist.

'Report,' he demanded of the Scout, though the sound of bolter fire and a

discordant, guttural chanting provided all the answer he needed.

'Brother, the enemy has found us!'



BEHIND THEM, the Thunderhawk's engine ratcheted upwards in pitch. At Korpus's order, Salvus had rushed through the last verses of the pre-flight incantation. The engines didn't sound too healthy – what should have been a smooth rise in tone and volume was interrupted by coughs and judders that had more in common with a chronic chest infection – but the Scout remained confident that the craft would fly.

Korpus and Vaelus had paced away from the Thunderhawk, sheltering from the ash-storm kicked up by its back- and down-drafts under the fuselage of Hawk Four. Korpus held the Scout's ocularius to his eyes, scanning the perimeter of the airfield, while Vaelus continued his report. 'We made contact with their point men during a sweep of the southern perimeter. We hit them hard and fast – I don't think they had time to send out a warning. The others hung back. We still have a few frag mines. They were to lay the mines beyond the perimeter and then retreat. They should have been back by now.'

'Here they come,' Korpus said. 'And they are not alone.'

Through the lenses of the instrument, Korpus watched as the three Scouts raced through the ragged remains of the airfield's southern gate. Bolter fire chewed up the ash-covered ground all around them. A black-armoured horde was at their back, howling, scenting blood and one more victory in the name of their foul masters. From the unevenness of Tallis's stride, Korpus judged that he must have taken a serious hit to one leg. Shifting focus, he tried to assess the exact size of the threat they were facing, when his gaze fell upon a sight that could mean only disaster.

'Emperor's mercy!' he breathed as the vast, obscene bulk of a Dreadnought filled his view, towering over the troops around it, lurching as it stomped through the ash and mud. Its black armour was covered in twisted sigils proclaiming its daemonic allegiance, blasphemous verses in praise of

the Dark Gods, and what looked like dolls hanging from chains attached to its carapace.

Despite his revulsion, Korpus adjusted the focusing dials again... Not dolls. Human corpses, some still wearing the tattered remains of Imperial Guard uniforms; faces bloated, limbs torn away, guts slit open and their contents hung like grotesque garlands around their necks. Final proof, if proof were needed, that Antillis IV had fallen.

'They need covering fire!' Korpus barked as he tore the ocularius from his eyes. His mind raced. Even if the jury-rigged Thunderhawk was air-worthy, it would need time to achieve sufficient altitude to be out of range of the Chaos army's guns. He tried not to think of the range of the Dreadnought's cannon. It could swat the fleeing craft from the sky long after it had outdistanced the Chaos Marines' bolters.

'Hawk Four's weapons system is still operational,' he told Vaelus. 'Get to work.' With a nod, the Scout ran for the main hatch. Korpus donned and secured his helmet. By the time he spoke into his transceiver, he had come to a decision: 'Scout Salvus, immediate dust-off. Do you understand? Go. Now!'

'Apothecary, please repeat!' came the uncomprehending reply. 'Leave now? What about the others? Yourself? I cannot—'

'My job is done. The future of the Second Company is in your hands. We'll keep them busy until you're out of range. Tell our brothers that we took the Emperor's holy vengeance into the mouth of Hell. For are we not Avenging Sons?'

'Avenging Sons!' Salvus answered, his voice firm once again. 'Your name shall live forever in the Chapel of Martyrs, Apothecary Korpus!'

The engine's pitch changed again, rising to a scream as the control surfaces swung into the correct alignment. The landing skids groaned as the gunship's bulk began to shift.

'Avenging Sons!' Vaelus's voice echoed in the Apothecary's ears as the Scout fired a first volley from Hawk Four's las-cannon into the approaching black horde. As he ran to meet the other Scouts, Korpus saw their impact: dark-armoured bodyparts flew in all directions like confetti, leaving holes in the oncoming line, which were quickly filled by more of their treacherous

brethren. Vaelus fired again, punching more holes in the onrushing tide of Chaos. Behind him, the engines of Salvus's Thunderhawk had taken on the unmistakable tone of an airborne craft. His precious cargo was on its way home.

'Avenging Sons!' Korpus cried, his blood singing as he raced to battle. His last duty performed, he was an Apothecary no longer. Now he was just a warrior. A warrior with a Vengeful Heart.



KORPUS HIT THE CHAOS LINE like a weapon wielded by the Emperor himself. Black-armoured abominations flew left and right, skull-helms shattered by close-quarters bolter fire and blows from his Power Fist at full discharge. To either side of him, Tallis, Orris and one-armed Marus carved sections from their enemy with their chainswords, blew away limbs and punctured breastplates with their bolters.

Marus was the first to fall. His bolter empty, he reached across his body to unhook his chainsword. In the few seconds it took for him to grasp the hilt of his weapon, a Khorne-chanting Chaos Marine tore his head from his shoulders with a chattering, sigil-etched chain-axe. Tallis returned the favour, severing the Chaos Marine's axe-arm with a well-placed sword-strike to its elbow, followed by a bolter volley in the face, but there was nothing to be done for Marus and no time to mourn. Tallis and Orris surged on, keeping pace with Korpus, cutting a gory swathe through the servants of the Outer Dark. The black tide closed behind them, still making for the Thunderhawks, some already wasting bolts in an attempt to bring down the accelerating Thunderhawk, already several hundred feet above them.

Korpus and the others ignored them. Vaelus, still at the weapons board of Hawk Four, scythed them down with the las-cannon. Korpus had issued fresh orders as he ran, leading the Scouts into battle. They knew their target: the Dreadnought.

It already loomed above them, marching with implacable, earth-shaking strides to meet them. In one steel-clawed arm it held

a mace the size of a man; its other upper limb had been replaced by a double-linked las-cannon which was aimed far above the heads of the Marines. Korpus didn't need to turn to see its target. The half-dead, totally insane Chaos Marine encased within its inches-thick hide was drawing a bead on the fleeing Thunderhawk gunship.

Kicking aside the last, headless victim of his bolter, Korpus holstered the weapon and made an adjustment to his Power Fist. Already buzzing with energy, the glove began to emit a continuous high-pitched squeal. The plates of Korpus's battle suit rang with sympathetic vibrations. His teeth began to chatter insanely as the energy from the overloading glove hummed through his bones. His head felt as if it might explode within his helmet.

A single Chaos Marine stood between Korpus and the Dreadnought. Rapid fire from its bolter sprayed diagonally across the Apothecary's armour, knocking him back several steps, but the ceramite plates held. Korpus stepped up to his assailant and punched him squarely in the chest.

But for the lingering smell of ozone and the fragments of fused flesh and armour that lay scattered at Korpus's feet, the Chaos Marine might never have existed. For a heartbeat, the Power Fist was silent. Korpus feared that its power cell was already empty, that his plan would be undone by his unwise, pre-emptive strike. Then the glove resumed its ear-splitting squeal. Korpus smiled, then sprinted for the Dreadnought's nearest leg.



A VOLLEY OF LAS-FIRE arced up from the Dreadnought's cannon. Flashing across the intervening space, it missed the nose of the still-rising Thunderhawk by what felt like inches. The craft's superstructure groaned and creaked as it was buffeted by the shock-waves of super-heated air. As he jockeyed the flight controls, Salvus muttered a short prayer to the Machine God.

'Whatever you plan to do to that cursed thing, Apothecary,' Salvus added, sparing a thought for the comrades he was leaving behind, 'do it now!'

THE DREADNOUGHT PAUSED in its march to adjust its aim. Korpus knew that it would not miss a second time. Shucking his Power Fist, whose squeal had passed beyond the range of human hearing, he jammed it between the web of struts and power conduits that ran behind the unholy war machine's knee joint. Blue fire played across the surface of the glove. Tendrils of the barely-tamed lightning began to arc across the surface of the Dreadnought's lower extremities.

For a moment, Korpus stared, entranced by the sight. Orris's cry of pain as his armour was breached by bolter fire from a dozen attackers jerked him back to the deadly present. Spinning on his heel, Korpus made to rejoin the fray.

Orris lay where he had been defending the Apothecary's back, his chest a smoking ruin. One more son of the Emperor to be avenged. Tallis was nowhere to be seen; had he also fallen? Korpus noticed also that Hawk Four's las-cannon had fallen silent. Was he the last Avenging Son alive on Antillis IV? If so the hordes of Chaos would remember his name.

'Avenging Son!' he bellowed, launching himself at the nearest of the surrounding Chaos-spawn, chainsword raised, bolter spitting death.

He never reached his target. The Power Fist detonated, vaporising the lower half of the Dreadnought. The corrupt war machine tumbled backwards, las-cannon firing a wild, ineffectual volley into the sky. The shock wave from the blast slapped Korpus in the back, scattering him and the Chaos Marines around him like so many model soldiers, swept off a table at the end of a game. Ears ringing, Korpus momentarily lost consciousness.

Blinking back to awareness, Korpus found himself on his back, staring up at the sky. Above him arched a single vapour trail – the Thunderhawk, powering through the stratosphere, safe from attack.

His killing rage, his Vengeful Heart, had subsided. He felt a strange sense of peace, one borne of exhaustion and the knowledge that he had done his duty. He tried to move, to get to his feet, but his legs wouldn't respond. Something had been broken by the Power Fist's detonation. Was he dying? He thought briefly of Sergeant Pereus.

'Man is born alone,' he whispered. A grey mist edged his vision. He knew he should complete the Rite of Extreme Unction, but felt too tired to continue. The grey mist enveloped him.

'Apothecary!' It was the voice he had heard earlier, while marching alone across Antillis IV. He had thought it to be an echo, an old transmission bounced off the upper atmosphere. Now, undisguised by static, it sounded close to his ear. It was not the voice of any of the Second Company. It had a soft, unpleasant tone.

He tried to turn his head, open his eyes, see to whom the voice belonged. But his head wouldn't turn and his eyes wouldn't open.

The grey mist turned to black.



APOTHECARY?' Surprised that he was able to do so, Korpus opened his eyes. Rather than the sky above Antillis IV, or the ruins of the airfield, he found himself staring at the walls of what might have been a laboratory in the Avenging Sons' Apothecarion – might have been, were it not for the nightmarish collection of specimens that hung upon the walls and sat in clear jars of preserving fluid. The malformed limbs, misshapen heads and torsos bore no relation to humanity, but to the breeding grounds of the Warp. In the shadows cast by the dull reddish light which illuminated the room, Korpus thought he saw movement. Narrowing his eyes, he saw that he was right. A collection of what resembled nothing so much as clawed, fanged foetuses thrashed against the glass of one large vessel.

'Apothecary!' The tone of the voice at his ear shifted from enquiry to satisfaction. Korpus tried to turn his head, move any of his limbs, but found that he could not. He was all but naked, stripped of his armour and robe, secured by metallic straps to a table of some kind, tilted at an angle close to the vertical. 'Of course,' the voice purred. 'You would like to see your saviour.'

A figure stepped into Korpus's field of view. Covered from throat to floor in a robe made from a slick, vulcanised fabric, he held in one hand a pair of gloves of the

same material. The hand which held the gloves appeared normal, but the other was twisted, possessed of too many knuckle joints.

Noticing the direction of Korpus's gaze, the figure held up the hand – his left – and flexed the fingers before Korpus's eyes. The digits moved with an unnatural, insectile grace, each of the extra joints allowing the fingers a range of movement that Korpus, dedicated to the preservation of the human form, found appalling.

'One of my first refinements,' the vile figure said, proudly. 'I find it allows for a more subtle surgical approach.'

For the first time, Korpus focused on the stranger's face. With the bald pate, the sallow skin and sunken cheeks, Korpus might have been looking at his old instructor, Apothecary Lorus. But the skin was stretched too tightly over this man's skull, as if it had been removed, the fat scraped away from under the skin and then reapplied too closely. The black eyes shone out from under heavy brows. A warped intelligence, perhaps genius, danced in those eyes.

'It has been some time since I sought to preserve a human life,' the stranger continued. 'I am pleased that I have not forgotten how.'

Korpus tried to speak, but his throat was clogged as if from an unnaturally long sleep. He coughed, tried again, his voice cracking. 'Who...?'

'Of course!' the stranger laughed. 'How impolite of me! It has also been some time since I received a guest schooled in simple social manners.'

'I am Fabrikus. Apothecary Fabrikus.'

The words froze Korpus's heart. Fabrikus's name was a dark legend in the Apothecarion of every Space Marine Chapter. A brilliant man, he served with the First Company of the World Eaters, gaining distinction as a warrior and as a surgeon, before following Primarch Angron into the service of the Ruinous Powers. In the centuries since the Great Heresy, his name had become a byword for perverse experimentation. Some said he was even behind many of the mutations undergone by Chaos Marines: the fusion of flesh to armour of the World Eaters, the hellish combination of near-dead warrior and implacable war machine that was a Chaos Dreadnought.

'I see you have heard of me,' Fabrikus smiled at the look of horror on Korpus's face. 'And I imagine you are wondering what my interest might be in a fallen Space Marine on a fallen world. The answer is simple: the gene-seed.'

Korpus's mind spun back in time, to his last communication with Commander Selleus. He heard again his words, obscured by the waves of static: 'New incursion... Cognis dead...'

'Your Librarian was a truly powerful psyker,' Fabrikus purred, as if reading his mind. 'Fortunately my... allies... were more than his equal. It seemed, however, that before his death he gleaned enough of our purpose in joining the assault on the planet you knew as Antillis IV to warn his commander. Their suicide destroyed all of our advance party. Had it not been for our interception of your leader's last transmission, we would have believed our cause was lost.'

'All viable glands... out of enemy hands...' Selleus's words rang in Korpus's memory.

'You see, my masters require more troops, more than can be provided by the harvest of the seed from those already serving their holy purpose. I have spent centuries experimenting with the other races available to me, but the seed refuses to take, or else it produces mutations that are...unhelpful,' Fabrikus' words carried a hint of frustration. As if hearing them, the fanged things thrashed against the confining glass walls of their preservative-filled prison.

'Though I would never say this to my masters, I believe the Warp causes problems with the seed from our own warriors, affects their potency. I have, therefore, decided to return to take up my earlier role and harvest glands from a more pure source, unaffected by the energies of my masters' home.' To hear Fabrikus speak, he and Korpus might have been fellow professionals, discussing the results of a failed experiment and the new measures that might be taken to ensure future success.

'I believe that the seed from those who continue to stubbornly serve the False Emperor might provide me with the material I need to create new types of warrior, loyal to the Dark Lords of the Warp, unstoppable in battle.'

'You... you knew I had the glands,' Korpus whispered.

Fabrikus nodded. 'We tracked you across half the world,' he said, smiling. 'And we found you!'

Now it was Korpus's turn to smile. 'But I have them no longer! By the time I blew your Dreadnought to oblivion, they were already off-world! You have failed, Fabrikus! Failed!'

'By the time I found you, all the glands you carried so heroically were indeed off-world,' Fabrikus conceded, apparently unaffected by Korpus's mocking words. 'All of the glands – bar two.'

The import of his words crashed in on Korpus. Nestling at the base of his throat and deep within his naked chest, were the glands he had carried since the day of their implantation, the day that he truly became a Space Marine, a day of such pride, such honour.

'No!' he gasped, wide-eyed with horror. He had been so intent on vengeance, of dying as an Avenging Son should. Believing his duty as an Apothecary was complete, he had delivered the future of his breed, perhaps of the entire human race, into the hands of this monster, this twisted reflection of all he held dear.

