WATCHERS OF THE THRONE
THE EMPEROR’S LEGION
CHRIS WRAIGHT
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CHRIS WRAIGHT
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1: I AM SLAUGHTER
2: PREDATOR, PREY
3: THE EMPEROR EXPECTS
4: THE LAST WALL
5: THRONEWORLD
6: ECHOES OF THE LONG WAR
7: THE HUNT FOR VULKAN
8: THE BEAST MUST DIE
9: WATCHERS IN DEATH
10: THE LAST SON OF DORN
11: SHADOW OF ULLANOR
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CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
Warhammer 40,000
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
Valerian
Aleya
Tieron
About the Author
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WARHAMMER 40,000

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

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

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruelest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.
Huge thanks to Nick Kyme, Aaron Dembski-Bowden and John French for their invaluable help in planning this story.
I have considered it. Making an end to it all. Of course I have. I looked to the skies. I saw good souls succumb to weakness, and foul souls seize their moment. What of it?
We all doubt.

I have lived over two hundred standard years. Too long, I think now. I have buried two wives, and seen seven children enter service and leave me for the void, and still I remain here, old, stubborn, in irritatingly good health despite an atmosphere of toxins both natural and political.

I am alone again now. Strange to say that, surrounded as I am by the quadrillions of the Throneworld, and yet it is truer now than it has ever been. The faces pass me by. I know all of them. I know their histories and their allegiances. I see the plots they hatch and hear the whispers they make under gilded archways, and I grow numb to it all, for it matters so little. Even now, hard against the End of Time, when the death rattle of our species has become audible even to the thick-eared, they still grasp for a little more of the things we have always desired – coin, power, knowledge, gratification.

We are yet animals, at heart. Nothing has changed that. Not even He could change us really, though I think He wanted to once. I like to believe that we must be a disappointment to Him. If we are not, then His ambitions for us must have been so very poor, and that strikes at all I believe and hold dear.

I am Alexei Lev Tieron, and I was a supremely powerful man. I was not a warrior, nor was I a witch, nor was I a commander of great vessels. My power came only from the Lex Imperialis – a cold source, but an ancient one. Like so
many within the bureaucracy that swaths us, I was protected by words written on parchment. It gave me my station and defined it. Without this piece of paper, the meanest hive-ganger could have ended me with impunity – she would have ripped the jewels from my fingers and tried to sell them for weapons, and none would have come to my aid, for this galaxy only recognises strength.

But there are many kinds of strength. I learned this during schola, when I was as sickly as I am now hale, and the smooth-limbed scions of noble houses sought to crush my spirit with their brutishness. I might have died in that hateful place, had I not possessed the one talent that has preserved me ever since – the ability to deflect the ambition of others, to make it swerve, to direct hatred onto a target other than myself, to emerge from the lattice of competing egos intact and with no one aware of what veils have been cast over their stupid, powerful eyes.

No, I was not a witch. I just understood the pull of glory while having little attraction to it. I saw a man, or a woman, and I knew what they desired. I knew what to say to them, and I knew where to direct them. If they wished to do me harm, I found them prey more alluring. If they wished to help me, I extracted a suitable price. Thus I weaved my path between the paths of others, evading death while it devoured my rivals, until I reached the pinnacle, gazing back on a life of dissemblance and brokered deals. Compromise was my way, and for that I am despised, but that is as it should be. The Emperor has many servants, and we cannot all be power-armoured killers, can we?

I had many titles. This Imperium adores titles. The governor of the lowliest backwater rock will have a hundred names, each more ludicrous than the last. As for myself, only one really mattered: Cancellarius Senatorum Imperialis. Chancellor of the Imperial Council, in Low Gothic. Should you be inclined to trace that title back to its origins, you will find the true meaning of the words.

I was a doorkeeper. I watched people come and go. I made note of their intent, I had soft words with the ones who carried the weapons. I considered those who might be better suited to more exalted positions, and those who might be better extinguished. Over time, that capability generated a mix of terror and attraction. Many were afraid of what I could do to them; others speculated wildly on what I might desire, so that they might buy me and make me their creature. I was always amused by both reactions, for I did not act from malice and I cannot be bought. I was a cipher. Even now I wish for nothing other than that which I already possess, for I possess a very great deal.

I served in that station for nearly eighty years. I saw the composition of the High Twelve change over that span as death and rivalry took its toll. Some of
those lords were vicious, many of them narcissists. Two were positively psychotic, and I remain convinced that a slim majority were always technically insane.

And yet – here’s the thing – they were all quite superlative. You doubt this? You wish to believe that the masters of the Imperium are men and women of grasping inadequacy, forever squabbling over their own ambitions? Believe away. You’re a fool.

There are twelve of them. Twelve. Consider what that means. More human souls now live than have ever lived. In the absence of the active guidance of He who sits on the Throne – may His name be blessed – it is those twelve alone who have guided our ravenously fecund species through ten thousand years of survival, within a universe that most assuredly desires to chew on our collective souls and spit the gristle out.

Many lesser mortals might have wished, in their idle moments, that they too could have risen to the heights, and sat on a throne of gold and ordered the Imperium as it ought to have been ordered – but they did not do it, and these ones did. They faced down the demands of the Inquisition, the belligerence of Chapter Masters, the condescension of mutant Novators and the injunctions of semi-feral assassins, and held their power intact. They orchestrated every response to every xenos incursion and patiently calibrated the defences of the Endless War. They withstood insurrections and civil strife, zealotry and madness. Every one of them is a master or mistress of the most strenuous and the most acute capability, though they burn out quickly – I have seen it – for the cares of humanity are infinite and they themselves are most assuredly finite.

So mock them if you will, and tell yourself that they have fattened themselves on the labour of the masses and that they dwell in glorious ignorance while the galaxy smoulders to its inevitable ending. That is idiocy and it is indulgence. I served them for a good mortal span, judging them quietly even as they gave me their orders, and I tell you that though they had their many flaws, they were, and have always been, the greatest of us.

I never thought it would end. I never thought I would live to see the dawn of a day when the High Lords did not govern the Imperium as the highest arbiters of the Emperor’s Will. In this, as in so much else, I have lived to see my error. Now, as I contemplate what must come next, I understand the true import of what I witnessed.

For the first time since He drew mortal breath, they no longer rule. For the first time since the Emperor was placed on the Holy Golden Throne, the High Lords
no longer govern the Imperium that preserves His memory.

This is how it happened.

I remember the date. I remember the time, and remember the angle of the dying sun through my banqueting chamber’s windows. You need not be detained with the figures, for all that has changed. In time, I suspect we will measure things from a different fulcrum, for they cannot remain as they were.

What is important? I do not know any more. My belly was full, as it was so often then. I was dining well from a table set with silver platters. All of it was real – fruits conveyed from the farthest reaches of the Segmentum in cryo-tanks. I felt the tight berries burst in my mouth as I chewed. One of those alone would have bought a hive spire on a lesser world, but we were on Terra, at the top of the pyramid, and barely gave it a thought.

Perhaps that offends you. Perhaps you think that we were insensitive to indulge ourselves at a time when so many wanted for the basic necessities of life.

I care nothing for your judgement. I care not for piety of any kind, and I do not regret the way we were then. We were sophisticates swimming in an infinity of resources, and we laboured for our luxuries. Above all, do not mistake indulgence for corruption – their elision is frequent but not inevitable, whatever some inquisitors might think.

I looked down the table, and saw the balance of power arranged at every place setting. The mighty were decked in their heavy gowns of office, weighed down with medallions and caskets. Their flesh was bronzed or black or gold, painted with the filigree of fine Martian improvements. They murmured to one another, keeping heads bowed so the words did not travel beyond the hearing of their present counterpart. They were accompanied by pleasure-companions – catamites, courtesans and confidantes, who were arrayed even more spectacularly in jerkins and gowns of silk and ruffs of lace. All skin was flawless, all eyes were bright, all conversation was fluid.

I held court, and enjoyed doing so. I saw the Lord Constable of the Synopticon lean in close to the neck of the Mistress Plenary of Catacombs and breathe something intended to be scandalous. She absorbed the information without reaction, which was little surprise, as she knew he was destined for removal in a week’s time. She knew that because I had told her. She was the sponsor of the one who would replace him, so I judged it prudent to keep her informed, only asking for the standard level of discretion in return.

They were all at the same game, my guests – angling, jostling, manoeuvring –
and that gave me no little pleasure, as they were all stepping, to a greater or lesser extent, to the moves I had given them.

I took another bite, then reached for a golden goblet of opalwine. My hands were heavy with silver, my arms draped with a cloak of thick velvet. Only as I drew the rim to my lips did I notice the presence hovering at my arm.

I had no servitors in my employ. I detest them, and even now will not admit them to my chambers. All my staff were human-normal, trained at the finest scholae and destined for positions of their own within the Adeptus Terra. This was one of those who had excelled – a student plucked from the Schola Havrath before he had turned fifteen standard, now my poison-catcher, his blood swimming with anti-toxins.

‘Lord,’ he whispered softly, lowering his head.
I turned to him. ‘What is it, Galeas?’

‘Forgive me. The Master awaits in your reception chamber.’

I did not need to ask which one. There were three Masters among the Twelve. The Master of the Astronomican, Leops Franck, would not have travelled here without warning, for he never went without an entourage of over a hundred attendants and that required planning; while the Master of the Administratum, Irthu Haemotalion, would not have deigned to visit me, but would have required me to visit him, such were the requirements of precedence that he set great store by. That left one: the Master of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, Zlatad Aph Kerapliades.

My heart sank. I was enjoying myself. Kerapliades was a bore, a man atrophied by his work and shrivelled into a drab kernel of pessimism. If he had come here, it would be due to some dire portent delivered by his ranks of dream-speakers. The portents scryed by Kerapliades were always dire, and had been since his first blinded interpreter had been bound to the God-Emperor’s holy will.

But he was a High Lord. If he was here, then I needed to be with him. I observed rank, for all my many sins – not even my many enemies ever accused me otherwise.

‘Thank you,’ I said to Galeas in the closed-speech of our household. ‘Ensure he’s comfortable – I will be there presently.’

I did not move immediately. Others would have observed Galeas leaving, and to follow him too swiftly would have invited speculation. I ate some more, I drank some more, I planted a seed of gossip in the mind of the Urbanius Cardinal of the Opheliate Tendency and exchanged pleasantries with a major general of the Astra Militarum segmentum command.
When the time was right, when the ebb and flow of the conversation had taken its own course, I rose from my seat and pulled my robes around me. ‘You’ll have to get along without me for a little while,’ I said. ‘Try not to eat everything, or each other, while I’m gone.’

Then I was out into the corridors, padding along the polished floors of my domain. I was dimly aware of movement in the shadows – my cadres of close protection bodyguards, hanging within las-shot range, tracking my every move. After so many years I barely noticed them, and even had they not been clad in cameleo-plate I might have forgotten they were there altogether.

My aide-de-camp Anna-Murza Jek fell in alongside me, her long gown whispering over the black marble. ‘What’s going on?’ I asked, never breaking stride. ‘He’s flanked by his nulls,’ she said, speaking quickly as she always did. ‘That makes things difficult. This is a guess – he’s worried about Cadia.’ ‘I’m worried about Cadia.’ ‘I don’t have much else.’ ‘Run a grid-search over his senior staff movements.’ ‘Already under way.’ ‘How many of our people do we have in the Scholastia?’ ‘Thirty-seven.’ ‘Make contact with them all, and have reports in my chamber before dawn.’ ‘Already under way.’

I reached the doors to my reception chamber, turned to Jek and smiled. ‘When you’re done, have a drink.’ ‘If there’s time, lord,’ she said, bowing and withdrawing. The doors opened.

My reception chamber was a wonderful place. It ought to have been – I had eighty years to refine it. The objects within it were the most exquisite, the decoration a study in good taste. On occasion, despite all the changes, I still spend time there, enjoying it. The High Lords have their own palaces, and the spires of the Senatorum are the most magnificent in the entire galaxy, but I still prefer the oasis I made there. It acts as the exemplar of the message I wished to send at all times – that we are more than guns and fury. We are an ancient species with subtle tastes. We are intelligent. And we are still here. ‘My greetings, Master,’ I said, closing the doors behind me. Kerapliades was standing before a sandstone fireplace. He gave no indication he had any comprehension of how valuable it was – over twelve thousand years
old, fashioned in pre-Unity Francia, literally irreplaceable – but I could not blame him for that. He spent his days in iron-ribbed spires determining how many thousands of human souls would be fed into the mechanisms of the Throne and how many hundreds would be doled out to lives of unremitting duty as sanctioned Imperial psykers. I might have been less than equable, had I been in his place.

‘Is the chamber secure?’ Kerapliades asked.

His long face, a bony white-grey with sunken black eyes, regarded me mournfully. He was nearly two metres tall, with high-bunched shoulders and long slender arms. His robes of office were simple – black, heavy fabric hanging in long swathes. He was flanked, as Jek had warned me, by his two nulls, whose psychic dampening aura was palpable even to me.

‘All my chambers are secure, Master,’ I said. ‘You know this.’

‘I know nothing any more.’ Kerapliades leaned on a steel staff with an iron eye at its tip. ‘I took a risk, coming here.’

He looked at me with rheumy eyes. I had never managed to find out just how much he could see through them. Almost all astropaths are blinded by their creation ritual, and those who retain some visual function are damaged in other ways, so they say. I never liked to speculate too closely on what his eyes must have seen since his own soul-binding.

‘We speak in confidence,’ I told him, and that was true. Anything told to me by one of the Council would never be disclosed to another unless they wished it to be.

Kerapliades limped away from the mantelpiece. There were chairs everywhere, but I knew he wouldn’t sit.

‘It’s Cadia,’ he said, as if that conveyed everything that needed to be said.

*Well done, Jek*, I thought.

For as long as the Imperium had existed, Cadia was ever at the forefront of its deliberations. Over the last two hundred years – my lifetime – the High Lords had devoted an ever-increasing amount of time to that one world. Regiments had been thrown into the void to bolster it. Space Marine Chapters had been petitioned to reinforce its approaches. Armour-wrights and strategeos had been seconded to augment its walls and its fortresses. There were other battle zones of import – Armageddon, Badab – in which we were stretched, but in truth none of them mattered besides Cadia, for if that world fell then the balance of power we had cultivated for ten thousand years would be ended at a stroke.

‘You have tidings from the sector?’ I asked.
‘None.’
‘Well then,’ I said. ‘In the absence of that–’
‘You do not understand me.’

It was then that I first truly noticed the Master was not his moribund, desiccated self. I was used to seeing him gloomy. I was not used to seeing him scared. His long grey fingers clutched at his support, and even that did not quell the faint trembling.

‘We can handle the visions,’ he said, and he no longer looked at me. I do not think he was looking at anything in the chamber just then. ‘I do not ask any of my alpha-level astropaths to undergo what I would not myself. I witness what they witness. I undergo the same trials.’

I let him speak. I will be truthful – his manner disturbed me. Kerapliades was not the confessional sort. I wondered if his mind had finally been cracked by the strain put on it, yet he did not show signs of mania, just a kind of dread.

‘Probing that close to the Eye has always been perilous,’ he went on. ‘But now – nothing. No terror. No screaming visions. A curtain has been drawn across it.’

I did not know what to say to that. We had been at full-scale war over the Cadian Gate for over five years, and during that time we had relied on the Adeptus Astra Telepathica for the vast bulk of our knowledge of how our forces were faring. There had always been interference, and ambiguity, and often contradiction, but never silence. In my naivety I even wondered whether it might be a good thing – that the nightmares unleashed by our enemies there might be finally abating.

Then I looked at the Master again, and saw immediately that it was not a good thing.

‘Tell me what you need,’ I said.

‘Need?’ Kerapliades barked a dry sort of laugh. ‘I need a thousand more psykers – stronger ones, not the dross I get from the Black Ships now.’ He blinked. His breathing was shallow. ‘This is different, chancellor. I can’t read it yet, but my blood tells me true enough. Don’t be misled by this calm – it comes before catastrophe.’

He had told me similar things before. I might have learned to ignore the warnings, if it were not for the horrendous expression on his mournful face.

‘The Twelve must meet,’ he said. ‘And Dissolution must be enacted.’

So that was it. Another throw of this old die. Despite myself, my heart sank.
The arguments had been scoured over and over for more years than I had been
alive, and there had never been a resolution.

‘I do not think that will be easy,’ I said, already determining how such a thing could be done. ‘Camera inferior is not scheduled for another three months.’

Kerapliades whirled around, fixing me with his strange, swimming eyes. I felt a brief tremor, just for a moment — a flash of insight into his colossal psychic power. It was not meant as a threat, I think, just a momentary lapse in control, but the effect was still startling, like placing one’s hand on static electricity.

‘You can make it happen,’ he said.

Possibly so. ‘Have you spoken of this to any of the others?’ I asked.

‘None,’ he said.

‘Then I beg you — do not. Not yet. I will make my approaches — it would be best coming from me.’

‘I know,’ he said, and a grim smile cracked his features. ‘You have wormed your way into the confidence of us all, doorkeeper. Sometimes I think you are the most dangerous man on Terra.’

Perhaps he meant that to be flattering.

‘You give me too much credit,’ I said. ‘I merely accommodate.’

‘So you say.’ The hollow look in his eyes returned. ‘Do it, though. Do what has to be done. If you need coin, if you need anything, let me know.’

That was an amusing thought. I had more coin than any of them knew. I could have bought half the Council with it already, were any of them remotely interested in such things, but, to their credit, none of them were. If they had vices then they were all connected to power, not avarice, and baubles held little sway over such souls.

‘Of course, there is one difference, this time,’ I ventured cautiously, knowing that I was telling Kerapliades something he already knew. ‘The Lord Brach has not yet been replaced, and so one seat is empty.’

‘Yes, and you know now what must be done, do you not?’

‘I do not choose the High Lords,’ I said.

‘Go to see him,’ he said.

‘I do not think he will receive me,’ I said.

‘You will find a way,’ he said.

And that was it. That was why he had come — to plant this idea in my head, to give it his blessing. I judged from this that he had support from others of the Twelve — he would not have advanced it if not. He was bound by the Lex Imperialis from making overt approaches himself, as were all his peers in the Council, but that would never stop them from making their views known.
It put me in a delicate position. Half the Council had always been against Dissolution, half for it. A reconfiguration might not change that, and by intervening now I risked aligning myself with a losing cause – a dangerous thing, even for a man like me.

I would need time to think. I would need time to confer with Jek and plot a route through this. The tides of intrigue in the Palace could rise fast and fall fast – the trick was not to be carried by them.

I bowed. ‘I’m honoured that you came, Master,’ I said. Kerapliades did not return the bow.

‘I’ll be waiting,’ he said, limping towards the chamber’s doors. His nulls went with him, making my flesh crawl as they passed me.

Once he was gone, I waited awhile, pondering what to make of the visit. His fear had not been feigned. I still found it unsettling to witness fear from a High Lord, and that alone weighed more heavily on me than anything he had said.

After a suitable interval, Jek reappeared, looking curious. ‘Anything of importance?’ she asked.

‘Not sure yet,’ I said.

I was aware I had guests waiting. I placed my hands on Jek’s to thank her for her concern, but could not linger to consult her then – that would have to wait for a few hours, by which point I might have settled the issues more clearly in my own mind.

I went back towards the dining chamber, gradually resuming my appearance of joviality as I walked. By the time I re-entered, my face was full of smiles again.

‘What kept you?’ asked the woman sitting on my left, just as the final courses were being delivered. ‘Great matters of state?’

‘A little indigestion,’ I said, reaching for the sorbet. ‘Not that there’s much difference.’
We were never soldiers.

Whenever we are seen outside the walls of this place, as rare as that is, it is in our martial aspect. We are clad in gold, just as we were in the earliest days when He was our living captain, and mortals fall on their faces as if before gods. To them, it must seem as if we are wrath incarnate. To them, it must seem as if we were created for destruction and nothing else.

But we were His companions, once. We were the ones in whom He confided. We were His counsellors, we were His artisans. We were the first glimpse at what the species could become, if shepherded aright and unshackled from its vicious weaknesses.

Of course, we were taught to fight. He knew that war would come. It was a necessary part of the ascension, though it was never destined to last for eternity. We were the guardians of a new age, and had to be strong enough to keep it secure.

We failed in that, and now wear the mark of that failure in the black robes that cover our auramite. It is a permanent reminder, replacing the cloaks of blood-red that once adorned our battleplate. It weighs heavy with every one of us, for we know more of the nature of the fall than most. We still recite the old stories, and we study in the lost archives where we alone are suffered to tread, and so do not have the comforting illusions of ignorance to salve the wound. In a galaxy defined by ignorance, we remember. We cultivate the shards of the thing that was broken, and remain aware of what would have been.

I think sometimes that this knowledge is the most severe of our many burdens.
Any brutal soul may fight if he has the goal ahead of him. We fight knowing that our truest purpose lies behind us, and all that remains is faithfulness to an extinguished vision.

But still we preserve. We tend the things of value that have survived. We seek to embody His will in all things. We cleave to His light as the darkness gathers. We interpret, we study, we delve into the philosophy of the ages.

We have many duties. But that is just as it should be, for we are not simple creations. The aeons have changed us in many ways, but not in that.

We were a thousand things to a thousand souls, but we were never soldiers.

I am Valerian, Shield-Captain of the Palaiologian Chamber of the Hykanatoi. Like all my brothers, I have many other names, carved in a long trail one after the other along the inside of my breastplate. Some names were earned in combat, many more were earned after contemplation of the mysteries. We cleave to this old practice, though I do not know for certain if we observe the rituals correctly. So much has been lost as the millennia unwind, and most significant of all is certainty.

In our theology, we talk of the *speculum certus* and the *speculum obscurus*. The first of these is the study of what is already known. If this strikes you as pointless, allow me to respectfully demur, for it is one thing to know what the Emperor said, and quite another to know what He meant.

He left no written testimony. The entirety of what we know of Him is revealed either through the records of remembrancers or the ecstatic visions gifted to the faithful. And thus, when a thing is placed in the canon of the certus, the intention behind it can never be fixed with surety. There are arguments nearly ten thousand years old concerning single utterances committed to parchment a hundred years after He spoke last from mortal lips. There are savants in the Tower of Hegemon who have devoted their entire lives to the interpretation of such fragments, and we do not scorn them, for their study is the study of fate’s weft itself. Even now, it is possible to gain enlightenment through meditation on the words of those who lived then.

But if the matter of the certus provokes debate, then that is nothing to the controversy of the obscurus, for the Emperor left much unsaid that He would doubtless have made clear in time. There were things He would have wished us to know, had there only been the opportunity to place it on record. We look out from our spires at the realm of mankind as it exists now, and we can only speculate what His intention is towards it. This is the study of the Emperor’s
Will, revealed in dreams and the patient scrutiny of arcane logic.  
If such matters bore or baffle you, then forgive me, for they are the objects of my very existence. I am named *philologus* by my brothers – the scholar. If I did not have my many other duties, I could imagine a life immersed in the minutiae of such philosophy. That may appear as indulgent, and a waste of the gifts given to me, but such would be to misunderstand the precipice on which we teeter.  
Without Him, we are lost. Everything is lost. Our only salvation is through the interpretation of His Will, and as a consequence of our failure we must divine this much as a blind man might divine the pattern of marks on an unseen page.  
And, in any case, I have never had the luxury of an indulgent life. For a long time now the walls we guard have been crumbling. Enemies assail us from every quarter, striking even at the heart of the most heavily guarded citadel in the Imperium of Man, forcing us to become what we were never intended to be – pure vengeance, pure defiance.  
In that time I took up my spear, and found a different artistry there, but those were not the first battles we fought. They took place within the walls, and were conducted with our own kind amid the very Palace where He yet dwelt, dormant in His deathless vigil. I did not know it then, back before the skies were cleaved and the foundations of all creation were rocked, but it began at that moment, with the arrival of a mortal man to the halls of the undying.  
He was overweight, with a wry face and sparse curls of age-whitened hair. He carried himself poorly, almost apologetically, as if he were somehow surprised to be instantiated at all. His dress, however, was far from modest – a thick robe of purple overlaid with a chasuble of gold. He bore icons of the High Council, the double-headed aquila surmounted by the skull-within-halo.  
I knew his name, but had never met him in person before. That was not especially unusual – even the senior staff of the Administratum ran into many tens of thousands, though this one was more influential than most.  
Out of long habit, virtually unconsciously, I reached a judgement on the fastest method of killing him. I found the optimal results – less than a microsecond of effort required – slightly amusing.  
‘Chancellor Tieron,’ I said.  
I did not bow. There are some who see this absence of traditional courtesy as arrogance, but in truth we only bow to the Master of Mankind, for to do otherwise would be the most profound disrespect. I attempted to be non-threatening, however, and extended my hand to usher him into my private
chambers.

‘Shield-captain,’ Tieron said, bowing conventionally and going inside.

I was not wearing armour, only the simple black robes of my order. Even so, I was over a third taller than Tieron and far more heavily built. My rooms were no doubt sparser than he was used to, being undressed stone and solely candlelit. The only relief from the austere lines came from my piles of hidebound books, some surrounded by glittering stasis fields to preserve the fragile contents.

‘I’m grateful for this audience,’ the man said, settling into the chair I had selected for him. I took my place opposite. I would have preferred to stand, but did what I could to make things less awkward for him.

‘There is nothing to be grateful for,’ I said. ‘The chancellor of the Senatorum Imperialis is welcome here at any time. Your burdens must be heavy.’

He smiled a dry smile. ‘Nothing in comparison to yours,’ he said. ‘I’ll not detain you longer than necessary – I request an audience with the Captain-General. I’m aware it’s difficult, but I’m acting on behalf of the Council. It’s been hard to know who to approach, as I was informed that both tribunes are indisposed, so – I’ll say it again – I’m grateful for you making the time.’

Tieron was correct – both tribunes were indisposed. Heracleon was performing ritual duties in his capacity as master of the Hataeron Guard, the Companions of the Emperor, and would not have responded to a summons from anyone. Italeo, his counterpart, was engaged in holy warfare and was similarly impossible to reach for all but the most vital of causes. The chancellor, I had been told by my amanuensis beforehand, had been prepared for the first circumstance, but not the latter.

Yes, the Custodians fight. Yes, we have been doing so for millennia. How else could it be that our fellowship remains prepared? Only the nature and the parameters of our warfare were at issue in those days of transition, not the essential matter of it.

‘The Captain-General is aware of the situation within the Council,’ I said. ‘It’s a delicate stage,’ Tieron said. ‘Understand me, I don’t act on behalf of any faction, but I’m beholden when any of them ask me.’

‘Understood.’

‘But you’re aware of the debates.’

‘Perfectly.’

‘And that matters in the war are reaching a critical juncture.’

I suspect that no one in the entire Imperium knew that better than us.

‘The Captain-General stated his opposition to taking a seat on the Senatorum
‘Imperialis fifteen years ago,’ I said. ‘His views have not changed.’

‘But the seat must be filled,’ Tieron said, quietly.

He was an effective performer. I have seen men and women enter into blind panic when confronted with one of our kind. The chancellor was afraid – that was natural – but he was neither foolish enough to hide it, nor craven enough to let it master him. He clearly knew what the settled position of the Adeptus Custodes was, yet must also have known that our master had come close to accepting the honour following the death of Speaker Iulia Lestia of the Ordo Malleus, fifteen years ago. Now that Chancellor Brach was gone too, another chance presented itself.

‘Is there unanimity in favour?’ I asked.

The question was superfluous – we knew the positions of all eleven remaining High Lords – but I was interested to hear Tieron’s response.

‘I’ve served the Council for eighty years,’ he said. ‘I’ve never known it to be unanimous about anything.’ He leaned forwards in his seat, cupping his hands.

‘When Dissolution was last proposed, the vote was split evenly, six for each motion, and thus no action was taken. I can’t help but think that matters have become more desperate since then. The proposal here is simple, shield-captain – to place the question into your hands.’

‘That is, if all the Lords cast their vote just as they did before.’

‘A safe assumption.’

‘Nothing in this galaxy is safe, though, is it?’

‘Hence the need to consider this.’

I smiled. I liked this man.

There had been a time when I despised mortals. In the early years of my service, when my physical perfection had been achieved but I knew little of the deeper truths of the universe, I saw them as irritants, impediments, ever apt to stray into corruption or futility.

It was Navradaran of the Ephoroi who changed my mind. He has spent more time outside the confines of the Palace than most of us, and his counsel had a great effect on me. In these darker days, I see humans as essentially children, which is not intended to belittle them. They have the potential to be so much more, but we, their guardians, will never lead them into that future if we concentrate exclusively on their inescapable failings.

All fail, even the greatest of us. We, perhaps above all, ought to remember that.

‘You are troubled by Cadia,’ I said.

He nodded earnestly. ‘Nothing troubles me more. I read the dispatches, I have
nightmares. Real nightmares, ones that keep me from getting the sleep I need. That’s the background to all this. That’s what’s changing.’

‘It is one world.’

‘It’s the Gate.’

‘One of many.’

He shrugged. ‘You’ll know more of that than me, but I’ll tell you truly, the High Lords have never been as anxious. They think we’ll lose it.’

‘Tell me this, then – what difference would Dissolution make?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not a member of the Council. My only task here is to set the options before those who’ll decide.’

I regarded him carefully. As we had been speaking, I had been making my assessment. He was clever, that much was certain. That cleverness was damaged by a degree of ebullience, which may well have been over-compensation from some deeper-seated sense of doubt. The Imperium as it exists rewards the strong and the savage – this Tieron was clearly neither, and so had been forced to develop other strategies for survival. I could not blame him for that.

My masters would want to know if he could be trusted, though. My initial feeling was that he could. It is hard to deceive us, even for the most subtle of souls, and I doubted Tieron would bother to try.

‘We are not a part of your Imperium,’ I said. ‘We involve ourselves within it only if we deem His will demands it. Do you really think, chancellor, that your proposed audience with the Captain-General could have any influence on his final judgement?’

This was the question. This was where he lost or won it. I waited for the reply with some interest, and was pleased to see that he did not hesitate.

‘Not to be impious,’ he said, looking me in the eye, ‘but yes, it most certainly could.’

‘You are confident.’

‘I’m aware of the stakes.’

‘You think we are not?’