'Oh, yes,' Fabrikus purred. Before Korpus's horrified gaze, the skin around his left eye began to bulge, the eye itself change shape, elongating in an impossible manner, as if supplementary lenses were pushing forward from within the confines of his skull, improving his focus for the surgery to come.

He reached towards an instrument gurney set beside the table upon which Korpus now struggled vainly. The multi-jointed fingers of his left hand selected a scalpel. Longer and thinner than the others, it was designed for only one purpose: excision.

'I prefer to operate without analgesia,' he said, stepping up to the table. 'I think the absence of pain always dulls the experience, don't you?'

Apothecary Fabrikus set to work. His subject's screaming served only to excite the thrashing abominations within their tank into a frenzy, snapping and clawing at their fellows. Korpus cried out, not for himself, but for his honour, lost in the heat of battle. Lost forever. ●

ANTENOR, A BLOOD ANGEL VETERAN SERGEANT HAS BEEN HURLED ABOVE THE PLANET OBZIDION BY A CATAclySMIC EXPLOSION CAUSED BY A RUNAWAY SUN PLATFORM COLLIDING WITH THE TEMPLE OF N'GREEL B'HAAN JUST AS THE GOD MATERIALISES. HIS ONLY HOPE IS TELEPORT RESCUE BY A CALLIDUS ASSASSIN.

"SORRY ANTENOR, BUT I CAN STILL SAVE TROILLUS FROM THE RUINS OF THE TEMPLE!"

OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Sixteen

HIS BULK SHIELDS ME, BUT I HAVE ONLY A FEW MORE SECONDS TO LIVE!

NOW, I MUST DO IT!

WHAT?

SISTER, YOUR TIMING IS PERFECT! WHERE IS ANTENOR?



"I HAVE LOST HIM,
THE INTERFERENCE
IS TOO GREAT..."

WE WITNESS
THE END OF
OBZIDION...

WE HAVE
FAILED!

THE PLANET IS
TOO DAMAGED TO
HEAL AND CLAIMS
ITS OWN.

THE RIFT CAUSED
BY THE FIRST
BOMBARDMENT
RIPS OBZIDION
APART...

ALL THOSE
MILLIONS IN THE
CATACOMBS
ARE LOST!

AT LEAST B'HAAN
WILL NOT FEAST
ON THEIR SOULS!

BUT WAIT... A
SIGNAL... COULD
IT BE ANTENOR?

"... YET HOW MUCH LONGER CAN HE SURVIVE THE INFERNO BELOW?"

THE CHASM MAW OPENS TO CONSUME THE FILTH OF OBZIDIUM.

I WILL NOT SHARE THEIR DOOM!

NOOOO... FATE IS AGAINST ME!

THIS IS THE END!

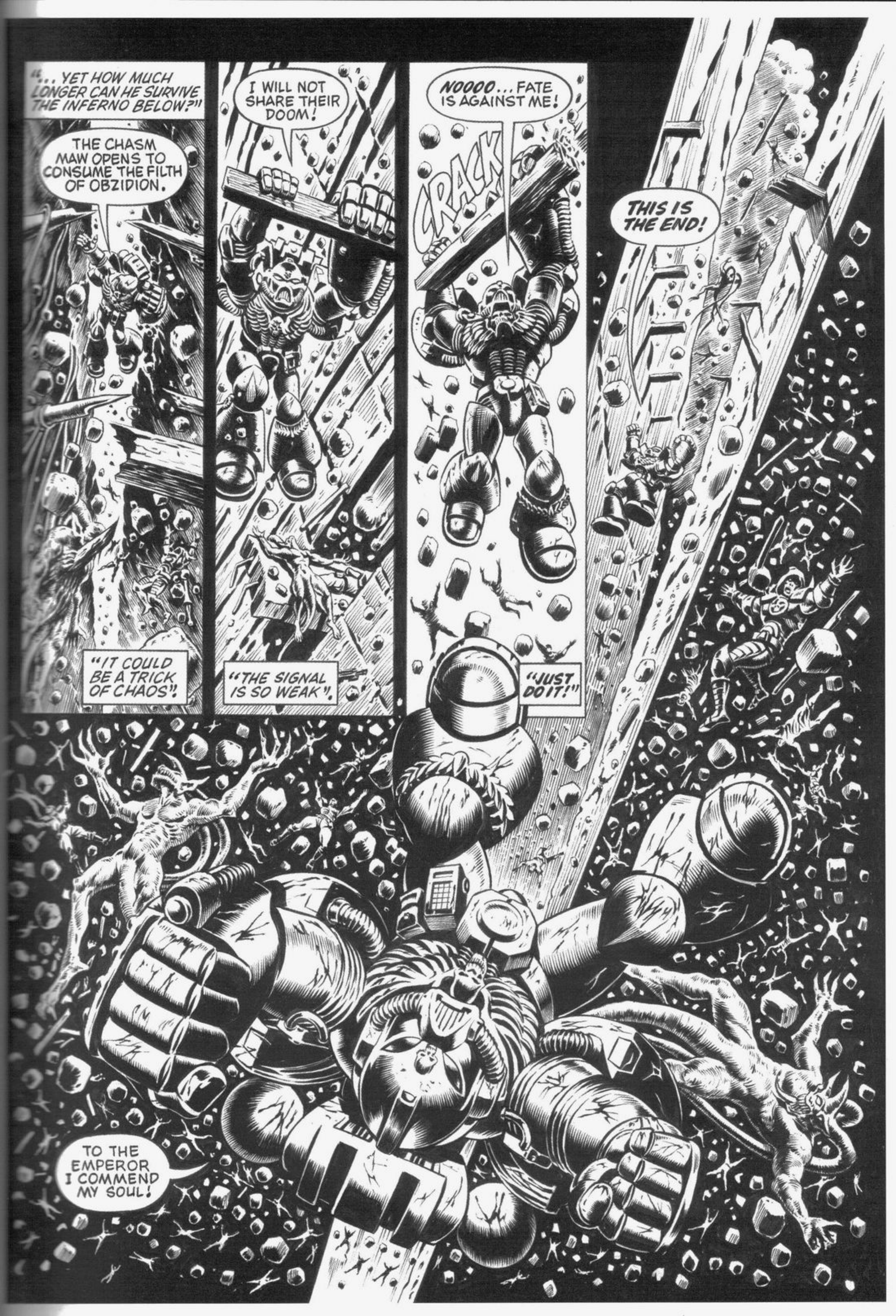
"IT COULD BE A TRICK OF CHAOS!"

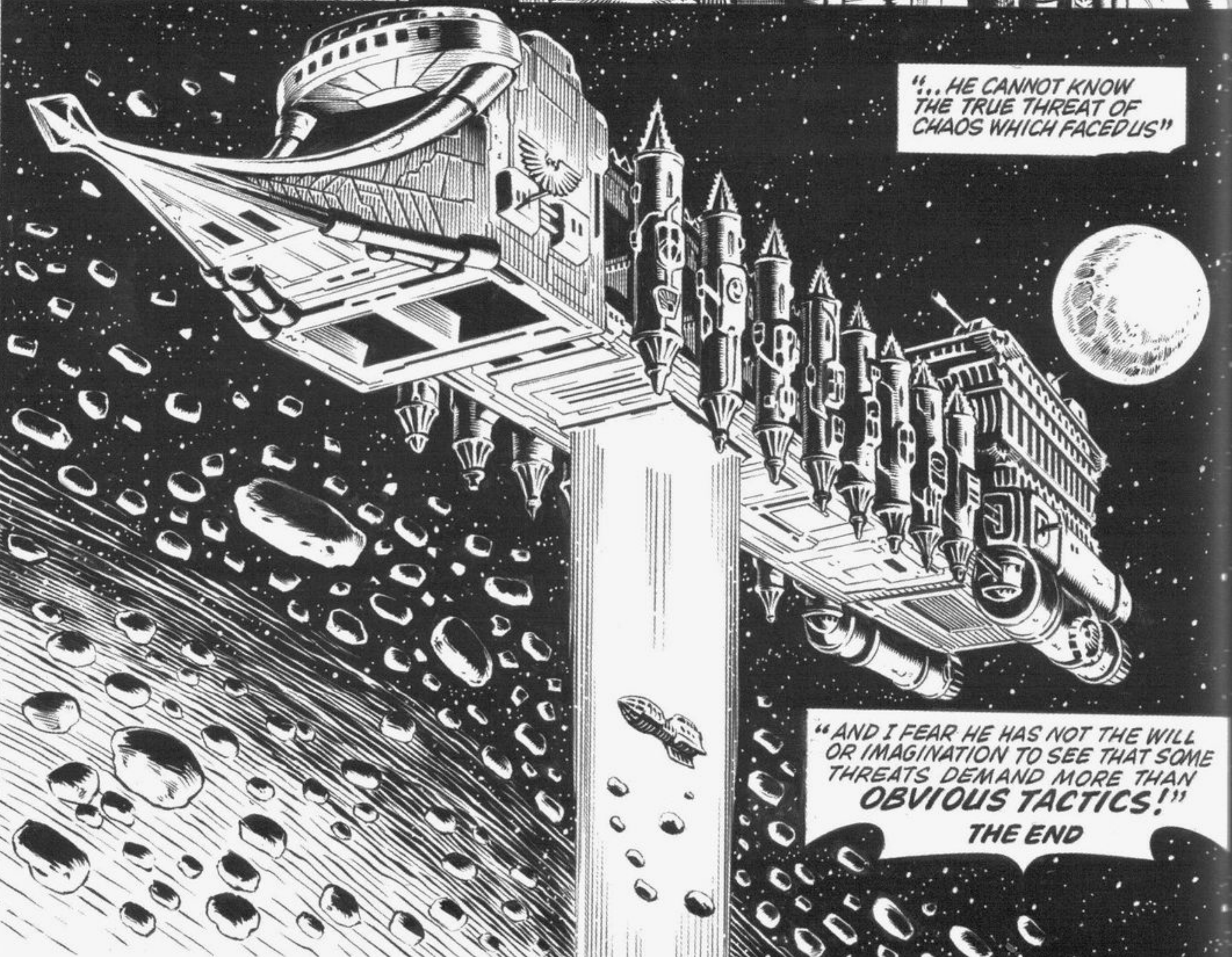
"THE SIGNAL IS SO WEAK".

"JUST DO IT!"

CRACK

TO THE EMPEROR I COMMEND MY SOUL!





PROFESSOR Gerhardt Kleinhoffer, Lector in Magical Arts at the University of Nuln, looked down at the pentagram and the triple-ringed circle his younger companion had just drawn in chalk upon the floor.

‘Lothar,’ he said nervously, ‘surely this is blasphemy?’

Across the chamber, Lothar von Diehl ran bony fingers through his dark beard and paused to give the appearance of reflective thought before replying.

‘Herr Professor, you were the one who taught me that it is those who seek to hold back the advancement of knowledge who are blasphemous. You and I are men of science. It is our duty to perform this experiment.’

Kleinhoffer adjusted his pince-nez glasses and glanced at the leather-bound volume that rested on the lectern standing beside the two men.

‘De Courcy’s book is an important piece of scholarship, no doubt of that. But Lothar, don’t you think that it wanders too close to the forbidden lore of Chaos... towards the end?’ He shivered. ‘His final chapter is almost the ranting of a madman. Drunk on the wine of stars, false heavens, false hells, all of that stuff.’

Von Diehl glanced at his tutor, fighting down his mounting impatience. It had been Kleinhoffer himself who, years ago, had discovered *The Book of Changes*, written in Classical Old Worlde by the long-dead Bretonnian poet and mystic, Giles de Courcy. Kleinhoffer had spent the rest of his life translating it, worrying away at the cryptic symbolism until he was sure he had decoded it correctly. By then, he had become the foremost authority on magic at the ancient University of Nuln – and Lothar von Diehl, the single person in whom Kleinhoffer had confided, was his most gifted student.

‘True,’ von Diehl said, striving to keep his voice calm and reasonable, ‘but that should not deter us. As you yourself have said, all magic is based, ultimately, on Chaos. The only way to tell if de Courcy was right is to perform this ultimate ritual. And if it works, then it will lead us to the most profound understanding of universe.’



THE ULTIMATE

RITUAL

by

Neil Jones

&

William King

'My boy, I am as committed to the project as you are but... but...'
Kleinhoffer's voice trailed off.

Von Diehl stared at the old man's pale, sweating face. 'Herr Professor, I thought you understood when I suggested this experiment. The ritual is not something that I can attempt without your help.'

The old man nodded shakily. 'Of course, of course. It's just that... Lothar, my boy, are you sure it's *safe*?'

'Absolutely, Herr Professor.'

Kleinhoffer swallowed and once more glanced around the secret chamber in the basement of von Diehl's residence. Finally, he came to a decision.

'Very well, Lothar,' he said with reluctance. 'I know how important this is to you.'

Von Diehl allowed himself a brief sigh of satisfaction. 'Thank you, Herr Professor. Now, please, if you will take up your position.'

Von Diehl lifted the rune-encrusted wand which he had carved from a beastman's thighbone and advanced towards the lectern. He lit the braziers and threw handfuls of cloying incense to fizz on them. As the echoes died away he began the chant.

'Amak te aresci Tzeentch! Venii loci aresci Tzeentch! Amak te aresci Tzeentch!'

Von Diehl's chant rumbled on, seeming to gain resonance from the echoes and the constant repetition. The fumes from the braziers billowed around him and seemed to expand his perception. It was almost as if he could see the edges of the world starting to ripple at the corners of his vision.

He continued to chant, visualising in his mind the form of the Tzeentchian Steed he was attempting to summon, filling in the details, compelling it to take more concrete form. While doing so, he moved the tip of the wand through a complex pattern, pointing it at every angle of the pentacle in turn.

The effects of the narcotic incense, the constant chanting and visualisation distorted his sense of the flow of time. The ritual seemed to be going on for hours. He felt himself to be a vessel for

transcendent energies. Finally, somewhere off at the edge of infinity, he sensed a hungry presence. He reached out with the power of his soul and touched it. The being sensed him and began to move closer, painfully slowly, seeking sustenance.

As if far off in the distance, he heard Kleinhoffer moan. The air was filled with the burnt tin smell of ozone. Von Diehl opened his eyes. The room was lit by a strange blue glow from the lines of the pentacle and circle. Sparks flickered in the air and his hair was standing on end.

'Venii aresci Tzeentch! Venii! Venii!' he yelled and fell silent.

There was a rush of air, a sense of presence and suddenly it was there before them: the Steed of Tzeentch.

It took the form of a flat disc of sleek, silvery-blue flesh. The edges of the disc were rimmed with small, sardonic eyes. It flickered about within the pentagram as if testing the boundaries of its cage. After a while it seemed to realise it was trapped and ceased to struggle, simply hovering in mid-air.

'What do you wish from me, mortals?' asked a voice within von Diehl's head.

'We seek knowledge,' von Diehl answered certainly. 'We wish to travel across the Sea of Souls and converse with He Who Knows All Secrets.'

'Others have requested this in the past. To their regret. The minds of mortals are fragile things.'

'Nonetheless, we wish to go. Once we are safely returned here you will be released from this compulsion.'

'Very well. Advance, human, and meet your fate!'

With no hint of trepidation von Diehl walked down the corridor of chalk which connected the circle to the pentagram. He stepped over the side of the magical sigil and put one foot on the creature of light. Surprisingly it supported his weight. He felt a strange tingling pass through his foot and up his body.

'I will take both of you,' the voice said in von Diehl's head. *'Both of you or neither.'*

Von Diehl turned. Kleinhoffer had not moved. His lined face seemed to float

amid the darkness, lit from below by the glow from the pentagram.

'Herr Professor,' von Diehl called urgently, 'you must join me. Quickly now!'

Kleinhoffer licked his lips. A sheen of sweat had formed on his forehead. 'Lothar, I can't! I just can't!'

Anger pulsed through von Diehl. 'The book is explicit. We must be two – or else the Steed can refuse to transport us, can break the binding spell. You knew. You agreed!'

'I know, but – Lothar, forgive me, I'm old. Old and afraid.'

'But Gerhard, you've worked for this all your life. Ultimate knowledge. Transcendence.'

The old scholar shuddered.

'Join me,' von Diehl commanded. 'Join me, join me, join me!'

Kleinhoffer sighed, and then, almost as if hypnotised, he shuffled down the chalk corridor and took his place aboard the Steed beside von Diehl.

Two, the daemon said. Two in search of knowledge. Now we go!

There was a screaming rush of air, and the sound of a thunderclap.



VON DIEHL LOOKED down and found they were far above the city of Nuln itself. He could see the University quarter with its aged, many-spired buildings. His gaze wandered to the docks and the dark curve of the River Reik as it snaked northwards. Although he was hundreds of feet above the tallest tower of the Temple of Verena he felt no fear. Standing on the back of the Chaos-steed was like standing on solid earth.

The Daemon-thing began to accelerate but there was no sense of motion or of the wind tearing at his clothing. He stood at a point of absolute calm. Only when he looked down at the Great Forest rushing past did von Diehl get a sense of their terrific speed.

In a few moments he saw an open glade where beastmen danced around a great

bonfire and a two-headed black-armoured figure looked on. He saw strange monsters moving in the depths where no man had ever penetrated. Their steed hurtled like a meteor until the ground was simply a blur. They gained height until they were above the clouds. It was like skimming over a misty white sea whose surface was illuminated by the twin moons.

Excitement flooded through von Diehl's veins as they flashed along. He felt like a god. It seemed to him that no one could ever have travelled so fast before. The energy of the Daemon passed up through his legs, filling him with a tremendous sense of well-being. Perhaps it was the steed's power which protected them from the cold air, he thought. Through a break in the clouds he saw that they were passing over a bleak steppeland only occasionally blotched by the lights of cities. Surely they could not have reached Kislev already?

Soon after, he felt no such doubts. They were moving across snow-covered tundra towards a bleak, stony land. The sky to the north was illuminated by a dancing aurora of dark-coloured lights. They had entered the Chaos Wastes.

Below he could see great troupes of warriors fighting. Champions in the blood-red armour of Khorne fought with dancing lascivious Daemonettes. Enormous slobbering monsters pursued fleeing beastmen. The land itself writhed as if tortured. Lakes of blood washed across great deserts of ash. Castles carved from mountains erupted from forests of flesh-trees. Islands broke off from the earth and floated into the sky.

It was a horrific and awesome sight. Beside him, he heard Kleinhoffer call out in fear, but he cared not.

They flew straight towards the aurora, picking up speed as they went. They passed over a flight of dragons that seemed frozen in place so slowly did they move compared to the Steed of Tzeentch.

Now von Diehl could make out a vast dark hole in the sky. It was as if the firmament were a painting and someone had torn a square from the canvas to reveal another picture beneath. He peered into a realm of flowing colours

and pulsing lights, an area where the natural laws which governed the physical universe no longer applied. Von Diehl pointed the bone wand towards the Chaos Gate and the steed surged forward in response. They crossed the threshold into a new and darker universe.

‘Lothar,’ Kleinhoffer murmured, his voice full of awe. ‘I believe that this must be—’

‘Yes,’ von Diehl replied distantly, ‘we have entered the Sea of Souls.’

For a moment their steed paused on the threshold between the two worlds and von Diehl stared into what was the final and strangest realm of Chaos.

Off in the farthest distance, further away than the stars, he saw the things that he decided must be the Powers. They were vast eddies and whirlpools of luminescence, bigger than galaxies. Their twists and flows illuminated the Sea of Souls. Was that mighty red and black agglomeration Khorne? wondered von Diehl. He noted how its spiral arms of bloody light seemed to tangle with long pastel streamers of lilac and green and mauve. Could that be Slaanesh? It was like watching two nests of vipers fighting.

Then he made out a third pulsating mass that was clearly greater than the many lesser ones in this vast realm. It writhed and pulsed obscenely, and something about this one made the hair on the nape of his neck bristle. From his instinctive reaction it knew that this one had to be Nurgle.

Yet another form came into view. It was the most complex and convoluted of the gigantic structures of energy and he knew it to be Tzeentch, his ultimate goal.

These were clearly the Powers, the Four Great Ones and the many lesser. And this was the true realm of Chaos.

Beside him, Kleinhoffer clutched at his sleeve. ‘Lothar, what is happening?’

Von Diehl understood the old man’s confusion. His own brain was reeling under this sudden influx of sensation. ‘Our human minds are adjusting to the Sea of Souls,’ he said happily.

He realised that they were not seeing the whole of this twisted realm. Their human minds were not capable of it.

Instead, they were simply imposing their own ideas of scale and form and function on a place where these did not apply. It was a staggering thought.

Much closer than the Great Powers were tiny points of light that von Diehl somehow knew were the souls of mortals. They glittered like stars. Cutting a swathe through them, like a shark through a shoal of fish, von Diehl could see a long streamlined creature, all sucker mouths and questing antennae, a soul-shark. It devoured the small panicky shapes as they swam towards their distant, unseen destinations.

Again he felt Kleinhoffer’s hand on his sleeve. ‘Lothar,’ the old man cried in a frightened voice. ‘Lothar, look down!’

Beneath their feet, their Daemon-steed had changed shape, so it now resembled the soul-shark. It, too, feasted upon the glittering souls as it swept ever on.

Von Diehl was not surprised. The beast was dangerous. He did not doubt that it would devour the essence of both of them if it could. Very softly, he chanted the words of a spell he had prepared. A thin line of radiance streamed from his bone wand, a pink-hued light that was indescribably richer here in the Sea of Souls. As the light touched the steed it opened up a delicate channel between their steed and himself.

As the creature fed it passed the merest trickle of that energy to him through the channel his spell had created. The energy flowed through von Diehl’s veins like liquid ecstasy. He breathed deeply and sucked the pure essence of magic into his lungs. It was a totally exhilarating experience.

‘It cannot harm us,’ he reminded the terrified old man. ‘Not as long as it is compelled by the binding spell.’

But Kleinhoffer only stared down with a look of utmost horror on his face, as if the steed were already dining upon his lower limbs.

The Daemon-thing surged forward once more. Von Diehl felt that whatever awesome velocity it had achieved in the mortal world was nothing compared to what it was doing here. It seemed as if the creature was capable of traversing the universe.

As they raced along they passed other great rents in the fabric of the sea. Sometimes what von Diehl saw through them beggared his imagination. Worlds laid waste by war, hells presided over by false gods and heavens of endless serenity.

Suddenly he sensed a change of mood in their steed. He looked back and understood why. They were being pursued. Other creatures chased them, creatures not controlled by any binding spell. More soul-sharks. They could devour their flesh and their souls.

Kleinhoffer followed his gaze and cried out in alarm.

The soul-sharks came closer, their great jaws gaping. They were fast, faster than their own steed, not hindered as it was by two human riders.

Von Diehl raised the wand of bone and prodded the Daemon with it. 'Save us,' he commanded the thing. 'Save us or you will never be free!'

A wordless cry of mingled rage and despair echoed inside von Diehl's skull. The Daemon-steed suddenly veered and plunged through one of the gates.

Reality rippled like the surface of a pond. They hurtled over a desolate plain on which great pyramidal cities sat. As von Diehl watched, great beams of force flickered between the pyramids. Some were absorbed by huge, thrumming black screens of energy, but one city was reduced to slag in an instant. Their mount swept into an evasive pattern to dodge the webs of force-beams. Several came too close for comfort but none hit them. Von Diehl watched one of their pursuers get caught in the cross-fire and wink out of existence. The others came on.

Their supernatural steed raced through another gate above the greatest of pyramids. There was a sense of space stretching. Now they were above a hell of sulphur pits and dancing flames. Toad-like Daemons pitch-forked the souls of some strange amphibian race into the volcanic fires. Von Diehl wondered whether this was real or the dream of one of the Old Powers. Perhaps it was a real hell of a real race brought into being by the imaginations of an alien people stirring the Realm of Chaos.

Their Steed dived into one volcanic pit. Beside him, Kleinhoffer screamed uncontrollably, surely convinced that the creature had betrayed them and that they were going to die. He covered his eyes with his hands.

Von Diehl felt only exhilaration.

Once more though they hurtled through a gate. Fewer of the pursuing Daemons followed.

They were in the blackness of space, hurtling through a void darker than night over a small world that had been reshaped into a city. They raced by bubble domes from which creatures much like Elves stared out. The workmanship of the buildings within the domes was as refined and delicate as spider-webs. They dipped and swooped into a great corridor holding another gate. Once more they vanished.

Von Diehl had no idea how long the chase lasted. They passed through vaults where rebellious daemons plotted against the Powers; frozen hells where immobile souls begged for freedom; leafy Arcadias where golden people made love and dreadful things watched from the bushes.

They swooped across worlds where great war-machines, shaped like men eighty feet high, fought with weapons that could level cities. They blazed along corridors in doomed hulks that had drifted for a thousand years in the spaces between worlds and where sleeping monsters waited in icy coffins for new prey. They zoomed across the surface of suns where creatures of plasma drifted in strange mating dances.

But eventually their twists and turns through the labyrinth of space-time threw off the last of their pursuers, and they returned once more to the Sea of Souls.



THEIR STEED RACED along the threads of the vast disturbance in the sea that was Tzeentch, picking their way along great arteries of energy

until they came to the very heart of it all. They swept past great winged creatures which gave von Diehl knowing smiles. He felt as if the Daemons were looking into his very soul and probing his innermost secrets. He did not care. He was exalted. He knew they were nearing the end of the quest and that soon they would both have what they had come for. Kleinhoffer was exhausted, his face bloodless. But the exhilaration of the chase and sharing their Daemon-steed's energy had only buoyed von Diehl up.

They approached a mighty sphere of pulsing light. Colours danced and shifted on its surface like oil glistening on the surface of water.

They drifted closer and slid into, then through the wall. Within was a huge being, larger than a castle. In form it was similar to a man although its head was horned. It possessed great beauty but the shifting lights of the sphere reflected dazzlingly off its no-coloured skin and the brilliance caused von Diehl to look away.

Welcome, mortals, to the House of the Lord of Change!

The voice spoke within the travellers' heads. It was calm, polite and reasonable, but there was an under-current of malicious amusement.

Von Diehl peered back at the great figure, looking up into glittering gem-like eyes. He thought that those eyes could take in the entire universe at a glance. Before it he felt as insignificant as a flea.

'Thank you, lord,' he said gravely. He nudged Gerhardt Kleinhoffer with his free hand. The old man mumbled a greeting of his own.

Why have you come here? boomed the voice. Why have you disturbed my servants who have other more important tasks to perform?

'We have come,' von Diehl said, 'seeking knowledge, lord.' He gestured at his companion.

'Yes,' Kleinhoffer stammered after a moment, a dazed expression on his face. 'That's it. That's why we're here. Knowledge.'

Knowledge. For what purpose do you seek it? To change yourself or your world?

Von Diehl turned and waited for his

companion to speak. The old man's gaze went back and forth between his student and the gigantic being. His mouth opened and closed several times but no words emerged. Still von Diehl said nothing.

'Neither,' Kleinhoffer blurted at last.

Lothar von Diehl smiled and turned back to face the Power. 'Both,' he said.

Gerhardt Kleinhoffer blinked, and then finally appeared to realise what von Diehl had said. He jerked around to face von Diehl. His face was ashen. 'Lothar, what are you saying? Have you forgotten the ritual?'

So then, mortal, the gigantic being boomed, addressing only Gerhardt Kleinhoffer now. Why then do you crave knowledge?

'I- I-' Kleinhoffer's eyes bulged. He put his hands to his head, clearly wilting under the gaze of this enormous entity. 'Lothar, for pity's sake, help me!'

Von Diehl raised both hands. 'Lord, he seeks knowledge - for its own sake.'

That is unfortunate. The creature smiled malevolently. Still, what does he wish to know?

Again Gerhardt Kleinhoffer's mouth opened and shut and again no words emerged.

Smiling, von Diehl said, 'Everything.'

Suitably ambitious. So shall it be.

Lord Tzeentch reached out and touched Kleinhoffer. The old man went rigid.

At the same moment, von Diehl again murmured the words of the spell which had linked him to the steed as it had fed. Leaning forward, he pressed the tip of the bone wand to Kleinhoffer's temple. Knowledge was flowing into his companion, filling him. And Lothar von Diehl intended to witness it - from a safe distance.

A vast ocean of information cascaded into Kleinhoffer's brain. Von Diehl glimpsed the birth of the universe and the Sea of Souls, the creation of stars and planets, the rise of races, the structure of molecules. He saw the universe burst into a great flood of change and understood the nature of the power that drove it relentlessly onwards. He saw that the universe was never still but constantly altering itself. He knew instantly that he could never know everything because

there were always new things coming into being.

Kleinoffer's face contorted as the flow of knowledge continued inexorably. His mind was drowning in a flood of information, far too much knowledge to cope with. It had stretched his mind to the breaking point and beyond. As if from a great distance, von Diehl sensed the man's personality erode then finally collapse as he descended into screaming madness. And still the torrent of knowledge did not stop.

Slowly, still clutching feebly at von Diehl's tunic, the old man sank down to von Diehl's feet.

Enough, thought von Diehl, sensing his own mind begin to strain. Chanting the words of his spell, he drew back the wand, breaking the contact with the old man.

Lothar von Diehl.

He looked out at the vast unknowable being that was Tzeentch.

Your companion's wish has been granted.

'Yes, lord,' von Diehl replied, glancing down at the huddled figure at his feet. He smiled. 'And I offer you thanks – on his behalf.'

A rumbling sound issued from the creature before him that perhaps was laughter on a cosmic scale.

And you, Lothar von Diehl. You have also been granted the gift of knowledge – knowledge that you may take back with you into the mundane world you came from.

'Accept my gratitude for that gift also, lord.'

Of course, for that gift, too, there is a price.

'I understand, lord, and one I am quite prepared to pay.'

You will be bound to my service for eternity.

Von Diehl bowed his head. Tzeentch the Great Mutator. Tzeentch the Changer of the Ways. 'Willingly,' he said.

Tzeentch, his chosen Power of Chaos.

You will serve me in your world. You know what it is that I wish, that I thrive upon.

'I know.'

ONCE MORE THERE was a flickering in the air and the smell of ozone. The steed reappeared in the tiny cellar chamber, a glowing disc of light within the pentagram. This time it bore two riders, one standing, the other slumped at his feet.

Lothar von Diehl stepped down from the Daemon-steed. The secret chamber was just as he had left it. The Book of Changes still rested on the lectern, open to the page upon which Giles de Courcy had inscribed the secret of the ultimate ritual, the secret von Diehl had felt it wise to share only partially with his tutor.