‘Just five minutes with him,’ Tieron said, seriously. ‘Then we’ll see.’
In a time when so much was lost, we were found.
It truly amazes me now, thinking back, knowing more than I did, that the Imperium’s grasp on us had been let slip so completely. We held within our hands the kernel of salvation, and we were forgotten.
To be sure, we had always served, here and there – they still had to garrison their Black Ships, and there were inquisitors who understood our value – but in essence they had let us wither.
I explained this to Valerian, a long time later, when I was still angry. He did his best to understand that, but I could not help contrast the life he had enjoyed, cloistered in his halls of gold, immersed in the finest and the oldest things of a fading empire, when we were in the emptiness, scratching for survival as horrific tides lapped at our ankles.
It was all so stupid. That’s the great danger that condemns us – not daemon blades, but dumb ignorance. We’ve become a stupid race, glorying in the easy goals of anger and piety.
Then again, I’m aware my perspective is unusual. You see reality differently, lacking a soul. It’s a harder place, I think. Its edges are sharper.
There are no gods in my world. The things other people see, I do not. Even He is not a god to us, though saying that out loud would soon see me in a gaol and on the racks.
Not that I’d ever say it out loud. Not that I’d ever say anything out loud.
I don’t talk much these days.
I called myself a witch-seeker long before the rank became established again.
That was what we did, hunting the soul-weak from the long shadows. It was like an instinct. That was all we had, for Throne knows we had little else.

Our chamber was nine-strong. Seven of us had taken the vow, two more were undergoing trials. In the ancient past, it was said that the vow was taken in the presence of the Emperor, but that was obviously impossible for us – we could not even reliably get to Terra, let alone negotiate an audience with the guardians of the Throne. We observed the old rites as best we could, convening in our draughty old tower on Arraissa with our chipped armour and blunted swords. None of us knew, when we spoke the words, if we did so correctly, but we maintained the faith, and the binding effect was as strong for us as it had been for our sisters in generations past.

The last audible words to pass my lips were, ‘I so vow it.’

Actually, that’s not true. At the time, though, I certainly believed it to be. After that, it was all gesture and nuance and Thoughtmark. I preferred it. The clarity I have always sought came more easily when not distracted by the twitter of pointless, fleeting utterances.

If I had to make one change, one single change that might restore something like spine to this decaying Imperium, it would be this: say less, do more. A battle-sign gesture is the thing itself, the first movement of the sword-thrust or the trigger-pull, not the spoken command, which is a different act.

So much talk, so little action. Now that I’ve seen Terra itself I’ve seen how bad it can truly be. There are humans who spend their entire lives drowning in words written and spoken, bleeding their limited existence out over pointless verbal jockeying.

And they say we have no souls.

My name is Tanau Aleya. I am of the anathema psykana, what used to be called a null-maiden, or – even stupider – a Sister of Silence. Who came up with those titles? Not one of our order, that’s for sure. Probably a High Lord. They’re mostly idiots.

We didn’t have organised ranks back then. I served under the one who had kept things together for a long time, a woman whose memory I revere. I still hope to meet her again, for I don’t think she can possibly be dead. It would have taken a whole tide of the shedim to keep her down, and they’d be shrieking the whole time while she pulled them apart. Her name was Sister Atarine Hestia, and she was the one who found us all, back when Terra had all but forgotten we existed, pulled us up, beat some sense into our hive-trash heads and made us warriors.

I think it must have been like that on a hundred worlds, sometimes with official
blessing, sometimes under active persecution, but always there, gathering in the
dark, doing what we had been made to do.

Who made us like this? I don’t know. I don’t think He did. I think we were
always waiting, playing different parts, waiting for our time to come again.

We’ll all have our versions of when it started. For me, it was out in the void,
running silent, closing in on the benighted staging post of Hellion Quintus,
where I had reason to believe there was a woman who had sold her soul to
damnation for a brief escape from the hell of living.

I was right about that. I was just wrong about everything else.

I entered the Hellion orbital zone on a single-person Cull-class interceptor. In
those days we rarely used fully crewed sub-warp vessels. Even highly trained
cadres of human-normals found it hard to work with us, so in many cases we
opted for servitor-equipped ships. Those thought-dead drones were still capable
of twitching when I walked past them. Somewhere deep in what remained of
their limbic function a vestigial horror of me still squatted, which was annoying.
You could slice half their brains open, tie their nerves into loops, and still they
could barely remain in the same chamber as us.

It would be worse in the staging post, but I might be able to get in and out
without attracting much attention. Hellion was one of those throwback stations,
built sometime in the very distant past when traders would still attempt to make
warp jumps without properly sanctioned Navigators, then find themselves stuck
in scream-space and having to abort rapidly. The vagaries of warp conduits being
what they were, the station grew up around what old-time captains used to call a
bail-shaft – a safe well in real space squatting at the base of a whole cluster of
capillary exits. For a time, so our intelligence told us, the place had done well,
even attracting some military spending from the sub-prefect’s resilience
commander to beef up its guns. The usual hangers-on turned up – permanent
traders, thieves, missionaries, pleasure-bringers. They said it was quite the place
back then, if rough around the edges.

Not now. No one flew a warp-hull now without a whole team of Navigators to
guide it. Even contemplating making a jump without many days’ preparation and
the Geller fields at full integrity was madness – the ether was like boiling oil,
and rumour said more ships were being lost now than were being built.

That was bad news for Hellion, and all the other half-cocked stations spinning
within the old bail-shafts. Hardly anything dared to make the passage. The
bulkers stopped coming, as did the Navy tenders. The only ships that plied such
routes now were the ones that had a reason to stay hidden, and that diminished the quality of Hellion’s occupants further. Respectable people drifted away, leaving whole sections of its spiral structure echoing and empty.

So there we had it – a half-deserted void station full of contraband runners and slavers operating off the major warp routes as the empyrean fizzed madly all around it. You didn’t need to be a seer to guess that it was a weak link, a place where mortal fallibility would find plenty of hooks to get entangled with.

That wasn’t all, of course. We had our methods, our informers, our hunches. We’d seen a pattern of events develop over the past few decades – cells of shedim-worshippers had grown more numerous, and we couldn’t burn them fast enough, especially considering the need to remain out of sight of the jumpier units of the Adeptus Arbites. Hestia herself had immolated a secret society called the Circlet locked deep down under the shipyards orbiting Eyrinan V. Before they had all died, we got some garbled information that led us to other associated beds of heresy, among them Hellion Quintus.

So here I was, clad in my old armour, my charred flamer in my hand, watching the dark twist of metal turning slowly in the abyss. I let the servitors handle the comm traffic for docking, which involved them shunting binaric response codes to similarly lobotomised creatures at the other end. We came in low, under a heavy supporting beam for one of the station’s big spokes.

I finalised suiting up, and opened the airlock doors into a place that stank of human urine. There was no one waiting for me, not even automated guard-units. The corridor’s lumens strobed uncomfortably on low power levels.

I activated my helm’s cartographic scanner and isolated the chamber I needed. There was a direct route through the lower strata, avoiding the station’s populated zones, which made my task a little easier. I went quickly, hugging the plentiful shadows.

Most of the living things I encountered were servitor-grade, blind and limping creatures of metal and pulled-flesh that ignored me. A few human-normals lingered in those wells of darkness, and as soon as they laid eyes on me they looked even more nauseous than they had before, before hurrying away. I caught sight of flashes of grey in the dark, and filmy eyes, and emaciated hands clutching at ragged cloak-ends.

_Humanity_, I thought to myself. _Master of the stars._

Soon one of those wretches would get a message up to what passed for the authorities in that place, alerting them to the strangely armoured interloper skulking along in the gloom, but by that point I planned to be long gone.
I reached my destination – a locked door set amid a whole row of locked doors. The plasteel was pitted and spotted with rust, and in the centre of the panel was a small armourglass slide-viewer.

I might have chosen to depress the summon-chime and wait for someone to pull the viewer’s shielding back, but long experience had taught me that my unique repulsiveness could be detected even through a solid mass, so I seized the mechanism with my gauntlet, activated a freeze-grip and shattered it.

Then I was through, kicking the door aside and scanning beyond it. I detected movement from six warm-bodies within – two up close, four more further off. Las-fire criss-crossed out of the gloom, aimed immediately and accurately. I ducked under the worst of it, letting my armour deal with the rest. The hot stench of scorched auralite filled my nostrils as I opened up with my flamer.

I caught the two closest in that inferno, and soon heard the counterpoint of their screams. A lasgun’s power unit blew, showering the confined space with a burst of static, but by then I was already pushing through the shimmering flame-curtains to the ones beyond.

They fired back, and I perceived outlines of armoured bodies trembling in the heat-shake. Nothing they possessed could harm me. My presence alone was enough to make their flesh rebel, and I could smell panic in their gestures. I used my flames like a flail, pulling them round and melting their crude armour plates.

Even as they were dying I learned something of them. They were better equipped and better armed than the cult members I had expected, which was good, as it indicated we’d found a higher breed of degenerate. I glimpsed snatches of bare flesh as their armour crisped away – pale and diseased – before it too was consumed. They did not run, despite their fear. Never let it be said that hatred had blinded me entirely to quality – I could appreciate a foe who stood their ground.

Soon, though, only one remained – the woman I had come for, backing away from me. She was portly, swathed in a layer of fat that was probably synthetic and designed for endurance during void transit. She was wearing the slack uniform of a maintenance supervisor, marked with pale grey runes of relevant expertise, but she was no maintenance supervisor.

Even one of the ungifted, even one of the very stupidest of our species, ought to have been able to spot it – the wrongness, hanging over her like foul flatus. There were no visual cues, just a certain manner, a certain bearing, and it shrieked out moral squalor.

I let the flamer gutter out. She looked at me, her eyes half-steady, holding a
lasgun two-handed. She had dark hair, matted with greasy sweat.

She grinned at me twitchily. I could see she was terrified. Perhaps she knew better than most what I lacked that I should have possessed.

‘They told us you’d be a danger,’ she said.

I don’t know what she expected me to do then. Talk to her? I wasn’t even remotely tempted. Talking, like most things, is a skill built on repetition. After a while, you lose even the motivation to practise.

I looked around the chamber. Documents were spread out across dark iron tables, among them data-slates and secure comm-canisters. On one of the walls was a great chart made of what looked like animal hides, only part burned away by my flamer. It contained symbolic representations of planetary systems, connected by a skein of warp routes etched in a dark brown fluid.

‘Too late, anyway,’ she said, tracking me with her weapon, a standard-grade item that had no chance of troubling my armour. ‘Doesn’t matter now. It’s all ending, and very soon.’

I found her certainty intriguing. Most invective from cultists was bluster, designed to bolster their own courage more than anything else. This was different. She almost sounded sorry about it.

I looked back at her, and she recoiled. Her lip curled back, she took a step away almost before she’d realised it.

Let me tell you something. You never get used to it. You never lose the wounds. You grow up, your whole life, surrounded by people who loathe you for a reason they can’t even articulate, and it gets stuck under your skin. The training helps, of course. We learn techniques. We have old mantras to recite, telling ourselves that we are in reality the greatest of His servants, which is less about boastfulness than self-preservation, but you never really believe it, and every flinch, every appalled expression, twists the old knife a little bit.

‘I won’t tell you anything,’ she said, defiantly.

What a strange notion. She thought I was there to question her.

I opened the flamer up again, dousing her in a column of heart’s-blood-fire. For a moment I watched her writhe and jerk within the hot purification, her body a black clot against the screen of unleashed energy.

So look at me now, I thought, allowing myself a sliver of savage pleasure at the spectacle of this woman’s just and warranted suffering.

I let the execution go on too long. I used up too much sacred fuel, which was a sin Hestia would not find easy to forgive. By the time I was done, her body was a steaming heap of embers, laced with the last boiling remnants of her blood and
I shut off my flamer’s promethium line. I took a long breath. I let the heavy clouds of heat dissipate.

Then I went over to the chart. Unsurprisingly, the material was not animal hide, but something fouler. More surprisingly, it was a coherent representation of warp space, such as might be used by a Navigator or an Imperial general. I was no scholar of the empyrean, but I could understand a great deal of what it depicted. To my eye, it looked like the kind of schema used by a tactical war-planner – an almanac of systems, arranged in the esoteric order imposed by warp currents.

I took a pict of the data for later study, and moved over to the piles of comm-canisters. Many were marked with runes of warding – smears of blood designed to invoke curses on anyone tampering with them without the proper initiation. I activated hololith-beams from their emitters, and got little back but fuzzy, scrambled images for my trouble. They were either erased, or my unsanctioned usage had automatically wiped the contents.

I had to revise my opinions of this rabble again. They were behaving almost professionally.

I went back to the smouldering body of the woman. She had been clutching something before I had burst in – what looked like a hand-mirror, framed in heavy bronze in the shape of a gasping mouth. As I picked it up, I felt a spark of energy curl across my fist. The flat surface was cloudy, marked with half-images that still scudded.

I was about to shatter it, recognising a proscribed device that could be dissected at leisure on my return to the home world, when the glass suddenly clarified. I found myself looking into the dead eyes of something much, much more troubling than the burned woman at my feet.

I will be honest – my heart missed a beat. There’s no shame in that. There are few among the living who can look upon the face of the Enemy directly and not feel a spasm of ice clutch at their hearts.

It was rare to see one of them in such a manner. I have killed their kind before, of course. I take no greater pleasure than seeing a cursed warrior of the Old Legions die at my hands, for they are among the greatest of the foes we face, and eminently capable of ending us just as we are capable of ending them. We made the study of their ways the focus of our scarce resources, scrutinising their ancient iconography and their base heraldry for anything that might help us understand their intentions.

So I knew what it was I looked at. It was not a live feed, but the last stutter of
whatever arcane communication had been in use before I entered. I was staring at a warrior of the greatest of all the hosts of the Enemy – the self-styled Black Legion. I saw it through veils of rising mist, but could perceive clearly enough the ebon death mask, rimmed with greenish gold. I had faced these unholy fighters before in combat only once, many years ago, and could vouch for their extreme deadliness. Of all the various warbands and mongrel battalions of the Enemy, it was this Legion that ever portended the worst days ahead for us.

I could not understand what was being said. The language was distorted by the extreme distance, or mangled by sorcery, or perhaps spoken in some guttural battle-code, but its very presence here changed the whole tenor of this action. Something necessary yet routine had just become critical – if there was any link, even the slightest, between the Circlet and the Old Legions then word of it had to be taken back to Hestia immediately.

I moved quickly, collecting the remaining canisters, intending to place both them and the mirror within a null-casket on board my interceptor. I took down the hide map and rolled it tightly. As I went, I laid charges around the chamber, giving them only a few minutes to count down before going off. Soon after my departure this whole level would be purged, leaving no hint of what had taken place within. The need for haste was pressing.

It was only as I reached the broken doorway that I heard the word that truly knocked me off balance. Amid all the growls and hisses of the still-active feed, there came a name so familiar that no distortion could disguise it. The legionnaire spoke it like an expletive, sharp and vicious, and thus there could be no mistake.

Arraissa.

I started to run.
In those days it felt like the tasks before us would never end. The Council acted with great purpose, as far as I could ascertain, but it was scarcely sufficient to meet the growing tide of demands. We did not need Kerapliades’ counsel to know that the war was going badly, and yet the specifics still eluded us. Warp storms were rising to levels never witnessed by the living, astropathic choirs succumbed to madness, deafness or torpor, and my attempts to gain further information through the usual web of contacts yielded very little. Somehow, through that odd sense of herd intuition that always ran ahead of firm tidings one way or the other, the Throneworld began to panic.

We began to receive more reports than usual from the Palace guards, all of them complaining of sedition in the great slum-pans out beyond the gargantuan walls. It was nothing the regular enforcers couldn’t handle, but the frequency bothered me. These were not carefully planned revolts against the tyranny of the Lords, but spontaneous uprisings, confused and without purpose. When the leaders were interrogated, they could say nothing other than that a madness had seized them. They did not plead for their lives. In more than one report, it was said that they preferred death to what they thought was coming, which I found both contemptible and unsettling.

Much of what passed across my desk remained unread, such was the volume of missives that came my way, rising out of every avenue like a foetid tide of floodwater. There was a sense, I remember, of things coming apart, of seams gradually unpicking, of the levers of control no longer pulling on the machinery below.
That was hardly new. I had had the same sense many other times, and yet order had always been restored, the will of the Throne clamped back on to an unruly populace. I don’t remember thinking that this would be any different. Or perhaps I did. It’s hard now to recall, for we did not rest much then, and our dinners became less fine and more hurried, and we shuffled endlessly from citadel to citadel with our parchment bundles carried by trains of lumbering menials.

I met a general from the Cadian high command. His name was Alberich Harster, and he had been back on Terra for three months by then. I was fairly used to dealing with senior figures of the Astra Militarum, though had never quite shaken off my vague sense of inferiority in their company. You may find this odd, given the mightier warriors I was used to dealing with, such as Valerian, but in my mind these were an entirely different category altogether – almost beyond human. Men like Harster were what I might have become, had I been made of harder stone, and the lingering suspicion never left me that I somehow hadn’t tried enough, and that my world of scholars and expensive wines was an insult to those who died daily in the trenches.

If Harster felt the same way, he gave no sign of it. He was of the old school – calmly deferential without giving much away. He respected my rank, like all the military did, and was diplomatic enough not to betray what he thought of its bearer.

I received him in the same chamber where Kerapliades had spoken with me. By day it looked much the same as it did by night – Terra’s sludge-grey sunlight did little to leaven the oppressive gloom hanging over all my fine furniture.

‘General,’ I said, offering him a drink and taking a seat.

‘Chancellor,’ he replied, refusing it graciously and doing likewise.

He was a big man, his neck corded and tight up against his dress collar. A long scar ran down his right cheek, bisecting an augmetic eye socket. His flesh was tanned tight, solid like old leather, and his grey-white hair was cropped short.

‘When do you go back?’ I asked.

‘Two weeks,’ he replied.

‘You take the hopes of us all with you.’

His expression did not flicker. ‘I take half a million soldiers, in fifty fresh-raised regiments. It has taken ten years to muster them, and only now do I have the commission to depart. I pray to the Throne they will not arrive too late.’

I absorbed the implied insult. The wheels of Imperial bureaucracy grind slowly, and he could have no appreciation of how difficult a task it was to raise such an army over such a short span of time. Truth be told, ten years was nothing – I
have known it take five times as long to gather less potent forces together.

‘You have been fighting a long time,’ I said. ‘Tell me of it.’

‘We endure,’ Harster said, stiffly. ‘The line will not break.’

‘Come, general,’ I said, placing my ring-heavy hands in my lap. ‘If I wanted a catechism I would have gone to a priest. Tell me how it truly stands.’

For the first time, a shadow of unease fell across his features. He hesitated, knowing that it might be a test of fidelity to the public line we spun to the masses. After only a moment, though, the uncertainty passed. He had been fighting too long to be worried about what I might do to him.

‘Half a million will not do it,’ he said. ‘Ten times that would not do it.’

I nodded. ‘We’ve not heard from Cadia for a long time now.’

‘I know.’

‘That’s making all sorts of rumours fly around. The Gate might already be breached, they say.’

‘I’ve heard those rumours.’

‘You’ll still travel there?’

Harster’s grey eyes – one natural, one ringed with iron – stayed steady. ‘It’s where our duty lies.’

Despite myself, that caught me. I looked at this man, who had many years of natural life left to him, and no doubt had the coin and influence to find a less suicidal posting, and saw what those brutes at the schola could become, once the edges had been knocked off them. I will admit it – I felt shame.

‘What can be done?’ I asked.

He understood what I was getting at. I wished to know what the Astra Militarum would make of our great undertaking, and whether they could countenance it.

‘I’ve seen things no sane man should see,’ he said, taking a kind of rough pride in that, though it hollowed out his expression. ‘I’ve seen the Angels of Death defeated. You think that possible? I didn’t, but I’ve seen it. There’s strength in the universe greater even than theirs. Some of it dwells here, they tell me, held fast by the ancient law.’ His gaze, steel-hard, simply didn’t change. I’d have followed this one into battle, if that had been my calling. ‘They’re old laws. They’re old habits. I might say, if I were asked, that we can’t afford them any more.’

I pursed my lips in thought. I wanted to thank him for that, but I supposed he had little use for thanks from such as me.

‘I see,’ was all I said.
He was getting impatient. I knew when his lander was scheduled to take him up to the fleet hanging in orbit – a thousand slab-hulled troop carriers, escorted by every Navy frigate the Praeses Command could scrape together. After a meagre two weeks of no doubt understaffed preparation, they would be gone, so I got up, and watched him do the same. We walked to the doorway together, me shuffling under my heavy robes, he striding awkwardly, carrying old wounds.

‘May He preserve you out there, general,’ I said, standing at the threshold.

He gave me a curt nod. We were both observant, but neither of us thought that it really worked like that. I knew with perfect clarity that the man was going to his death, as were the half a million souls he took with him. Whether that would achieve anything, whether it would even slow the collapse, was another question.

‘We fight out there,’ he said, making the sign of the aquila, then looking at the over-fashioned pillars of gold around him. ‘You fight in here. I don’t know which of us has the worse job.’

Then he was gone, turning on his boot heel and limping down the corridor.

‘I do,’ I murmured, watching him go.

The engagement put me in a foul mood. For the first time in a long while, I found the bottomless mire of Terra’s slow-working procedures pointless and frustrating. I was as much a master of those mazes as any who had ever lived, and yet the wheels turned with agonising slowness in the face of annihilation. Everything told us that the walls would be breached, that the flood would rise to engulf us, and yet we did what we had been doing for ten thousand years – raised fresh regiments, sent entreaties to wilful Chapter Masters, argued over precedence and sector commands in Council.

I strode down the corridors towards my secure command hall, ignoring the many staff who attempted to get my attention.

All but one. I could never refuse Jek, who was as much a part of me as my synthetic lungs. She wasn’t as old and broken as I was, and yet had the quick mind and steady intelligence needed to thrive in this old fen of competing rivalries.

‘How was he?’ she asked, walking briskly beside me. That’s what we always seemed to do – conduct hurried conversations while on the move to some fresh crisis.

‘It breaks my bloody heart,’ I growled.

‘It’s his duty.’ That word again – duty. Perhaps, once, there had been more than
that.
‘Tell me how we stand,’ I said.
‘We have an agreed date,’ she said, letting a note of triumph slip into the statement. This was what we’d been working for – slogging for days and weeks with the offices and sentinels and gatekeepers of the Twelve – and I finally looked up at her. ‘The Ninth of Decimus. All have agreed.’
‘Even Raskian?’
‘Even Raskian.’

Oud Oudia Raskian was Fabricator-General of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the hardest of all the Twelve to pin down to a general assembly at the Senatorum, since his physical form was more building than body and required extensive modification to travel from Mars at all. It would take eight Basilikon megalifters to get him to the Palace, and all that required tedious orbital clearance.

Still, he’d agreed. We’d done it.
‘At last, some good news,’ I muttered, still walking. Ahead of me loomed the heavy bronze doors of my command hall, flanked by gun-drones and a brace of house guards in purple livery. ‘It doesn’t give us much time to organise the orders of inquiry. Arx has been pushing for her damnable intra-ordo summit madness, and it’s got to stay off the agenda.’

You’ll understand, I hope, the need for the flurry of names here, for the politics was complicated – Kleopatra Arx was the Inquisitorial Representative, and had been agitating for a grand reorganisation of the labyrinthine layers of cells and cabals within her purview, something that required a majority of the High Lords to warrant. I wanted this tortuous and largely administrative proposal nowhere near the table, for it could only delay the truly important matters at hand.
‘I’ve put out feelers, chancellor,’ said Jek. ‘The Provost is opposed, so we should be able to defer until the next scheduled session.’

As the doors opened, revealing the vast dome within, my mind was working hard. I barely saw the hundreds of menials and savants toiling over their comm-stations and scholastic pedestals. Through high windows above us the towering profile of the Inner Palace could be seen against the sky, all of it grey and monolithic.

For some time, virtually the entire set of mechanisms at my command had been devoted to a single goal – to place the issue of Dissolution before the Twelve, and get them to meet to consider it. At the start, I had done so out of a sense of duty to Kerapliades; as I had learned more, and spoken to those like Harster, I
had come to see it as the only tasking that made any sense at all. And more than this – I wanted it to succeed.

Remember this: history records the warriors and the sword-bearers, but there were always those who did what was necessary to get them to battle. That was my role now, the one contribution I could make.

‘My mind is sluggish,’ I said, making my way up to my strategium platform – a hexagonal plane of rippled marble overlooking the great expanse of workers, studded with a mighty polished stone table and encircled with floating picter lenses and hololith casters. ‘I need to set things in their right place.’

Jek joined me at the table’s edge. I summoned a read-out of our running tactical situation, and lithcasts flickered into translucent life around me.

Every member of the Council had an entry there, scored in vivid red runes. I had a team attached to each one, shadowing their movements and reporting on their conversations. It would have come as little surprise to them to know that their inner courts were infiltrated by my spies, for no doubt my own organisation was similarly riddled, but my people were better.

I looked over the data. Despite everything, all the entreaties and the quiet bribes and the appeals to reason, the matter remained poised. The structure of the Council had been designed to encourage consensus. It was twelve-strong, making it hard to pass contentious acts, for an even vote ensured that the proposal remained unacted. Any member could choose to support, reject or abstain.

At present, we knew that Dissolution had the firm support of five members of the Council: Kleopatra Arx, the Inquisitorial Representative; Uila Lamma, the Paternoval Envoy of the Navigator Houses; Kania Dhanda, the Speaker of the Chartists Captains; Merelda Pereth, the Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy; and the originator of it all, Kerapliades. We also knew that five members would vote against: Oud Oudia Raskian of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Irlthu Haemotalion, the Master of the Administratum and the primus inter pares of the Council; Baldo Slyst, the Ecclesiarch of the Adeptus Ministorum; Aveliza Drachmar, the Grand Provost Marshal of the Adeptus Arbites; and Leops Franck, the Master of the Astronomican.

So then, five for, five against. Our efforts over the past weeks had been directed to the sole undecided member – Fadix, the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum. The assassins often abstained from votes, since their interests were generally served no matter what policies were enacted by their masters. Fadix had always been an archetypal grand master – swathed in layers of
protection, his domain the hardest of all to penetrate, and alongside Arx the most perilous to cross. We had tried carefully, doing what we could to make the case and secure some kind of indication of preference. If he opted to oppose, then all was lost – the vote could not be passed. If he opted to support, then things became easier – the seat vacated by Brach could remain unfilled and the vote would still be carried. That would mean our attempts to make contact with the Captain-General became less pressing, something that I would have welcomed, for I was still no closer to gaining an audience there.

‘Any news from the Grand Master?’ I asked, noting that we hadn’t had a communication from our agent for some time.

Jek gave me an apologetic look, and handed me a small casket.

I opened it, to find a comm-bead, speckled with blood, sitting on a bed of crumpled silk. I didn’t need to activate it to know that it was one of ours. The silk was Fadix’s signature – they said that every kill he made was left with a ribbon of it somewhere close by.

I sighed deeply. I had known our agent there – a good and brave woman who had operated undetected for a long time.

‘So that’s that, then,’ I said, deflated.

‘Not quite,’ said Jek, motioning for me to close the lid of the casket. As I did so, I noticed the inscription, written in one of the Council’s many internal ciphers, inlaid black on black and almost undetectable.

I looked up at Jek. ‘He wants to see me,’ I said.

‘For what, though?’ asked Jek, warily.

‘He doesn’t take kindly to interference, I’d say.’

‘Or he means to end it for good.’

It would be a bold move, for a Council member to extinguish one of its more prominent servants, but not impossible. They were beholden to no one but themselves, and I had always known I was eminently replaceable.

‘Perhaps we’ve pushed things too far,’ I murmured.

Jek hesitated before replying. She was the most loyal of my many aides-de-camp, and yet now there was the slightest hint of reproach.

‘Forgive me, lord, if I don’t fully understand it,’ she said. ‘There have been many proposals, and yet with this one…’

I knew what she was trying to say. It was a mystery to me too, why this one idea had captured my attention so completely. I had built a career on playing the odds, remaining allies with all, never letting a single issue derail me from the greater goal of efficiency and self-preservation.
If she had pressed me, I do not know what I could have told her. I didn’t even fully understand the deeper legal aspects of Dissolution, which in its fullest sense was a whole range of measures involving the repeal of some of the earliest acts of the Lex Imperialis as laid down by the first Lord Commander. In practice, though, we all knew what it truly meant – the end of the standing injunction that tied the Adeptus Custodes to Terra – although this had never been something that had taxed me, not until now.

Were the Custodians sorcerers, I wondered? Could Valerian have done something to my mind? Could Kerapliades have done?

I leaned on the desk. I probably looked tired.

‘You do not have to go,’ Jek said, concerned for me.

‘No, I don’t,’ I said.

Then she smiled. ‘But you will.’

‘Of course.’

She reached out and placed her hand over mine. I couldn’t help but notice how young it was, next to my wrinkled, many-times-rejuved flesh.

‘He would not dare to end you,’ she said.

That was a kind thing to say, and perhaps she even believed it. I, though, knew better how the man worked. I was getting in too deep, as if past sins were catching up with me.

‘I guess we’ll find out,’ I said, pulling my hand away.

I will not deny it – I was discomforted. My nerves were weakened by the heavy burden of care, and the sense of things running beyond our ability to control them never went away.

But I got in the shuttle, gave directions to the pilot, and did what I had to. As we took off from the high spire of my domain, I saw the cityscape of Terra run away before us, crumbling and magnificent, grey under a darkening sky. Some way to the north was the mountain-face of the Sanctum Imperialis itself, glowering like a dormant volcano. The urban tower-mass stretched off in every direction, tangled and overbearing. I considered this my natural habitat, though I had always understood its danger. Harster had been right in one sense – this was a warzone, albeit one where the killing happened silently.

Fadix’s realm was a long transit south of the holy apex, lodged up against the inner sweep of the walls themselves. A neophyte would never have known that the place housed what it did – its facade looked no different from one of a thousand Ecclesiarchy temples, blackened by old soot and bedecked with
dolorous angels on pediments of granite. Perhaps it was a little darker than the rest, a little more solidly made. For some reason its lintels were dotted with psy-ravens, dozens of them, staring out with black augur-eyes over the vistas of decay. No other aircraft went within a kilometre of that place, warned off either by reputation or silent intuition. For the last few moments of the journey my flyer was the only one in the air, a lonely speck against the giant terraces ahead.

We docked, and I was greeted in a cavernous, dusty hall by a single attendant. He wore a suit of black armour, close-fitting and tight-plated. He never spoke and I never saw his face, which was hidden behind an eyeless vox-distortion mask. If there were other menials or servitors present, they remained out of view. The whole place was cold, and heavy with grime and shadow. It was almost a parody of what the order stood for, perhaps put on as some kind of elaborate theatre for their own amusement. I was perfectly aware, for instance, that this was only one of many Officio Assassinorum citadels. The true nexus of their operations was unknown to all but the Grand Master himself, and perhaps a few of his peers in the Council.