In his mind, the memory of the ocean of knowledge still glittered. He had glimpsed at least some of what was to be. Change was coming to the Old World. Elves returning from their long exile in the west, eager for trade, disrupting the nations of men. The Empire itself about to totter as, tempted by that Elvish trade, its wealthiest province sought to secede from its rule. A fitting moment for magic to take its place upon the battlefield, to become a weapon of war for the first time in recorded human history.

Von Diehl laughed aloud. The battle-magic spells were in his mind now, knowledge Lord Tzeentch had granted to him. He would have a considerable part to play in the events that were to come.

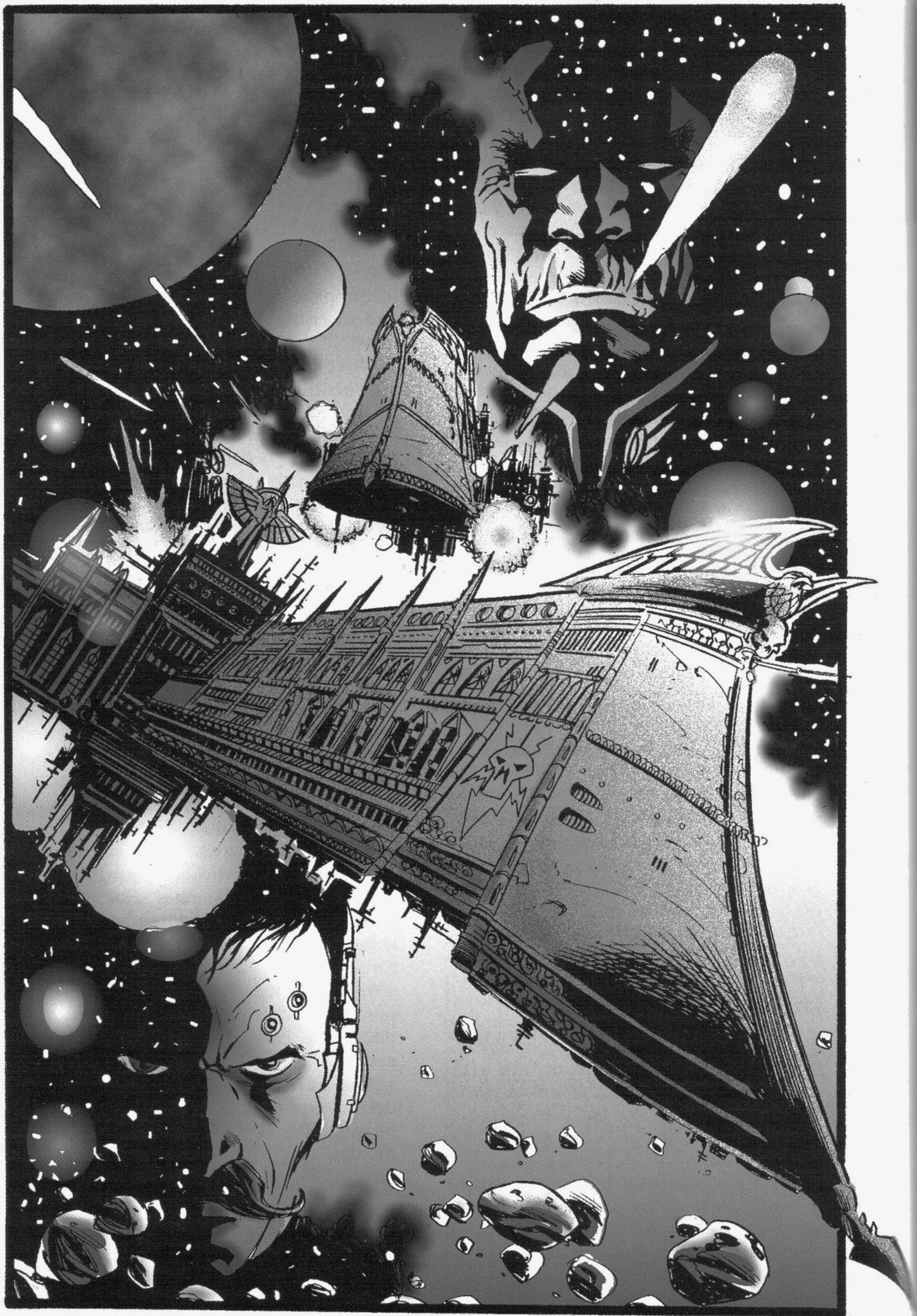
Change.

This was what Tzeentch, the Great Mutator desired – what any true servant of Tzeentch craved more than life itself. And outside this chamber was an entire world, crying out for change. Eager to begin his master's work, von Diehl strode for the door.

Behind him, sprawled across the pentagram, Gerhardt Kleinoffer raised a thin hand. Pure madness gleamed in his eyes.

'Seas of lost souls,' he mumbled as the door closed on his departing pupil. 'False heavens, false hells. All is change and the dreams of dark gods.' ●





BAPTISM OF FIRE

BY GORDON RENNIE

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

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

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

Semper turned to face the young officer, studying his second-in-command's refined features. *Hito Ulant*, he thought. *A Necromundan aristocrat's name. Strange to find one of his sort serving aboard a Navy ship. And aristocrats are always ambitious. This one may bear watching*, Semper noted, wryly remembering that assassination had once been a viable means of advancement for ambitious young Navy officers during the dark days of the Age of Apostasy.

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

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

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

Semper turned to look out the command deck viewing bay, seeing his own reflection staring back at him. It was an image almost identical to any one of the dozens of ancestral portraits displayed in the family manor house back home on Cypra Mundi – the same severe and hawk-like features of the elite Cypra Mundian officer class, the same proudly-worn battle scars (the one which marked his face the result of a boarding action assault he once led as a young junior lieutenant on an Ork ship), the same resplendent uniform of a senior officer of the Imperial Navy of the Segmentum Obscurus – but it was to the gleaming captain's stars on the collar of that uniform that his eye was most drawn. There had been Sempers in the Imperial Navy since before the Age of Apostasy. The very latest in the line wondered if, unlike most of his illustrious ancestors, he would ever live long enough to return to Cypra Mundi to see the portrait of himself now hanging there along with all those others. He shook his head, focusing his vision on the starfield beyond, his experienced eyes picking out the tiny moving dot of light that was the *Indefatigable*. As he watched, the light flared brighter as the Sword-class frigate fired up its engines and veered away from the *Macharius* to rejoin the picket line of scout ships and defence monitor vessels now patrolling the fringes of the Stranivar system.

He cursed, asking himself yet again where such precautions had been when the Chaos ships had swept out of Warpspace and caught most of Battlesquadron Stranivar helpless in space-dock. The attack had been devastating – two-thirds of the squadron crippled or destroyed – but it was only in the aftermath that the full extent of the disaster became clear, as reports of similar sudden attacks come flooding in from all over the Gothic Sector. This was no isolated

event. The Eye of Terror had opened to unleash an invasion armada, and all of Battlefleet Gothic was now at war. It was essential that the Imperial Navy counter-attacked in force as soon as possible, if they were not to lose the whole of the Gothic Sector, and Lord Admiral Ravensburg had ordered every spaceworthy ship under his command to assemble for immediate deployment. As the only ship in the squadron to survive unscathed, the *Macharius* was the first to put out of spacedock, on orders to rendezvous with a squadron of Cobra destroyers in the uninhabited Dolorosa system before travelling on to join the battlegroup currently gathering in the Bhein Morr system. It would be there also that the ship would take on its new complement of Fury and Starhawk deep-space attack craft to replace its aged Interceptors and Marauders. Slipping its moorings, the *Macharius* had seemed like a thief in the night as it glided past the drifting hulks of those ships destroyed in the attack and leaving behind the crippled remnants of the rest of the squadron.

His was a troubled ship, Semper knew. There was anger and a desire for revenge, but there was something else too: fear. Fear of what was waiting for them out there in the Warp, and of their new captain's ability to deal with it. This was Semper's first command, and the onset of war on a scale not seen since the Horus Heresy ten thousand years earlier would scarcely ease the traditional problems encountered by all new captains struggling to master an unfamiliar crew and vessel. This war would be a baptism of fire which would see them either forged together in the heat of battle – or swept away in the firestorm of conflict now raging through the Gothic Sector.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The monitor galleries stretched almost up to the bridge's vaulted ceiling some twenty metres above, but Semper found the figure he was looking for on one of the lower

levels, standing on a walkway which spanned the breadth of the central nave and from where the command deck activity could be closely watched. The light from the nearby screens picked out the gleaming silver skulls on the figure's black uniform, and Semper noticed that few of the other crew members approached that area of the bridge. Having already asserted his authority over the Magos Technicus, it was time to deal with a far more intractable challenge to any captain's command.

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



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

Morrau had immediately despatched boarding parties; chittering Daemon-things specially bred for this purpose and usually kept confined in the *Contagion's* festering hold. Ship-bound by his mutations, Morrau

envied the creatures their sport as they searched through the wreck for pockets of life, and he had eagerly listened to the screams and pleading human voices as each group of survivors was found and slaughtered in turn. Morrau would not deny his crew their spoils of victory, but he gave strict orders that some of the humans be taken alive and brought back for interrogation. The commander smiled at that thought, knowing that those taken alive and delivered into the eager hands of the ship's surgeon-interrogator would soon wish that they had been butchered aboard their vessel with the rest of their comrades.

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

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

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

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

'The name of this ship?'

'*The Lord Solar Mac... Macharius*, captain,' Torque replied, his Chaos-altered

speech patterns stumbling over the name of one of the Imperium's greatest heroes.

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

'And the record of the prisoners' interrogation?'

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



LEOTEN SEMPER COULD feel the sharp beginnings of a headache, always a sure sign of an approaching Warp-jump as the vessel's ancient Warp-field generators powered up and sent out unpredictable psychic vibrations into the minds of its crew. All around him, preparations were underway for the jump into the Immaterium. In their engine section sanctum the tech-priests would be striking runes upon the workings of the ship's mighty Warp drives, while Semper could smell the sickly-sweet scent of burning incense that told him the Adeptus Ministorum confessors were at their work, moving through the ship and bestowing protective blessings upon the crew in anticipation of their journey into the Daemon-haunted realm of the Immaterium. From their position on the gantry platform overlooking the metal cavern of the forward starboard gun bay, Semper and Commissar Kyogen could see work teams of hundreds

of sweating ratings hauling the massive gun batteries back along the tracks to their standby positions or turning the huge gear wheels to close thick blast shields over the bay's viewing ports.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kyogen looked Semper straight in the eye as he answered. 'Your service record shows you to be a highly capable officer, and it is difficult to argue with Admiral Haasen's decision to promote you to your first full captaincy.' There was a scream from the

deck below, abruptly cut off, as one of the gun crew stumbled and was instantly crushed beneath the weapon carriage's huge rolling wheels. If Kyogen noticed, he gave no indication. Deaths amongst the lower ranks were so common on an Imperial warship that they passed unnoticed. 'You acquitted yourself well in the attack on Stranivar, but in view of your basic inexperience and the threat now facing the Gothic Sector fleet, there must remain some doubts about your ability to captain a vessel of this size during the present crisis.'

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

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

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

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

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

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



ON THE GUN-DECK below, Maxim Borusa glanced up at the two officers on the walkway above before a vicious kick from

Gogol brought him sharply back to the business at hand.

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

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



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

'Quinque...'

'Quattuorum...'

'Tres...'

'Due...'

'Unus...'

'Engagus!'

At the magos's command, the truly stellar levels of energy contained within the ship's plasma reactors were released into the Warp engines, ripping a hole in the fabric of space and pushing the cruiser forward into the

Immaterium. The Geller Field – the teardrop-shaped bubble of reality which protected the ship and its crew from the full fury of the maelstrom – crackled with power as waves of Warp energy lashed against it, rocking the *Macharius* from prow to stern. Inside the ship, the new recruits cringed in terror, their screams and cries almost drowning out the traditional litanies of protection chanted by their more experienced crewmates. Confessors, junior commissars and shotgun-armed petty officers walked every deck, encouraging the crew to keep good faith in the divine protection of the Emperor, but meanwhile keeping a close vigil for any sign of daemonic intrusion into the minds and bodies of their shipmates.



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

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

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

ship's main frontal armament: six missile tube tunnels, each firing a thirty metre-long plasma torpedo.

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

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

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



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

'Your pardon, Flag-Captain, but—'

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

standard Fleet frequencies.'

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

Emperor's throne, where are they?



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

'Maintain course and increase speed by Mark Point Two. Stay in his Warp trail. Bring the prow batteries and dorsal lances up to half power. Void shields to remain down until I give the order.'

Morrau watched the target blip grow brighter on the screen in front of him. It was an ambush tactic he had long ago honed to perfection – using the energy trail of a craft recently emerged from the Warp to mask his own approach from directly behind it. By the time the enemy even knew he was there, the *Contagion* would already be in position to deliver a crippling strike to its power systems. The defenceless Imperium ship would then be boarded and seized, and Morrau looked forward to the prospect of more prisoners, particularly if the *Macharius*' captain was amongst them. The Chaos captain had already given Surgeon-Interrogator Torque careful and highly specific instructions on what he wanted done, should the captain of the *Macharius* be foolish enough to allow himself to be taken alive.



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

'Identify!'

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

'Engage void shields!' Morrau bellowed, already knowing that the *Macharius's* manoeuvre would bring its port batteries into firing alignment before enough energy could be diverted to the *Contagion's* void shield generators. At this range, the damage would not be critical, but the Chaos cruiser

sustained several hull-deep hits as it passed through the sights of the *Macharius's* weapons batteries, before its void shields finally powered up sufficiently to absorb the energy blasts and macro-shell impacts.

The moment of danger over, Hendrik Morrau sat back in his chair, grudgingly impressed by his enemy's unexpected resourcefulness. Perhaps this engagement might be even more enjoyable than he anticipated.



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

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

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

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

'On screen,' Semper ordered, warily noting the way Kyogen unsnapped the fastenings on his holstered bolt pistol. 'Have faith, comrade commissar,' the captain remarked, smiling grimly. 'Perhaps he merely wishes to discuss the terms of his surrender.'

Even over the interference of the ship-to-ship link, the inhuman nature of the voice that suddenly filled the interior of the *Macharius's* command deck was all too apparent. It was a voice thick with decay, each word bubbling obscenely up from a body bloated full of its own poisons. 'My congratulations, captain,' gloated the voice. 'It has been some time – several centuries, in fact – since I last saw an Immerman Manoeuvre implemented so well.'

'This is Flag-Captain Leoten Semper of his Divine Majesty's Ship the *Lord Solar*

Macharius,' Semper said. 'Identify yourself!'

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

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

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

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

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



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

'Without our payload of attack craft our offensive capabilities are limited. Even if we already had our new Starhawk squadrons aboard, we would still be outgunned against a Hades-class ship. I am satisfied that your decision to disengage from contact with a

more powerful enemy vessel is the best course of action under the circumstances.'

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

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

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

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



'ENEMY CONTACT detected. *Vandire's* oath, he's found us again! All decks, brace for impact!'

It had been three days since their initial encounter with the *Contagion* in the Dolorosa system. Three days of emergency Warp jumps and constant skirmishing with the Chaos vessel, the *Macharius* unable to shake off its pursuer. Unable to match its opponent's firepower, the Imperial vessel had retreated into the Warp where, as Flag-Lieutenant Ulanti had predicted, it had still been impossible to evade the Daemon-piloted Chaos ship amongst the storms and tides of the Immaterium. Time and again the Chaos ship had emerged, weapons firing, from one of the swirling energy storms, forcing the *Macharius* to crash-jump back out of the Warp to emerge in the empty

interstellar void between star systems. Morrau's ship would either follow them, not allowing them sufficient time to properly recharge their Warp drives, or would wait in ambush for them to re-enter the Warp again, the Contagion holding position on the ever-changing Warp currents in a show of skill that no human navigator could ever match.

It had become a battle of energy levels and crew stamina instead of firepower and ordinance attacks, Leoten Semper grimly realised – and one which his ship was losing, its power systems and human crew overloaded to the point of exhaustion by the effort of so many emergency jumps.

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

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

At Semper's command, the *Macharius* locked on with its remaining starboard weapons, both ships firing simultaneous broadsides as they came abeam of each

other. Combat in Warp space was up-close and deadly, the range of scanners and weapon targeters so limited here that engagements took place at distances measured in hundreds rather than tens of thousands of kilometres. The area between the two ships was saturated with energy as enough firepower to level a city was unleashed across it. Void shield strikes registered as bright blossoms on surveyor screens, and both ships shuddered under the impact of on-target hits.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Thank you, magos. That is all I need to

know.' said the commissar, stepping aside and lowering his pistol. 'You may proceed, flag-captain.'

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

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



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

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

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



HE'S NOT *taking the bait. We must raise the stakes higher!* 'Lower Geller Field level to 40%,' he ordered, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. There was a deep groan from all around them – the ship's hull starting to buckle inwards as the forces of the Warp pressed in all around the weakened Geller Field – and many of the

Adeptus Mechanicus adepts on the bridge cried out in fear, believing it to be the angry voice of the Machine God spirit inhabiting the *Macharius*. Magos Castaboras led his adepts in fevered prayer, knowing that the Warp field could not maintain its integrity for more than one or two minutes at such a low energy level.

Semper stared at the image of the *Contagion* on the flickering green screen, willing it to move closer. Hendrik Morrau was a tenacious and determined opponent, yes, but Semper remembered reading of another side to this Battlefleet Gothic legend. Morrau was a cruel and capricious martinet; a captain who once watched as over three thousand mutineers were fed out an open airlock or thrown into the furnace chambers of the plasma reactors. This was a man who had enjoyed the suffering of others, even before he had joined the Emperor's enemies. How could he resist the lure of the spectacle now being offered to him?

'Enemy vessel closing!'

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

'Torpedoes, flag-captain?'

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



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

These could not be lost. Not at this range.

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

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



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

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

'Orders, flag-captain?'

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



MAXIM BORUSA picked his way carefully through the still-burning metal and human wreckage of the gun-bay. The bay adjacent to this one had taken a direct hit in the battle, and the blast doors hadn't sealed

fast enough to stop the wave of fire that came roaring along the gun deck. Maxim had acted fast, pulling two of his fellow press-gang conscripts down on top of him to act as human shields as wave of fire rolled over them.

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

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

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

Gogol never knew what hit him.

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



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

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

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

DEFF SKWADRON IN:

38 SECONDS OVER BIG SCRAP ALLEY

SCRIPT: GORDON RENNIE

ART: PAUL STAPLES JEACOCK

LETTERS: DAVID PUGH

THE TELLING OF THE TALE OF THE RAID ON BIG SCRAP ALLEY, AS LED BY KOMMANDA UZGOB (AND AS RECOUNTED BY HIS SMARTBOY NAVIGATOR, GIMZOD).

"WE CAME OUT OF THE SUN - WELL, ONE OF 'EM ANYWAY - AT DAWN, COMIN' IN LOW AND FAST AND REAL SNEAKY LIKE ON THE TARGET.

BOM!

"SEE, CAUSE OF HIS GANGS OF GROT SPIES, WARBOSS BADTHUG KNEW THAT WARBOSS GRIMLUG WAS PLANNIN' A SNEAK ATTACK.

"NATURALLY, 'GAINST SUCH LOW AND DOWNRIGHT GITTISH BEHAVIOUR, GOOD OLD BADTHUG DID WHAT ANY SMART-THINKIN' MORK-FEARIN' BOSSBOY WOULD DO --

"E DECIDED TO GET 'IS RETALIATION IN FIRST AND SENT US BOYZ IN TO BLOW UP GRIMLUG'S GARGANT YARDS AT BIG SCRAP ALLEY."

"NOW OLD GRIMLUG WASN'T NO SMARTBOY, BUT HE KNEW 'NUFF TO MAKE SURE THAT ATTACKIN' BIG SCRAP WASN'T GONNA BE NO EASY SQUIGFEAST.

"BUT ME, I WAS A SMARTBOY AND I'D DRAWED OUT A SAFE ROUTE THROUGH ALL THEM TWISTY CANYONS AND SHOOTER BATTERIES.

"THERE GOES RAZNUTS, BOSS".

"E MAKE IT OUT IN ONE PIECE?"

"FRAID SO, BOSS.

"WELL, SAFE AS COULD BE EXPECTED, ANYHOWS --"

"LUCKY GIT. DON'T SPOSE THERE'S TIME TO TURN BACK AND TEST OUT THE WING KANNONS ON 'IM?"

"FRAID NOT, BOSS. TARGET AREA DEAD AHEAD!"

"WE'D PRACTISED THIS TRICK FOR WEEKS - WELL, MAYBE ONCE OR TWICE - UNTIL I WAS SURE THE BOYZ HAD IT DOWN PERFECT -

"OR NEAR 'NUFF, ANYHOW."

WHO'S THAT FLASH
GIT STILL FLYIN' WITHOUT
'IS WINGS, GIMZOD?


GORTHANK,
BOSS, WHO ELSE
WOULD IT BE?

'heh'
GOOD OL'
KILLBOY.
LOOK AT 'IM
GOOOO!

CAN'T SHOOT
OR FLY WORTH
A ZOG, BUT
'E'S THE BEST
FLYBOY I GOT!

UZGOB TO DEFF SKWADRON.
TIME FOR SOME WAAAGH
FROM ABOVE, BOYZ --

HIT 'EM HARD,
HIT 'EM LOW AND
GIVE 'EM PLENTY
OF DAKKA!



'heh' THAT WAS WORTH GETTIN'
UP EARLY FOR. OKAY, LADZ, TAKE
'EM DOWN FOR ANOWER -- FRAGGIN'
MORK! WHAT WAS THAT...!?

SCRAP!

ZZZZZZ!

WE'LL LEAVE THESE
RUNTY LITTLE 'UNS FOR WHAT'S
LEFT OF THE REST OF THE
BOYZ AND TAKE THE **BOSS**
'GANT OURSELVES.

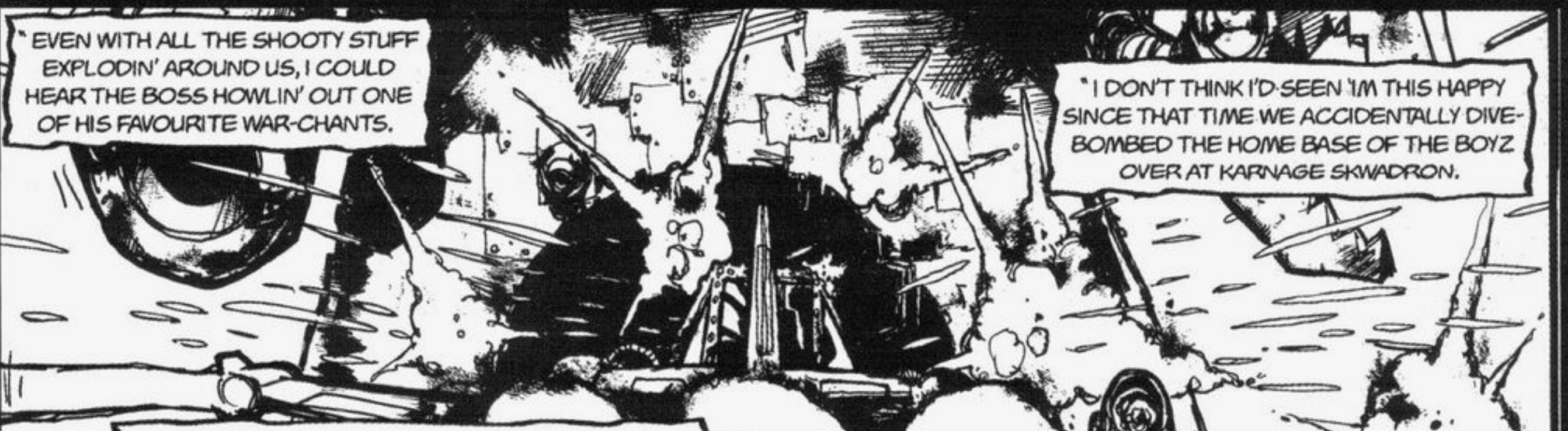
WE'RE
GONNA
RUN
THE ALLEY,
BOSS?

THAT
WE ARE,
GIMZOD!

"MEGA CANNON
SHELL! THAT'S
GRIMLUG'S OWN
BOSSBOY
GARGANT
SHOOTIN'
AT US, BOSS!"

EVEN IF WE GET FRAGGED
TO ZOG, THE STORYBOYZ WILL
BE TELLING TALES FOREVER
ABOUT THE TIME THE LADZ
FROM DEFF SKWADRON
RAN BIG SCRAP ALLEY!

'SIDES, IT'LL BE A GOOD
CHANCE TO SEE IF THAT
PROTOTYPE 'GANTBUSTER
BOMB WE LUGGED ALL
THIS WAY REALLY DOES
THE GUBBINS...



"EVEN WITH ALL THE SHOOTY STUFF EXPLODIN' AROUND US, I COULD HEAR THE BOSS HOWLIN' OUT ONE OF HIS FAVOURITE WAR-CHANTS."

"I DON'T THINK I'D SEEN 'IM THIS HAPPY SINCE THAT TIME WE ACCIDENTALLY DIVE-BOMBED THE HOME BASE OF THE BOYZ OVER AT KARNAGE SKWADRON."

"ME, I WAS BUSY WORKIN' OUT SPEED, TRAJECTORY, ANGLE OF APPROACH AND ALL THAT OTHER BRAIN-HURTIN' STUFF THAT BOSSBOYZ LIKE UZGOB NEVER 'AD TO BOTHER THEMSELVES WITH--"

"IN THE END, I JUST CLOSED ME EYES, PRAYED TO MORK AND PULLED THE LEVER."

"GANTBUSTER AWAY, BOSS!"



"NOW, EVERYONE KNEW BADTHUG'S MEKBOYZ WAS A FEW SHELLS SHORT OF A FULL SHOOTA CLIP, BUT I 'AD TO GIVE 'EM THEIR DUES--"



"WHEN IT CAME TO BUILDIN' GUBBINS THAT GOES BANG, THEY SEEMED TO KNOW WHAT THEY WAS DOIN'."

JOB'S A GOOD 'UN, BOSS. TARGET DESTROYED!

'ERE, BOSS - LOOK! AIN'T THAT RAZNUTS DOWN THERE? I THINK E'S SIGNALLING TO US!

THAT 'E IS, GIMZOD. USELESS GIT!

'Heh heh' 'OW MUCH AMMO DID YOU SAY WE 'AD LEFT IN THE WING KANNONS...?

THE END

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

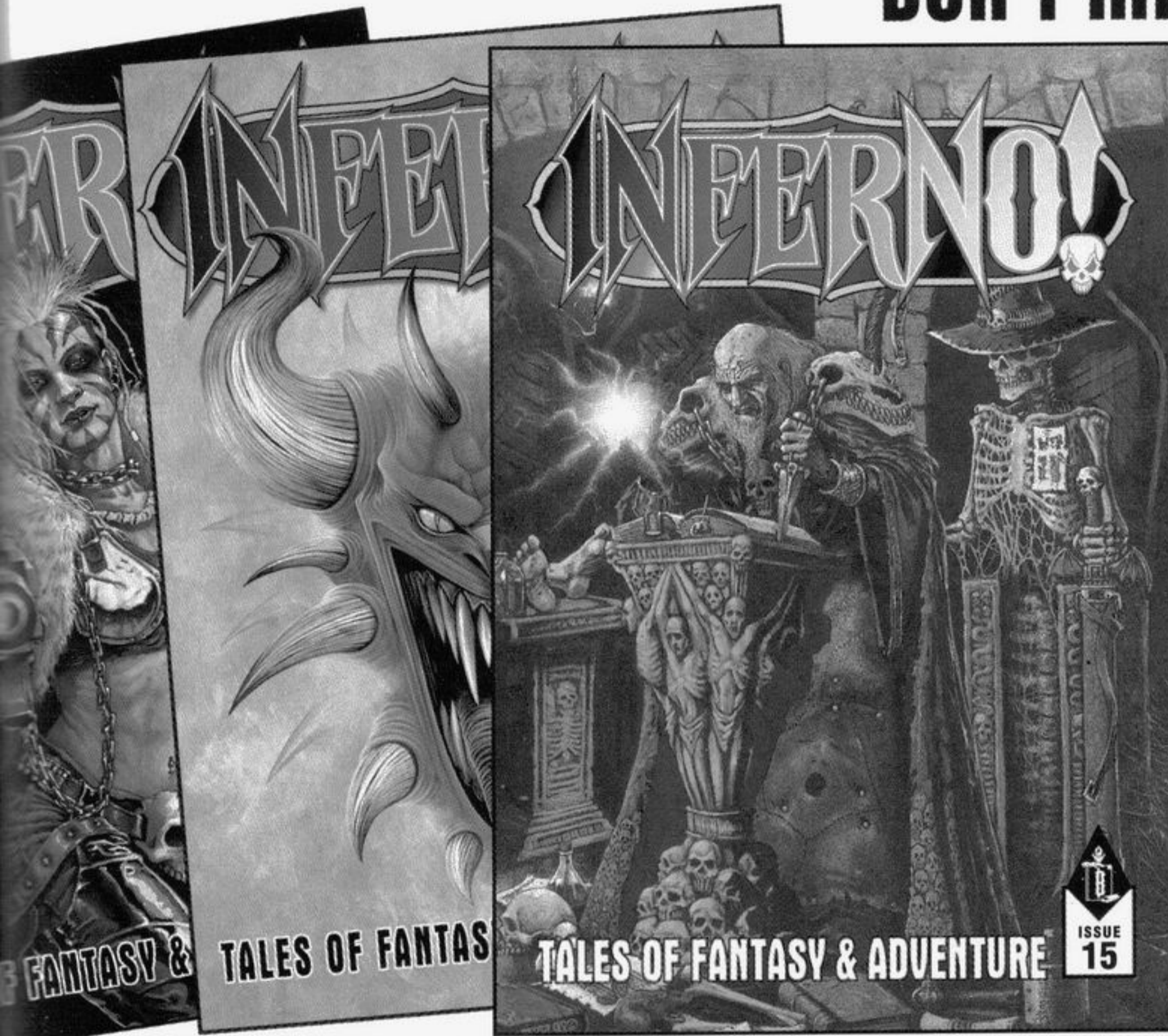
BOOM!