As we passed further within, I saw icons of the Officio Assassinorum sunk deep into walls of brass and onyx. The passageways remained quiet, almost deathly, and I glimpsed great vaults yawning off on either side of us as we walked, each lined with obscure cabinets and strange sculptures.

It was a long time before we reached the Grand Master’s own chambers. Once there, my guide melted away, going as silently as everything in that damned morgue, leaving me alone before a pair of copper-faced doors. They opened before I had a chance to move, sweeping soundlessly across a dark stone floor.

He was waiting for me inside, seated behind a long desk stacked high with parchment. Candles burned in iron holders, scarcely illuminating the room. What little I could see was exquisite – thick oil paintings in sooty gilt frames, bronzes atop mahogany side tables. I could almost smell the age of it all. Some of it might have been there for thousands of years, some of it might have made its way to the room as a result of the contracts carried out against powerful figures across the Imperium.

I had not heard it said that the assassins were more corrupt than the rest of us, but there had never been much official disapproval attached to the accumulation of suitable compensation for services rendered. And there had been, after all, so many of those services.

He did not rise. I carried myself as confidently as I could. I had a profound sensation of being watched from all sides, and resisted the urge to look around
me into the gloom.
‘Be welcome, chancellor,’ he said.
Fadix was as cadaverous as his profession demanded. His head was lean, his eyes as black as the psy-ravens that stood guard over his halls. He wore loose robes – silk, of course – that glistened like oil in the flickering light. Even seated, there was something in his posture that gave away the extreme conditioning he had always lived his life under. I wondered then, as I had done when meeting him before, which Temple he had originally served in. He was surely not one of the Eversor monsters – they were ruined by their unique regimen – and I do not think a Culexus could have been restored either. That still left plenty of possibilities.
‘Your message was perfectly eloquent,’ I said.
‘It was nothing personal. I dislike being observed too closely, by you or anyone else.’
‘I do what I must.’
‘But you do not suffer for it. She did.’
I resisted the sudden urge to swallow. There was no overt malice in his words, just a chilling lack of intonation. This man killed like another man breathes.
‘I regret that greatly,’ I said, honestly enough.
‘Maybe you do.’ Fadix leaned forwards a little, and the silk drapes shifted. ‘But you’re taking a peculiar interest in this matter. I’ve never known you to overreach before.’
It was all true, so there was little point denying it.
‘I act on the demands of the Council,’ I said.
‘In the beginning, maybe,’ Fadix said. ‘But you’re not Kerapladies’ creature. Unless he’s bought you now, which might not have been a wise move for either of you.’
I grew impatient. ‘This is Terra, my lord,’ I said. ‘Even the statues watch one another.’
Despite my long experience, I was letting the Grand Master get to me. If that counted as some kind of victory for him, he gave no outward sign of satisfaction. His expression never seemed to change.
‘No doubt,’ he said. ‘And now you have your date for camera inferior set, and all of us lining up to do your bidding. And yet this time is different. You are doing more than arranging times and places. You’re gathering information as if it were food for a starving man. They tell me coin has changed hands in quantities not seen for years. You’ve been careful to hide the sources, but you’re not the
only one to have spies.’

I began to reply, to make the standard defence of my independence, but he held up a thin hand, and my lips closed. His fingernails were long, carefully filed into perfectly smooth ellipses.

‘You want a certain result,’ Fadix said. ‘You’re no longer impartial. That intrigues me. I could shatter your game with a single choice, for I too know how the Council stands. If I voted against your motion it would die. I’m quite used to killing things.’

‘You are bound, lord, to vote in the interests of the Imperium.’

Fadix smiled dryly. ‘I’ve done more for the Imperium than you’ll ever know,’ he said, and his teeth glinted like burnished iron in the dark. ‘I’ve sent my sons and daughters into the hell of Cadia, and almost none return. For every target we eliminate, we lose twice that number of priceless operatives. Do I think Dissolution would change that?’

‘That is the matter before you.’

He shrugged. ‘For me, I have no view. I care little for laws, only that they bind my hands. Suppose you release the Custodians from their vigil here. They say there are ten thousand of them. The enemy numbers in the billions. A lion is a poor hunter to set against so many jackals.’

I remembered Harster’s bleak face then. *There’s strength in the universe even greater than theirs.*

‘The same argument applies to the Angels of Death,’ I said. ‘We’ve always needed elites.’

‘And so we have them.’ Fadix reached for the leaf of parchment before him and brandished it. I could see reams of close-scr awled text, stamped and restamped with the great seals of the Adeptus Terra. ‘This is the warrant, under the Lex, for an Eversor to be unleashed. It has taken two years to secure. This night, it will be activated, and the stasis pod will be launched into the void. It is the deadliest weapon in my arsenal, honed over ten thousand years of experience. It will kill and kill until it reaches its target. It will cause terror to set against terror. What have the Custodians done to prepare themselves for such fighting, save patrol these walls and polish their spears?’

I knew that they had done far more than that. I guessed that Fadix knew too, but the point was still well made.

‘If you mean to oppose,’ I said, feeling that I had come here at such personal risk only to see my endeavour thwarted, ‘then you are within your rights.’

‘Hah. If I wished to wound you that way, it would have been sweeter to do it at
the Council, and watch your hopes crumple at the moment of completion.’ He replaced the parchment lightly. Every one of those sheets was a warrant for the death of some proscribed soul, and he shuffled them like a banker shuffles notes of promise. ‘No, I have in mind a subtler punishment for you. I know you’ve already spoken to the Adeptus Custodes. You do not wish to return to them. I would not wish to return to them either, and yet you will have to, for I plan to abstain. And you understand what that means.’

I did. If he were telling the truth, the votes would remained tied at five each. The twelfth place would have to be filled in order to break the deadlock. I would have to, somehow, speak to the Captain-General.

I could see now what Fadix had done. My interest in the result had been uncovered. Going anywhere near the Custodians would be dangerous for me now, and yet doing nothing risked the chance slipping away. I could pursue it, but it endangered everything I had striven to build over eighty years.

The matter had always been delicate. Now it had become perilous.

‘I do not yet know the intentions of the Adeptus Custodes,’ I said, almost to myself.

Fadix placed his hands on the tabletop, folded neatly, sheathed in cuffs of purest silk.

‘Then, chancellor,’ he said, bringing the interview to its terminus, ‘if you value your reputation, and care anything for this project of your Council allies, I think you had better find out.’
I ran down the long corridor. I was deep within the Inner Palace, where the ground itself was hallowed. The high vaulted roof was hung with battle-standards, hundreds of them, all stiff with age. Tall windows let a poor light slip across the flags, etching silver across skull-faced gargoyles.

My guardian spear, Gnosis, crackled in my grip. I could feel my heart thumping steadily, my lungs working, my blood coursing. My armour swam with lines of static electricity, feeding thin lines of energy from the snarling blade. I was like a star in the void.

He was ahead. I could smell him now. This enemy was not one for concealment – he had been built to level walls, and now he was inside them. I had few illusions over what he was capable of – for all that our cultivation was in many respects superior to that of the old Legiones Astartes, they were still among our deadliest foes and quite capable of defeating one of us if sufficient care were not taken. The Long War had given them many dark gifts, ones that we had to learn about and counter.

I wondered often if we even surpassed our brothers of old now, the ones who had worn the crimson-and-gold, for we had had so many more centuries to understand the nature of the enemy we fought. That was no doubt prideful, and probably inaccurate, but still the thought often came to me.

I rounded the corner at speed, and saw my quarry. He was still running, going faster than his gunmetal-heavy armour would have suggested was possible. He might have been making for one of the pulpits higher up, hoping to find some vantage from which to launch a defence, but my pursuit had been too swift.
I opened up Gnosis’ bolter, catching my enemy on the shoulder and sending him crashing to the ground. Above us both, banners swayed heavily, caught by the backwash from the explosion.

I raced after him, watching him twist back to his feet. He was a massive brute, crusted with ridged and tarnished battleplate. His helm-lenses glowed a dull red, like magma, and he carried a two-handed warhammer. The stench of engine fuel hung over him. He might have even approached my own size, my weight, my strength – such were the perversions the warp had wrought on those who had once served the Throne.

We slammed together, and the impact rippled the stone around us. Our weapons crunched into a brace-lock, showering plasma over both of us. I swung away, hilt-first, and smashed him back a pace. He shoved back, aiming to ram the fizzing hammerhead into my chest.

He nearly connected. I judged his weapon was within a few microseconds of an impact that would have cracked my auranite breastplate. That interval, however, was comfortably sufficient to spin my blade over in my grip, ram the spear tip into the Traitor’s gorget and fire at point-blank range.

The bolt-shell exploded instantly, blasting his head apart in a shower of blown metal-shreds. His warhammer spun out of control, his limbs jerked apart and the momentum of my down-thrust sent his headless corpse crashing to the ground.

I stood over him for a moment longer, breathing heavily, my spear gripped loosely. Blood, viscous as sump-oil, oozed from the rotten stump of his neck. His metal fingers twitched. The aegis of force around his warhammer flickered out.

Slowly, carefully, I relaxed. The kill had been clean, with no damage taken. I was not satisfied with how far this one had penetrated, though. On another run, I would have hoped to have downed him further out.

I felt no particular emotion as I studied the body. I understood that my cousins in the Adeptus Astartes reserved an almost pathological hatred for their Traitor counterparts. I wondered if that made them more or less effective on the field of battle. To me, the surviving members of the Old Legions were like bands of animals – feral threats to the Throne that required culling. I felt no discernible difference in my response to them than that I had experienced when hunting xenotype tyranids and eldar in these same tunnels – they were all dangerous, all worthy of study, but unworthy of expending emotional energy upon.

I deactivated Gnosis’ energy field and stood back from the corpse. In a few moments, Palace menials would catch up and secure the body. Every atom of it
would be destroyed in furnaces watched over by sanctioned priests. For the time
being, though, it would lie in the dust, ruined and broken, just as so many of his
kin had done ten thousand years before.

In case you are in any doubt, let me make two things clear. This was no
hololith – we were in the real Palace. This was also a real legionary, once of the
IV Legion, latterly part of some warband operating in the Ophir Reach, so they
told me.

That knowledge may appal you, or perhaps strike you as ludicrous. How could
we allow such a monster to get so close to the centre of our power, the one site
we were sworn to defend above all else?

I remember when I discovered the nature of this particular Blood Game, and
had similar thoughts myself. And yet, recall that the Palace is the size of a
continent, with many sections lost to habitation, and so we have literally
hundreds of square kilometres in which to stage our exercises. If I had let the
creature escape the hunt, it would have been a mark of shame against my record,
but several hundred gun-servitors would have annihilated him before he could
have broken the cordon we had set.

And, of course, not one of them has ever escaped my hunt. I say that not to
boast, but to demonstrate both the wisdom and the necessity of these exercises.
We must fight real enemies, in the real environment we are pledged to guard.
They change, as the corrupting years work their spell, and so must we.

That leaves the question of how he came to be there at all. Remember, I told you
that we are not idle. We have our ships, and we have knowledge of many gates
into the Outside, and we have whole corps devoted to the recovery of suitable
subjects. As for the particular place this one was taken, that shall of course
remain undisclosed.

I shook the blood from Gnosis’ blade, and withdrew from the site of the kill. As
I did so, I suddenly sensed that I was not alone. I turned, and saw the
approaching dark-gold profile of Navradaran of the Ephoroi.

I smiled. ‘Were you close behind the whole time?’ I asked.

‘Just to observe,’ he replied.

Navradaran’s voice was far lower than mine, a bass rumble that seemed to swell
up from within the heart of his armour.

‘He got too far,’ I said.

‘Only judged against the standard of perfection,’ he said.

‘What other standard is there?’

‘Come beyond the walls with me one day,’ he said. ‘I will show you.’
We walked together. Lingering close to the corrupted corpse was distasteful, and I could already hear the clatter and rumble of the approaching disposal teams.

‘Then what brings you inside, brother?’ I asked.
‘Dreams,’ he said.
I stopped walking. The word alone was enough to halt me.
Dreams do not mean the same to us as they do to others. In ordinary life, we do not dream at all. If I ever dreamed as a child, I have forgotten it. Something in our minds is changed by what we become, and whatever purpose dreaming has for the mortal psyche is made redundant by our alteration.
But there are exceptions. Legendary ones. They are spoken of carefully, reverently, for it was in the form of dreams, long ago, that His will was made most clearly manifest to us. There are accounts, written in arcane script and buried in the deepest vaults of the Inner Palace, that tell of detailed testimony from the oldest of our order, now all long dead. The greatest of us all – Diocletian Exemplar, Thanassar, even Valdor himself – were said to have had dreams in which knowledge was given.
There have not been dreams for millennia. Many, including myself, had begun to doubt that they would ever come again.
‘What did they tell you?’ I asked, eagerly.
‘The dreams were not mine. I have been occupied with lesser things – witches, xenos and their hunters. They were Heracleon’s. He wished to speak with me about them.’
The tribune Heracleon was still within the inner sanctum, fully occupied with the hieratic duties that were the most sacred calling for us all.
‘And what did he dream of?’ I pressed. I found myself burning to know, with the kind of almost juvenile curiosity that should have been driven out of me a long time ago.
‘You have been a fine shield-captain, Valerian,’ Navradaran said, starting to walk again. ‘You must have considered where your fate would lead you.’
‘I serve at His will,’ I said, following close behind.
‘No one doubts it. But this is a time of change – you see that more clearly on the other side.’
‘You speak in riddles.’
Navradaran laughed. ‘You wish for it plainly? Heracleon dreamed of a name. Your name. The Hataeron Guard are depleted, and he has taken this as a sign. Having spoken to him myself, I am in agreement.’
The words made my pulse rate pick up. The Companions were never more than three hundred strong. It was the highest honour to be chosen for duty within that brotherhood. There would be sacrifice, of course – I would have to leave my precious books behind – but that counted as nothing besides the opportunity to serve in the most profound way imaginable.

I hardly knew what to say. Only a short time ago I had been dealing with matters of political protocol with short-lived mortal scuttlers of the High Lords’ hierarchy. Now the prospect of taking my place behind the Eternity Gate and never leaving, spending the remainder of my life in the radiant aegis of His immanent presence, rose up instead.

‘A surprise?’ Navradaran asked, looking wryly amused at my stupefaction.

‘You might say it.’ I attempted to collect myself. ‘He has mentioned nothing to me of this.’

Navradaran placed his hand on my arm, halting me.

‘That is why he sent me to find you,’ he said. ‘Come, the Throne awaits.’

The Throne.

Such a simple word, used across every world of the Imperium as a curse, a blessing, a vow or a mere preposition. Almost none of those who invoked it knew anything about it. They imagined a simple golden chair, I suppose, like something a princeling of a barbarian world might occupy. They imagined a chamber around it, glittering with the riches of our interstellar domain, and maybe courtiers drifting across fine floors, murmuring to one another about high matters of state.

I cannot blame them for their lack of imagination. They are taught what to think by the priests, and the image does no harm and some good. They can fix their minds on it in times of darkness, and their faith in its power may stiffen their resolve. That does not prevent them from being so very badly wrong.

Whatever it might once have been, the Throne is no longer a single object, nor is it housed in a single room. Its mechanisms spread out like roots throughout the entire Inner Palace, worming down into the forgotten crypts and climbing up into the highest peaks. Its power coils are the size of cities, its foundations the remade mountains themselves. The adepts of the Mechanicus who toil without rest to maintain its workings have added so many accretions over its ten millennia of life that the planet around it has been utterly changed – bored away, ground down and raised up again.

You might say that Terra itself is little more than a holding vessel for the
Throne. Certainly, if one takes the mighty psionic transmission conduits leading to the Fortress of the Astronomican as part of its structure – which would be a reasonable judgement – then the Throne’s mechanism is far more massive than the Outer Palace itself. It is woven into the strata of the planet like an internal organ, pulsing and arterial. In truth, I doubt that any living soul, save the one who ordered its construction and dwells at its heart, has any true understanding of its full extent.

And yet, the unschooled men and women of the Imperium are not wrong in every particular. There was once a room at the heart of it all – vast enough, to be sure, but a room nonetheless. It has not entirely disappeared, though its inner faces are now scored with the detritus of Mars and its roots have been replaced by pits clawed into the heart of the world. The air in that place is hard to breathe. The temperature is astonishing. The ground trembles, and the vaults ring with the grind of immense machines that have been in ceaseless operation for millennia.

It is hard for me to convey what it is like to be there. I have walked through its halls and its vaults, surrounded on all sides by the holiest of all human physical creations, and have been brought nigh to my knees by the magnitude of it all. Save for the greatest savants of the Red Planet, who are human only in the most nominal sense, only we pass through its portals. There used to be others, the silent daughters of the anathema psykana, but for many years they had not been fully part of the Adeptus Terra and did not come into the precincts as they once had done.

So only we remained, clad in the black of our penance, stalking among the snaking cables and clustered power lines, listening for any slight change in the heartbeat of the machine that surrounded us, lost in its burnished shadows.

Navradaran and I went swiftly, walking the long and winding stairs down to the deepest operational levels. For a long time the only witnesses we had were red-eyed Martian automata, scrabbling in the dark, tracing ritual routes through the mazes and mumbling words of forgotten process-languages.

I looked up briefly, and saw a childlike angel flap across the face of the high arches, leaking a messy trail of incense. The creature looked vaguely lost.

My heart was still beating fast. I had been told, a long time ago, that even the Space Marines feared this place. Everything living feared this place. It was said that humanity could not bear to be close to the source of both its creation and destruction, and so we were like moths to the candle here, burning ourselves as we approached the engine of souls.
I saw a cadre of Mechanicus magi processing across a walkway hundred of metres above us, their passage lit by the candle-like flicker of arc-welders. We kept moving, gliding deeper into the underworld.

In time we came to the Astral Gate, marked with the Emperor’s own original thunderbolt sigil over the lintel. The first of the Hataeron Guard were waiting for us there with their guardian spears in hand. The tribune Heracleon stood among them, his helm removed to reveal his severe, blunt face.

‘Tribune,’ I acknowledged.

He looked at me for a long time. ‘Shield-captain,’ he said. ‘Navradaran told you everything?’

‘He said you had been dreaming.’

‘It seemed… the right word to use,’ he said.

I looked beyond him, through the portal and into the heart of the Throne’s inner workings. A long corridor ran onwards, ridged with bands of iron, glinting from tiny lumens implanted in the metal. The floor was lost in an ankle-deep soup of condensation, and slender sparks of static danced across the serrations.

‘I am not the only one,’ Heracleon said. ‘All of us here, little by little, we have begun to see things.’

‘You are honoured.’

‘If they are true visions. But the Throne is not what it was.’

Even as he spoke, I saw a hiss of steam burst from an overhead coolant line, high up in the tangled heights. Immediately a little skull-drone swept up towards it, isolating the leak and hovering below it, dendrites flickering.

‘As you see,’ Heracleon remarked, dryly. ‘Come, this way.’

We passed under the Gate’s arch. The guards remained at the portal, leaving the three of us to make our way further in.

‘I had little idea you were considering me for this, tribune,’ I said.

‘Neither did I. There were other names ahead of yours.’ Heracleon looked over at me. ‘I mean no disrespect. There are many roles to fill on the walls too.’

‘For myself, I did not foresee my fate here. Not yet.’

‘No. But then we live in an age of surprises, do we not?’

At the terminus of the long corridor, we emerged out onto the floor of a colossal hemisphere, filled with glowing power exchangers. The air itself thrummed with electric force, and mighty beams of plasma danced above us, making the reflective metal of the machinery flash vividly.

‘There will be trials,’ I said.

‘Of course,’ Heracleon said. ‘Many of them. But this is the first test.’
From the chamber of light, we crossed over a single-span bridge flung over a cloudy gulf that seemed to go down forever. The noises became heavier and deeper, and I felt the torment of the earth below. It was forever cracking, I knew – prised apart by the forces barely contained within the Martian groundwork of buried iron. On the far side of the chasm soared a wall, entirely man-made, a dizzying patchwork of pipes and riveted panels. Ancient standards hung against the ticking dials and shackled vacuum-pods, most etched with binaric litanies, a few inked with High Gothic purity rotes.

The next portal was guarded by two Contemptor-Galatus Venerated Fallen, both static and silent in the flickering gloom. They didn’t move as we passed them by, their armoured helms gazing in eternal vigil out into the shadows.

There were more gates, more chambers, all passing in stately procession as we wound our way inwards. Some were vast, burning with shackled star-fires and pulsating like hearts; others were frigid, grave-like and lined with crystal fusion vanes. Most were empty of the living. A few held conclaves of red-robed magi poring over open workings while tech-savants whispered sequence-prayers to the Omnisshia, though they paid us no heed.

Eventually we came to the heart of it. Companions were waiting for us, twelve of them. The gold of their auranite was blackened, as if charred by fire. I had heard that proximity to the source did that, turning our pride into ashes. I had always thought the symbolism appropriate.

The door ahead of us was the largest yet, a gothic arch of banded basalt columns. Electricity snapped and fizzed openly through the air now, briefly dazzling in the otherwise near-black interior. Over the Last Door, carved in Archaic Gothic, were the ancient words Conservus, Restituere, Revivicarem.

During the journey, I had been feeling steadily more oppressed. It was not the monolithic architecture, for I had ventured almost as far on previous occasions. Like all my order, I knew the twisting ways of the Inner Palace perfectly. I could not place the source of my unease, but it had grown with every step, and that troubled me.

Now, poised on the threshold of the final gate, I could feel cold sweat-lines running down my neck. My blood was pumping in my temples.

‘The Hataeron are with the Emperor,’ said Heracleon, speaking the words as if they were some rite of ascension. ‘They alone see Him with mortal eyes. Once inducted into the brotherhood, they never leave His side.’

I understood that. I had known it from the very beginning. Such a sacrifice would have been worth it a thousand times just for the certainty that it was His
desire for me to serve there.

But I felt nauseous. The air was thick, shimmering with heat and psychic afterburn. The very stones were swimming in it, blazing with it. For a moment, it felt as if they were screaming at me.

‘Brother?’ asked Heracleon. ‘Do you hear?’

I nodded, working hard to remain focused. This was all part of the first trial. I had to remain calm. If it were not difficult to pass the threshold, then all might do it.

‘And so the first step is the greatest,’ the tribune went on. ‘Take it, and witness the most profound sphere of duty.’

The Companions parted. For a moment, I saw the Last Door ahead of me. Its surface was black and pitted, fused together from old ceramite. In the centre, where the two doors met, an ebon face had been carved. It was a human face, austere, mournful, encircled with a halo of fire.

Then the image split in two, and the doors swung inwards. I saw what lay beyond – ranks of pillars, marching into a mist-thick distance. I saw the energy-feeders, each one the size of a Titan, hanging from the stalactites of the unseen roof. I saw the power lines, ribbed and massive, coiled across every surface like engorged serpents. The air was golden, thick as milk, spilling out of the doorway like a tarnished sunrise.

Through the haze, the swimming motes of power, I laid eyes on the nexus itself. It was hard to gauge size in there – everything shook in a heat-tremor of psychic intensity. I saw impossibly old panels, fluted like organ pipes, rising up and up through the mist, webbed with patina and repeatedly repaired. I saw arcs of lightning snap and twist, and blood-cyclers wheezing, and smelt a pervasive stench as sweet as rotting meat.

And somewhere in the heart of that titanic construction, somewhere in the midst of the stacked terraces and the baroque platforms and the gantries and the forests of cabling, lost like a pearl in the heart of some obscene mechanical clamshell, I glimpsed just a slip of flesh, a shred of hairless grey, perhaps a scalp, perhaps the fragment of a face, buried under it all, slaved to it, dominating it, dominating everything.

I tried to take a step, to move through the gate, and felt the air shimmer against me.

I lost the vision. The gold bled out of the air, and I felt my focus shatter.

‘Take the step,’ said Heracleon.

I couldn’t move. My mind instructed my body, but it didn’t obey. Every attempt
to pass that doorway resulted in the same dreadful pressure. I raged against it, bringing all my strength to bear, but it was like trying to force myself through stone.

I withdrew, and the pressure relented.

I could see Heracleon looking at me quizzically.

‘You do not obey,’ he said.

I turned shakily to face the tribune, having to concentrate just to keep my footing. I felt drained and humiliated, and could not hope for my brothers to understand it. I was not accustomed to failure, but there was no way I could cross that threshold.

‘I… cannot,’ I said, which was just about all I could get out.

Then I turned my back on the Throne, for as long as I had lived the object of all my devotion, and stumbled back out into the dark.
I came too late. In all that happened afterwards, the blood and the folly, I think that remains the hardest burden to bear.

I had a sense of it from a long way out. I’d taken the interceptor back up into the hull of my transport, the Cadamara, and ordered the captain to make full haste back to Arraissa. It had been a bad journey, as they all were now, with several drops back into real space to avoid the Navigators losing their limited grip on reality.

I seethed the whole time. There was nothing more frustrating than knowing something bad had been unleashed and being prevented from intervening. It was just a word, hissed from the mouth of a deceiver, but my soul knew it to be true.

I say ‘my soul’, but of course I’m speaking figuratively. We still had hunches.

By the time we finally arrived into Arraissa’s system limit, all my fears were swiftly confirmed. The beacons were gone, smashed into a belt of spinning metal. Just out from the Mandeville point we encountered the corpses of two Navy monitors. It looked like they’d got a few shots away before the end came, but not much more than that.

*Take us straight in,* I ordered in battle-sign, standing on the bridge next to the captain. *Full burn.*

The crew did not hesitate to comply. We were relatively lightly armed by Naval standards, and thus running a terrible risk, but if there was any chance of arriving in time then we had to take it.

Arriving at a planet after a void-raid is always a strange experience. Unless something truly apocalyptic has occurred, there’s never any sign of trouble from
the augurs – a world, even the smallest, is just too vast to show signs of pinpoint attack. Arraissa was no different – it looked just as I always remembered it from a hundred homecomings, pearl-white and banded with drifting cloudbanks.

The orbital defences, though, were gone. Tumbling fragments circled like a planetary ring, blasted dark. There were more empty ship hulls drifting, all powered-down. Most were the kind of things I’d have expected to see – trading barges, landers and lifters, a few void-capable zeta-grade haulers. There should have been Navy ships there too, a dozen of them, but there was no sign, not even wrecks.

‘Do you want us to hold anchor, lord?’ Captain Erefan asked quietly.

No, I did not. I gave him a quick flurry of battle-sign orders, then went down to the hangars to find the interceptor. Just as before, I went alone. There was no use in risking their lives on the ground, and in any case I wanted the Cadama to scan the system for any hostiles still remaining. It looked like we’d come far too late to play any meaningful part, but you never knew what foulness might linger.

I was feeling sick by then, mostly from frustration and fear – not for myself, but for those who manned the convent walls. There was nothing else of military value on the planet, nothing else that might have drawn the attention of the Enemy. That was why Hestia had chosen it, carefully keeping us away from the roving eyes of both Imperial and other authorities.

I took my place in the Cull, watched the hangar bay doors creak open, and powered the ship out into the void. I pushed it hard down through the atmosphere, making the forward viewers roar with fire. As the superstructure shook, I pushed the ship harder, taking a little sour pleasure in hurting it.

That had always been my weakness – a desire for violence that ran beyond the righteous. At that point, though, I could hardly admonish myself for it. I was worried, and keyed for battle, and increasingly sure I had missed out on the action.

As I plunged beneath the clouds and levelled out over Novion Urban Primus, the damage became clear at last. Six of the great hives were on fire, sending smoke boiling out of rents in their sides. The urban lowland between them was also burning, punched through as if by massive bullet holes. Flyers were everywhere, swarming like angry and impotent wasps. My console flashed with alerts as ongoing activity – fighting? – was picked up, but I cared nothing for those signals. I drove the Cull steeply, not bothering to hide my approach as I would normally have done. As I neared my destination I could see the pallets of inky smoke rising, thicker and more concentrated than anywhere else.
Our convent was housed in what passed for a regular Ecclesiarchy basilica. The occupants looked like priests or Ministorum menials; the Sisterhood could easily be mistaken for a minor order of the Adepta Sororitas. Anyone looking too closely might have noticed that we were nothing of the sort, and that we never had visitations from the true diocesan authorities, but Hestia had always made sure no one looked too closely. We paid the tithes and bribes we needed to, cultivated the right members of the planetary Arbites fortresses, and pursued our true vocation under a cloak of semi-obscurity.

Now, though, the entire grid had been levelled. Whole hab-towers had been demolished, their outer structures slumped into scorched piles of scree. As I wound down the engines to land I could hear the rumble of ongoing destruction, laced with the screams of thousands. The air itself was black down here, thick with tattered ashes.

I pulled into the ruined hangar, its blast doors melted away, cut the power and leapt from the Cull’s cockpit. The interior was charred, and bodies of servitors and menials littered the apron. All the ships that had stood here before were gone, looted just as Arraisa’s standing Naval detachment must have been.

I ran inside, leaping over the corpses, my flamer primed and ready. The corridors were thick with more ruin – bodies thrown against the walls, doorways demolished, libraries ransacked and still smouldering.

I began to think that there would be nothing left. I raced towards the command nexus, buried deep under the false Ministorum shell. The whole place stank of blood and burning. I pushed through broken doors, expecting just the same scenes of destruction, and found a creature of Outer Hell waiting for me.

I have no idea why this one was still there. Its comrades were long gone, fled back into the warp as was their habit, but one remained. Perhaps it had been intended as a sentinel to guard against my return, or perhaps they had fought among themselves in their base fashion and left one of their number as some kind of punishment for weakness.

I cared not. It was there, ahead of me, hunched over the corpse of one of my precious sisters, its claws running with her blood.

It was massive. Its black armour was thick and ether-pitted, inscribed with curls and spikes of gold over a matt-black base. It breathed like a beast breathes, condensation spilling from its ornate vox-grille. In one hand it held its prey, in another a spattered chainsword.

I was screaming as I charged it – inwardly, of course, but the screams were real enough. I leapt high before it was even aware of me, my flamer bursting into
It turned at the last moment, and we crashed together. My momentum was vicious, but it was as heavy as a tank and just as deadly. I punched at its helm through my flames, taking savage satisfaction in its roar of surprise.

Then the chainsword geared up, swinging throatily through the fire. I pulled away, emptying my flamer into its face as it lumbered closer, slashing wildly. Its movements were as fast as mine, though much heavier. I could smell the corruption spilling from it, the long-wearing corrosion of its warp-soaked home. It was badly wounded, a long gash down one flank, which perhaps explained its exile here.