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SNARES & DELUSIONS

BY MATTHEW FARRER

THE TOWN surrounds the obscenity, and the obscenity is eating the town. It has no name, this elegant pattern of buildings spread out beneath the wind on the dusty green hills. It is an oddity on this world, this town of dove-grey walls which seem to flow up out of the ground, their smooth lines and gentle angles forcing the eye to look in vain for any tool-marks or signs of shaping. Simplicity of shape and complexity of detail, like outcrops growing unworked from the soil, but natural rock could never grow in the delicate mandala of streets and paths, flowing across the hillside in a design so subtle that the eye can take it in for hours before it begins to understand how much the pattern delights.

Even the violence with which the obscenity has torn its way into the heart of the town has not eclipsed the art of its building, not yet. Despite the craters blasted into the buildings, the smoke in the streets, the dead scattered upon the ground, despite whatever invisible thing it is that is withering the grass and trees and silencing the song of the insects – the place still holds scraps of its beauty, for now.

The town has never needed a name. The Exodites speak of it as they ride their fierce dragons to and fro over the steppes and prairies, but they bring its uniqueness to mind without the coining of a label to go on a sign. For all that they are a warrior race of beast-riding and beast-hunting tribes, their language is the silky melody of all Eldar and they are able to speak of the one little town on their world, its historians and artisans

and seers, without its ever needing a name.

The obscenity is different. It drives its way out of the ground like the head of a murderous giant buried too shallow, buttresses bulging out from its walls like tendons pulled rigid on a neck as the head is thrown back to scream. Black iron gates gape and steel spines give an idiot glint from the parapets and niches. They are not there to defend. The thing leers and swaggers against the landscape in its power, sure that it is above attack. The spikes are there for cruelty, for execution and display. The obscenity is being built not for subjugating but for the pleasure of the subjugation.

It is growing. As small bands of figures grow from dots across the prairie, advance and join up and form into a procession through streets choked with the stink of death, they can see where buildings are being torn down and the earth beneath them ripped up to furnish more rock for the obscenity. There are rough patches, cavities along the side where new chambers and wings will be added, and the procession – the armoured figures gripping the chains, and the slim cloaked shapes staggering beneath the weight of them – passes the crowds of slaves, toiling in the dust, crying and groaning as the obscenity creeps outward and grows ever taller beneath their hands.

The town does not have a name, but the obscenity does. There is no Eldar word for this red-black spear of rock, eating the town from within like a cancer, but it bears a name in the hacking, cawing language of the once-

human creatures who drive the slaves ever harder to build it. It is called the Cathedral of the Fifth Blessing, and in its sick, buried heart its master is at prayers. The air in the Deepest Chapel was torn this way and that by the screams of the thralls, but Chaplain De Haan paid them no mind. The patterns on the warp-carved obelisk seemed to writhe, the lines and angles impossible by any sane geometry, and De Haan's eyes and brain shuddered as he tried to follow them. There had been times when he had relished or loathed the sensation in turn, even times when he had screamed when he looked at the pillar just as their mortal serfs were screaming now. That had been in the early days, when the Word Bearers had taken up the banner of Horus himself and Lorgar had still been crafting the great laws of faith in the Pentadict. Those laws had commanded contemplation of the work of Chaos as part of the Ritual of Turning, and now De Haan was calm as he felt the carvings send ripples through his sanity. *A lesson in self-disgust and abasement*, he had learned in his noviciate. *Realise that your mind is but a breath of mist in the face of the gale that is Chaos Undivided.* It was a useful lesson.

The time for contemplation was at an end, and he rose. The screams from the chapel floor, beneath the gallery where the Word Bearers themselves sat, went on. Although their mortal thralls were being herded out perhaps a dozen remained, those whose minds had not withstood the gaze at the column, who had begun to convulse on the floor and mutilate themselves. The slave-masters began to drag them toward the torturing pens; they would be adequate as sacrifices later. De Haan walked forward to the pulpit, turned to face the ranks of wine-dark armour and horned helms to begin his first sermon on this new world.

The cycle of worship laid down in the Pentadict decreed that sermon and prayers for that hour were to be about *bate*. There was a certain expectation in the air that plucked a little chord of pleasure at the base of the Chaplain's

spine. Of all Lorgar's virtues hatred was the one De Haan prized most, the sea in which his soul swam, the light with which he saw the world. Some of his most beautiful blasphemies had been done in the name of hate. He knew he was revered as a scholar in the field.

The Sacristans moved to the dais below him and reached into the brocaded satchels they carried. They began to array objects on the dais: a banner of purple-and-gold silk tattered and scorched by gunfire in places; a slender Eldar helmet and gauntlet in the same colours were set atop it. At the other end of the dais, a delicate crystal mask and a slender sword seemingly made from feather-light, smoky glass, a single pale gem set into the pommel. And beside them, carefully set exactly between the rest, a fist-sized stone, smooth and hard, that shone like a Phoenix egg even in the dimness of the Chapel. De Haan looked at them, heard the words in his mind: *All will be at an end.*

An exquisite shudder went through his body. He unclenched his right hand from the pulpit rail, gripped his crozius in his left and opened his mouth to preach. And something happened to the Revered Chaplain De Haan that had never happened to him in his millennia as a Word Bearer: he found himself mute.



HIGH CLOUDS HAD turned the sky dull and cool as De Haan stood on the jutting rampart outside his war room. His eyes narrowed behind his faceplate as if he were trying to stare through the curve of the planet itself.

'This race has been allowed to *go on*, Meer. It has been allowed to spread itself. They drink their wine on their craftworlds and stand under the sky on worlds like this. They crept out across the galaxy like the glint of mildew.'

Meer, chief among his lieutenants,

knew better than to respond. He stood at the door which led out onto the rampart, hands folded respectfully before him. He had heard De Haan talk about the Eldar many times.

‘Not even the whining Emperor’s puppies are like this. Nor the mangy Orks. Tyranids, feh, beneath our dignity. But these things, these are an *affront*. To be assailed by them – ah! It gnaws at my pride.’ His hand squeezed the haft of his crozius and the weapon’s daemon-head hissed and cursed and spat its displeasure. Only during the rituals would the thing keep quiet. De Haan twisted it around and held it at a more dignified angle. It was a symbol of his office, a chaplaincy in the only Traitor Legion to remember and revere the importance of Chaplains. It did not do to show it disrespect.

De Haan wondered why he had not been able to speak like this in the chapel, why he had stood grasping for words, trying to force thoughts to his lips. A sermon on hate, no less, and yet he had stumbled over the words, choked on maddening distractions, images, snatches of voices, the swirl of memories he was normally able to leave behind at prayer.

‘The eyes of our Dark Master see far, Meer, and who am I to set myself up beside them?’ Meer remained silent, but De Haan was speaking half to himself. ‘The words fled me. My throat was dry and empty. I am wondering, Meer, was it an omen? Do they prey on my mind because they are so near? There was a... a *feel* to this world, something in the words of our prisoners and spies. Perhaps the Great Conspirator planned from the start that it would end here. To end here, Meer, to bring the sacrament into full flower! Imagine that.’

‘I know you believe your enemy is here, revered,’ came Meer’s careful voice from behind him, ‘but my counsel, and Traika’s, is still that the time was not ripe for you to join us here.’

De Haan’s fist tightened around the crozius again, and the head – now a fanged mouth and eye-stalk; it was

always different each time he looked at it – yapped and spat again.

‘The fortifications are still not complete, revered, and only threescore of our own brethren are in this citadel. The battle tanks and Dreadnoughts are still being readied, and the dissonance in this world’s aura has made auguries hard. We still cannot scry far beyond what our own eyes could see. Our bridgehead is not secure, revered. Do you believe this is worth the risk? The reports we had of Eldar here seem only to mean these savages, or perhaps mere pirates. We cannot be sure Varantha has passed near this system. We have seen no Craftworld Eldar here, or–’

De Haan spun around. ‘And *I* told *you*, Meer, that it is not suspicions and rumours which have drawn us here this time. I could feel the slippery Eldar filth singing to me when I first heard the reports. I saw their faces dancing in the clouds when I looked from the bridge of our ship. What could this psychic ‘dissonance’ you complain of be, but the cowards trying to fog our minds and cover their tracks?’

‘These Eldar savages keep a thing called a World-Spirit, revered. They–’

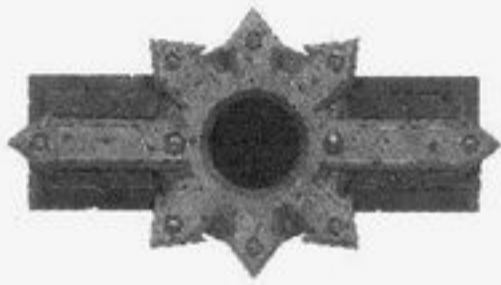
‘I *know* what is a World-Spirit – and what is the stink of a Farseer!’ De Haan’s voice did not quite go all the way to a roar, but it did not have to. There was a jitter in his vision and a rustle far off in his hearing as the systems in his armour, long since come to a Chaotic life of their own, tried to recoil from his anger. ‘You were not given the sacrament, Meer! You do not carry the Fifth Blessing! I do, and I command you with it. I tell you that Varantha is here, and this is our doorway to it! I have known it in my soul since we broke from the Warp!’

Meer bowed, accepting the rebuke, and De Haan slowly, deliberately turned his back. High in his vision he could see a point of light, visible even while the sun was up: their orbiting battle-barge. A space hulk full of Chaos Marines and their slaves and thralls, cultists doped with Frenzon with their explosive suicide collars clamped to their necks, mutants

and beastfolk from the Eye of Terror and traitors of every stripe. Seeing it focused his thoughts again.

'We shall bring down our brethren soon enough. The engines and Dreadnoughts too. For now, fetch Nessun. And have the latest prisoner train brought before me.'

There was a scrape of ceramite on stone as Meer bowed again and turned to go, and by the time Meer had reached the bottom of the stairs De Haan was sinking back into reverie.



HE WAS THINKING of the cramped, fetid tunnels within the walls of the giant canal-cities of Sahch-V, where he and Meer and Alaema and barely a half-dozen Word Bearer squads had lived like rats in burrows for nearly two years, as around them their covert missionaries moved out through the cities and along the canals which brought life to the basalt plains, beginning their quiet preaching, their mission schools with their drugs and brainwashing rooms. He remembered the small chamber beneath the thermic pumps outside Vana City where the three of them had listened to their agents' reports and pored over their ever-spreading web of traitors and catspaws.

He remembered cries in the tunnels, in particular the voice of Belg, the scrawny cleft-chinned cult emissary loud in the coffin-like burrows as he shouted down the passages: 'We are lost! The missions are dying. Our rebellion is clipped before it begins!' Someone had shot Belg down in a fury before De Haan had had a chance to hear more, but he remembered the word that had gone flying through the base as the reports began to come in.

Eldar!

And the second, the three syllables that had not yet – he could barely remember the feeling – become sweet poison in his

brain, not yet become the black-burning obsession hanging in front of his eyes, the name they had not heard until the Warp Spiders had begun to hunt them through their chambers and drove them out to where the rest of the Eldar lay waiting with shuriken and plasma-shot, fusion-beam and wraithcannon. Alaema had gone down with a lightning-wrapped witchblade through his gut, and De Haan had barely managed to drag himself and Meer away to the teleport point.

Varantha.

Oh, he remembered. Twenty-one centuries of remembering.

He remembered the sick anger that had seized him when he first spoke to the Imperial scholar they had captured as the wretch thrashed on the torture rack. *Varantha* meant 'Crown of our Steadfast Hopes'. Human traders spoke in awe of the gems it crafted, the rare flowers it bred, the beautiful metals its artisans worked. *Varantha* that passed through the western galactic margins, scraping the borders of the Halo where not even the Traitor Legions went, *Varantha* that was supposed to have passed through Hydraphur itself, the home of the Imperial Battlefleet Pacificus, coasting through the system's intricate double-ecliptic and away again before the whey-faced Imperials had even a suspicion it had been there.

Varantha that hated Chaos with a white heat. *Varantha* that had held off Karlsen of the Night Lords in his raids on the Clavian Belt until the Ultramarines had arrived, *Varantha* whose Farseers had tricked and feinted to lure the Orks of Waaagh-Chobog into falling on the Iron Hands' fortresses on Taira-Shodan instead of the Imperial and Exodite worlds around them, *Varantha* whose warriors had driven Arhendros the Silken Whisper off the three worlds he had claimed for Slaanesh.

And *Varantha* that had balked the Word Bearers on Sahch-V, had unravelled their plans and made sure the great citadels and halls they would have built could

never be. A Varantha witch blade had cut down De Haan's mentor, Varantha wraithships had driven their battle-barges and strikers out of the system. And when they had broken free of the Warp outside the Cadian Gate, ready for their last final jump back to the Eye of Terror and sanctuary, it had been Varantha craft which had led the fleets of Ulthwe and Cadia, driving into the Chaos fleet like a bullet tearing into flesh.

Fighting Varantha, stalking the craftworld through a quarter of the galaxy, De Haan had discovered a capacity for hate he had never realised that even a Traitor Marine could possess. Every battle against the craftworld had been like a stroke of the bellows, fanning it ever hotter. The orbital refineries at Rhea, where the Eldar had lured De Haan and his warband in – then disappeared, leaving the Word Bearers in the abandoned, Genestealer-infested satellite compounds. The island chains of Herano's World where their Doomblaster had smashed the Eldar psykers into the ocean at the campaign's opening, and the De Haan had led a joyous hunt through the jungles, mopping up the scattered and leaderless Guardians.

And at the last, the Farseer, staggering beneath the red-black clouds of Iante as artillery flashed and boomed across the distant horizon, watching De Haan as he circled it, stepping over its dead bodyguard. The calm resignation in its stance and the cold precision of its voice.

'So tell me then. What do you see for us, little insect?' De Haan had taunted.

'Why, you will set your eyes on the heart of Varantha, and all will come to an end,' it had replied, before a howling stroke of De Haan's crozius had torn it in half. He had felt the Spirit Stone shudder and pulse as he tore it free of the thing's breastplate with a sound like cracking bone, and he wondered every so often if the creature's soul was aware of who owned its stone now. He hoped it did.

It had not been long after that that he had been called to receive his sacrament, the Sacrament of the Fifth Blessing. The

highest priests of his Chapter had recognised the depth of his spite and had praised him for it: the Fifth Blessing was hate, and the sacrament had appointed De Haan a holy vessel, freed him from his duties in order to lead a crusade that he might express that hate to the utmost, a great hymn to Lorgar carved across the galaxy in Varantha's wake. He could never think back on his sacrament without the hot red flames of pride flaring deep in what he thought was his soul.

He walked to the edge of his rampart and watched the slaves toiling at the walls far below. His arms convulsed, as though he could already feel Eldar souls pulsing and struggling in his fingers, and the wave of malice which surged up his spine made him almost giddy.

'Revered?'

De Haan started at the voice and spun around. His crozius head, now some kind of grotesque insect, chattered something that sounded almost like words. He ignored it and found his concentration again.

'What have the threads of Fate brought us, Nessun?'

The other Marine hesitated. Nessun was no full-fledged sorcerer as the adepts of the Thousand Sons were, but by Lorgar's grace he had developed a spirit sight that could scry almost as well as the Eldar warlocks they hunted. The mutation that had given him his Warp eye had pushed it far out and up onto his brow, making an ungainly lump of his head. The ceramite of his armour had turned glass-clear over it, but De Haan and the others had long ago become used to the way the great milky eyeball pulsed and rolled between the horns of Nessun's helm.