‘Anathema,’ it croaked, swinging at me. At least it knew what it was fighting.

The longer this went on, the more likely it was I would die. My purpose was to blunt the shedim, the apparitions of dreams, not the physical servants of Enemy. Despite its wounds, it was stronger than I was, built for this kind of fight, and it had already ended scores of my sisters in their own citadel.

But I was enraged. I was near-blind with it. And it made me stronger.

I shoved the flamer into its outstretched chainsword, and the whirring teeth caught fire and spiralled madly. Then I was ducking under the flailing attack, using my size and speed and reaching for my rondel dagger. I pushed up, two-handed, driving the tip into the creature’s jaw line.

The tip pierced, and I drove it in deep. Blood as black as pitch slopped over its gorget, and it caught me in a bear-hug, crushing me against it.

I felt it squeeze, and my armour flexed. The stench made me gag, and I struggled to breathe. All the while I pressed the dagger home, twisting, churning through flesh and bone. I felt something burst, and a cascade of stinking pus streamed over both of us. It crushed me further, and I heard the first crack in my breastplate.

We were face-to-face. I was looking into its filmy helm-lenses. Just below the surface of that grotesque armour I knew that a once-human was looking back at me, matching my hatred with its own. The pressure grew worse. It was crushing me to death.

I was losing consciousness. I screwed my eyes closed, gathered all my remaining strength, and pushed upwards. Its vox-grille shattered, and I propelled my blade up into its cranium. For a moment longer it clutched at me, hissing bloody spittle, and then the terrible pressure finally fell away.

It collapsed, crashing into a heap of armour-plates, gauntlets falling limp. I dropped to my knees on top of it, hauling breaths into my crushed lungs, barely
able to see for the spinning stars crowding my vision.

I clawed my way across its breastplate, back towards the opening at its neck. I ripped the helm from its head, and gazed on the monster. Its flesh was white, like gristle. Its eyes were bloodshot and swollen, its black tongue lolling from pierced lips. Its last expression was one of derangement and agony, which gave me some measure of fierce recompense.

I took my own helm off to look at it unfiltered. Then I hawked up a gobbet and spat into its unseeing eyes.

_For my sisters_, I told it, silently.

I would have liked to mourn for longer, to immolate the bodies with the proper rites, but I knew time was already short. The entire grid-sector had been ruined in the attack, but soon reinforcements would arrive from elsewhere on the planet, looking for a reason for the attack and digging down to its epicentre. That would bring unwelcome eyes to what remained of the convent, potentially undoing all we had built in secrecy.

I got up from the corpse of the monster. The command nexus, an arched chamber placed like a crypt at the base of an old nave, had been thoroughly smashed. Bodies littered the cracked floor. Many were out of armour, perhaps dragged from their meditations or studies. One by one, I saw the faces I knew, all battered and lifeless.

I limped through the nexus and into the network of chambers beyond. The raiders had torched the archives, and the data coils were still acrid and smoking. The armoury was empty, its contents either destroyed or looted. We did not have our own chapels, only the sham ones in the levels above, but our private cells where we trained and rested were ransacked.

All were dead. The raiders had not come to seize anything, simply to destroy. Somehow, despite all our efforts, they had found out where we were based, and assembled a force strong enough to nullify our defences and gut our citadel.

That thought alone troubled me greatly. Our order was clandestine, but we were not undefended. The lower halls were shielded and augur-resistant. We had heavy weapons and the crew to handle them. Any one of my sisters had been trained to fight the greatest dangers of the Imperium, and on their own ground were more than a match for those that had come after them.

The fact that there were no bodies of the Enemy did not mean that many had not died in the assault. Aside from the crippled one they had left behind, there was evidence of other casualties having been taken away, dragged heavily along
the ground for retrieval of armour and gene-seed. It was almost unheard of, even in those straitened times, for a sizeable band of such warriors to assault a world like Arraissa. There must have been so many monsters here, acting in such brutal, concentrated force.

Perhaps that was the true reason they had left one behind – as a marker of things to come, to let the citizens of the Imperium know just what was now stalking them.

My rage still burned as I kicked through the remnants, partly directed against myself. Perhaps it had been unwise to leave for Hellion, I thought, despite the fact there had been no warning. Would my presence have changed anything? Probably not. I might have downed one, maybe two, but it was clear that the battle had been horribly one-sided. My ignorance of the coming attack was what had saved my life.

It was both the great strength and the great weakness of our kind, that we had no ready access to the warp. Our counterparts in the Adeptus Astartes employed the services of Librarians and the finest astropaths, seers and mystics, and thus could often detect threats before they arose. We, on the other hand, were blind to that aspect of the universe. Our own Navigators and astropaths were stunted things, barely able to operate in our presence, and thus we had no means of scrying the paths of the future by ourselves.

It had been different, once. We had been part of the grand machinery of the Adeptus Terra itself, able to draw on its near-infinite resources to bolster our unique martial expertise. That was how we had been designed, as interoperable parts of a greater whole. The Space Marine Legions were self-contained armies capable of doing everything, whereas we and the Custodian Guard had been complementary, just elements of a unified capability under the Throne’s combined gaze.

But that was all so long ago. I had no idea if the Custodian Guard still existed as they once had. Everything had decayed so much, falling steadily away from its original purpose. We were like children stumbling in the shadows, trying hard to remember old lessons before they were lost forever, and now the nightmares were coming back.

The rooms marched past me, each one more decrepit than the rest. The raiders had been thorough. Every corridor brought a fresh brace of bodies, wedged and broken into the corners. Here and there I could see my sisters had attempted to form bulwarks against the tide, barricading themselves behind strongpoints and fighting hard. I hoped they had extracted a heavy toll before the end.
There had to be a specific reason for this. It couldn’t have been a random raid – the resources required were too enormous, the intelligence too precise. I remembered the crowing words of the woman on Hellion – *Doesn’t matter now. It’s all ending, and very soon.*

What was the Circlet? Was it a creation of the Old Legions, then? Had our uncovering of its activities provoked this response, or had we been marked for destruction for some other reason?

There was no sign of Hestia. Some of the other Sisters were missing too, though I had no idea whether they had been absent on other missions. I reached the comm-station with its annihilated transmitters. Crunching across a floor of broken crystal, I managed to find a local-range emitter, which was still just about functional. I restored power to it from a half-empty cell and instructed it to broadcast a ciphered warning to stay away. I had no idea how long it would last, but at least it was something.

From far above, I heard heavy crashes, and the distant sound of human voices shouting. A search team, perhaps, finally making its way into the basilica. I would have to move on before they found me, but there were still some chambers to search.

The last was that of Lokk, the old astropath who had served Hestia faithfully for nearly twenty years. He had been a weakened man for much of that time, drained by his proximity to our foul, soulless ways, and yet he’d remained to do his duty. His body wasn’t there, though there was a long slick of blood along the far wall. His cot had been smashed and his books torched, leaving trails of soot across the crumbling plasterwork.

I pushed my boot-tip through the mess, sifting for anything retrievable. He’d been a writer of copious texts, had Lokk, forever scribbling down his dreams before they drifted from his memory. Most of it had never made much sense, and had only limited value for guiding the convent, but Hestia had valued his loyalty, and on occasion his visions had proved both true and valuable.

Very little of his stock of parchment had avoided the flames, and the few scraps that had survived were scrawled with endless lists of runes and astrological charts. I couldn’t make any sense of them, and let them flutter back to the ground.

It was only as I turned to leave that I saw the phrase, written across the door itself in what looked like blood. The language was our own, the private script we employed for the most secret matters, and which to an untrained eye hardly looked like writing at all. Even I almost missed it. Once I saw the patches of
dark red, I wondered how they could have been made – had Lokk written them before he’d died? Or even before the attack?

In any event, it was unusually concise.

*He calls His daughters Home.*

I looked at it for a long time. I didn’t quite believe it. I wished Hestia were there to give me confidence in my judgement, but of course she couldn’t be. I felt very alone then, stalking through the ruins of the only home I had ever known, now a haunt of corpses.

I heard more noises from up above. I would have to make my way to the hangar before my route was cut off. There was nothing left to salvage here, though the scenes of destruction and the bodies encased in ancient armour would give the enforcers pause when they eventually arrived.

I moved out carefully, keeping my dagger in hand. I’d have to get back to the *Cadamara* swiftly, get out of range of *Arraissa*, and then plan my next move. There were many possibilities, but I needed time to think, to start to make sense of what had happened. Grieving would come when I could afford it – right now, I had to assume I was hunted, as were perhaps all my kind still operating out in the void.

*He calls His daughters Home.*

I couldn’t get the words out of my mind. They echoed as I broke into a run, fleeing through the blood-webbed corridors.

What did it mean? What did any of it mean?

I returned to the *Cadamara*, hardly bothering to evade the clusters of frantic air traffic that threatened to bar my way. Civil defence assets had been fully mobilised by then, as had the matt-black flyers of the planetary Arbites units. Their enforcers were effective troops, but I shuddered to think what slaughter would have taken place had they arrived in time to disturb the true enemy.

Even for us, I admit, there was a tendency to think of our foes as deranged and bloodthirsty, ever likely to sink into a berserk frenzy when the opportunity for slaughter presented itself. Some of them were, of course, and we had won battles on the basis of our greater discipline, but that was to underestimate the true masters of ruin, who fought as keenly and as shrewdly as they had once done as servants of Terra.

They were taking out identified targets, moving on before discovery, making the best use of their numbers. I thought again to the star map from *Hellion*.

My thoughts were interrupted by the commencement of the docking cycle. I
pulled inside the hangar, secured the interceptor and made my way back to the command bridge.

‘Widespread damage to major planetary infrastructure,’ Erefan reported, somewhat superfluously. ‘No sign of enemy units remaining in-system.’

There had been one, though, I thought to myself.

My crew would need orders now. They would need to be told what to do, and how to react. In the normal run of things I would have given them what they needed without hesitation, but I was still in a state of shocked grief. Erefan must have sensed it, for he started giving commands without waiting for me.

‘Take us out of orbit,’ he commanded. ‘Beyond augur range, then hold for further instructions.’

The Cadamara swung round, bumping up against some tumbling wreckage, then boosted clear of the upper atmosphere. As we picked up speed for system-exit, I saw the colossal outline of an Astra Militarum troop carrier emerge over the horizon. Arraissa had its own regiments, and one had clearly been scrambled already. The clean-up was beginning.

Then we were gone, boosting clear of the debris and back out into the open void. Once the Cadamara’s engines hit full tilt, the world shrank back quickly, first a pale orb, then a spot, then nothing. I knew somehow it would be the last time I would ever see it, and so watched the viewers the whole time to ensure I would remember the sight.

The crew said nothing to me. Most averted their eyes, though I caught a few snatched upward glances from the scanner pits. They knew I had no soul. They were probably wondering whether I also lacked a heart.

I sent a message to the ship’s Navigator, indicated for Erefan to carry on as he was doing, then went back to my own quarters. Once there, I retrieved the items I had taken from Hellion, most of them still shrouded in null-fields. I started to go through them all, activating any comm-canisters I could find, studying the scraps of parchment and ritual prayers.

After a while of this, the Navigator, Slovo, appeared. I could sense the extreme wariness in him. It was harder for him than it was for human-normals to be close to me. At least they were only partly psychic creatures, whereas Slovo was at the opposite end of the spectrum – a being wholly steeped in the tide of souls. I found him fairly objectionable too, but that was mostly down to poor personal hygiene.

‘You asked for me, lord,’ he said, bowing stiffly.

He was a skinny man, draped in dirty robes in his House colours. He had a long
hooked nose and sunken eyes. We never managed to get the best to serve with us, only those who for whatever reason couldn’t secure service with a more palatable branch of our glorious Imperium, but he was competent enough and addicted to some of the less ruinous sense-dulling narcotics.

I gestured towards the great swath of human flesh, pinned up again between staves and now adorning the far wall of my chamber. Slovo limped up to it and looked hard across the swirls of blood.

‘A warp map,’ he sniffed. ‘Basic error. You can’t map the warp.’

My fingers flickered in a series of simple responses – he didn’t understand Thoughtmark, so we were limited to cruder phrases.

_I don’t care._

_Tell me what it means._

_Keep it concise._

He looked more carefully.

‘I see what they’re doing,’ he said eventually. ‘These are representations, such as you can have them, of major channels. The kind of thing you’d bring a fleet down. They’ve been getting narrower, those channels – remember I told you that? Perhaps they know why.’

He traced a bony finger over the flayed cartograph, mumbling to himself. I let him carry on. I could never decide how much of this was for show or not – they liked to guard their secrets, did those old mutants of the warp.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, then trailed off again. ‘Perhaps, but maybe not.’

I sent my fingers into a _Say it_ pattern.

He shot me an irritated glance. I could see how much he hated me then. He understood the origin of that hatred, and for that reason kept it suppressed as best he could, but it still spilled out from time to time.

‘Suppose they knew what was going to happen,’ he said. ‘Suppose they knew which way the tides were pulling. They might know that some channels would close, and some would open. Then they’d have to keep control over the ones that were open. There would be worlds, sitting at the mouths of those conduits. They could pour their filthy craft down those ways. It’d be difficult. They’d have to coordinate strikes over a huge span of space. And they’d have to be right, about it all. I don’t think this is a sensible scheme, though. I don’t think it’s possible.’

We had all got used to things thought impossible suddenly turning into reality, so I didn’t place much confidence in that judgement.

I looked at the map myself. It wasn’t easy to study, for the shapes slid and baffled, like optical illusions. I saw systems picked out in a script I didn’t
recognise – some foul tongue of the Eye, no doubt. Their arrangement was not as it was in real space, or I might have been able to identify them from our cartographic records, but instead showed their ether-relationship – the way they stood set against the currents of the unseen realm. As this was forever in flux, so they told me, no static maps of it could be produced. The only use this had, then, was as the Navigator said: if they somehow knew the future alignment of things.

I drew closer to the centre of the diagram. The nearer I drew to that point, the more the circles and pentagrams overlapped, drawing the eye down towards a single world. Even I could see the significance of that one, lodged like a jewel at the nexus of so many interwoven lines of blood.

_Terra?_ I indicated.

Slovo shrugged. ‘You can read this rubbish, can you? I can’t. There are other cardinal worlds – Cadia, Hydraphur, Mars. I wouldn’t want to make that judgement, not from what I see here.’

I pushed down my irritation. The man did not mean to be insolent, but he was doing what every mortal always did when talking with me – fighting against repulsion. He wanted to get out of this room, and that instinct coloured everything he said.

_All the same,_ I signed.

He shrugged. I felt that I’d got everything out of him I was likely to. He’d be needed soon. He’d require at least some rest before I ordered us into the warp again.

So I sent him away. Then I looked over the marks again, as if a final look could give me what I needed.

I didn’t derive any great inspiration from it. Those signs had been made for corrupted eyes, steeped in significance that mine would miss. Nonetheless, I could at least tally up the names of the worlds, for that would give me something. There were places of scholarship where I might be able to decipher that list, which would then go some way towards deciphering the map.

But in truth there were now very few places to go. We had been operating alone, sundered from the rest of our Sisterhood – if indeed any still remained. I couldn’t just set course for the next convent and hope to find refuge. I would have to make a choice.

_He calls His daughters Home._

I went back up to the bridge, feeling the tremor of the decks under my boots as the ship burned out into the deep void. By the time I arrived back at station, Erefan was waiting for me.
‘Your orders?’ he asked.

*Run silent, hold once out of system range*, I signed.

Then I looked up at the real-viewers above me, already black and scattered with stars.

‘But we’re heading into the warp,’ Erefan said. ‘That’s the intention?’

I gave him no signal. I looked at the stars, and I tried to imagine how they would overlay onto that map.

*It is*, I signed. *To the Throneworld.*

That was a long way. The routes would all be perilous, clogged with pilgrim traffic and watched by the Enemy.

I was certain, though. As certain as I was about anything in those confused times. Some of it was established protocol in the event of a catastrophe, some of it was a vaguer sense of the way things were going, but most came from Lokk’s blood-scrawled message, something he had meant me to find, I remain sure of it.

Having seen that, I could hardly have done otherwise. If He had truly called us, after so many millennia of painful silence, then I was surely bound to answer.
I had been so fixated on the problem of Cadia. We all had. That was perhaps why we all missed Fenris.

I had barely even thought about the Planet of the Wolves. To me it was a semi-mythical place. I had heard plenty about its fearsome Chapter, of course, but even then I had never met one of its members.

Space Marines of any description were not common on Terra. I find it almost amusing to remember now, but the ancient prohibition on their presence here was one of the things that lingered after the old rationale for it had long since faded. It was said that the Throneworld still carried the scars of the Great Heresy, and so had kept its distance from the Chapters out of a lingering sense of remembered terror.

There was a little truth in that, and much nonsense. The visible scars of that old war were all still there, all the way from the highest domes of the Palace down to the slum-pits of the equatorial zone, but very few of the ordinary people, even many of the priests, had any clear idea what they represented. In the face of all that forgetfulness, the Angels of Death had long since ceased to be any kind of terror for the great mass of the population here. Indeed, if they read their Ecclesiarchy catechisms they probably near-worshipped them as mythical saviours.

What lingered was the wariness of the ruling classes. They knew their history, such as it still existed for us. They knew that even after the great reforms of the first Lord Commander, the combined strength of the Adeptus Astartes was still phenomenal, and that if those hundreds of miniature armies ever made common
cause then they would be by far the most powerful single bloc within the Imperium. And so the High Lords worked hard to maintain a distance between the Throneworld and the Chapter Masters. The Inquisition was not above sanctioning any that got too close for comfort, though in any case the antipathy was generally mutual – the Chapters themselves preferred to be out in the void, able to fight the enemy where it persisted.

And so I had never laid eyes on a Space Wolf. I had never laid eyes on a Dark Angel or a White Scar. The only ones I had ever witnessed – from a distance – were the golden warriors of Dorn’s Imperial Fists, who still maintained a monastery on the world they had once garrisoned alone, and who were now the most frequent visitors to the glittering halls of the Inner Palace.

Just like everything else, that would change. On that day, though, the tidings of strife were still coming in from a long way away.

‘Fenris?’ I asked, for a moment assuming Jek had made a rare mistake.

‘Undoubtedly,’ she replied, calm as ever. ‘Something happened. There’s talk of the Inquisition. Other Chapters too. I hear things I can scarcely believe, if I’m honest, but the sources are impeccable.’

Knowing what we know now, it seems inconceivable that we found out so late, and yet that was always the greatest burden we carried – the paucity of communication across our scattered and stormy domains. There were familiar stories, some apocryphal, many true, of entire wars beginning and ending before we on Terra ever became aware of them. Standard communication conduits were incredibly slow, relying on physical transport between worlds sundered by thousands of light years. Psychic communication was little better – unreliable, prone to madness and disruption, gnomic in its utterances.

So do not blame us overmuch for the disaster of Fenris. It was not as if the Wolves themselves had ever been eager to involve us in their many battles.

‘We gain a grip in one place, another slips into danger,’ I muttered, already wondering what this would mean for our great undertaking. The Imperium, for all its faults, could act decisively and well when confronted with a single grand issue. When the warzones multiplied, that was when paralysis set in. ‘Who else knows?’

By ‘who’, I meant the High Lords. Only they had access to better intelligence than we did.

‘Not all of them,’ said Jek. ‘Not yet. Haemotalion, certainly. Arx, probably. Kerapliades, we can assume, was the first to get tidings, but I’ve had nothing from our agent there. I don’t think the Navy is informed yet, but if they start
needing mass fleet movements then Pereth will be next in line.’
‘It’s not an isolated event, though, is it?’ I said, thoughtfully.
Jek waited for me to go on. She knew I wasn’t asking her.
‘You know, I never really listened to all those prophets of doom in the pulpits,’ I went on. ‘I told myself they’ve been predicting the days of darkness for a thousand years, and it never quite gets that bad. But first we have Armageddon, bleeding us white, and then this damned endless war at the Eye, and now this. They keep piling up. I could learn to get religious.’
Jek laughed. ‘You’d have plenty to atone for,’ she said.
I didn’t feel like laughing back. I tried not to think about the number of files I’d passed over bearing the galactic orientation for Fenris – there was always so much else to keep us busy.
I began to think harder.
‘Shocking as it is, it can help us,’ I said. ‘If true, it’ll be another argument to use in camera. Why are we keeping forces held back here, when the threats increase? Throne, we have ten thousand of them here. That’s ten Chapters. It’s insane.’
We only had days then before the great conclave of the camera inferior.
‘Anything back from the Captain-General?’ Jek asked.
That was the one remaining problem.
‘I can’t get close.’
‘I don’t think you will, now.’
I hated to admit defeat. It was the one fault I admitted readily. Back in the old days of schola bullying, when I was beaten bloody by men who would go on to command regiments, I would lie in the dark, aching, and plot how best to come back from the humiliation. I would have tears still wet on my juvenile cheeks, but I would already be considering how to weaken the standing of my enemies, to spread the rumours that would isolate them, to call in the favours that would eventually see them humbled and in debt to me.
Knowing when you’re beaten – that’s the route to certain defeat. I had heard so many high-ranking officials whisper to me over the past few years, ‘It’s over, we’ve had it, we just can’t raise the troops we need’, and I had never believed a single one of them. The only true question was the one I had asked Harster – ‘What can be done?’
But at that point I could see no way forward. I had failed Fadix’s test, and could not guarantee bringing the Captain-General to the High Lords’ table. In his absence, nothing would change, and we would remain passive as our defeats multiplied.
‘You might be right,’ I muttered, hating the sound of the words, but unable to see past them.

I woke up to the sound of the highest alarm-level going off inside my ear. For a moment I had no idea where I was or what was happening – all I could hear was the tinny shriek of my cochlear alert blazing.

I shut it down and sat up, the silk sheets of my bed sliding from sweaty limbs.

‘Lights,’ I said, and three pearly suspensors glowed into life.

My room was in disarray, and for a moment I thought it had been ransacked. Then I remembered the events of the evening, the entertaining company and the copious wine we had all sunk, and discounted that.

I got up blearily, pulling on a robe and twisting the sash around my fleshy waist.

‘Report,’ I ordered, speaking into the comm-bead implanted in my wrist.

‘**Violent incursion in sector lamba-sept of the Inner Palace,**’ came the voice of the duty officer, a man named Rivo Jemel. ‘**Countermeasures enacted, but severity required notification.**’

‘I’ll be there,’ I said, slipping on shoes and reaching for a heavy cloak. ‘Send me the coordinates.’

Then I was running. I was not a good runner, you will not be surprised to hear – I waddled like an overfed fowl, my loose shoes slapping on the polished floors. As I went, as part of standard procedure, I was joined by members of my household guard, who jogged along behind me in deference to my uncertain pace.

The destination was close. I reached an internal groundcar transport and we bundled inside it, then hurtled down the transit tubes towards the inner ring of the Palace interior. Through brief flashes from the armourglass portals I saw the high spires streak by through the night, their flanks lit with sodium glare-points.

My earpiece was by then full of shouted orders, incoming reports, exclamations of surprise and horror. They had all known about the widespread disorder beyond the walls, but to have something take place _inside_ – that was something else.

I let them jabber. I was already ahead of them, notified first and in the best position to act. The groundcar slammed into its terminus, now deep inside the Senatorum Imperialis complex itself, and we disembarked. The six guards fanned out around me protectively, and we plunged further in, racing through half-lit anterooms and audience halls.
I knew them all. Perhaps more than any mortal man then living I knew how to get from one side of the labyrinth to the other, and so we made swift progress. By then I could already hear the snap of lasgun impacts, followed by the crash and splatter of priceless things breaking.

We broke into a semi-ruined chamber, thick with old dust and the faded remnants of some Telech-era frescoes. The suspensors had been blown, and so we saw what happened only through whirling pools of head-mounted lumens.

They were servitors – huge, vat-bulked servitors with heavy chaininglaives. They had been stamped with the livery of the Palace, wore their ragged uniforms over obscenely muscled bodies, and were rampaging, storming down the centre of the long room like enraged groxes. I estimated twenty of them were loose, charging at a nervous line of Palatine Sentinels arrayed at the far end.

My guards crouched to fire, levelling lasrifles.

‘Hold,’ I said, walking out beyond their protection. The barrage of comm traffic in my audex-feed was giving me information they couldn’t have heard, and I felt a tremor of excitement, tinged with terrible fear.

I knew, you see, what was coming next.

He broke through at the far end of the chamber, where the Palatines were, and instantly rendered them superfluous. Great panelled doors smashed back on their hinges, rammed hard against the walls and splintering. Light flooded through the opening, dazzling and iridescent.

He looked magnificent. If I’d not been so blindsided I might have fallen down and worshipped that apparition. He moved like something out of legend – far faster than I was able to follow, impossibly fast for his huge bulk, a whirlwind of gold and black. The air screamed around him, blazing from where his great blade scythed and burned.

He cut through the servitors as if they were nothing at all, just random tatters of useless machinery thrown up as an affront to his immortal dignity. I could barely even follow how he did it – the movement was so ludicrously quick, so horrifically powerful – and even then I had the sense that he was barely tested.

He flung his spear out wide and sent three of them – three of them – sailing into the far wall to crunch and slither in a tangled mess. He punched out, breaking the neck of a fourth, then blasting a fifth with the stave-mounted bolter. The noise was incredible, a wall of snarling plasma-burn that seemed to wreath him in a cloak of distortion, and yet he said nothing at all.

Only mindless servitors would not have fled shrieking then, but these flesh-automata just kept on coming, zeroing their targeting sensors and blundering to
get a shot. He barrelled in among them, now twisting, now lunging, slicing his blade clean through the knots of grey flesh and burning metal. Another servitor was hurled into the air, limbs cartwheeling, before it crashed into the floor in a cloud of splintered tiles. Two more were decapitated with a two-handed heave, then more were blasted apart by the bolter. He worked almost casually, and yet nothing was casual at all – it was choreographed with such remorseless precision that it was more art than combat.

And it only lasted seconds. That was all he needed. The echoes of his destruction took longer to die down, drifting over a smouldering scene of absolute annihilation. I had barely even fully registered his entrance before I was trying to make sense of what had just happened, marvelling at the volume of wreckage generated in such a tiny slice of time.

Afterwards he stood at the centre of it, his spear held loose, his black cloak sinking back around his shoulders. His helm-lenses glowed like rubies in the dark, giving a faint red tinge to the baroque majesty of his closed-face helm. His armour was even finer and more intensely adorned than Valerian’s had been – a veritable hulk of heavy gold, emblazoned with thunderbolts and lightning strikes, the oldest of our ancient symbols, surrounded by astrological embellishments that seemed to writhe and grin in the flickering gloom.

The guards beside me had not even had the chance to open fire. They were as stunned as I was, but then they had never been a significant factor here. The only two souls who mattered in that room were him and me.

He knew what had happened even before his blade’s energy field had kindled. That had always been the risk, and there were more risks to come, but desperate times required desperate remedies.

He walked towards me. Every move he made was still bleeding with barely contained menace. I wanted to throw up then. I could feel saliva pooling at the back of my throat, and swallowed thickly.

‘Get out,’ he said.

He wasn’t talking to me. The Palatine Sentinels obeyed instantly, clattering out of the chamber in disciplined files. To their credit, my own guard hesitated for a moment or two, but their resolve was only human, and so they too withdrew.

I was left looking up into the helm-visor of Trajann Valoris, Captain-General of the Adeptus Custodes, perhaps the deadliest individual warrior in the entire Imperium, and one whom I had just made very angry indeed.

I started to blurt something out.

‘Silence,’ he commanded, and I stammered to a halt. ‘How did you know?’
Somehow my external comm-feed had been closed by then – I assume he’d done that – and I felt terribly vulnerable. His voice, booming out of a vox-emitter, made my bones shiver. I wanted so badly to kneel, though that gesture would have achieved nothing.

‘Forgive me, lord, I–’

‘How did you know?’

I swallowed again. I felt light-headed. This was a gamble too far, and I cursed myself for daring it. Perhaps it would have been better to acknowledge defeat.

‘I arranged the transit of the Fabricator General’s entourage to this zone,’ I said, trying to keep a lid on my fear. ‘He was the last one to arrive. I knew you would have been overseeing the security for his installation in person. I also knew the access codes, and had the means to circumvent the security protocols. I needed to get you here – you and me.’

By then he was standing over me. I could smell the blood and oil from the servitors slowly cooking on his still-hot blade. I could feel the actinic tang of the energy field. I could trace the lines of that impossibly crafted armour, and see just how achingly beautiful it was up-close. I wondered if it might be my last sight. Not a bad one, I thought, grimly.

‘I have killed men for less than this,’ he said.
‘I know,’ I said.
‘Your rank will not protect you.’
‘I know.’
‘Then why do it?’

That was the question I’d been waiting for. If he’d truly made his mind up to execute me then and there, he would not have asked it. It was my only way in, though whether I would be able to take it was still very much moot.

‘Because my life really means very little,’ I said, trying my best to hold things together. ‘Almost nothing, I suppose, but I do know things. I can see how things are going. And I have a duty, when the call comes, to do what I can to aid the workings of the Council.’ I still felt nauseous, and had to fight the urge to vomit.

‘I’ve been trying to speak to you for weeks. All my other avenues are exhausted. This was the only thing I had left, and it had to be dared.’

He never made a move. After seeing just how astonishingly powerful he could be when in motion, watching him remain perfectly static was intimidating in itself.

‘I asked your shield-captain for five minutes,’ I went on, doing what I could to look less than ridiculous. ‘The request remains in place.’
He waited a long time. I was clammy with sweat by then, and feeling dizzy, and expected at any moment for the spear to come plunging into my neck. I wouldn’t have even felt it, I imagine. I’d have never seen it coming.

I felt my knees begin to give out. The last twitches and pops of the dying servitors were the only sounds in that place then, save for the faint grind of the power armour before me.

I began to make my preparations. I had never been devout, but there were certain prayers one should recite at the hour of passing, and I still remembered some of the words.

‘Come with me, then,’ he said.

He turned on his heel, and stalked back through the bodies. Mouthing a whispered thanks to whichever saint was watching over me that day, I pulled my robes about me and hurried to follow.

Let me tell you what I knew of Trajann Valoris.

The second of those use-names was, I think, an honorific earned in battle, a prestige title that had long since passed out of use by the rest of the Imperium. Of course, he would have had a thousand other names too, all inscribed within that carcass of auramite, but it was standard protocol to refer to him as Valoris on the rare occasions when any of his appellations were used directly.

While the two tribunes of the Adeptus Custodes were generally occupied with the many ritual purposes of the order, the Captain-General had no set remit, but governed the forces under his command with complete freedom. To the extent that if the Ten Thousand had dealings with any part of the Adeptus Terra, they were carried out through him. The High Lords might seek to gain an audience, as might other great warriors or the mightiest of our inquisitor lords, but only those of equivalent seniority.

And that was it. There were no records in the Imperial databanks on his martial conquests or his ascent into the order. I didn’t know what his name had been before he was taken into the Sanctum Imperialis, or where he had been born, or when. It might have been a hundred years ago, or it might have been five thousand.

For as long as I had been alive, though, his name had been spoken of with nothing short of reverence. Even the High Lords might be mocked, when in wine or in anger, but to do so with the Captain-General was simply beyond imagination. In the Age of Wonder, it was said that the Emperor had employed a regent – a powerful figure who set in train the vast bureaucracy that would one
day become the Administratum – and to speak ill of the Emperor’s regent was a breath away from speaking ill of the Emperor. So it was with Valoris. While not officially numbered among the High Lords himself, there was little doubt that he was the closest thing we still possessed to the Emperor’s own representative.

And so, even when the fear of imminent death had subsided a little, I remained daunted by this figure. I was not generally swayed by reputations, for I had seen how often they were false masks hiding small minds, but this one was quite literally a breed apart.

He led me deeper into the Palace, and soon we were down in the crypts below one of the great battle-chapels commemorating the first Ullanor triumph. By the time he stopped walking, it felt as if we had descended into the heart of the planet. The stone around us was cold and cracked with age, and the only light came from the glow of his helm-lenses and the residual aura of his magnificent armour.

‘You wanted five minutes,’ he said.

I might have asked if this place was secure from listening devices, but immediately thought better of it. He had brought me here. Of course it was.

‘I hear reports from every corner of the Imperium,’ I started, trying to control the shake in my voice and remember who I was and whom I worked for. ‘In truth I hear more than anyone else, even the High Lords, for they all have their fiefs to watch, and I have allegiance to both none and all. And, though I risk telling you what you already know, I see a tipping point being reached now. I see the losses we’re taking becoming irrecoverable. And I can’t stand back and do nothing.’

He was silent as I spoke, but slowly reached up to his helm and took it off. I don’t know what I was expecting to see – perhaps something like Valerian had been, with his smooth skin and pleasant complexion.

Valoris was nothing of the kind. His visage was hard-edged, broken by scar tissue, the skin veined and vivid. His lips were thin, his nose flared, his neck sinewy. In that low light, no doubt amplified by my own fear, he looked almost ghoulìsh.

‘It is not your task to tell me this,’ he said. Once free of his helm, his voice was low, considered.

‘In the normal run of things, yes, that’s right,’ I said, working to keep my composure. ‘But the composition of the Council is within my purview, and the Lord Brach is gone – Throne preserve his soul – and there’s no consensus on who should replace him. And then there’s Dissolution, which has been discussed
and discussed but never been ruled on.’

Valoris placed his empty helm on the altar beside him. He leaned his great spear against one of the columns, and the cutting blade clinked against the stone. Then he regarded me with those terrible bloodshot eyes.

‘And you wish me to settle the issue,’ he said. ‘None of this is new to me.’

‘But since then, lord, we have had word of catastrophe on Fenris. And two fleets have been lost en route to the edges of Segmentum Solar to reinforce the supply lines of Warmaster Katarek. These are hardly trivial setbacks. And then there is—’

‘Cadia. The Gate into the Eye. You seem to think, chancellor, that we are unaware of this.’

‘No, not at all, but you may not have the perspective I do.’

His gaze, as unbending as the granite around us, never wavered. I wondered what it might look like if he tried to smile.

‘I know what you wish for,’ Valoris said. ‘And you know we had this chance before, when Speaker Lestia died. We did not take it then. The reason was simple – the High Lords rule the Imperium, and we are not of the Imperium.’ I remembered that Valerian had said the same thing. ‘There was a time when His vision was manifest. All you see around you now, all that has been built over ten thousand years, none of that is His. While you have forgotten, we remember.’

‘But there were captains-general on the Council before.’

‘When the need was greatest.’

I could not help myself – I let slip a wry smile. ‘And now the need is great, lord. The need is very great indeed.’

‘For the Imperium,’ Valoris agreed. ‘If my first duty were to your mortal realm, the case would be strong. But my first duty is to the Emperor. We are His guardians, not an army under the Council.’

‘Yes, that is what you have become, but it was not always the way.’

And then, for the first time, I detected the smallest indication of surprise. Knowledge of the Great Crusade was vanishingly rare even in the highest levels of the hierarchy, but I had access to many obscure libraries and had made it the subject of much study. Once, I knew, the Custodians had waged war in the farthest reaches of the galaxy, and not invariably with the Emperor at their head.

‘Things were different then,’ he said.

‘Of course they were. The many ages are always different.’ I was somehow forgetting my fear. The debate had reignited something within me – love of an argument, perhaps. ‘But how can the Throneworld remain safe if its fortress
worlds fall, one by one? I hear the entreaties from those we send out into the void. One of them, a fine man who is almost certainly dead now, said that we can no longer afford our old laws. He’s looked the Enemy in the eye. I’d trust his judgement.’

I was getting carried away then, and I recognised it immediately.

The Captain-General remained impassive. I doubt I could have done anything to seriously discomfort him – I was so far below him in the scale of majesty that I was lucky he even deigned to talk at all.
‘You may be right, chancellor,’ he said, evenly. ‘Everything you say may be right, and yet it is all irrelevant. Wars and tactics are for our generals – for me, they are nothing. A thousand worlds might fall, and still it would be nothing. You understand this? Only one thing would compel me to change the ancient law that governs us – if it were His manifest will.’

I hesitated, unsure what to make of that. ‘But… how do you–’
‘That is the task of our lives to unravel.’

There was something exhausting about talking to one with such unbreakable certainty. They had to be that way, no doubt, but I was used to the world of politics, where the art of the possible was all and a person might believe one thing in the morning and another by dusk, and so it was hard to engage with.
‘The High Lords will discuss it anyway,’ I said, clutching at what I could.
‘Yes,’ said Valoris. ‘Your doing, I understand.’
‘Only partly.’ I looked him directly in the eye, as closely as I could bear to. ‘If you’re not there, they’ll debate these issues without full understanding. They’re currently divided, but that might change. I’ve known it before. Suppose they vote to withdraw the law – what then? You’ll be a part of this war, whether you like it or not.’
‘None may compel us.’
‘Maybe not, but the vote would create division. Now, when we really don’t need any more of it.’ I felt myself warming to the theme, and some of my confidence returned. ‘This is the issue, Captain-General – you have control. You can end this for a generation, if you choose. If you’re so sure of your stance, come to the Council. You can take Brach’s seat. You can say what you have said here, to me, and none could gainsay you. Is that not worth it?’

He was studying me. Just then, I saw what he had been doing. My words made no difference at all, and it had always been the utmost hubris to think they might do, but he was interested in me.
‘Why does this drive you so much, chancellor?’ he asked.
‘My duty is to serve.’
‘Impartially. And yet you are so desperate to see the motion pass.’
I floundered a little. ‘I wish to see the war won. Surely all of us do.’
Valoris drew closer to me then. He was looking at me almost hungrily, as if I were one of his many hunt-targets. ‘You were a cynical man,’ he said. ‘You were loyal, but you never took sides. For you, it was simply about the wheels of the machine. And now you are ready to die just to meet me. Have you never considered what is happening to you?’
Jek had asked me the same thing. For once, I was lost for words.
‘There is a maxim,’ said Valoris, ‘that you may be familiar with. It states that the Emperor is within all of us, and that all of us are within the Emperor. If you wish to discern His desire, then look to the desire of those who serve. He no longer speaks to us with a mortal voice, but may yet act through the devotion of those who do.’
This sounded dangerously like heresy. If it had come from any other but him, I might have turned away then. As it was, all I could do was listen.
‘We are not blind to this,’ he said. ‘When Valerian reported back to me after his meeting with you, I might have summoned you then, but did not, wishing to see how far you were willing to go. That sounds like a cruel game? It was not intended to be. We have learned to be wary, for there are more false prophets than true. But your zeal is unfeigned, for if it had not been, you would be dead already.’
I cracked a dry smile. ‘Nice to know that,’ I said.
‘I do not see the way ahead yet,’ Valoris went on, ignoring me. ‘All paths are dark now, and if I had known the route to take with clarity, it would have been taken fifteen years ago. But I cannot ignore what you have done. It may be nothing, just the weakness of an old man, but then again it may be something else.’
I didn’t speak. By then I could hardly believe what I was hearing.
‘So I will take the seat on the Council,’ he said. ‘I will listen to what they have to say. And when it has been considered, I will cast my vote. Consider your task accomplished – for now.’
I felt a surge of joy well up within me. All we had worked for, week after week of dangerous toil, had paid off, at least for now.
I could have no certainty that it would go as intended, but I had the ineffable sense, just as before, of rightness. For the first time in my long career, perhaps ever, I was doing something that I truly believed in.
‘I will ensure all is made ready, lord,’ I said, slipping back into my well-trod role as factotum to the powerful.

By then he was already reaching for his helm. His scarred face disappeared behind the mask of gold, ending the brief sense that I had been talking to something more human than demigod.

‘Then we will speak again,’ said the Captain-General, taking his spear up as if ready to use it. ‘And let us hope your vision does not lead us awry.’
I felt many things, after that day.

Shame, of course. Even some degree of anger, but mostly confusion. Heracleon was not given to flights of fancy. Even if I had not been present in his visions as he believed, I should still have been able to cross the threshold. I was one of the Ten Thousand – that place was my spiritual home, and all of us, to one degree or another, belonged there in the end.

After leaving the catacombs I returned to my duties. I participated in the Blood Games. I resumed my meditations. I attended the rites of armour, blade and shield. I completed my study of the philosophy of Ustiandes of Thar, and consigned my monograph to be stored in the archives.

And yet the episode nagged at me. My sleep was disturbed. Every time I blinked, it seemed, I would see those metaphysical chambers again, the great iron vanes, the ancient flesh clinging to the bones of older machines. I felt that my inability to enter must reflect some lack within me. In some way, as yet undetected and undefined, I must have failed.

The most immediate consequence of the episode was that I did not even begin preparation for induction into the Hataeron Guard. Heracleon visited me once several days had passed and held open the possibility of reconsideration. He told me the fault may have been his, for misinterpreting the symbols. I appreciated that, but did not believe him. In any event, we agreed that for the time being my duty should remain as it had been – in the Outer Palace, as one of the many thousands who guarded the walls against the external enemy.

Navradaran, too, visited me before his labours took him away again. I was
honoured to have had his friendship at that time. Perhaps, looking at us from the outside, you will think our lives somewhat cold and unrelenting, but they are not devoid of the greater human characteristics, and even some of the baser. There were those of my brothers whom I disliked, and those whose fellowship I cherished. Navradaran was one of the latter.

I was in the Library of Ancients when he found me. I had been so engrossed in the tome before me that I only heard his distinctive approach from thirty metres away, far less than was required by standard battle-readiness.

He saw what I was reading, raised an eyebrow, then sat opposite me. All around us, the vast library continued in its ancient rhythms – the shuffle of robes, the tick of iron-tipped fingers, the echoing thud of volumes being replaced on the high shelves.

‘The Master of Mankind,’ Navradaran read, softly. ‘Diocletian Exemplar. You must have read it many times.’

‘Just once. A long time ago.’

‘Does it give you answers?’

I slowly turned the great pages, each one a single sheet of thick vellum inscribed in faded inks. This was a copy of a copy of a copy, yet still more than five thousand years old.

‘It tells me that our service was not always like this,’ I said. ‘We were not always fighting with silence.’

Navradaran nodded. ‘And yet, even then, there was error.’

‘With greater excuse.’

‘Was there?’ He smiled faintly. He was older than I was, and had the scars to show it. I did not know how many names he had inscribed on the interior of his armour, but I guessed there were a great number. ‘We have become too used to regret, I think,’ he said. ‘We have become too used to thinking that the time before was so much greater than our own. And yet, you are reading Diocletian. You can see that even before the Failure, there were doubts.’

‘When I think what has been lost—’

‘–then you do not remember what has been gained.’ Navradaran placed a heavy gauntlet on the polished wood between us. ‘They lived in a time of plenty, and we in a time of strife. Consider how much greater our faith must be, compared to theirs.’

The words did not bring me much comfort, though neither did I wholly disagree with them.

I looked up at him. ‘I could not pass. I saw what lay within, and I could not
pass.’
‘I know.’
‘What does it mean?’
‘Take it as a sign you are unworthy, and you only harm yourself. We are so ready to believe that we are not good enough.’
‘Because once we–’
‘Once! Once, ten thousand years ago, we were faced with an impossible task, and we performed better than any could have ever demanded.’ He laughed. ‘Do you know, there is some advantage to spending time outside this place? I have met men with no discernible talent who believe themselves kings. I have met the sick who think themselves healthy, the wicked who think themselves righteous. They are so weak, all of them, weak as chaff, yet they do not torture themselves with our doubt. They live, they squabble, they laugh, they blaspheme, and I have come to think that this, somehow, is the greatest sense of all.’
I could not help but smile. ‘You will go back out there, then,’ I said.
‘I find it invigorating.’ He looked around him. ‘More so than these places.’
I could not agree with him then. Here, surrounded by the oldest words, the heavy-set parchments, the theology of the long ages, I felt at my greatest peace. The universe outside was like an inchoate sea, ephemeral and ever-shifting, but in these sites were the eternal verities, warded and preserved forever. There could be no more sacred calling than to keep this safe.
‘Go in His will, then,’ I said, reaching to clasp his hand.
‘As you, brother,’ he said, returning the gesture. ‘And do not read too much.’

As it turned out, that did not prove a danger. From that point onwards, I had precious little time for any kind of study.

I remembered my meeting with the mortal Tieron. He had been agitated when we had spoken, no doubt with much reason. What I did not appreciate immediately was quite how far that agitation had spread.

We, in our privileged echelons, knew of the worsening war at the Cadian Gate. Piece by piece, we became slowly aware of the disaster on the Planet of the Wolves. The Captain-General was detained much with consideration of both great battle zones, as well as many other older campaigns, and it was said then that he spoke at length with the serving High Lords on the provisions made to contain them. The two tribunes were kept informed, and in their own ways made preparation for what might come next.

I do not know how word of this spread beyond the walls. We live in a galaxy of
uncertain communication, where the screams of a billion voices might disappear into the void while a single whisper travels securely to its destination. Even the greatest were capable of having their judgement blunted by such extreme variations in transmission failure, and yet I never failed to be astonished at how the rumour of war could spread even among the least educated. Like rats, the populace somehow knew. We did what we could, as the guardians of the species, to ward our charges from hearing harmful tidings, but our efforts failed more often than not.

Of course, it was certain that the Enemy had a hand in such dissemination. We were not so blind that we discounted the presence of seditious cells on Terra. However many inquisitors we deployed, though, and however many pyres they constructed, there were always more traitors waiting to take their place. For all Navradaran admired the mortal human spirit, it was also capable of truly pathetic weakness.

And so, almost as soon as we knew it ourselves, word of the worsening state of the war began to filter, by some strange process of osmosis, into the slums and the hive-towers. The enforcers were soon run ragged trying to keep up with it. We received tidings of more rioting across the southern hemispheric zones, fuelled by both panic and long-stoked resentments. The downtrodden impoverished could put up with much if they believed that the Imperium could at least keep them safe; once they lost that sense, our grip on their loyalty was loosened.

My first direct experience of this came two days after Navradaran had left the Palace. Tribune Italeo requested my presence at the south-eastern wall-zones, following entreaties made to him by the regular garrison commanders. These were the Outer Palace walls, you understand, running around the gigantic estates for hundreds of kilometres. Even if all ten thousand of my brothers had patrolled those walls there would still have been gaping swathes of emptiness, and so instead many regiments of psycho-conditioned mortal soldiers were used to bolster our limited numbers. Some were drawn from regiments famed in the outside Imperium, such as the Lucifer Blacks, while others were virtually unknown outside Terra, like the white-robed Palatine Sentinels.

I answered the call, and was met at the landing site by the captain of the 156th regiment, the Tramman Standards, a man with a name badge reading Leovine Werrish. We arranged our rendezvous just inside the vast concave sweep of the curtain wall, the wide landing site falling under its shadow as the sun struggled to climb over the eastern horizon. Above us, the grey screen of Terra’s unquiet
skies churned away, and hot-ash wind danced around us.

He did his best not to be daunted by my presence. Even for those who served within the sacred confines of the Palace, though, we were a rare and imposing sight.

‘My lord Custodian,’ he said, kneeling.

When he rose again I could see how drawn his face was. He had the kind of fatigue that only comes from long periods of near-constant action without respite, the kind that gets into the bones and never loosens its bite.

‘They tell me you are having trouble, captain,’ I said.

‘I don’t know where it all comes from,’ he said, too tired to make any attempt to hide the scale of the problem. In fact, I could hear the size of it for myself – a dull rolling roar from the far side of the massive walls, the telltale sound of thousands of voices raised in anger. ‘There’s a madness out there.’

‘You have done your best, I am sure.’

He looked hollowed out. ‘I’m glad you’re with us, lord. Will... ah, the rest of your detachment be here soon?’

If I smiled at that he would not have seen it, for I was wearing my full panoply of war and my face was enclosed in gold. There was no detachment. It was unusual for us even to consider deploying as a ‘detachment’ – my chamber would come with me when they were called, but the need for that was rare and I would only consider summoning them in the utmost extremity. He could not possibly know that, though. Perhaps he had served with the Angels of Death in some other warzone, and had seen how they used their bonds of brotherhood to multiply their unique prowess, and it was logical enough for him to assume that we operated in the same fashion.

‘Let us see this, then,’ was all I said.

He bowed hastily, signalled his departure to an escort of thirty equally weary staff officers, and the two of us moved to where my Talion grav-lander was waiting on the apron. I took the pilot’s seat, and Werrish strapped himself into the counterpart, looking ludicrously small among restraint strapping designed for one of my kind.

We lifted off, and headed for an egress gate built into the wall’s structure. For a little while, all we had ahead of us was the gently curving slope of pure black adamantium. Steps were carved every two hundred metres, zigzagging up the windswept face towards the walkway at the top – thirty metres across and overshadowed by a high, embattled parapet. Defence towers loomed at hundred-metre intervals, massive gun-citadels crowned with lascannons and heavy
bolters, all angled outwards into the cityscape beyond.

Then the egress gate opened – twin blast doors sliding apart to reveal the glowing red innards of the wall itself. We passed within, and saw the racks of attack craft hanging from launch-cages within the dimly lit interior, then the ammunition trains for the towers above, then the strobing power beams for the void shielding. The wall here was less of a solid barrier than an incredibly large contiguous fortress, one that was garrisoned and active and home to hundreds of thousands.

The gate opened on the far side, and the Talion emerged into the dull grey of the Terran dawn. The landscape beyond the walls was open, scoured of the usual hard press of hab-towers and hive spires by ancient ordinances prohibiting building right up to the ancient wall-line. In that rarest of things on this world – open space – thousands of people had gathered. They were chanting something in semi-unison, mobbing the walls in stages before falling back. I could see Werrish’s troops down among them, holding the tide back in thin lines of pale grey.

There was no risk of such a rabble penetrating the wall themselves. The danger was that they would overrun the urban zone leading back from the perimeter, triggering a degradation of the secure cordon and making clearance operations necessary. Even from the flyer’s closed cockpit I could taste mania in the air, a stench that rose higher than the fervid chants.

The sky above us was, as ever, filled with aircraft, adding their own contrails to the film of soot that hung over us. I could see Arbites scrutiny landers among them, hovering watchfully. Beyond the disturbance rose the behemoths of the eternal city, a jungle of both squalor and magnificence. Glancing ahead at it, I suddenly had a vision of dry tinder, heaps of it, piled up against the foundations of our walls, ready for the spark.

‘That crowd is preparing to charge your men,’ I observed, noting a basic swarm-pattern developing amid the mobs.

Werrish nodded wearily. ‘I’ll order another volley. We have air support now.’

He had ordered his forces logically. They were spread out in a long ragged line against the base of the wall, with reserve units dug in on either flank. They looked to be equipped with lasguns for the most part, and evidence of their use was everywhere – a tidemark of bodies where the crowd had last pushed up against them.

I brought the lander down towards ground level. I could see the leaders of the rabble now, stirring the crowds up to charge at the hated bringers of discipline.
Some of the mob were carrying burning braziers, others power staves that snapped with faint curls of plasma. One of them was wearing pale blue robes, streaked with dust and dirt. His eyes were blank, like pearls, and his bald pate had a false third eye daubed across it.

Things were escalating. The throngs were furious, and a great many of their number had already been shot. I estimated perhaps eight thousand were present versus a few hundred of Werrish’s soldiers. Most of the front-rank rioters would die in a rush, but a lasgun could only down so many before its bearer was overwhelmed.

The senselessness of it saddened me. Those gathered there could have had no true idea what they were rioting about; their latent rage and fear had been whipped up by more cynical souls. The chants rose in volume. The braziers spat with dirty flame. The skies above us ran with the faint crackle of lightning, lancing from the turning gyre over the Sanctum Imperialis. It was all ready to explode.

‘Do not fire,’ I told Werrish, bringing the flyer ever lower and making the dust skitter in the downdraught. ‘Kill these thousands today, and there will be tens of thousands tomorrow. Tell your troops to hold position.’

I set the flyer’s machine-spirit to override, opened the cockpit blister, pulled free of the seat and leapt earthwards. We were only a matter of metres from the ground by then. I dropped to one knee on impact, then rose up smoothly and began to walk.

I was surrounded on every side. For a few moments, I went unimpeded. The closest of the mortals stared at me, open-mouthed. Then the more perspicacious, recognising slowly what I was, started to shout in alarm, then to run, to fall on their faces, to stumble and panic. More turned and fled, shoving their way through the rest to get away. The vast crowd began to fold in on itself, suddenly riven by inexplicable terror at its heart.

I paid them no attention. They were like a swarm of insects – huge but incapable of doing me harm. Many were not even properly armed, just carrying machine tools or improvised spears, and their screaming turned swiftly from anger to terror. Some even cried out words of desperate repentance, sobbing frantically and trying to touch my cloak, though the bulk of them merely wished to get away from me as fast as they could.

I knew the Angels of Death had an expression for this phenomenon – *transhuman dread*, they called it. If anything, our order possessed the greater power in that regard, amplified by our stature, our rarity, the esoteric imagery of
our golden armour. I could have killed so many of them then, if I’d wanted to. I could have waded into those reeling ranks and handed down the judgement of the Emperor until the many thousands were all broken at my feet.

I did none of those things. Killing is easy. Our Imperium has stagnated in many ways and yet we have become such experts in the application of violence that to end a life has become as trivial and as commonplace as clearing a throat. I had no compunction over using my power when it was necessary, but neither did I share the zeal for destruction that so many of the Throne’s own servants exhibited. If it had been possible to solve our many problems through the continual application of unrestrained force, then you would have thought that over ten thousand years of trying it we might have had some rather better outcomes.

I reached the location of the one who controlled them, the man with the eye-mark. His bodyguards fell away from him as I approached, scrambling to get clear. One of them choked on his fear, others voided their bladders even as they ran.

The man himself was shaking, barely able to remain in position to face me, his face convulsing jerkily with an attempt at defiance. He carried some kind of staff bedecked with feathers. I had no idea where he might have obtained feathers – real ones were not generally to be found in the slums of Terra.

‘Here to kill me then, golden one?’ the man cried, and his strained voice gave away his crippling terror.

It would have been the work of but a moment.

‘Why are you doing this?’ I asked, quietly.

He could barely meet my gaze. His skin was glossy with sweat.

‘The end is coming for you!’ he blurted, wild-eyed now. ‘I have been shown it!’

‘Why are you doing this?’ I asked again, with just the same inflection.

He started to lose his last slivers of self-command. ‘Because you can’t protect us,’ he hissed. ‘They’ll sweep you away. They’ll sweep it all away!’ His eyes lost focus. ‘What did he tell me? The… path. It is opening now.’

I was aware of a hundred things around me. Men and women were running, surging around us, trying to get back into the hab-zones. The braziers had toppled. The flyers still hovered, their guns trained but silent. The entire offensive had dissolved into panicked retreat, testament both to its fragility and to the residual authority of the Throne.

‘The Gate has already fallen,’ he went on, raving now in both fear and excitement. ‘You know that? Has it got back to your deaf and blind masters yet?’
‘Who told you these things?’ I asked. He started to laugh, and the sound had an edge of frenzy to it. ‘What does it matter to you? You are deaf to those voices. You are deaf to all living voices. The dead cannot stand against the living. You hear me? The dead cannot stand against the living!’

The two of us were like a small island of stability amid a world of motion. This amateur assault was over, but that meant little in the wider scheme of things. More mobs would come, larger ones, stirred up by madness such as this, and there were not enough of us to break them all. We needed to discover more of their origin.

‘Come with me,’ I said. He stared at me, horrified. ‘No,’ he said, in a smaller voice. ‘You have committed great sins.’

I never lifted my voice above a murmur, but he lost what little composure he’d had, then. Tears started in his eyes. ‘I have, though,’ he confessed, wonderingly, as if only just seeing it. ‘I have committed great sins.’

‘There are ways to atone for them,’ I said. He took a faltering step towards me, blinking, staring. ‘Oh, by the Throne,’ he mumbled, dispirited. ‘But all these things are ended.’

I summoned the flyer, and a moment later heard its engines overhead. Werrish was still on board, and looked startled to see me conversing with the heretic.

I gestured towards the open cockpit door. Meekly, haltingly, the man let his staff fall from his hands, then made his way to the compartment at the rear, moving as if in a stupor. I sealed the door behind him, then went back to Werrish.

‘The machine-spirit will take you back,’ I said. ‘Deliver him to the Ordo Hereticus watch division in your sector. Explain the manner of his capture. Tell them I wish to study their report on him when it is done.’

Werrish nodded. His eyes flickered to the retreating crowds, still out in the open, all within range of his guns. ‘And the rest?’ he asked.

I followed his gaze. I could see them scampering, stumbling, their eyes wide with fear. According to the Lex Imperialis, all of them were traitors.

‘Let them go.’

‘Their executions are warranted,’ he ventured, carefully.

‘They were fools and weaklings,’ I said. ‘Do not become too fond of killing such, captain.’

Then I flicked a finger, and the flyer rose up, twisting on a column of
superheated air, before heading back towards the still-open egress gate, taking Werrish and the weeping heretic with it.

I turned back towards the eternal city, a place I had barely ventured into since my ascension. I could not quite believe how dirty it was, up close. It smelt of confinement. They were still running from me.

I remembered Navradaran’s words. *There is some advantage to spending time outside this place.*

Then I looked back over my shoulder at the wall, soaring high above even the greatest of the city’s towers. Its outer surface, dark as jet, was still scored with antiquated wounds. Even the newest sections were almost nine thousand years old; some parts were as old as the Imperium itself. They looked utterly indomitable, the kind of barrier that armies would shatter against for eternity.

I could just make out the greatest of the structures housed within. The Sanctum Imperialis itself, the apex of our entire existence, was like a distant mountain, hazy with mist. The Tower of Heroes was a slender vertical line of grey against a stormy horizon.

It is a curious thing, to witness one’s home from the outside, to see it as they did. I had always supposed that they must have felt excluded, the masses of Terra, shut out from the magnificence and forever scratching up against closed doors like famished waifs.

But just then I suddenly saw it in a different aspect. They had been terrified of me. I was the closest living embodiment of the Emperor’s soul, and they had run from me screaming. Perhaps they saw the walls not as the barrier that kept them from getting into the Palace, but the barrier that kept us from getting out. Perhaps they saw it not as an impediment to their movement, but as our necessary cage.

I could see that now. I could see the high walls and the age-darkened towers, and it looked like nothing quite so much as a prison, vast and old, sealing its terrible heart closed like layers of rockcrete thrown up over a lethal reactor.

I had to go back inside. My duties were many, and already I could detect mind-impulse queries and commands from the Tower of Hegemon. When I turned to walk back, though, my boots felt heavy, as if I were walking through sand.

The sense was easy to shake off, and I started to move.

But I had felt it, all the same.
I had never known the warp like it. Travel had always been difficult between the stars, and over the past few years I had been told many times by many different Navigators that it had been getting steadily worse. Most of the things they told me about, the ether eddies and the surge-tunnels, made no sense at all to me, but I could certainly feel the hammering our vessels took as they rattled through the empyrean.

On previous journeys I had often wondered what would have happened if I’d lifted the warp shutters and gazed at it, like the Navigators do. A normal human would have been driven mad in seconds, they said. But then normal humans had souls, and thus the psychic realm was intelligible to them. What would I see? Nothing? Legions of daemons? The true essence of the warp itself?

I’d never been sufficiently curious to find out. The chances were that the sight would have been fatal to me in one way or another – pariah or not, the empyrean was no place to linger in or gaze upon, not if you wanted to keep your sanity.

Now, though, I was half tempted again. The decks of the Cadamara were like drumskins, resonating in a way that put my teeth on edge. We’d already lost one of our secondary drivetrains, dropping our speed through the galactic mire and amplifying every crash and slew that the unquiet abyss imposed on us.

I staggered down teetering corridors, feeling queasy from the weeks-long incessant movement. There was some irony to that – I spent most of my time making others nauseous, and now had some sympathy for how that felt.

My sense of dislocation had another cause. For a while after returning to the ship I had refused to mourn, preferring to channel my energy into activity. As the
strange days in the ether had lengthened, though, my thoughts had turned increasingly to what had been lost.

I had loved my sisters. It was a fierce, almost desperate kind of love, born of the fact that we shared such a unique bond. All of us could remember the time when we had been dragged into the convent, filthy and starving, more used to blows than words of explanation, and then slowly realised that this place was safe, and that it had been made for us, and that we were not alone in the universe.

It was not a comfortable existence. We were trained, sometimes brutally. Hestia was not motivated by any benevolent sense of care, but by a pitiless vocation rooted in ancient doctrine. Some who found their way into the convent died soon afterwards, at times from exhaustion, at times by taking their own life. Those who survived became stronger in both body and mind. We learned secrets about the universe, ones that would have been our death sentence if ever uttered outside the walls of that place.