'In the way of Eldar, revered, there is little I can say for definite. I see shadows at the corners of my vision and echoes that I must interpret. You know that nothing is certain with these creatures.'

'Describe these shadows and echoes, Nessun. I am patient.'

'I have kept my gaze on the tribes here

in the days since our first landing, Revered, and watched as they fought our thralls and Brother Traika's vanguard force. There is a... texture to them that I have taught myself to recognise, by Lorgar's grace. But I have caught ripples, something dancing out of sight. I am not sure how I can explain it, revered. Imagine a figure standing just beyond the reach of light from a fire, so that sometimes its shape is touched by the firelight...'

'I think I understand.' De Haan wasn't aware that he had tensed until he felt his armour, alive like his helmet systems, shiver and creak as it tried to find a comfortable position.

'Revered, I am abased and humble before the foul glory of Chaos, but I must venture the guess that Craftworld Eldar may be here. Here on this world. I have dimly seen the patterns that the minds of Farseers form when they assemble, and I have felt... *gaps* in my vision that I believe are warp gates, Webway gates here and in orbit beyond the planet from our own ship, that have opened and closed and that they have not been able to hide...' He stopped short as De Haan drove gauntlet into fist, hissing with triumph, sending his armour shivering and flexing from the blow.

'An omen! My voice was bound in the Chapel as an omen!' And he was about to speak again when Meer called from the war room.

'Most revered lord, the prisoners await you.'

There was something in Meer's voice that made De Haan almost run for the doorway.



TWO ELDAR STOOD in the great hall, heads bowed as De Haan strode to his throne and sat down, crozius across his knees. The arm of one hung brokenly; blood matted the other's hair. Both were dressed in rough cloth and

hide tunics, and their lasers, the power chambers smashed, had been hung around their necks. Traika, the commander of their vanguard and Raptors, bowed to De Haan and made the sign of the Eightfold Arrow with the hand that had fused to his chainsword. Traika's legs had warped and lengthened too, now bending backward like an insect's, the armour over them lumpy and stretched. It had made him fleet of foot but gave him an odd, tilted way of standing.

'We found these in the south-west quarter where the hills steepen. We thought we had cleansed the area, revered, but these were part of an ambush on one of our scouring forces. The fight was fierce but we carried the day.'

'Praise Lorgar's dark light and the great Will of Chaos,' De Haan intoned, and the two were led away into the cathedral's cells. Traika gestured and a third alien was dragged up the steps, limping and tripping. The thrall holding its chains tossed a dead power-lance and a tall bone helm onto the floor. The prisoner did not react, standing slumped with its hair in its face, its long cloak of golden-scaled hide hanging limply around it.

'The last survivor of a group of Dragon Knights we believe were scouting the northern border of our controlled zone. I will attend the tormenting of this one personally, revered. I had felt sure that our deep raids had gutted the last of the Exodite resistance on the prairies. We must find out how this new raid was organised so soon.' The thrall began to drag the knight out, and Meer walked over to stand beside the throne.

'Revered, this is the final prisoner. It was badly wounded, and did not survive the journey back to be brought before you, but we believed you would want to see it. The Raptors brought it down in the river-valley to the south and our bikers brought it here with all haste.'

With a scraping groan of wheels the thralls pushed forward an iron frame with a figure stretched in it, a figure whose rich purple and gold armour

caught the sunlight coming through the still-unglazed windows and gave off a burnished glow. Behind it four more – strong beastfolk these, whose muscles rippled and corded with their burden – dragged something into view and dropped it crashing to the floor, stirring the rock-dust that still coated the hall from its building. A jet-bike, its canopy cracked open by bolt shells, the drive smashed and burnt from its crash, but the pennons hanging from its vanes perfectly clear: the stylised crown-and-starburst of Varantha.

For a long moment, De Haan was silent. Then he threw his arms wide as though he were about to embrace the corpse, and gave a bellow that echoed through the length of the hall.

‘All will come to an end! Horus’s eye, but the filthy little creature spoke the truth. The craftworld’s heart! It is here! The sacrament ends here, my brethren! *I will end it here!*’



‘**R**EVERED!’ De Haan did not look back. His stride had lengthened as his pace had picked up, and he was practically jogging through the halls to the Deepest Chapel, Meer and Nessun shouldering one another aside to keep up. The air in the fortress shivered as the great gongs they had hung over the barracks rang out again and again. Under the sound De Haan left a trail of angry murmurs in the air, curses and threats and dark prayers. Every so often he would slash his crozius viciously around him as if to knock the air itself out of his path.

He knew what Meer would be saying. More weak-spirited yapping, more about caution and rashness and the trickery of the Eldar. But the warp gate was close. Varantha was close. The time when the heads of Varantha’s Farseers were set on spikes atop his Land Raider was a breath away.

Why, you will set your eyes on the

heart of Varantha, and all will come to an end.

The heart of the craftworld, the very heart of Varantha! He wondered how it would feel, walking from the Webway gate into Varantha itself. The domes where the most ancient of their Farseers sat, their flesh crystallised and gleaming like diamond, waiting for the blow of an armoured fist that would send their souls screaming into the Warp. The Grove of New Songs, that was what they called the forest-hall deep in Varantha where the few Eldar children were born and weaned. De Haan had spent a hundred weeks agonising over whether he would kill the children or take them as slaves after he had poisoned and burned the trees. The Infinity Circuit, the wraithbone core which held the spirits of a billion dead Eldar, had shone through his dreams like a galaxy aflame. Oh, to crack its lattice with his crozius and watch the Warp tides pour in! It would need a special ceremony, the culmination of his crusade and sacrament, something he would have to plan.

And was Varantha possessed of engines, a world that could control its drift and sweep through space? He had never been able to discover that, but he began turning the idea over feverishly as he strode down the hallway to the chapel. To take command of Varantha, hollow out its core of Eldar souls and fill them with sacrifices and the cries of Daemons, to sail the fallen craftworld to the Eye of Terror itself! His head swam with the audacity: a world that would put their daemon-world fortresses and the asteroid seminaries at Milarro to shame. A corrupted world that would carry them through the galaxy, a great blight that would stand as a testament to their faith, their hate, their spite, their unholiness.

The rest of the Traitor Marines began to file in and take their places, and the slave-choir in their cells beneath the chapel floor raised a hymn of howls and cries as the choir-masters puffed drugs into their faces and yanked on the

needles in their flesh. De Haan closed his eyes and could see the conquered Varantha still, a great twisted flower of black and crimson, sprawled against the stars. The shapes of the spires and walls, great plazas where the zealous would come to plead for the favour of Chaos, the cells and scriptoria where Lorgar's holy Pentadict would be copied and studied, the fighting pits where generations of new Word Bearers would be initiated. There would be pillars and statues greater than those they had raised after driving the White Scars from the island chains of Morag's World. There would be chamber after chamber of altars more richly decorated than those they had seized when they had sacked the treasury of Kintarre. There would be the slaughtering pens for the worship of Khorne, great libraries and chambers for meditating upon the lore of Tzeentch. There would be palaces of incense and music dedicated to Slaanesh, and cess-pits for the rituals of self-defilement dedicated to Nurgle. And all just parts, even as the Chaos Gods were just facets, all parts of the great treacherous hymn, an obscene prayer in wraithbone and carved ceramite. The Sacred City of Chaos Undivided.

De Haan cradled his vision lovingly in his mind, and saw that it was good.



LORGAR IS WITH US, Chaos is within us, damnation clothes us and none can stand against us.' Voices around the chapel echoed the blessing as De Haan held his rosarius aloft and made the sign of the Eightfold Arrow. For the second time that day he looked out over ranks of helms, leaned forward to look down at the bright eyes of the cultists and beastfolk crowded below him. But this time, his thoughts and his words were clear.

'Be it known to you, most devout of my comrades in Lorgar's footsteps, that

we are gathered here once again in the observance of the Fifth Blessing of Lorgar, the blessing of hate. Bring your thoughts to the sacrament granted to me by the most high of our order, that I might light a dark beacon of spite for all the cosmos to see.' He paused, looked down again. The Eldar artefacts had gone from the dais, locked away again by the Sacristans. It was not important – he did not need them now.

'Hatred earned me the great and honoured sacrament. Hatred has pleased the beautiful abomination of Chaos Undivided, and shone a light through the Warp to Varantha. My beautiful hatred has brought us to their scent. After more than two millennia, the fulfilment of our sacred charter is near.' The memory of the Varantha Guardian, the knowledge of what they had found here, surged through him afresh: his head spun, his joints felt weak with exhilaration. His crozius head as he raised it was now a contorted nightmare-face, grimacing as if in ecstasy, mirroring his feelings.

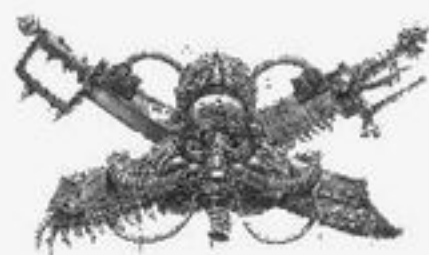
'Soon we will be joined by our brothers, our fellow warriors and bearers of Lorgar's words. Even now the order goes out to land our machines of war, our bound Dreadnoughts. Within the week, my congregation, this world will have felt the full fury of our crusade and when the Exodites are scoured from it we shall march through the Warp gate into the craftworld itself! Hone yourselves, my acolytes, hone your spite and fan your hate to the hottest, most bitter flame. None shall pass us in our devotion, none are as steeped in poisoned thoughts as we!' His voice hammered out and boomed against the walls of the chapel, intoxicating even with the power of its echoes. De Haan fought back an urge to laugh – this felt so right.

'In the beginning, even in the days before my pursuit earned me the sacrament, I had spoken to one of the degenerate Farseers the Eldar claim to revere. At its death the maggot spoke a prophecy that the blessed oracles of our

high temples have sworn to be true. Brethren, as I lead you to battle I will set my eyes on the heart of Varantha and then all will come to an end. I will cut down their last Farseer, I will break open the seals of their Infinity Circuit, I will shatter the heart and eye of their home!' His voice had risen to a roar. 'All will come to an end! Our crusade, our sacrament fulfilled! The Eldar themselves have sworn it will be so. What honours, what glories we will build!'

Above him the gong rang again, and De Haan opened his eyes and leaned forward.

'Look to your weapons, brothers. I will lead you now in the *Martio Imprimis*. I tell you this: by the end of even this day we will be at war!'



THE CHANT OF the *Martio Imprimis* was an old song and a good one, crafted by Lorgar himself in the days before the Emperor had turned on his Word Bearers and when even De Haan had been only a youngblood initiate. The words were strange and their meanings almost lost, but they filled him with a beautiful, electric energy. It rang in De Haan's blood even now. The service in the Deepest Chapel had been over for an hour but the Word Bearers had caught something of their chaplain's mood and as the teleport beam sent thundercracks and sickly shimmers of light through the citadel's hangar, the Marines chanted still as they selected weapons and directed the thralls in moving the crates and engines away.

'Duxhai!' The crusade's chief artisan, still swaying a little from his teleport, turned as De Haan called him. He stepped back into a deep kneeling bow as De Haan strode across the hangar floor and left the moving of the icon-encrusted Razorback tanks to his seconds.

'Is it true, revered lord? I was told you

have received omens and that Varantha itself is in our grip. They are singing hymns in all the halls and chambers of our fortress. Look!' The old Marine pointed to the nearest tank's turret, where splashes of blood glistened. 'They have already made sacrifices over our wargear.'

'It is true, Duxhai, and it is fitting that our brethren in orbit are making their thanks and obeisances. Lorgar has exalted us. I have been shown the way.'

Duxhai had worked on his armour himself over the centuries, making it a glorious construction of red and gold. Chaos had worked on it too: the studs and rivets on its carapace had all turned to eyes, yellow slit-pupilled eyes, which stared at De Haan now but rolled forward to watch Meer walk into the hangar. De Haan pointed to the Razorbacks.

'Give praise, Meer! See how Brother Duxhai's skills have transformed these? Captured barely a year ago, and already adorned and consecrated for service! These will carry Traika's vanguard squads into the teeth of the Varantha lines!'

'Our revered chaplain's own Land Raider will be brought down next,' put in Duxhai, 'and the transports are being readied to bring down the Dreadnoughts and Rhinos. We will be ready to move soon.'

'A dark blessing on you, brother, and thanks to the great foulness of Chaos. Revered, I must make a report.'

'Well?' De Haan was becoming nettled by Meer's manner, his shifty-eyed caution. He could see in the corner of his eyes that Duxhai had registered the offhand greeting also.

'Revered, we have lost contact with our patrols at the furthest sweep of the contested zone. I had our adepts move the communicators onto the outer balconies but there is still no way to raise them. The Raptors who went out to counterstrike at the areas where our own forces were ambushed cannot be reached either, and the bike squadron was due two hours ago but cannot be

seen. The psychic haze has thickened, and Nessun's warp eye is almost blind. He reports a presence like a light through fog, but he cannot pinpoint it.'

'I will come to the war room, Meer. Wait for me there.' His lieutenant backed away, bowed, departed. 'Something in the air on this world turns my warriors to water, Duxhai. They whimper to me of "caution" and "fortification". Meer is a good warrior, but I should have made you my lieutenant for this world. I need your ferocity by me here.'

Duxhai bowed. 'I am honoured, revered. Lieutenant or no, I will gladly fight by your side. Allow me to prepare my weapons and I will meet you in the war room.'

De Haan nodded and waited a moment more, allowing the chanting of the Traitor Marines to soothe his ruffled nerves, before he strode away.



NESSUN WAS STANDING quietly in the War Room when De Haan entered, head bowed, warp eye clouded. Meer and Traika were pacing, almost circling each other, clearly at odds. De Haan ordered them to report.

'Something is coming, revered!' Meer began. 'The slaves are restless, there have been revolts on the building crews! The Eldar know something! We must prepare for assault!'

'We must *make* the assault!' Traika's rasping voice. 'We are Word Bearers, not Iron Warriors! We do not skulk behind walls. We take Lorgar's blessing to our enemies, His blessings of hate and fire and blood and agony!' The obscenely long fingers of Traika's left hand flexed and clenched, as if to claw the tension out of the air.

Listening to them, De Haan hesitated. For the first time he felt a tug, a tilt at the back of his mind that he could not identify. He could not see with Nessun's precision, no seer he, but ten thousand years in the Eye of Terror had tuned him

to the coarser ebbs and flows as it had them all. Something was near. He raised his crozius for silence – its crown a snarling hound's head now – and looked to Nessun.

'Speak, Nessun! Stare through these walls. Tell me what you see!'

'Revered, I... am not sure. There are patterns, something moving... a ring, a wall... closing or opening, I cannot say... a mind... shapes, silent... rushing air...'

His voice was becoming ragged, and De Haan cut him off.

'It's clear enough. Meer, Traika: you are both right. The Eldar know of us.' He fought back a chuckle. 'And they fear us. Catch us off-guard, would they? A quick strike at the head, was it? Drive me off their trail?' And now he did laugh, feeling the tension lifting from his back.

'Time for our sortie, my brothers! Have the Razorbacks lowered to the ramp. Traika, assemble your veteran squads! Meer, have our space command ready a bombardment for when we–'

That was when the first plasma blast hit the side of the cathedral with a sound like the sky being torn apart. The thunderous roar died away amid vast dust clouds, the groan of masonry, frenzied shouts from up and down the halls. De Haan stared straight ahead for one speechless moment, then hurled himself to the balcony, the others behind him. And then they could only stand and watch.