Before we took our vow of tranquility, we spoke and chattered and gossiped just as all juveniles did. We even laughed, whenever our regulated days would allow, sharing private jests about our humourless instructors. Even once the time for spoken words had passed, we still shared those bonds. Thoughtmark, in its fullest form, was an expressive language, in some ways more so than standard speech, and the friendships I made were all the stronger for the adversity in which they had been forged.

Now I could only recall their faces – Erynn, Catale, Ruja – bloodied by their untimely deaths. The memory of that was like a wound, gaping and blood-raw, taking me right back to my earliest days as a hunted infant, unable to understand why the whole world seemed intent on causing me harm.

I could share that grief with no one. I was as alone as I had ever been, surrounded only by the besoullled, who could never understand that it is hard for our kind to be isolated. We have less to draw on internally than others, and the great irony of our self-imposed seclusion is that we need human fellowship more, for it temporarily fills the void lurking within our own hearts.

I began to dread what I would find when we finally arrived at the Throneworld. I was under no illusions that the journey would be easy, or even that we would make it at all. Hestia had once told me that the pilgrim-route was only for the deluded, and that the chances of reaching Holy Terra as an individual were tiny. Now that the High Lords seemingly wished to forget all about the Sisterhood of Silence – how I hated that name! – we could be sure of no special treatment to
ease our passage.

But I pushed the ship onwards, keeping it at the limit of its power, ignoring the warnings of Slovo and his acolytes to respect the turbulence of the warp.

In my mind, the three things were surely linked. The Old Legions making their return, the targeting of the convent, the gathering storm in the ether. You did not need to be a seer to realise that some new alignment was in progress, and that we had struggled on for too long with the old ways when their efficacy had long since ceased.

I subsumed everything else to this new goal. I took my grief and I made it into a weapon, just as we had been trained to do. If I had to break the Cadamara apart to do it, I would still make it to the golden spires of the shrine world and discover just what Lokk had seen before he died.

Perhaps I should have listened to Slovo’s warnings, but then temperance had never been my strong point, and, as Hestia had always told me, there is greater power in righteous wrath than in meek acceptance.

I staggered. Something had hit us hard. That, I thought, was impossible. We were deep in the warp, and there were no physical objects to hit.

Then I saw the alert rune, and started to run. I was in my armour, as we all were – void passage was so perilous now that I had instructed the crew to remain battle-prepared at all times.

We were hit again. It felt like some enormous closed fist had rammed us amidships, sending the ship swinging round its centre of gravity.

As I closed in on Slovo’s sanctum, high up in the spine of the ship, I heard the screams. His chambers were entirely sealed off from the main structure during warp passage, the better to insulate him during the arduous process of guidance. I reached the first of the heavy doors and punched the access codes hurriedly. All the while I could hear booms shuddering down the superstructure, loud and getting louder.

The doors heaved open, and I smelt the stale air of the sanctum’s interior as it washed over me. The lumens were erratic, blinking across dirty bulkheads. I plunged inside, and saw a pair of acolytes holding their temples and weeping what looked like blood. They were menials from House Rehata, ungifted with the Seeing Eye, and they were wailing like slaughtered porcines.

I heard Slovo crying out from further inside. The chambers were low-roofed and braced with heavy bands of adamantium. The whole place looked like a military bunker, solid and unbreakable.
But it was breaking now. Cracks had already shot up the inner walls, shivering with released energy. I ran through the maze to Slovo’s inner domain, a sphere of iron lodged within the ship’s hull, accessible only by a single metal gantry over a moat of oil. As I crossed, I could see more breaches, popping with lightning that curled and danced across the void.

As I neared the portal it blew open, sending a cloud of noxious gas boiling out at me. Slovo himself staggered into view, his skin wet with whatever fluids he’d immersed himself in, cables still trailing from intravenous lines in his arms.

‘Get us out!’ he gasped, his mortal eyes staring and bloodshot. Thankfully he’d managed to wrap up his deadly Seeing Eye, though the rest of his robes were only loosely hanging from his scrawny body. ‘Get us out!’

I punched the runes through to Erefan – *Immediate crash out of warp* – and moved to help Slovo. He pushed me away, teetering on the gantry’s railing. He was wild, barely seeing what was around him, and he too had lines of blood running from his nostrils.

‘They’re getting in,’ he hissed, drooling. ‘The field’s breaking down. *Get us out!*’

Looking over his reeling shoulder, I could just make out the disarray in the sphere – the nutrient tank he floated in was filthy and leaking, and the cables hanging like spider’s limbs from the roof were sending spears of electricity scattering across the interior. I grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him away from it, backing up along the gantry. I could already hear the alert klaxons as Erefan did as he was asked. The ship shook wildly, blowing more lumens, then seemed to drop vertiginously, as if falling through a place where gravity still existed.

I gestured furiously at him – *What happened?* – but he was blind to me.

Then I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. More lights shattered, plunging the space into flickering shadow. It looked – but this was impossible – as if the walls were draining down like viscous fluid, sliding off the ship’s substructure and pooling into a slough of molten steel.

I dragged Slovo the rest of the way, back to the blast doors and into the warren of chambers beyond. He clawed at me, jabbering something about the impossibility of a Geller field losing integrity and just what took place if that happened, and how they were coming and they were getting inside and they knew who we were and where we were going.

My heart was thumping hard. There were noises echoing up from the bilges below us, distorted and shrieking. For a moment I thought this might be what the
warp itself sounded like, some terrible snapshot into an infinity of agonised souls, before the *Cadamara* bucked again, thrown away from its ventral axis.

Inner panels punched inwards, power lines exploded, armourglass suddenly frosted with impact-patterns. I heard fresh alarms going off, and a status panel above me flashed runes indicating we were tumbling back into real space.

We reached the room with the menials in it. One was slumped on the deck face down, a pool of blood slowly forming under her face. The other, a male, was still on his feet, twitching madly against the far wall as if impaled on it.

The vibrations from the hull were dying down now, and the worst of the lurching subsided, but we remained in a whirling lumen-pattern of intermittent darkness. I could barely see anything with clarity – freeze-frame images of blood and terror jumped around before me.

‘Are we out?’ hissed Slovo, clutching at my cloak.

I didn’t answer. I pushed him away from me and reached for my flamer.

The standing menial was grinning at me. He was grinning so wide that it tore the edges of his mouth. Every flash of swaying light made that grin bigger and darker, and as I watched, he reached up to his mouth, pushed a hand inside, grabbed his tongue, and began to pull.

I slipped my hand over the trigger. Something long and black and glistening came out of his mouth, and just kept coming.

I opened up the flamer. I saw the man scream and writhe within the shaking torrent of extreme heat. His robes ignited in a burst, his skin crisped to black, but I kept up the roaring inferno. I saw something slimy and oil-dark curl up amid the flames, coiling for the strike. I heard fractured screaming as if from many places at once, none of them here.

I reached for my sword just as it leapt for me, a mass of prehensile limbs and wicked spines. I lashed out, severing one of the tentacles, then spun around to plunge my blade into the polyp of flesh at its heart. It shrieked and clutched at me, trying to smother me in waves of sinuous gristle, but by then I was in combat-trance, beyond mortal senses, moving faster and harder and working my blade in a whirl of pressed steel.

This was shedim. That should have been impossible, given our Geller aegis, but it was here, on the ship. I could smell its stink – the rotting of the human flesh it had taken for its own, pulled apart and remade.

I carved it open. It lashed at me, trying to drag me down, but by then I was a tongue of flame, a howl of the world’s wind. My sword gyrated, and slops of its unnatural body thudded to the deck, still jerking.
'Anathema psykana,' it whispered to me, rearing up in obscene mockery of physical law, growing into a tentacled slab of muscle and mucus. I saw its hundreds of eyes stare at me – hundreds of identical human eyes, copied from its host, replete with lids and lashes and tears. Its mouth had never stopped growing, and was now a huge and ragged maw lined with teeth, flapping and saliva-flecked. ‘Alone? Alone, out here? I will relish turning you inside out!’

I never listened. A mortal had to struggle not to listen to the shedim, but not me. This thing was an unbearable horror to a mortal, a temptation beyond endurance, but for me it was merely disgusting and dangerous, like a snake found under a pillow, something to stamp on.

I plunged my blade into its mouth and snickered it across those teeth, yanking them out of black gums. I danced harder, ducking under the flail of tentacles and severing those that came close. I felt its sting on my armour, the sucking pull of warp-spun strands, and slashed myself free.

The thing had a heart, it had lungs and it had organs, all pulled out of shape from its host but still necessary for it in this place. I delved to find them, cutting like a surgeon. When I reached my target the blade drove in deep, sending a jet of ink-black blood fountaining over both of us. I cut and I cut, wading into the belly of the creature to sever its essence before it could regenerate more.

It screamed all the while until I sawed out its swollen lungs, grabbing the sacs of pus and foul gas and hurling them messily to the deck. I ripped its gullet from its throat and I burst its flaccid stomach with a stamp of my boot, and that finally shut it up.

Then the rest of it exploded, blown apart by the violence of my assault, flying into scraps of torn fat and spittle. My armour was coated in it, my sword sopping, my loose hair caked.

I endured the deluge, waiting for the rain of slops to subside. The chamber was rancid now. The corpse of the second menial was almost lost under a pile of steaming viscera. Slovo cowered in the corner, scratching at the closed door, his eyes still staring in the stop-start lumen glare.

I had to be sure. I rooted through the remnants of the kill, blade at the ready. They were vicious things, always, and could revive after cursorily lethal amounts of punishment if you were unwary.

The main lumens came back on, stronger this time. I heard the rapid clatter of boots from the corridors outside, and guessed that Erefan had stabilised the ship and sent a security detail to aid me.

*A bit late, I thought, but at least we’re fully into real space.*
I turned to face Slovo. I must have looked half-daemonic myself, caked in a skin of black inky blood and scales.

He was in bad shape, but I was in no mood to go easy on him. *Answers*, I signed, and I truly think that command was the thing that scared him most of all.

Perhaps I should have been more sympathetic. Even for a Navigator, one who stares into the abyss as a vocation, it is very hard to look upon a true instantiated shedim. Up close, they are the weft of nightmares, and they send the mortal mind into paroxysm.

The rest of the crew were little better. Erefan’s detail skidded into the chamber with their guns drawn and were soon gagging and vomiting and trying to keep their bowels under control. They weren’t particularly cowardly or foolish, they were just human, and so weren’t designed to be confronted by a denizen of the undiluted ether.

I understood too that we were all of us seeing very different things. I experienced the shedim, the daemon, in its corporeal aspect only – the matter it had taken and reshaped from the unfortunate acolyte and turned into its new body. That was horrific enough, in a biological kind of way, but it didn’t possess any further terror for one of my experience. The besouled, on the other hand, could perceive its psychic aspect too, and that – I was told – was where the true fear lay. Even the smell of it could evoke that crushing sense of nausea and dread that made them lose their minds and surrender control over their bodies, and the sight was ten times worse.

Humans found so very much in the galaxy uniquely repulsive – the pariah and daemon and the xenos. I sometimes wondered how the fragile creatures ever lived long enough to breed.

I ordered the soldiers out, and they were just about able to understand battle-sign enough to comply. Then I wiped the ichor from my helm and dropped down to look at Slovo.

He was coming around. I guessed that being ripped from the warp-trance made it doubly difficult, but I needed to know what was going on.

*Clean yourself,* I signed to him again. *Five minutes.*

I pulled him to his feet and helped him walk out of there. I sealed the doors behind us, handed him over to his own surviving House menials and went to find a hose.

Five minutes later I was sitting opposite him in one of the ship’s lead-lined
interrogation chambers, with Erefan present too. The three of us sat around a bolted-down table and tried to ignore the stench emanating from two of us.
‘I couldn’t believe it,’ Slovo started, his eyes flickering between Erefan and me. He had calmed down a lot, but was still febrile. ‘I don’t even know how to describe it.’
‘Try, please,’ said Erefan sourly. The captain had done well to bring us out of the warp so quickly without scattering the hull across a swath of space-time, but he wasn’t happy that he’d had to.
Slovo drew in a miserable breath. ‘The warp’s growing,’ he said.
I didn’t understand how that could be possible. The warp, I had always been told, was a mirror of reality – the one was the size of the other.
‘Very, very bad,’ Slovo went on. ‘Was watching it happen – tearing space like a sheet of paper. We were heading right down the fault line. It blew the outer aegis. I could hear them. Throne, I could hear them.’
‘Can’t you always hear them?’ asked Erefan.
‘Not like this.’ Slovo looked up at me. ‘They knew you were here. They were smashing up against the hull to get to you. There were hundreds of them.’ He shook his head. ‘We had to drop out of it. I don’t know how long we had – a few seconds more.’
*But one got through,* I signed.
‘Just as we dropped to real space,’ Slovo nodded. ‘Must have done it then. Caught on the wrong side, and it was weak by then.’
Erefan turned to me. ‘The Geller array’s in a bad state,’ he said. ‘We have a lot of burned-out relays. It’ll take a while to repower it.’
It would have been good to have been able to use Thoughtmark then, to ask the kind of subtle questions I needed to ask. I wanted to know more about what was going on.
‘It’s like… a rift,’ Slovo said, his voice full of foreboding. ‘A crack. A canyon. It’s growing.’
‘I don’t know what that means,’ said Erefan.
Slovo barked a hoarse laugh. ‘I don’t know either, captain. I’m trying to make sense of what I saw.’ He pressed his hands together, trying to stop them shaking.
‘It felt… as if the whole galaxy were breaking apart down the middle. I saw the edge of it, dropping into a deeper void. I saw the light running out of the universe. Leaking out of it.’
I leaned forwards.
*The Beacon?* I signed.
‘The Astronomican? It’s damned faint. Damned faint. We lost it for a while, back there, but I could just about lock on before the aegis started to crack.’

I felt impatience growing. Slovo was in shock, that was clear, but I had little patience for his weakness. He had a task, and I needed him to fulfil it.

I turned to Erefan.

*How long?* I signed.

‘I can get the warp drives back online in a few hours. We’ve taken some hull damage, but nothing the servitors can’t patch. It’s the Geller field that worries me.’

‘We can’t go back in there,’ said Slovo, vehemently. ‘They’ll tear us apart. They know you’re here, and they hate you.’

I remembered the star map, with its lines of snaking warp channels. It felt then as if the universe were falling into some long-arranged configuration, its tectonic plates shifting, and we were caught in the heart of it.

‘And they know what we’re doing,’ Slovo went on, rambling now. ‘They know where we’re going, and they’ll break us open to prevent it.’

I could have silenced him. Some battle-sign gestures were physically painful for an untrained recipient, and I could have gummed those lips together easily, but I thought it best to let him get it out of his system.

‘I think it’s the Gate,’ he said, his eyes flickering from Erefan to me and back again. ‘I think something’s broken and the balance has gone. We can’t go back in there.’

I turned to Erefan.

*Four hours,* I signed.

‘I can do it in five,’ he replied.

*Four,* I told him.

Then I got up. I needed to clean myself properly, wipe the stench of daemon from my armour and boil-wash my hair. Then I needed to refuel the flamer, attend to my blades and begin the process of drilling the crew.

We would have to barricade the most vulnerable sections – the Navigator’s blister, the command bridge, the exposed enginarium chambers. The *Cadamara* had a standing garrison of a few hundred, and if they were prepared for combat they might be able to hold their ground for long enough for me to do what was necessary.

I was sure Slovo was right. I was sure that the empyrean was rupturing, and that the inhabitants of the warp would be on to us as soon as we cleared the veil again, and that the chances of us emerging unscathed were zero. But if his
visions were correct, then this growing rift risked stranding us forever in the
void, or at least on the wrong side of where we needed to be.
So we would do it. We would fight our way through.
The Navigator was looking at me, appalled. At least he wasn’t talking any
more. Erefan was a professional and kept his feelings to himself. I had no idea
whether it would be possible to get us back on course within four hours, but at
least he had something to work towards now.
I left them in the chamber and walked briskly to my own. I could worry about
the Navigator’s state of mind later, when crossing the veil was a possibility
again. For now, though, I had a defence scheme to plan.
'And so we come to the heart of the matter,’ said the Master of the Administratum, Irthu Haemotalion.

He sat at the head of the long black granite table, his grey face a picture of studied mournfulness. He was wearing his heavy ceremonial robes, just as all the other High Lords did, though his were perhaps the most ostentatious, as befitted his role as first among equals.

It hadn’t always been thus. In other ages our military commanders might have assumed an unofficial pre-eminence, but this was an age of bureaucracy and inertia, in which the greatest power now lay buried within the unknowably complex rules of procedure, and so the master of bureaucracy was also the de facto master of the Imperium.

I watched it all unfold from my place at the foot of the table. The Twelve were gathered in their various finery, attended by their robed officials who sat behind them on smaller thrones. We were high up on the northern face of the Senatorum Imperialis, and thin light lanced down from high stained-glass windows. Two armed Lucifer Blacks guarded the heavy doors, and many more were stationed in and around the Council chamber’s perimeter. I could hear the gun-drones as they circled endlessly above us, as well as the whine of seeker-turrets in active service.

They were paranoid, all of them, insisting on incredible levels of security even within the most secure of all locations of the Imperium. But I could sympathise with that – they weren’t truly concerned about external threats here, they were concerned about each other.
We had already been in session for several hours, and the watery sun was high in the sky. A whole raft of measures had been addressed, with much consensus. Now we were getting to the real business.

‘I must thank the cancellarius for his diligence in bringing this issue to Council again,’ Haemotalion went on, looking at me with sardonic eyes. ‘It seems that nothing could deter him from doing his duty on this occasion, even if it took much… persuasion to ensure that all views were taken account of.’

I despised the man. His intellect was possibly the greatest of all of them, and he was a master of figures and ledgers, just as he had to be, but there was a savage coldness in him that I had always found repellent. Of course, I merely smiled and bowed in acknowledgement.

‘It’s a weighty issue,’ the Master went on, intent on telling his peers what they already knew. ‘For ten thousand years the Lex has held the balance between our forces, all deriving from the original Lord Commander’s precepts. It was he who imposed the Codex on his Legiones Astartes brothers, keeping the peace between the Space Marines and the Adeptus Terra. And it was he, in consultation with the great Valdor, who issued the Edict of Restraint, under which the Custodian Guard were expressly enjoined to remain on Terra as guardians of the Enthroned Emperor. Many times, voices have been raised against this edict, and every time they have been quelled. But now, with the war at such a delicate stage, it comes to us again.’

‘It should never have done so,’ growled Raskian through a vox-filter. The Fabricator-General was a vast presence at the opposite end of the table, and took up almost as much room as the rest of the chamber combined. His nominally human-form body was locked into a whole series of stacked machines, all coughing and flickering amid a jungle of thick power lines. His head was the most unchanged part, though even that was bronze and emerald-eyed and hairless. ‘We’ve had a hundred crises, and never gone against the old pacts. What’s next – you dissolve the Treaty of Olympus?’

‘The Lex Imperialis is inviolable,’ agreed Aveliza Drachmar, the hatchet-faced mistress of the Adeptus Arbites. ‘It is unacceptable to modify its provisions at the first sign of military setback.’

So far, so predictable. I was happy to let the opposed parties make their cases.

‘Hardly the first sign,’ replied Merelda Pereth, Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy. She was a quietly cool character, used to giving orders under extreme pressure. I liked her. ‘You might argue we’ve shown considerable restraint.’
‘It’s still heresy,’ said Baldo Slyst, the ancient Ecclesiarch, and after Haemotalion the most absurdly over-embellished. He placed his many-ringed fingers before him on the stone table and fixed the rest of the High Lords with the bleak stare of a prophet. ‘The God-Emperor’s Will was reflected in that Edict. To erode it now is weakness of faith.’

‘It is weakness of mind to change nothing when the facts demand it,’ countered Uila Lamma, the Paternoval Envoy of the Navigators. Alone among the High Lords, Lamma was a representative of the real power behind the Houses, the vast and bloated mutant who occupied the Paternoval Palace of the warp scryers. I liked her too – as a servant like me, albeit an exalted one, she had retained some sense of proportion in life. ‘How many times have we seen the Lex bind our hands, when the Enemy has no law at all? We have held back from creating thousands more Chapters because we are held in thrall by the Lord Commander’s ancient doctrine. I say the day has long since passed for this. Let us unleash the Ten Thousand. Let us unlock the gene-labs and create new Space Marines to serve under our direct command. Let us re-form the Imperial Army, arm the Ecclesiarchy and end these divisions that cripple us.’

That was dangerous talk, and risked making the argument unwinnable. The first rule of political change was to limit what was being asked for – they would never go for a wholesale revision of the Codex Astartes.

Leops Franck spoke next, the stick-thin Master of the Astronomican and the last of those who opposed the motion. ‘You are forgetting your history, my lords,’ he whispered through his rebreather, making all strain to hear him. ‘Every crisis appears to its own generation as the greatest of them all. When the Beast threatened to destroy the Imperium, we did not unleash the Ten Thousand. When Nova Terra raised its heretical head, we did not unleash the Ten Thousand. When Vandire ushered in the Reign of Blood, we did not unleash the Ten Thousand. In every case, we held firm and the wisdom of millennia was affirmed. Waver from that now, and we will deserve to perish.’

‘But in all those ages,’ objected the one who had started all of this, Kerapliades of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, ‘we still held the Eye’s Gate. We could suffer all other wounds in the knowledge that hell was contained. That is what we risk now. You know as well as I do that our grip is slipping. When the Despoiler–’

‘The Despoiler cannot break the leaguer,’ said Slyst. ‘He has failed twelve times, and this shall be no different.’

‘Have you undertaken a warp journey in recent months, Ecclesiarch?’ asked Kania Dhanda, Speaker of the Chartist Captains and a strong ally of ours.
‘Nature itself is under strain. If he can bend the elements, then he can break the leaguer.’

‘And sedition has never been greater,’ said Kleopatra Arx, the Inquisition’s Representative. ‘We have long memories in the ordos, and we know when the tide is against us.’ She passed her cool, hard eyes across the assembled lords. ‘As I have been arguing for years, we are at breaking point now. We cannot burn the heretics fast enough, and we cannot slaughter the xenos quickly enough. This is not just another phase of trial for the Holy Imperium. This is our critical moment.’

By then, only two had remained silent. Fadix rarely spoke anyway, and busied himself making notes with a crystal stave on a bone-edged data-slate. That left Valoris.

He had come, just as promised. If any of the others were surprised by that, they did not show it. Once in place, there was no question of his right to be there. The vote of acceptance had been a formality, though he had barely spoken throughout it. Now he sat halfway along the sunlit side of the table, far bulkier and more imposing than any save Raskian.

In daylight his face was even more ravaged than I remembered it. I guessed one of his many battles had done that to him – it looked like acid had been left to run across his features, making them flared and angry.

Now, slowly and deliberately, he leaned forwards and placed his gauntlets together.

‘Be aware, lords, what is at stake here,’ he said quietly. All listened. Even Fadix put down his pen. ‘The Custodians have always fought. We do not merely patrol the walls while others die in service. I am sure that none of you would have supposed otherwise, for you are all intelligent souls.’

It was strange to hear him speak again. The last time had been days ago, down in the crypts, something that had come to seem more like a dream than reality.

‘What is at stake is this – shall we fight as we did in the Great Crusade, at the forefront, and under the authority of the Senatorum Imperialis? And that question has no easy answer, for if we are to fight, then who is to command us? The Emperor cannot lead us as He did in the lost age. We are not bound to the will of the Council as are the Astra Militarum and the Imperial Navy. Perhaps you desire us to become another Inquisition, answerable to no one but the Emperor Himself, but if so you should be wary of what you wish for, as our goals may not be the same as yours.’

I could not tell where this was leading. His own views were still unclear to me,
despite what he had said about my own role convincing him to come. I had hoped, perhaps unwisely, that the discussion here, when all was set out and the High Lords could demonstrate their own thinking, would be enough. After all, who could deny themselves more power? All we were offering was the chance for the Custodians to resume their rightful place. ‘There are a little under ten thousand of us,’ said Valoris. ‘That is a mote against the storm to come. Even the Adeptus Astartes are few in number – it has always been the uncounted masses that have won our wars. And, of course, in the Age of Wonder, we fought alongside the Sisterhood.’ ‘They are being recalled,’ said Haemotalion. Valoris looked at him with sudden interest. ‘I was not aware.’ ‘The chancellor can enlighten you.’

I coughed, and half rose from my subordinate throne. ‘The matter was dealt with in mandatum 786734-56, following the reported devastation of the Fenris System. The anathema psykana were never formally disbanded, and do not come under the provisions of this act. It was the unanimous decision of the Council to seek out the scattered members of the old Sisterhood and issue a recall notice where they still existed. Some are already en route. Others are yet to respond.’ Valoris regarded me carefully. ‘This was your doing?’ ‘It was the doing of the Council.’ ‘An interesting time to remember them. It should have been done centuries ago.’

I bowed in apology. ‘The war has driven much away that should have remained intact. I am told the Sisters are... hard to live with. They never had the allies here that they needed.’

I may have been a little too candid there. In truth, the long decay in our management of those pariahs was more down to the ossified nature of our command and control structures. They had never been deliberately ignored, just gradually run down over millennia as other priorities took over, and the widely held suspicion of their esoteric natures made them easy prey for zealous enemies. ‘It is the restoration of something that should never have been allowed to lapse,’ said Lamma. ‘We are going back to the old structures that allowed us to conquer the stars.’ ‘And Dissolution of the Lord Commander’s edict would complete the picture?’ asked Franck, scornfully. ‘You overstate your case, Envoy.’ ‘It has to be done,’ urged Kerapliades, ever the most forceful of the High Lords.
in this. ‘While we debate, Cadia burns. Can you doubt that even a tithe of the Ten Thousand would turn the tide back?’

‘I can doubt it,’ said Haemotalion dryly. ‘The Captain-General says it himself – they are a grain of dust.’

‘One that could inspire others,’ argued Pereth. ‘If I could bring a regiment of them to the front line, just a single regiment, and the troops could see it, and know that the Emperor has not forgotten them—’

‘He never has,’ sniped Slyst.

‘But they may well believe we have,’ retorted Dhanda.

‘It should never have come to this table,’ snarled Raskian again, growing surlier.

‘All things belong at this table,’ said Arx.

I could see then that the argument was dissolving. All those who were in favour before remained in favour now, and vice versa. My hopes for a wavering individual to settle the matter were clearly in vain, and the rancour now risked derailing the issue even further.

I looked over to Haemotalion, and caught his eye. We understood one another instantly. Vile man though he was, he knew how things worked.

‘Enough, please, my good lords,’ he said, holding up his hand. The chamber settled down. ‘The first arguments have been made. Any move towards Dissolution must command a majority of this chamber. To save us from more futile debate, I propose we gauge the balance of opinion now. If there is a majority in favour, we may proceed with further discussion. If not, then there are many other matters to detain us.’

This was the moment. With Valoris in play, I had the votes I needed. I felt a sudden lurch of fear, as if I were looking over a cliff at the waves crashing below. After so many long years of labour, we were finally at the point of decision.

‘Place your votes, if you will, my lords,’ said Haemotalion.

One by one, the High Lords put their hands out before them. An upward palm indicated consent, a downward palm dissent, a clenched fist abstention. Raskian and Kerapliades were first, on opposite sides of the argument. Then the others followed suit, some forcefully, some with more reserve.

Soon eleven hands were on the table. Fadix was the only abstention, and the Master of Assassins looked at me coolly as he placed his fist on the stone. Just as predicted, five votes either way were placed, leaving only Valoris to cast his.

I looked up at him, my heart thumping. I could already see it happening. I could
see the old Legio Custodes reborn at this moment, taking the fight at last to the Enemy, and it would be my work. Even if only a fraction of them took ship, I had seen what they could do in combat – there could be nothing, surely nothing, that would stand against them.

I felt my palms grow sweaty. All eyes turned to the Captain-General, who waited calmly, as if he were listening to something beyond our hearing. The tension became unbearable, and I had to restrain myself from blurring out something unwise.

And then he moved, lifting his massive arm from the stone and extending it outwards. With a lurch of pure horror, I saw his heavy palm turn over to face the tabletop.

But he never placed it. Just as he moved, every one of the High Lords suddenly received the same burst of tidings from their own private comm-feeds. Adjutants leapt out of their seats, frantically checking and then double-checking what they had just heard, before racing to confer with their masters.

The doors at the far end of the chamber slammed open, and robed officials raced in, ignoring the shouts of the Lucifer Blacks.

For a moment I genuinely had no idea what the commotion was about, until I saw Kerapliades shouting out in dismay and suddenly knew, with terrible certainty, what must have happened.

Only one piece of news could have halted that Council in mid-session, for the astropath relayers would never have dared to disturb them for anything less. By the time I had activated my own external channel and heard Jek’s frantic voice at the other end, I already knew what she would tell me.

‘My lord!’ she cried, her voice cracking with anguish. ‘It’s gone! It’s gone.’

‘Tell me plainly,’ I snapped. I could feel everything collapsing around me, everything I had worked and risked so much for, gone in an instant, and it made me desperate.

‘Cadia,’ Jek said, already in tears. ‘It’s fallen. It’s over, my lord. It’s all over.’
It happened so quickly.

Time, space, matter, thought – we had known for so long that they were a seamless weave, but perhaps we had not fully understood just how close the bonds were between them. A great plan, thousands of years in the gestation, came to its completion, and we were the generation to witness hell being freed from its boundaries.

I remember looking up at the skies, and seeing them change. The skyscapes of Terra are grey and occluded, forever churning in a soup of drifting smog. Those who live there learn not to look up. Why would they? There is nothing to see but the filthy evidence of our own destructiveness.

But then, on that day, those clouds became the red of arteries – vivid and virulent, their innards glowing as if lit by fire. Mortals ran to the ramparts of the Palace, staring wide-eyed into the burning atmosphere, crying out to the God-Emperor to save them from the madness they were seeing.

I stood where I was, high on the parapets of the Tower of Hegemon, and witnessed the sky burn. The air was filled with screaming. I saw great arcs of electricity, as bloody as the skies above, slam and skip across the reeling cityscape. A thousand war-horns were going off, sending spikes of clamour into an already reeling firmament. I saw aircraft lose power and collapse into the towers below, their systems scrambled by punishing bursts of electrostatic. One big hauler, a kilometre out over the Xericho hives, took a long time to impact, its pilots desperatey gunning their faltering engines as the hull ploughed slowly into a thicket of hab-units. I watched it all happen. I watched the inferno kick off
as the plasma drives detonated. All across that wide horizon, more fires swelled into life, adding to the heat-flare of the heavens above them.

My helm-feed skittered with incoming signal runes. I assessed them instantly, disregarding the thousands of alerts in favour of the truly essential order – Italeo had summoned us all to the muster chamber.

I ran. I was already armoured, and paused only momentarily to retrieve Gnosis from my armoury. By then fresh warning klaxons were shuddering through the citadel’s cavernous interior. Many of those had not been sounded since the Great Heresy itself when the False Warmaster had besieged the walls, and their croaking din sounded like the battle-trumpets of another reality.

I was among the first to respond. Within minutes of the summons there were more than three hundred of us in the grand hall, overlooked by statues of Valdor and the long golden roll-calls of the Glorious Dead, and more arriving all the time.

There was no air of panic. I think we were made to be incapable of panic. But there was expectation there, seething in the gilded confines of that chamber and waiting for its outlet. We all knew by instinct that something fundamental had broken, but as yet we did not know just what, or how much by.

Looking back at that moment, I find my strongest memory was a strange and unbidden sense of excitement. You must remember that we were lone hunters, and that it was rare, even for us, to see so many of our order gathered together. As I ran my eyes across the gathering battalions of auramite, I had a sudden vision of invincibility. This was how it must have been, I thought, before the Secret War – the last time we had been drawn together as a single army against a single enemy.

One of the Revered Fallen entered the chamber then – a mighty leviathan of the Contemptor-Galatus pattern, just like those interred at the portals to the Throne itself. I did not know how long it had been since his machine-spirits had been provoked from long stasis, but simply to witness the hallowed form of my still-living brother only amplified my sense of exhilaration. The entombed warrior lumbered out of the shadows, his huge shell glittering as if newly forged.

And then Tribune Italeo entered, flanked by two honour guards. His armour was heavily scored, as if raked over by claws, and his long black cloak was torn. He removed his helm, and his features were smeared with ash. I do not know where he had been fighting, or against whom, but the evidence of his trials was all too visible.

‘My brothers,’ he called out, coming to a halt atop the high dais at the far end of
the chamber. ‘You have heard the tidings from the Cadian Gate. I come to confirm the truth of them – the world is lost to the Imperium. The survivors are fleeing ahead of the storm. The Despoiler has broken the ancient leaguer, and now his armies march unopposed into the void.’

He spoke carefully, weighting each word, but I could see something in his grey eyes that I had never witnessed before. It might have been combat weariness, but that was not something I would normally detect. I wondered again where he had been before coming here, and what he had seen.

‘Our star-dreamers, those who live still, tell me this is only the beginning,’ Italeo went on. ‘The Eye is growing. Space around it is tearing. We have lost contact with large regions of His realm beyond a growing chasm of darkness. And amid all of this, and most grave, the Astronomican has failed.’

We were transhuman, all of us, conditioned to respond with stoicism to even the worst tidings, but we were not machines. A ripple of disquiet passed through the assembled ranks. I heard a muffled ‘it cannot be’ slip from more than one pair of lips.

The Astronomican was more than the beacon by which our starships sailed. It was the single most significant marker of the Emperor’s continued presence among us. We might hope for mystical signs from time to time, or inspiration from the Tarot, but in truth the greatest proof that our master still held sway against the tides of unreason was the light He guided through the empyrean. While that endured, He endured. If that failed, we would know that He had failed.

Italeo raised a gauntlet to still the murmuring, and I saw that the metal glove had been mauled and twisted out of shape.

‘As I speak, savants of the Red Planet are attending,’ he told us. ‘A Level Eight delegation from the Adeptus Mechanicus will be making planetfall within the hour, and the Fabricator-General will attend to repairs in person. I have spoken with Tribune Heracleon, who remains within the presence of the Emperor, and who reports that the operation of the Golden Throne is within normal parameters. We do not yet know the cause. Until it can be resolved, our fleets are blind and our armies are becalmed.’

I stole a glance at my brothers as the news sank in. In those who went without helms I saw a range of emotions playing across normally impassive faces – shock, a swift-kindling resolve, even anger, which was rare with us. I saw the varied vocations represented there – the artisans, the theologians, the sentinels and the lore wardens – and saw them all slowly assume the aspect of the warrior.
‘The Captain-General remains with the High Lords in High Council,’ Italeo said. ‘As of this moment, the Throneworld is declared in a state of *extremum bellum* and all provisions of the peacetime Lex are suspended. The Hataeron will remain within the Sanctum Imperialis, and all others are commanded to secure the Outer Palace according to the defence patterns laid down by precept.’

He looked out across us all. More of my brothers had arrived by then, swelling in number until the chamber floor was almost hidden under a field of gold. A second Dreadnought clanked into position, his blade swimming with simmerring energies. Above us hung the banners of our ancient campaigns, their livery sealed behind stasis fields and the bloodstains still vivid.

‘The day is dark, brothers,’ Italeo said, clenching his damaged gauntlet into a fist. ‘But we are the sons of Unity, the immaculate talons of the Emperor, and no enemy has ever crossed a threshold that we guarded. Remain true, remain indomitable, and He will guide you as He did before.’

We uttered no battle-cry then, such as the Space Marines did. We did not possess any, for we fought in silence and the roars of aggression they used to augment their prowess had no purchase for us.

But I was moved, all the same. My brothers were moved. We felt the fabric of our world, of our species’ existence, begin to unravel, and all that remained was defiance.

We raised our weapons. Several hundred guardian spears and longswords surged up into the air, all in silence, many etched with killing disruptor-charge, all as primordial and storied as our peerless battleplate.

‘By His will alone,’ said Italeo, invoking the eternal mantra.

‘By His will alone,’ we responded, the only thing we would say, or had ever said, before battle summoned us.

We knew our roles. Given the vastness of the Outer Palace, each Custodian acted as the figurehead for a whole host of lesser warriors. I knew the name of the senior mortal officer under my command – Colonel Slan Urbo of the Katanda 143rd Stalwarts. By the time I reached my assigned destination he had already mustered his regiment, close to four thousand troops in olive-green fatigues and carapace plate, all in full order and ready for deployment.

Our watch-sector was a few kilometres east of the fabled Lion’s Gate, site of some of the heaviest fighting during the Great Heresy and now a shrine zone full of cathedrals. The great processional avenue that led from the outer hab-regions all the way to the Eternity Gate itself passed through that region, overlooked by
a hundred defence towers and stalked by Titans.

By the time I arrived at the schedule rendezvous, the signs of battle preparation were everywhere. I knew that gun lines would be angling and blast shields grinding closed. The defence stations in orbit would be cycling up to full power, activating long-dormant plasma coils and feeding the energy to colossal ship-killer howitzers. Incoming void traffic would be halted, and reserve Navy forces pressed into immediate action. From Luna to Jupiter, squadrons would already be prowling, sending exhaustive augur sweeps deep into the void.

Even before a shot had been fired, these actions doomed millions. Terra could not feed itself, and had not been able to do so for millennia. Its very existence was dependent on an endless rota of incoming cargo ships – any halt in that procession triggered starvation, and the effects would begin to be felt only a few days from now.

That was our greatest weakness. The military installations had supply reserves for months, but for the civilian masses there was no such luxury. Once the multitudes realised that the cargo-drops were slowing due to the security cordon, an already restive populace would become ungovernable. If the authorities on this most priceless world had devoted just a tithe of the funds used to maintain their thousands of cathedrals on grain silos then our defence would have been so much less precarious, but such were the times we lived in.

I met Urbo amid a howling gale atop one of the big dropsites north of the wall. I saw ranks of Valkyrie gunships out on the apron, all of them whining up to full power. Squads of Stalwarts were racing across the apron, their faces hidden behind rebreathers.

‘My Lord Custodian,’ Urbo greeted me, bowing and making the sign of the aquila.

He was a squat, short man with piggish eyes and a nose that must have been broken more than twice. He spoke with a guttural catch in his voice, and I detected the black glint of augmetics at his neck. He was surrounded by his regimental staff, twenty of them, all decked in the same green fatigues save for the commissar in black and a bewildered looking astropath in pale robes.

‘You stand at full complement?’ I asked.

‘Ninety-eight per cent, lord,’ he said immediately, with some pride.

‘And you know your orders?’

‘Deployment complete within forty minutes, lord. The first gunships are leaving now.’

As if to underline the point, at the far end of the long dropsite a Valkyrie
boomed into the air, accompanied by two fighter escorts. Another followed it almost instantly, and the apron trembled beneath our boots.

The defence pattern had been determined a long time ago and regularly reviewed. Platoons of infantry would be dropped into strategic firepoints commanding views across the great jumbled mass of hive-spires and Ecclesiarchy monuments. A regular overwatch of gunships would act as a quick-response force, backed up by three standing reserves of four hundred troops each equipped with heavy weapons and Sentinel walkers. All across the thousands of kilometres of the perimeter similar schemes were also taking shape.

‘We shall survey the sector, then,’ I said to Urbo, who nodded and gestured for me to walk with him over to where a big command lifter waited, steaming on the rockcrete.

‘Your pardon, but can you tell us anything more, lord?’ the colonel asked, scurrying to match my long stride. ‘Our two sanctioned psykers are both in restraints and screaming. The astropath’s speechless and can’t remember his own name. And, well, you can see the sky.’

‘A precaution, colonel,’ I said. ‘When the situation is confirmed, you will be the first to know more.’

The command lifter was a big machine, squat and black and bristling with close-range gunnery. Its main hold was one of the few in the regiment’s arsenal that could accommodate me comfortably, and offered a decent view from slatted armourglass panes along each flank. We embarked, the doors slammed closed and the turbines swung us up into the air.

It was only when airborne that I fully gained an appreciation for what was taking place. We pulled clear of the wall, driving low over a banked line of lascannon emplacements, and were greeted by a vista of inferno. The horizon was aflame from north to south, the clouds burning incarnadine and weeping trails of black soot. I could feel it on my skin, even under the protection of my armour – Terra was always hot, but now it was painfully so. More lightning danced across the stricken cityscape, orange and vivid.

Normally the skies would have been filled with traffic, but now only military vehicles were aloft. Columns of smoke rose from the carcasses of aircraft knocked off course by the bursts of static. When the Astronomican had gone dark it had blown the electrics of equipment halfway across the planet. Here, near the epicentre, most of the hive-spires were still dark.

I cannot explain just how it felt, knowing that the beacon was gone. It was not a visible thing, of course – we did not lose a physical column of light over our
heads – but the psychic loss was palpable. We had all perceived it, but until Italeo’s tidings we had not truly known the cause.

I felt dislocated. The Astronomican was a literal lighthouse for the Navigator-mutants, but for the rest of us it also had a grounding function. Only with its withdrawal could we understand just how much its presence had been subliminally detected, a faint aura of assurance amid a galaxy that was tearing itself apart.

And that explained the madness. As the command lifter pulled further out into the maw of the world-city, we could see the enormous crowds spilling out onto the causeways and raised plazas. They were incredible – living seas of humanity, streaming out of every crevice. They clustered in the choked spaces like locusts, and their massed cries of desperation were audible even over the drone of the lifter’s engines.

I remembered my encounter with the far smaller crowd, only a few days ago. I remembered the nervousness of the mortal commander, the sense of impending violence in the air. Now all that was swept away, replaced by naked desperation on such a scale that it almost defied belief. Had they known then that this was coming? Was that what had driven their short-lived magus into his own madness?

To the west lay the Lion’s Gate itself, visible as a mountainous hunk of grey amid flickering swirls of fiery air. The defences were strongest there, but we served as the portal’s eastern flank, a critical location to hold if something were to attempt to force the passage. I found myself wishing for more than twice the troops that Urbo had under his command.

The colonel himself was subdued as we circled the wide zone of engagement. ‘So many,’ he murmured. ‘Throne, they’re all going mad.’

I had always doubted that the greater mass of humanity was sufficiently psychically attuned to detect the presence of the Astronomican, but perhaps I had been wrong. Or maybe this was a baser kind of fear here – a herd response, gathering momentum with every second.

‘Take us out there,’ I commanded, gesturing to the distant pinnacles of a giant basilica.

We passed over more sites of devastation. One entire hive-spire was burning along its eastern face, exposing a skeletal lattice of hab-levels within. Another was stricken with flickering lines of neon-blue as its main power grid overloaded. Even as we swooped lower, a major viaduct arching across a deep canyon collapsed under the weight of the crowds teeming across it, sending a
plume of steel-grey debris mushrooming high. Amid all the tumult, the loss seemed hardly to be noticed.

I narrowed my eyes. It was becoming hard to make anything out in that murk of flame and ash. The air was behaving strangely over the basilica’s cupola. There was something there – a dancing, snaking presence, like the reflection of light from a spyglass. As we drew closer, the impression faded, and the concrete outline of the great building rose up to obscure all else – a tiered, many-terraced colossus in slate-grey adamantium, crowned with lines of skulls and tear-streaked angels.

‘Complete your cordon, colonel,’ I said, moving towards the hold doors. ‘I need to see this.’

‘Lord, there are thousands down–’ Then he remembered who he was talking to, and gave an embarrassed half-smile.

‘I will return within the hour,’ I said, pulling the security latch and letting fiery air scream inside. ‘Ensure all is set in place by then.’

Then I pushed myself from the hold and out onto the lifter’s ledge. By then we were no more than ten metres from the ground, and I could smell the human stench of the throngs below.

I dropped heavily, barely evading those directly under my shadow. The basilica’s great doors rose up before me, though the plaza was stuffed tight with labourers and menial-grade workers. Just as before, one look at me was enough to send most of them shrieking and scrabbling to get away, though some of the desperate crawled to touch my cloak or plead for protection. They all reeked of fear and frenzy.

I pushed my way through them, climbed the steps and entered the basilica. The air inside was scarcely less febrile. A huge mingled congregation clustered around the mighty columns, wailing and rocking in unison. Frescoes of the Imperial saints hung in the side-chapels, dark with incense stains, and the high altar was throttled with supplicants trying to reach the reliquaries beyond. Servo-skulls zipped and bobbed through the pungent clouds, confused by the sensory overload, their augur-eyes flashing madly.

I moved towards the high altar, a vast construction of crusted gold set below the vault where the transepts crossed. A priest stumbled past me, his eyes bleeding, seemingly blinded. Others were surging up towards the altar dais, screaming. A penitent engine walker, greatest and most grotesque of the creations of the Ecclesiarchy’s militant arm, limped down the nave with its flamers activated, but it was hampered by the press of bodies around it. I caught a glimpse of bald-
headed prophets in rags occupying the pulpits and calling down the End Times.
  It was demented. No prayers were being said; the congregations were swilling
  around like dumb animals, lost on a tide of psychic fear. Amid all the confusion,
  ignored by all, something was taking shape over the altar. The air seemed
  thicker, more viscous, and it was rapidly curdling into something solid.
  I kicked through the altar railings and strode up the steps. One of many
  reliquaries hung over the altar-top – a crystal casket lined with blackened gold
  the length of a mortal man, chained heavily and covered in tatters of devotional
  prayer-strips. The casket was vibrating wildly, yanking against its bonds. Its
  transparent faces were cracked, and a thin whine emanated from it like glass
  placed under high pressure.
  A priest crawled up to me, his face covered in blood. ‘It… it…’ he gasped,
  sinking to his knees, gesturing weakly to the vibrating reliquary.
  They couldn’t get near it. The dais was already littered with dead or dying
  clerics, and blood was running down the marble steps in dark rivulets. I could
  hear something scratching. The air over the altar became thicker.
  I activated Gnosis’ energy field, and the snarl of plasma reacted wildly. The
  casket caught on its chains and shook violently. I looked inside the crystal and
  saw a sword suspended within – a relic of some saint imbued with ancient
  power, venerated no doubt for millennia but now acting as the conduit for
  something even older.
  I could sense the veil thinning rapidly, ready to be torn aside like so much
  gauze. I swung Gnosis two-handed, shattering the casket in a flash and a shriek
  of released energy. The entire nave shook, rocked by the shock wave, and the
  sword spun clear of its bonds, scything round to point itself at me. I had the
  fleeting impression of something reaching to grasp it – a tall creature with an
  animal’s grin under a crown of horns.
  I thrust Gnosis into the apparition’s heart, and the vision annihilated, blowing
  apart into a whirl of glistening teardrops. The sword clattered to the marble,
  flexing as the steel face hit. I heard the echo of a howl, then a choir of broken
  laughter.
  ‘I was first, though,’ I heard, like a hissed breath echoing around the nave.
  ‘First of Many.’
  Clanging echoes died away. The tumult in the nave went on unabated, but the
  aroma of madness at the altar faded.
  I knew what I had seen. The daemon had almost entered the world of flesh, just
  a breath away from becoming real. Whatever resonance it had taken on had been
connected to the relic, stored here under the watch of the Ministorum for generations.

I looked down at the blade. The metal was still hot, but cooling now. A terrified cleric approached it warily, holding up his staff as if it could protect him.

‘Leave it,’ I commanded, drawing closer to the fell blade. I could see writing etched along the steel in a language I did not understand. I guessed that it hadn’t been there before.

This was Terra. This was the shrine world of the Imperium and the temporal seat of the Master of Mankind. For all its corruption and all its many sins, there had not been daemonkind treading on this world since the cataclysm of the Great Heresy. Powerful wards had been constructed since then, consecrated and renewed by each generation, tended by an entire culture geared to endlessly watch the dark. It shouldn’t have been possible, not here, not under the gaze of so many priests and saints and Ordo Hereticus agents.

The world was awry, cast loose from its moorings.

The thing could not remain here, lost amid these crowds of half-mad and terror-stupid. I took it up, knowing the danger, and felt its wasp-sting touch even through the auranite of my gauntlets.

In the blink of an eye, I saw another reality. I saw the skies torn open and legions of the Neverborn striding across the burning arc of Terra’s ruins. I saw the Imperial Palace besieged as it had once been before, and heard the soul-scraping cry of vendetta tear the wind, and knew that the vision was close.

I turned from that place and made haste. I could not summon Urbo – the relic had to be taken out of the reach of mortals, destroyed if possible, locked away if not, and there were those whose entire lives were devoted to such exigencies. I found myself wondering how many such artefacts existed across the thousands of shrines on Terra, accumulated over long and patient millennia, and the thought chilled me.

I moved down the long nave and out into the red glow of the smouldering sky. Ahead of me stretched a towering, many-layered labyrinth of gathering confusion.

‘Shield-Captain Valerian,’ Ivoxed, feeling pain grow in the palm that held the sword. ‘Priority message for Tribune Italeo. Request immediate dispatch of Talion lifter to my location. Daemonspoor located on Terra, within sight of the walls.’

I could hardly believe I was speaking the words.

‘Recommend also summons be sent for assistance,’ I said. ‘It is time, I think,
that we spoke to Titan.’
They got in.

Every time they broke through, I destroyed them. Every time I destroyed them, they inflicted more damage. We were being killed, slowly, taken apart as we raced through the crumbling vaults of creation.

I had prepared as well as I could, given the constraints I was working under. I would have given anything to have had some of my sisters with me, but Erefan’s troops did better than I might have expected. They were far better trained and conditioned than the average trooper of the Astra Militarum, of course. Their drills had been taken from the guard manuals of the Black Ships, and so they knew how to respond to an order in battle-sign. They were psycho-steeled against all but the worst creatures of the Enemy, and so given appropriate warning could hold their nerve against much that a regular soldier would have balked at.

But that was the limit of it. When the nightmares clawed their way inside our cracked and leaking hull they could only hold position for a few seconds before they were forced into a bloody retreat. We adopted a terrible pattern of fight and flight – Erefan would keep us in the warp for as long as he possibly could. That might be several days, other times just a few hours. As soon as Slovo detected a break in the Geller field the order would be given to crash back into real space. Sometimes we would avoid a full breach then, and would slam back into the world of the senses unharmed. Other times we would smash a critical system and have to scramble madly to keep the plasma drives from overloading. And sometimes, worst of all, we would emerge into the physical void carrying new -
passengers – soulless like me, dragged up from the etheric swamp of the empyrean and ready to slaughter.

The last time had been the worst. I had been at my station in the very centre of the vessel, waiting like an ambush hunter at the major intersection of a dozen transit arteries. The Cadamara was not a big ship – less than a kilometre long, and with only a few dozen inhabited levels – but that still left hundreds of metres to traverse once the alarms started to sound.

I heard Slovo’s warning, then Erefan’s command to crash out, then the squeal and boom of the plasma conduits coming online, then mortal yells.

I ran hard. My flamer twitched in my grip, ready to explode into life, and my blade glinted in the shadows. It took me a long time to get to them, and by the time I was close my comm-bead was crammed with the howls of the dying and the terrified.

I burst into a narrow feeder corridor just below the aft enginarium tanks. A dozen of Erefan’s soldiers were scrambling back towards me, firing at something unseen in wayward bursts. Even if I could have shouted at them to fall back they wouldn’t have heard me – they were already breaking into that cold-sweat terror that fused their fingers to their triggers and locked their rational capacities closed.

So I shoved my way through them, flicking the safety from my flamer. The corridor was choked with bodies, piled up like sacks of grain and sodden with blood. For a moment, I couldn’t see what had done the damage. Here was the one disadvantage of my soulless state – I had to use my physical senses to detect the daemon, and had no access to the psychic dread that would have given its presence away sooner.

Run, I signed to my soldiers, hoping that they would see the signal and get out while they still could.

Then I saw it. The combat lumens flooded the corridor in a blush of red, catching the slick skin of something that looked like a hunchbacked infant, no bigger than a human child. It was eyeless, and its domed head was three times the size of its spindly body. I had a brief glimpse of it capering towards me on finger-like legs, a huge mouth yawning open to reveal concentric rings of human teeth.

I flooded the passage with flame, making the air shudder and blackening the bulkheads on either side of me. The creature leapt through them, its skin shrivelling and crisping from a greasy sack of bones underneath. Its howls were the howls of a human child in pain, and they set my teeth on edge.
It bounded from the walls to the ceiling, evading my flamer before launching itself at me. I switched instantly to my blade, aiming to catch its wattle neck with a slice, but it was too fast, and clattered in close. We skidded across the deck, my blade pirouetting, and it went for my throat with its distended jaws. I smelt its faecal breath waft over me and nearly vomited. I dropped my flamer and punched the horror-thing away, sending its glistening sac of grey flesh slapping from the walls.

It leapt back at me, jerkily fast, and clamped on to my leg. I felt the needle-pain of my armour breaking, then the hot wash of agony in my thigh. I whirled my blade and jabbed it down, stabbing the shedim clear. It was leaking black fluid by then, gasping, its little lung-bags quivering.

I felt light-headed. Something in that bite had got to me, and the nausea was heady. It coiled and pounced again, relentless like a cornered arachnid. Somehow I managed to angle my blade and shove it into the creature’s path, ramming it point-first down its throat.

It shivered, impaled on the length of steel, thrashing and clawing. Then it started to haul itself up towards the hilt, using its six prehensile fingers to drag itself closer.

Grimly, I reached for my discarded flamer. One hand gripping my sword hilt, the other on the trigger, I pressed the muzzle into its blindly snapping jaws.

*Choke, now,* I willed, opening the nozzles.

The gush of flames flooded into the daemon’s mouth, spilling and bubbling and making its flabby stomach swell into a burning bag. For a moment it writhed on that spit, gurgling and clawing closer.

Then its body burst, ripping open in a flail of dragged entrails. I shook it free of the blade, hurling its deflated husk into the deck, then stood over the remains and doused them with waves of flame.

The pain in my leg was excruciating by then, but I did not relent. Even as my vision faltered I saw the shedim’s corpse shrivel and twist.

As the last of its unnatural essence curled into ash, I finally ceased, sinking to one knee and leaning on the hilt of my blade. The flames blew out, and I was left alone in the bloody corridor, stacked high with tortured and broken flesh. I saw how many of my soldiers that thing had killed – I guessed about twenty – having gnawed its way through their chests and limbs in a hunger-frenzy. My own leg was aching too, swollen with pain far out of proportion to the size of the wound.

I gave the comm-signal to Erefan that the daemon had been extinguished. I screwed my eyes closed, willing myself not to lose focus, and shakily got to my
feet. I kicked through the residue of the shedim with my good leg, and saw that it had been annihilated.

I had never seen one like that before. I added a given-name to the hundreds that already populated my internal bestiary – a ‘gnawer’ – although I was sure that in some forgotten library of the Inquisition there was a better title for such a disgusting excrescence of the warp.

Dimly, I heard the drum of running boots. The standard drill would be enacted now – running repairs, an assessment of the damage, consultation with Slovo, and then it would begin all over again. We’d drag ourselves a little further along the winding guts of the warp, a little more battered, a little less able to defend ourselves against the inevitable assault.

I started to limp back the way I’d come, knowing that I’d need to remove my armour and treat that wound soon. It was as I reached the end of the corridor that I saw the clean-up team arrive – six troopers, plus one of Slovo’s surviving menials.

That was odd. There was no reason for the Navigator to send someone. I looked up at him, and he bowed.

‘My lord, Navigator Rehata wishes to speak to you at once,’ he said.

I waved him away and made to push past, but – somewhat unbelievably – he held his ground.

‘We can’t go back in, you see,’ he said, nervously. ‘It’s the Astronomican. The beacon. It’s gone.’

Slovo looked even worse than normal. I wondered if I was driving him to his death, and a part of me felt some guilt for that. It wouldn’t change anything, though, and I would have happily undertaken the same trials if our roles had been reversed. All that mattered was the objective, and we were all subordinate to that.

‘There’s just nothing,’ he said, miserably, dabbing a filthy cloth at his sallow face. His visible eyes were ringed with purple, and the plugs on the back of his hands were swollen with bruising. ‘It blinked. It flickered. Then it went out.’

The tidings hurt me. I couldn’t detect the beacon, being even less receptive to its presence than a normal human was, but the prospect of what this might represent was like a physical blow.

Erefan was in the chamber with me, plus his deputy on the command bridge, a man named Rythan. A newly promoted lieutenant called Oriath now served as my garrison commander, the last three having died fighting incursions. He
looked incredibly young to me, hardly more than a boy straight out of our training facility on Arraissa, and I didn’t relish the prospect of him leading an action against these enemies.

‘You’ve piloted ships in storms before,’ said Erefan wearily. ‘Is this not the same?’

Slovo laughed bitterly. ‘For a few moments, maybe.’ He looked at me accusingly. ‘I can still see the conduits. I can see how they move. But I can’t orientate it to anything. We could end up flying straight into the Eye, and I’d never know.’

‘You’d know that,’ muttered Rythan.

‘Then we make shorter jumps,’ said Erefan, also looking at me, this time for support.

‘Shorter jumps!’ Slovo’s laughter gained a manic edge. ‘Oh, then, shorter jumps.’ He leaned forwards across the table, his fingers shaking from lack of sleep. ‘They’re screaming for us out there,’ he growled. ‘You’ve no idea what I’m seeing. The universe is breaking apart. There’s a chasm now as far as I can see, and nothing leaking over from the other side.’ His eyes were darting now between us all. ‘This isn’t a storm. It’s something else. I’ve seen other ships, burning down in the deeps, broken open, mauled like carcasses. If we stay out here long enough, that’ll be us.’

I looked at Erefan. How far?

He shrugged. ‘Hard to tell. We’ve nothing to gauge by. Even the star charts seem awry, but we’re triangulating again.’ He saw that his answer was less than useless to me, and tried again. ‘I’d say that in normal circumstances we’d be a few weeks out, burning as hard as we could. But we’ve got a lot of damage now and a full medicae bay. I can hardly staff the bridge, let alone the rest of the ship.’

I found it irritating how often my officers reminded me of the problems. They were tired, I knew that, but still it would have been nice if just one of them could have offered something more positive when I asked them.

‘We could Geller-seal the cargo and bilge levels,’ said Oriath then, hesitantly. ‘I spoke to the master of the enginarium and he said it could be done. It’ll flood them with radiation, so we’d lose them, but it’d be less to patrol at least.’

I smiled. Youth brought some advantages – perhaps I shouldn’t have been so quick to write him off.

Do it, I signed to Erefan. Then I returned to Slovo. The map.

He rolled his eyes. ‘I wondered when you’d make me look at it again. Forget it.
It’s like I told you, you can’t map the warp.’

Perhaps you’re wondering why I tolerated him speaking to me like that. I didn’t like it. One crunch of my fist into his sweaty face would have reminded him of the proper courtesies, but of course I couldn’t afford to lose him. His natural aversion to me had been amplified by what I’d made him do, and he was close to losing his mind entirely.

I’d had the map in my thoughts for a long time. Attempting to study it was probably pointless, but I nevertheless had sat in front of it for hours, trying to understand what it represented. Slovo’s words had reverberated in my head more than once.

_Suppose they knew what was going to happen. Suppose they knew which way the tides were pulling._

They clearly had done. This was not a random development, it was something long-planned and brought to bear after the labour of millennia. That left the possibility that we might make use of their schematics. Perhaps Slovo could no longer see the Astronomican, but he could see the conduits as we travelled through them, and if they corresponded to the map in any way then he should be able to make use of it.

He might have been exhausted, and he might have been half-mad, but he was a wily old soul and saw what I was thinking without me having to grapple with the concepts in sign language he understood.

‘Oh, no,’ he warned, wagging a finger as if I were a child in schola. ‘Oh, no. Too risky. Far too risky. We don’t know anything about it. Perhaps they let you find it. Considered that, eh? I wouldn’t spit on it.’

But he would do more than that. He would study it, and he would use it. I would take it up to his chambers under armed guard and make him memorise its swirls and ganglia. The alternative was to sit here, rotting, while our supplies ran out and our engines choked for lack of fuel.

When I turned to him, Erefan was studying me with a strange expression. He didn’t know about the map. None of them did, save Slovo.

‘What are we doing, then?’ he asked.

I almost hesitated. For all my professed resolve, I understood the terrible risk here. Death was one thing – stranded in the void, gradually running out of air and light. The warp was another, a place in which death was the absolute best thing that could possibly happen.

But there was really no choice, not if the balance of things was understood. I had to get to Terra, and if I damned myself and everyone else in the attempt,
we’d still do it.

_We go back in_, I signed, looking deliberately at Slovo the whole time. _And we trust in Him._

Six hours later, that’s what we did. I’d had to literally grip Slovo’s head by both temples to get him to look at that flayed-skin schema again, and it had made his nose bleed and his breathing rapid, but there was just enough residual loyalty left in that dried-out body to get him through it and plan something like a route.

Before the shutters came down I took a final look out of the real-viewers. The void itself looked just as it ever did. You’d never have known there was anything wrong, and the stars burned across the arch of darkness, cold and clear. All that terror was cloistered on the other side, locked across the divide of emptiness, barred from psychics by laws older than the universe itself.