The world had filled with enemies. Sleek Eldar jet-bikes arrowed down from the sky to whip past the walls of the cathedral, and high above De Haan could hear the rumble of sonic booms as squadrons of larger alien assault craft criss-crossed over their heads. With sickening speed each distant blur in the air would grow and resolve into a raptor-sleek grav-tank, arcing in silently to spill a knot of infantry into the town before they rose and banked away again. In what seemed like a matter of heartbeats the fortress was ringed by a sea of advancing Guardians, their ranks dotted with gliding gun-platforms and dancing

war-walkers, and the air swarmed with the Eldar craft.

The aliens' assault started to be answered. Thumps and cracks came from the walls as the Word Bearers brought heavy weapons to bear and threads of tracer fire began reaching out to the purple-and-gold shapes that danced past on the wind. De Haan pushed to the edge of the balcony, heedless of the shapes above him and greedy for the sight of fireballs and smoke-trails, but he had time for no more than a glance before Meer and Traika pulled him away from the edge.

'Revered! With us! You must lead us. We cannot stay!' He cursed and almost raised his crozius to Meer, but the first laser beams had begun sweeping the balcony, carving at the rock and sending molten dribbles down the walls behind them. He nodded grimly and led them inside.

In the debris-swathed halls all was din and confusion. The slave-masters bellowed and flailed with their barbed whips, but their charges would not be ordered. De Haan realised someone had set off the Frenzon too early. Their thralls ran to and fro, shrieking and swinging their clubs, pistols spitting and making the stone chambers a hell of sparks and ricochets. Bullets spanged off De Haan's armour as he shouldered his way through the crowd of naked, bleeding berserkers.

'To me! They are upon us, we will cut them down here! To me!' and De Haan began the chant of the *Martio Secundus*. All around him Word Bearers turned and began to fall in behind him, dark red helms bearing down on him above the sea of bobbing cultist heads. Roars and growls began to mix with the cries of the mortals; the beastfolk were following too. De Haan gave a snarling grin behind his faceplate. *In Lorgar's name, we will make a fight of this yet.*

Reaching the great stair, they found that a whole part of wall had gone, simply vanished leaving smooth stone edges where a piece had been erased. A distort-cannon crater – and the ceiling

above it was already beginning to groan and send down streams of dust. He ignored the danger, sent his chant ringing out again and charged through the crater to the hall beyond; the hangar and teleport dais were close.

Then, swooping and darting through the breaches their cannon had made, came the Eldar, Aspect Warriors all in blue, thrumming wings spreading from their shoulders. Lasers stabbed down into the throng underneath them and grenades fell from their hands like petals.

'Fight!' De Haan bellowed, and now that he was in battle he roared the *Martio Tertius* and sent a fan of bolt shells screaming through the squadron, smashing two Hawks backwards into the wall in clouds of smoke. His crozius, twisted into the head of a one-eyed bull, was belching streams of red plasma that hung in the air when he moved it; it had not boasted the blue power-field of the Imperial croziae for eight thousand years.

The remaining Hawks tumbled gracefully in the air and glided towards the ruined wall, now with other shots chasing them, but then the braying of the beastfolk changed note. De Haan whirled to see three of them, firing wildly, looking about them in panic, caught in a silvery mist. All three seemed to twitch and heave and fall oddly out of shape before they collapsed into piles of filth on the stone floor. Beyond them, the two Warp Spider warriors sucked the filament clouds back into the muzzles of their weapons. While shells from De Haan and Meer took one apart, the other stepped back. With a gesture, the air flowed around it like water and it was gone.

Down the hall and up the broad stairs, running hard, and the hangar was filled with smoke and flashes of light. Duxhai came pounding out of the smoke, plasma gun clutched in his hands.

'The hangar is gone, lord, taken. We opened the gates to take the tanks down the ramp to the ground, but they drove us back with their strange weapons, and

their heavy tanks are bombarding us. The teleport platform is destroyed. I have said the *Martio Quartus* for our fallen, and my brothers have dug in to hold them at bay. But we cannot stay here.'

De Haan almost groaned aloud. 'I will not be driven like an animal! This is my fortress, I will stand to defend it!' But his soldier's instincts had taken charge and were giving the lie to his words: he was already moving back down the stairs to meet the last of the Marines and a gaggle of thralls struggling up to meet him. He looked at them for a moment, and did not flinch as a Fire Prism fired through the hangar doors, opened a dazzling sphere of yellow-white fire over their heads.

'The Deepest Chapel, then, and the Great Hall. We will cut them down as they enter, until our brothers can land. When the transports land the rest of our crusade the battle will turn soon enough.'

They hammered down the stairs. Beside them a glare came through the window-slits and then the rock wall flashed red-hot and crumbled as the Marines next to it hurled themselves away. The sleek alien tank which had opened the breach rose out of sight and the jet-bikes behind it – no Guardian craft these but the smoky grey-green and bright silver of the Shining Spears – threw a delicate cat's cradle of lasers through the opening. Thralls yowled and fell, while the beastfolk sent bullets and shot blasting out of the opening as the jet-bikes peeled off and rose out of sight.

Then the Word Bearers were in the chapel, the shadowy space and echoes calming De Haan, the familiar shape of the Warp obelisk giving him strength. They fanned out into the chamber, around the upper gallery and the floor itself, needing no orders: within seconds the doors were covered. The pack of thralls and Beastfolk huddled and muttered in the centre of the chamber, clutching weapons.

'Revered, we... we are beset on every side.' Nessun's voice was flat and hoarse

with anger. 'I feel them at the gates, fighting our brothers and slaves. But they are above us too, they are breaching the upper walls and stepping onto the balconies from their grav-sleds. And, and... most revered lord...'

Suddenly Nessun's voice was drenched with misery, and even the heads of the warriors around him were turning. 'Our battle-barge. Our fortress. I see it reeling in space, revered... it is ringed by the enemy... their ships dance away from our guns... our brothers were preparing their landing, the shields had been lowered for the teleport to work. The Eldar are tearing at it... my vision is dimming...'

There was silence in the chapel for a moment after Nessun's voice died away. De Haan thought of trying to reach the sensoria array in the spires above them, then pushed the useless thought away. The upper levels would be full of the Eldar scum by now, and by the time they could fight their way there his ship would indeed have been blasted from the sky.

He looked around. 'Alone, then. Alone with our hatred. I will hear no talk of flight. They will break against us as a wave against a cliff.'

'Lorgar is with us, Chaos is within us, damnation clothes us and none can stand against us.'

As they all said the blessing De Haan's eyes moved from one to the next. Meer cradling his bolter, seemingly deep in thought, Duxhai standing haughtily with plasma-gun held at arms, Traika glaring about him for any sign of weakness in the others, chainsword starting to flex and rev. De Haan raised his crozius and strode from the chapel, the others following, and as if on a signal they heard the bombardment outside begin again.



IT WAS ONLY fitting that De Haan and his retinue marched into the north end of the ruined Great Hall at the same time that the Eldar filled its south. They had blown in the walls and shot the bronze doors apart and were fanning out through the ruins. De Haan leapt down the steps into the hall, letting the dust and smoke blur his outline as shots clipped the columns around him and his men returned fire from the archway. A plasma grenade exploded nearby, an instant of scorching whiteness that betrayed the Eldar: in the instant that it blinded them the Word Bearers had launched their own advance, scrambling and vaulting over the rubble. There were insect-quick movements ahead and De Haan fired by reflex, plucking the Guardians out of their positions before he had consciously registered their location. The soft thrum of shuriken guns was drowned out by the hammer-and-yowl of the Word Bearers' bolt shells.

A stream of white energy flashed by De Haan's shoulder as Duxhai felled two more Eldar, but there were Dire Avengers in the Eldar positions now, with quicker reflexes and a hawk-eye aim to catch Duxhai before he could move again. The shuriken were monomolecular, too fast and thin to properly see, but the air around Duxhai seemed to shimmer and flesh. Blood and ceramite gouted from his back as his torso flew apart, the eyes on his armour glazing over. He staggered back and De Haan jinked around him, launched himself into battle.

A grenade went off somewhere to his left and shrapnel clipped his armour. The Word Bearer felt the moist embrace of the plates around his body jump and twitch with the pain. He brought his crozius up and over, its wolf's head yowling with both joy and pain and belching thick red plasma. It caught the Avenger square on its jutting helmet and the creature twitched for a moment only before the glowing crimson mist ate it down to the bone. His bolt pistol hammered in his hand and two more Eldar crashed backward, twitching and

tumbling. Just beyond them, Traika cleared a fallen column in a great leap and landed among yellow-armoured Striking Scorpions whose chainswords sang and sparked against his own. In the rubble, Meer led the others in laying down a crossfire that strewed alien corpses across a third of the hall.

De Haan sang the *Martio Tertius* in a clear, strong voice and shot the nearest Scorpion in the back. Traika screamed laughter and swung at another, but as it back-pedalled another Scorpion, in the heavy intricate armour of an Exarch, glided forward and whirled a many-chained crystalline flail in an intricate figure that smashed both Traika's shoulders and left him standing, astonished and motionless, for a blow that stove in his helm and sent ceramite splinters flying. De Haan bellowed a battle-curse and his crozius head became a snake that lashed and hissed. Two short steps forward and he lunged, fainted and struck the flail out of the creature's hand. It reeled back into Meer's sights, the plasma eating at it even as shells riddled it, but in the time it took for De Haan to strike down the last Scorpion the hall was alive with Eldar again, and Meer and Nessun were forced back and away from him by a shower of grenades and sighing filament webs as the blast from a distort-cannon scraped the roof off the hall and let in the raging sky.

Even as De Haan charged, fired and struck again and again, some distant part of him groaned. Faint, maddening alien thoughts brushed his own like spider-silk in the dark, and shadows danced at the upper edge of his vision as jet-bikes and Vypers circled, circled. The air around him was alive with shuriken fire and energy bolts. The Eldar melted away as he struck this way and that. Ancient stone burst into hot shards as he swung his crozius, but rage had taken his discipline and, like a man trying to snatch smoke in his fingers, he found himself standing and roaring wordlessly as the hall emptied once more and the shots died away.

THERE WERE NO voices, no cries from his companions. De Haan did not have to turn to look to know that this last assault had taken them all. Meer and Nessun were dead, and behind him he could hear the boom of masonry as his citadel began to crumble. The Prayer of Sacrifice and the *Martio Quartus* would not come to his numb lips, and he nodded to himself. Why should not his rites unravel along with everything else? The Chaos Star set in his rosarius was dead, lacklustre. He looked at it dully, and that was when he began to feel something tugging at his mind.

It was like an electrical tingle, or the distant sound of crickets; the way the air feels before a storm, or the thrum of distant war-machines. De Haan's Warp-tuned mind rang with the nearby song of power. He remembered Nessun speaking of the pattern that Farseers' minds made when they assembled.

You will set your eyes...

Suddenly he was running again. No screams now, just a low moan in his throat, a tangle of savage emotions he could not have put a name to if he had tried. Blood trickled from his lips and his crozius thrummed and crackled. The gates of the cathedral hung like broken wings. He ducked between them to stand on the broad black steps of his dying fortress.

...on the heart of Varantha...

His crozius's head had fallen silent, and he looked at it in puzzlement. It had formed itself into a human face, mouth gaping, eyes wide. A face that De Haan recognised as his own, from back in the days before his helm had sealed itself to him.

Turn, De Haan. Turn And Face Me.

The voice did not come through his ears, but seemed to resonate out of the air and throughout his bones and brain. It was measured, almost sombre, but its simple force almost shook him to his knees. Slowly, he raised his head.

...and all will come to an end.

More than twice De Haan's height, the immense figure stood with its spear at

rest. It took a step forward out of the smoke that had wreathed it, to the centre of the plaza. De Haan watched the blood drip from its hand and stain the grey stones on the ground. It stood and regarded him, and there was none of the expected madness or fury in the white-hot pits of its baleful eyes, only a brooding patience that was far more terrifying.

He took a step forward. All the fury had gone like the snuffing of a candle: now there was just wrenching despair which drove everything else from his mind. He wondered how long ago Varantha's Farseers had realised he was hunting them, how long ago they had begun cultivating his hate, how long ago they had begun to set this trap for him. He wondered if the Farseer whose prophecy he had thought to fulfil was laughing at him from within its Spirit Stone.

He stood alone on the steps, and the air was silent but for the hiss of heat from incandescent iron skin and the faint keening from the weapon in one giant hand.

Then the lines from the Pentadict danced through his mind, the lines with which Lorgar had closed his testament as his own death came upon him. *Pride and defiant hate, spite and harsh oblivion. Let the great jewelled knot of the Cosmos unravel in the dust.*

He looked up again, his mind suddenly clear and calm. He raised his crozius, but the salute was not returned. No matter. He took a pace forward and down the steps, that volcanic gaze on him all the time. He walked faster, now jogging. He worked the action on his pistol with the heel of his hand. Running, its eyes on him.

Charging now, feet hammering, voice found at last in a wail of defiance, Chaplain De Haan ran like a Daemon across his last battlefield to where the Avatar of Kaela-Mensha-Khaine stood, its smoking, shrieking spear in its vast hands, waiting for him. ●



APOTHECARY'S HONOUR by Simon Jowett

'Emperor's mercy!' Korpus breathed. The vast, obscene bulk of a Dreadnought filled his view, towering over the troops around it, lurching as it stomped through the ash and mud. Its black armour was covered in twisted sigils proclaiming its demonic allegiance, blasphemous verses in praise of the Dark Gods, and what looked like dolls hanging from chains attached to its carapace. No, not dolls; human corpses.

THE ULTIMATE RITUAL by Neil Jones and William King

Von Diehl's chant rumbled on, seeming to gain resonance from the echoes and the constant repetition. The fumes from the braziers billowed around him and seemed to expand his perception. It was almost as if he could see the edges of the world starting to ripple at the corners of his vision. He smiled.

BAPTISM OF FIRE by Gordon Rennie

The ominous arrowhead shape of the *Contagion* floated in space near the still-burning wreck of the Cobra-class destroyer. Of the other three vessels from the squadron, all that remained were three fading clouds of super-heated gas and dust. It was dark on the command deck of the *Contagion* – its captain had found normal lighting levels uncomfortable after his eyelids and much of his skin had atrophied – but many of the command no longer had need of their eyes anyway. That same captain – Hendrik Morrau, once one of the most famous names in the history of Battlefleet Gothic – passed one withered hand over the rune screen in front of him, his eyes reading the battle report statistics which flickered across it.

SNARES AND DELUSIONS by Matthew Farrer

In the debris-swathed halls all was din and confusion. The slave-masters bellowed and flailed with their barbed whips, but their charges would not be ordered. De Haan realised someone had set off the Frenzon too early. Their thralls ran to and fro, shrieking and swinging their clubs, pistols spitting and making the stone chambers a hell of sparks and ricochets. Bullets spanged off De Haan's armour as he shouldered his way through the crowd of naked, bleeding berserkers.

Also featuring...

Big Scrap Alley, an exhilarating blast of Waargh and Dakka from Gordon Rennie and Paul Jeacock; the conclusion of *Obvious Tactics* from David Pugh; and superlative art from Chris Smart and the mighty Karl Kopinski!

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