I’d always had so much trouble understanding that. Perhaps non-blank humans could grasp it more readily, given their sensitivity to the psychic substrates, but for me it was beyond imagination. Hestia had told me once that our limitation was no different to colour-blindness, but that was a comforting fallacy. A person might live easily in a world where a certain hue was missing, but I lacked so much more. The very characteristic that made me able to slay the daemonic made me completely unable to understand it.

Soon, though, the shutters came down and the vision disappeared. Once all was prepared, the klaxons sounded in anticipation of the leap. I made my way to the command bridge – I wanted to be close to Erefan in case this went wrong. As ever when we attempted a jump, all crew were armed and ready. What remained of our standing defence force had been distributed across the decks, waiting apprehensively.

The chimes sounded, the chronos clicked over, the plasma drives coughed out and the warp drives engaged. For a second there was that gut-turning lurch – the snag of realities pulled out of synch – and then we were immersed, back into the realm of dreams.

Erefan’s face was set hard with concentration. For a while, the cогitators whirred just as normal. Signal banks ticked over, and hard-plugged servitors gazed at scrolling rune lists. I felt the steady drumbeat of the Cadamara’s systems pushing us deeper in. The atmosphere became colder, just as it always did. Anything loose rattled. The mortal crew hunched over their stations, tense and distracted.

‘He’s finding a way,’ Erefan said eventually.
I didn’t answer, but kept my attention focused on the ship’s vital signs. We were going fast by then, pushing all power into the warp coils, eking out what progress we could before the inevitable attack. Time passed – the first hour, then the next, then the next. I never relaxed. No one on the bridge relaxed. The structures around us creaked and flexed, stressed by the enormous forces thundering around them. I watched the regular status indicators from Slovo’s blister, one every ten minutes – *nothing detected, nothing detected.*

It couldn’t last.

‘I have a signal,’ reported Rythan suddenly.

I moved over to his station.

‘Warp-wake,’ he said. ‘Something’s locked on.’

*Speed?* I signed.

‘Faster than us.’

By then Erefan had patched into the feed. ‘Bigger, too.’

For a ship to encounter another ship at random within the warp was so unlikely as to be a statistical impossibility. It wasn’t so much the size – real space was vast enough by itself for encounters to be rare – but the unique nature of the empyrean. You couldn’t ‘see’ another ship while warp-bound, only detect the interaction between the vessels’ Geller harmonics and the surrounding volume of extended ether. It didn’t even mean that the ships were in close proximity, physically speaking, only that they were occupying coextensive pockets of warp space, although given the reduction in viable routes brought about by Slovo’s ‘great rift’, it seemed unlikely that this one wasn’t right on our tail. Perhaps it had found us as a result of some coincidence of galactic proportions. Or perhaps whatever flew it had access to scrying methods and psychic expertise denied to us.

*They know what we’re doing,* Slovo had said. *They know where we’re going, and they’ll break us open to prevent it.*

Still, the matter was largely moot provided we both stayed in the warp. No interaction could take place between us, only a kind of shadow play that would last until one or both of us broke the barrier back into the real universe. No doubt Slovo could see it too, locked within his blister of visions, but I couldn’t ask him to clarify, not without breaking the concentration he needed to keep us from smashing into a chronovortex and hurling us out of space and time altogether.

*Maintain status,* I signed, watching the ship’s signals carefully.

‘Holding steady,’ Rythan reported, his voice tight.

Erefan shot off some orders to the enginarium and redistributed part of the
standing reserve to the *Cadamara*’s void gun batteries, such as they were. That was standard operating procedure, but I found myself almost smiling at its optimism – anything powerful enough to be capable of tracking us through the ether like this was unlikely to be as lightly armed as we were.

It wouldn’t go away. Every time I looked at the augur sweeps, the warp-wake was there, gaining on us, forging a faster and huger path through the maze. It had clearly locked on and was waiting for the chance to pounce.

And then, just then, came the report it needed.

‘Geller integrity weakening,’ came the call from further down the bridge’s rows of sensor stations.

I received notice from Slovo’s menials just a second later.

‘Daemonspoor detected,’ chirped the monotone readout. ‘Levels already high and climbing.’

Erefan turned to me for guidance. I let him wait.

Something boomed into the ship, knocking us in a slew to starboard. The overhead arches creaked, and a shower of fine dust drifted towards the deck.

I looked at the augur sweep again and saw our shadow. It was, if anything, getting closer.

*Damn them,* I thought. *They’re in collusion.*

‘Geller aegis drained across outer hull-wards,’ came another report, tinny and unwelcome. ‘Estimated time to failure – three minutes.’

The ship bucked again, as if we’d somehow slammed over an obstacle in our path. I heard the scrape and screech of things outside, and the long whine of what might have been talons down our spine. A bulkhead started to crack – I could see a filigree of microscopic lines spreading across it like age wrinkles.

Slovo’s strained voice crackled into my earpiece. ‘*Get us out,*’ he warned. ‘*Get us out now.*’

Still I waited. This was what they wanted. They were like a pack of hunters, flushing us from the thicket and into the open plain.

Something broke up high, over where the lumen-clusters hung, and the deck was showered with splinters of glass. I felt the deck keel over, swinging us down and round, and the warp shutters rattled in their armatures.

Erefan gave me a sharp look. ‘Orders?’ he asked, pointedly.

I wanted to wait. I wanted to let them in, and take them on again. I liked ending the shedim. I liked the look of outrage on their bestial faces as they realised that I would not be their victim but would be sending them back to their hell-realm to gnaw on failure. Such fights were the reason I had been made, after all.
Warning runes glowed into life, klaxons kicked off. Crew members scrambled to keep us flying straight, buffeted now by winds that were not winds.

‘One minute to Geller failure,’ came the tinny voice again.

The wall of the bridge began to bulge inwards, only metres from where I stood. I watched the metal stretch into the shape of a fist, curled and ready to slam its way in. From below us, the shouting had already started.

‘They’re latched on the hull!’ Slovo blurted. ‘They’re getting inside!’

Erefan lost patience. ‘Begin crash out of warp,’ he ordered, looking at me the whole time.

The crew didn’t react. Some looked at him, others looked at me. A cogitator station exploded, sending static skittering across the deck, and still they waited for the order.

They were a good crew, all told. They had worked faithfully for a woman they instinctively despised, and even now they held off until I gave them the command.

They deserved to live a little longer.

Crash out, I signed, beginning a flurry of concise orders. Void shields up on exit. Route plasma drive power to gunnery banks. Begin fire-sequence. Await targeting matrix on materialisation.

Erefan barked out the rest of the orders, beginning the wind-down that would see us hurtling back into reality. Fresh warning-blares sounded and the rune lenses streamed with screeds of trajectory data. The ship yawed again, wildly this time, and the swelling fist extended further, ripping the wall-matter wider until I thought it would surely split apart.

‘Out now! Out now!’ I heard Slovo squawking.

Erefan worked quickly, powering down the warp drives and sending us into a real space spiral. It was a violent exit, smashing and battering the Cadamara’s already bruised superstructure. Once across the threshold we flew into reality as if spat from the scabrous mouth of the gods themselves.

‘Shutters up!’ Erefan shouted. ‘Run out macrocannons! All crew to combat stations!’

Everything burst into motion – the crew were running, skidding across a teetering deck. Our internal grav-pull stuttered, our undercooked plasma drives blasted emptily. The damage wrought by the emerging shedim exploded as the nascent manifestations were ripped back into the warp – the bulkhead blew apart, the bulging wall collapsed in a rain of tumbling brace-spars. Augur lenses filled with flickering representations of local space, and for a moment I saw
nothing, and dared to hope we’d crashed out far enough away for a fix to fail.
  I stumbled over to the nearest full-spectrum scanner and widened the lens
  aperture. The real-view shutters clanged open, and across the forward oculus we
  saw a swath of space yawn away from us, empty and star-strewn.
  ‘Full burn ahead!’ Erefan bellowed. ‘Clamp that bulkhead down!’
  We were out. We were alone. The daemon-scraped hull was still voidtight. We
  were going to make it again.
  Then the oculus blazed with a riot of false colour, shining like multihued suns
go nova.
  ‘Down nadir!’ roared Erefan, his voice cracking now. ‘Full hard-
burn and roll out starboard gunnery!’
  I saw the pursuing vessel shoot from the gaping wound in real space. I had no
idea exit-precision like that was possible – it swung into visible range, huge and
smouldering, its ancient, char-black hull still burning with warpfire. One look at
that ship and I knew we weren’t getting out of this.
  Open fire, I signed. Enact first-stage evasion pattern.
  It was already too late. I saw our macrocannon array loose, sending a spread of
ordnance skittering wide of the target, and watched the stars smear away as we
umbled into a steepling dive. They were better shots – a barrage of high-energy
lances smacked into us, exploding our still-charging void shields and blowing
their coverage into a hail of electrostatic.
  We were dead in the void now, our protection gone and our weapons of little
use against the slab-hulled horror that loomed over us. We were whirling so fast
it was hard to get a glimpse of it in the real-viewers, but I could see terrifying
banks of esoteric weaponry hanging like withered fruit under twisted boughs.
  They wouldn’t destroy us – a voidship was too valuable – but it took only
seconds for the lock-on detectors to blare, signifying a teleport locus.
  ‘Stand by to repel boarders!’ ordered Erefan, reaching for his weapon and
crouching down by the command throne.
  Then the air ripped apart in a hard shiver of displacement. The space over the
command dais froze into a blaze of white-silver, and ether-lightning snarled out
across the decking. Out from the heart of the cold inferno strode six figures. I’d
already zeroed in on the leader, marking him for both flame and blade, and my
calves tightened for the leap that would take me into contact.
  ‘Stand down, in the name of the Throne!’ boomed a voice that chilled me to my
core. I froze, suddenly bewildered, before the last slivers of ether-matter ripped
away.
Sisters of Silence emerged from the breaking clouds, four of them, clad like I was in full battle-amour and carrying great zweihanders that ran with blue flame. They spread out calmly, covering every strategic point and radiating such an aura of psychic blankness that the mortal crew recoiled as if struck by fists.

The two others were different. They were huge, towering above us all, encased in full-bodied golden armour that swam and winked with scattered warp-light. For a moment I thought they might be shedim, clad in aspects of deception and glory, sent to baffle me before they pulled my mortal frame apart. I aimed my flamer at the leader’s baroque helm, ready to empty my promethium reserves into that terrible mask of wonder.

He came towards me. He carried a crackling force spear, a weapon so grotesquely over-engineered that I would not have been able to lift it, let alone use it.

‘You were of the Arraissa convent,’ the creature said.

My finger still lingered over the trigger. I nodded.

The creature reached up and removed its helm. I saw a human face revealed, though greater, like a Space Marine’s to look at, only less brutal and more beautiful. It was a courtier’s face as much as it was a soldier’s, betraying both power and subtlety.

He deactivated the energy field over his blade.

‘Are you the last?’ he asked.

I didn’t know the answer to that, and hesitated. Then, to my complete surprise, he asked the question again, this time in flawless Thoughtmark – *Are you the last?*

To the best of my knowledge, I replied, my fingers dancing. It had been a long time since I’d been able to make use of the medium’s full fluency, and despite everything I felt an almost emotional release.

*Then we were fortunate to find you,* the golden one continued. *I am Navradaran of the Ephoroi of the Adeptus Custodes, and I am here to take you home.*

His eyes flickered towards my still-activated flamer, and he shot me a brief, dry smile.

*Deactivate your weapon, please,* he signed. *Time is short, and if you will refrain from immolating me, there is much I have to tell you.*
Later we would call them the Days of Blindness. That was the time when we saw nothing and heard nothing. We were as alone as we had been before the Emperor had delivered us, sundered from our grand Imperium and cast adrift on the face of the abyss.

It was a time of terror. All laws were suspended, even those of time and space. We discovered later that all worlds had experienced the same horrific isolation, but the duration varied wildly. Some reported mere days of blindness, others months. For all I know, there may be many systems still in that terrible grip of nothingness.

It was caused by the warp, of course, staining into the void like blood in water. Everything it touched became mad, and the old boundaries flexed and broke around it. We discovered then how prescient the warnings of the old seers had been, as our many sins finally caught up with us.

On Terra, at the source of it, the blindness lasted just over a month. Thirty-three days of fear and violence overlooked all the time by our new skies of blood-red. The rioting became uncontrollable, spreading like wildfire and fuelled by false guides. The entire planet was placed under martial law, and every available member of the Astra Militarum was pressed into immediate action. Regiments still being raised for deployment to Cadia and Armageddon were recalled from their orbital musters and sent into the whirlwind of the hive-zones, forced to open fire not on xenos or heretics, but on their own kind storming supply bunkers or ransacking cathedrals for gold.

Thirty-three days seems such a short time, set against the span of years before
and after, but in truth it felt like an eternity. I barely slept during the whole period, and only staved off mania due to heavy self-dosing of narcotics. The air fizzed with fevered energies, making true rest or contemplation impossible. Every glance seemed to disclose fresh terrors in the dark. I would wake from snatched half-hours of slumber crying out, clutching at my sweat-dank sheets. On one occasion I looked in the mirror while shaving to see a leering daemonic face staring back at me, and I had to shatter the glass to get rid of it. Another night I nearly choked on my own nightmares of being skinned alive by laughing butchers in winged helms, and it took Jek to calm me down and stop me chewing my own tongue off.

Yes, Jek was sharing my bed. Do not judge us harshly for that – we had not given into base lust, but had been thrown together by something like need. Back then she was the only one I could trust completely, and I think she felt the same way about me. If she had not been there, I do not know what would have happened to me. I clung to her, and she clung to me. We were like neophytes again in the face of that maelstrom, stripped of our offices and pretensions and reduced to what we had always really been.

‘I should be able to shake free of it,’ I told her, lying in the dark.
‘The worst will pass,’ she said, not sounding at all certain.

I chewed my lip nervously. The shadows in my chamber seemed unnaturally black, as if they would suddenly slither up on to the bed and strangle me.

‘I was so sure,’ I said.
‘Sure of what?’
‘The Council. I was so sure the Legio would be remade, and I would be its architect, and then all would be well.’
‘There was never a guarantee.’
But I remembered what Valoris had told me. He had thought I was the conduit for His will. I had come to believe it too. What else could explain my extraordinary certainty, emerging from a life in which certainty had always been absent?

Such hubris.
‘Perhaps He no longer even lives,’ I murmured.
‘Hush!’ Jek chided urgently, sitting up and pressing her finger to my mouth.
‘Do not even think it.’

Once I would have found the notion itself absurd. I would not have uttered it even in private, wary of the listening devices of the Ordo Hereticus. Now I found I cared nothing for spies and inquisitors. All was undone, and there was no
greater terror to be unleashed than that which already had been.

I rose. It was still early, several hours before dawn, but the sickly red glow, now permanent, leaked through the drapes and across my chamber. I padded to the pulse-shower cubicle and washed the worst of the night-sweat from my skin. Under the harsh lumens I looked pastier and flabbier than ever, and my cheeks hung from my bones like rags.

By the time I returned to dress, Jek had fallen asleep again. I looked at her for a while. She was so much younger. Perhaps that made it harder for her. I had seen too much hope drain away over the years already – she should have lived to see better times.

I could not linger, of course. Despite the fatigue and the sickness, we were busier than we had ever been. The Council was feverish with activity, passing resolution after resolution. Martians were crawling through the deeps of the Throne and the conduits of the Astronomican, prying and testing and trying whatever they could to restore the sacred beacon. I had guessed for some time that they were charlatans in many ways, dabbling in things they no longer understood, and their hapless tinkering during that time only reinforced my view. When I looked Raskian in the eye – or rather, what passed for his eyes – I detected a real fear there: not of death or pain, but of being discovered, found out as ignorant and deluded about that which they so jealously guarded as their own realm.

Once I had made myself as respectable as possible, I left my bedchamber and limped to the audience rooms. Guards were everywhere, all carrying their weapons unholstered and ready for use. They were twitchy, shadowing even senior officials like me until they were sure I was not some simulacrum sent to deceive them. They weren’t entirely stupid to think that – reports were rife of body-wearers infiltrating the Palace then opening fire and slaughtering dozens. No one trusted anyone, and every order was checked and counter-checked before being followed. That made us slow to react. We were living in a fog of confusion, something no doubt intended by our enemies.

The first meeting I had that day was with Representative Arx, the mistress of the Inquisition. I had barely made myself comfortable when she entered, gliding into the chamber like a black swan.

Arx was a strange one, and I did not know her well. I always found inquisitors hard to deal with – they were intense souls, driven by forces that I didn’t fully understand. The Representative was drawn from the ranks of the Ordo Malleus, the daemonhunters, a fact that I found gave some rare comfort during that hard
time. Of all the High Lords, she was amongst the most composed just then, having been exposed to malign phenomena throughout her long career in the Imperium’s service and thus inured to its worst effects.

‘Cancellarius,’ she said, bowing slightly.

‘Representative,’ I replied, gesturing towards a low leather armchair close to the fireplace.

In times past we might have indulged in small talk, asking after one another’s staff or relations, musing on the absurdities of life in the Administratum, but no longer. She came straight to the point.

‘There are daemons on this world,’ she said, flatly. ‘Consider that. No planet has had more scrutiny than this one. The merest hint of heresy was punished without pity. And now there are the foulest creatures in all eternity capering within sight of the Palace.’

I knew it. I’d seen the classified documents, and heard the testimony from those brave enough to venture into the restive hives. I’d even seen them myself, unless that mirror had been a hallucination.

‘Can it be contained?’ I asked, feeling groggy and wanting more sleep, knowing I had hours of meetings ahead of me.

‘I’ve mobilised all my inquisitors in-world. Dozens more are being pulled back from stations elsewhere, but we can’t go beyond the Sol System. I dread to think what’s happening outside.’

‘Titan, then,’ I said.

I was not supposed to know about the Grey Knights. Only a few of the High Lords were, plus the highest echelons of the Ordo Malleus. It’s funny what you pick up, though, over the centuries. For all its undoubted efforts, the Imperium’s never actually been very good with secrets.

Arx knew the score, of course. ‘The request’s already been made,’ she said. ‘Valoris spoke to me. You credit that? Our golden protectors, those whom you wished to send off into the grinder of Cadia, are already asking for help.’

I could have done without the sarcasm. It was bad enough to see my hopes dashed so publicly without a reminder that my proposal would also have stripped us of our most capable defenders.

‘And what was their response?’

At that, Arx laughed. I’d never seen her laugh before, and I never wish to again. It was entirely without human qualities – a cynical expression of bleak amusement that exposed more of her soul than I think she’d intended.

‘Their response? They’re sending forces to Luna.’
I was momentarily taken aback. ‘I’ve had no reports of disturbance on Luna.’
‘No. That’s the point. The Grey Knights have… capabilities. That’s where they think the next move will play out.’
I rubbed my hands over my eyes. Throne, I was tired. ‘Then we’ll need to reinforce the dockyards—’ I began.
‘No,’ she said. ‘No, we’ll need our forces here. They’re sending what they can spare. Grand Master Anval Laraon has divided his forces three ways – a standing defence on Titan, a major attack group for Luna, and a reserve detachment for Terra. The latter will be the weakest of the three – little more than a sop for Trajann Valoris, to keep relations sweet.’
I couldn’t help my smile – it slipped out, a sly one, released through exhaustion. ‘I’d like to see those two meet,’ I said.
‘I wouldn’t,’ Arx said, primly. ‘So here it is. We’ll have minimal Grey Knights support. The Palace is the priority. That, and the Fortress of the Astronomican. We can plausibly keep those secure. The rest…’
She trailed off. It took me a moment to realise what she was suggesting – abandon the planet to ruin and confusion. If I’d heard it from any other lips, I would have snorted in derision.
‘Then you’re saying we can’t hold this world in its entirety?’ I asked, wanting to be sure I understood.
‘I am.’
‘This is Terra.’
‘I’m aware of that.’
‘We have billions under arms. We have Titans. We have Naval support.’
‘Indeed. And they’re all going quite, quite mad.’
She said it so calmly. I knew she was right – Throne, I’d seen the reports from overrun Arbites stations and watched the vid-feeds of hab-towers descending into anarchy. The age-old grip of the priests was breaking. Reality had cracked. The skies were on fire and no one had slept for days.
‘You’ve spoken to Haemotalion about this?’ I asked.
‘You’ll do that. You’ll speak to the others too. It’s about priorities. We can’t afford to make mistakes now.’
I had that horrible sinking feeling then – that she was right, and that very few others would see it, and that all that lay ahead was more grind and conflict.
‘We’ve lost the beacon temporarily,’ I said. ‘We’ve some work to do to restore order. You can’t be suggesting we cede our control just when things get difficult.’
At that, Arx leaned forwards, resting her elbows on her knees. She was a hard woman to look at – all bones and severity.

‘I had a man delivered to my care some weeks ago,’ she said. ‘He was sent up to me by a watch division of the south-eastern wall sector. I think he was detained by a Custodian, one whom you may possibly know, but that is unimportant. What is important is this – he was no ranting demagogue. He was steeped in the kind of corruption I’ve only seen on worlds far from here and riddled with the warp. And once we applied the instruments, we began to understand what has been happening.’

I couldn’t look away. Arx had the air of a woman who had nothing more to lose – the almost fey resolve of the damned.

‘He knew so much,’ she went on. ‘He knew things even my adepts don’t. There’s a blind and mutilated sorcerer down in the gaols calling himself Iskandar Khayon, and others, and they’re all in agreement to a startling degree. They’re telling us all we could ever wish to know, these people, because they aren’t afraid of anything any more. They’re telling us of the Crimson Path. They’re telling us of the Great Rift. They’re telling us things that weren’t possible before are possible now, and it’s becoming hard not to believe them.’

‘They’re lying.’

‘No, chancellor. They’re not. Why would they?’ She pressed her palms together. ‘Every war we’ve ever fought, every crusade we’ve ever launched, every Black Crusade we’ve ever fended off, it’s all been leading up to this. Ask your Custodian friends – they know it too. That’s why they’re paralysed by doubt. They know things we’ve forgotten. It all rests on this moment. Our decisions now can damn us.’

As she spoke, I felt increasingly sick. I had lived for so long at the epicentre of the empire, far from the wars and the squalor, and it had made me flaccid.

‘Why are you telling me this?’ I asked.

‘I’m telling everyone the same thing,’ she said. ‘We have anathema psykana returning, some running ahead of the storm, others caught in its approach. We’ll need as many as we can gather, and the Captain-General has been active in bringing them back.’

I hesitated. ‘He didn’t know we’d ordered them home.’

‘You believed that? You’re losing your touch, chancellor. He’s been doing everything he can to collect them for some time. They always fought together, those two. He recognised the signs a while back, and I suspect only he had the knowledge to get a message to them in time.’
I felt foolish. Events were racing ahead of my ability to comprehend, let alone influence. I wondered how long this had been going on, and how much it had been governed, if at all, by my entreaties to them.

‘Then Lamma was right,’ I said. ‘We’re going back to the old templates.’

‘Some of them.’ Arx stood up then, brushing her long robes about her. I did likewise. ‘I supported you in Council, chancellor, because you were right. This changes nothing – for now. Things will have to alter in time, but first comes survival. You understand this?’ She came closer, and I saw the fine lines of care around her eyes. ‘You’ve seen us all come and go. We must keep the Council together on this.’

I nodded weakly. There was so much to process. ‘Thank you for telling me these things.’

‘What we said will remain secret.’

‘Of course.’

‘Not that there’s much cause for secrets now.’

She turned to leave. Just as she did so, I felt a sudden surge of irritation. It might have been building for weeks, prompted by my recent failures, or maybe triggered by the exhaustion infesting my system. Whatever the cause, it was most unlike me, but it spilled out nonetheless.

‘We’re not done yet, Representative,’ I said, causing her to turn back to face me. ‘I’ve had my aides tell me we’re done for fifty years, but we’re not. There are daemons on Terra? There were before. Damn them. Damn them all. This is our home.’

I couldn’t decipher her expression then. Was she amused? Contemptuous? Confused? Maybe all of those things. In the end, though, she just nodded.

‘It is at that,’ she murmured.

Then she was gone, leaving me alone in the chamber I had spent my lifetime beautifying. I looked around at the fine things, the objects that had given me such pleasure. I could no longer summon enthusiasm for them. They were fragile. Collecting them seemed more like an indulgence than ever, the compensatory occupation of a weak man who should have been stronger.

But then my comm-bead clicked, and a dozen new bulletins ran down my retinal-feed.

So I started walking. Work called. As always, work called.

At least I had direction now. We called it the Arx Doctrine, the strategy of reinforcing the essential core of the planet: the Sanctum Imperialis, the Palace
perimeter, the still-dormant Fortress of the Astronomican and the other capital structures of the Administratum. I spent my time shuttling from High Lord to High Lord, cajoling and persuading and bribing so that dissension was minimised.

Some saw the necessity of it from the start. Oddly enough, Haemotalion was my staunchest ally in those days. He was sufficiently cold that the sacrifice of billions to save the inner core of the Imperium never seemed like a difficult choice to make.

Others resisted. I could understand why – we had not yet been invaded in any significant numbers, and the unrest across the planet was, while disturbing, hardly critical. Pereth in particular was loath to see the standing defence orders unravel, for she commanded the vast resources of the Imperial Navy within the Sol System, and perhaps was seduced by their huge potential. We had fully equipped squadrons in orbit, including system-destroying battleships stuffed with whole regiments of shock troops. We had thousands of regiments garrisoned across the world’s surface, plus three full Titan maniples, huge volumes of Mechanicus forces, an entire company of Imperial Fists, plus scattered representatives of other Space Marine Chapters.

So we were hardly defenceless, but neither were we facing normal foes. The madness within the citizenry spread quickly, fuelled by starvation and loss of belief. Reports of daemonic incursions erupted with staggering frequency, and our resident inquisitors were soon run ragged trying to eradicate them all. The failure of the Astronomican meant that the steady run of cargo ships, already interrupted by our defence arrangements, dried up completely. It had long been a maxim that the loss of three meals was enough to send a man feral. For our already starving population, cowed by disease and the incessant whispers of spirits in the night, it didn’t take that much. And, above all, two words were on all our lips, never uttered but always there – The Despoiler.

So the Arx Doctrine took shape. Regular regiments were pulled back to the walls, ceding control of massive urban tracts to the Adeptus Arbites. Many of those regions swiftly descended into full disorder, while others only retained a semblance of control.

I found the experience painful. You can imagine what it felt like to listen to the comm-feeds from desperate sector prefects, pleading for support as their command citadels were swamped by starving mobs of heretics. There was one exchange I remember keenly even now – a young-looking woman with a bloodied forehead and damaged armour, begging me to send reinforcements to
her outlying fief.
‘There’s no assault on the Palace!’ she cried, outraged. ‘Your walls are secure! By the Holy Throne, what reason do you have not to help us?’
I could only look at her, powerless to intervene. What could I say? That we knew even worse was coming? That the greatest of our kind believed the End Times were upon us and the Emperor’s halls themselves were at risk?
‘Remain stalwart, prefect,’ I said, hating the sound of my voice. ‘Help will be sent when it can.’
‘You’ve murdered us, then,’ she spat. ‘You damned dogs! You’ve murdered—’
I cut the feed. I couldn’t listen to any more.
Slowly, though, over days and weeks, we built up what defences we could. The orbital grid remained mostly intact even as we lost contact with roughly a quarter of the planetary surface. The priests of Mars, less susceptible to mortal weakness, lent us what aid they could, though I suspect they were also terrified about the precariousness of Mars. Our battleships maintained a tight cordon throughout the Sol System, plying the cold depths even as the Throneworld withered under preternatural flames.
On the twentieth day of the Blindness came two developments that gave us hope. The first was a flight of silver-grey landers dropped from a strike cruiser newly locked in geostation over the Palace. The occupants of those craft were dispatched directly into the heart of the Sanctum, striding in pale grey robes beneath the bloody storm-light.
I witnessed their arrival from a long way away, but even a distant glimpse of Grey Knights gave my tired old soul a brief spike of exhilaration. In times past that sight would have seen me mind-wiped, or perhaps killed, but those old strictures seemed pointless now and I did not fear them. They were going to confer with Valoris himself, I understood, and thence to the walls themselves. I could not tell you how many had come. Perhaps fifty? It was not what we needed, but I was mindful of Arx’s words, and knew that their greatest strength had been mustered close by. Still, it was something.
The second cause for hope was less visible. Had Arx not said anything I might never have known of it, but once the seed had been planted I was relentless in tracking it down. My agents were sent into every sensor station we still controlled, sifting through millions of planetfall records and orbital transfer dockets. The more we looked, the more we found.
They had been careful, and they had been discreet, but it’s very hard to keep secrets entirely on Terra from someone who knows where to look. Sisters of
Silence had been landed for months, sometimes from Black Ships, other times from chartered transports or military convoys. They had disappeared into the Tower of Hegemon, where the trail had died.

I wondered who else knew about it. Had Valoris informed his fellow High Lords yet? Perhaps some of them had been in on this for a long time, merely playing along with the rest of the Council. In ordinary times I would have delved for more, but the knowledge that they were here was enough. It gave me some comfort to know that it was not just the Enemy who had been preparing – others had foreseen the darkening of the skies and had set plans in motion to counter it.

But I doubt that any living soul on this world, save perhaps He who dwells on the undying Throne, had any true conception of what was coming for us next. The Grey Knights, by whatever means they used to peer into the murk of the future, had been closest to the truth – Luna, not Terra, was the first target hit. All we knew of it here was a sudden flash of multihued light that briefly pierced the gyre of clouds above us.

I had been high up in my private sanctum, scouring the day’s many piles of frantic missives. Jek was with me, as always, and the candles were burning low. Suddenly, shafts of vivid illumination lanced through the high windows, breaking on the stone flags. Both of us dropped what we were doing and raced to the iron-barred windows. Jek gasped out loud. I dropped my quill. We could see the stars.

I should explain why that was so remarkable. I had never seen stars on Terra. None of us had – the toxic cloud cover was absolute, all the time, and had been for thousands of years. Now, though, we were staring into a night sky of flickering, dancing aurorae, torn open for the first time in living memory. I saw the hulls of the low-orbit defence platforms at guard over the world-city, their undersides blinking with markers and their position thrusters churning blue-white. I saw millions of military aircraft in stark relief, zigzagging across tortured skies on strafing runs against our own kind. But most of all, I saw the moon – Luna, our great naval dockyard, by reputation as dirt-grey and damaged as the world it circled. Just then, though, it was dazzling, a disc of reflected sunlight that made my eyes water.

‘By the Throne…’ Jek murmured, her gaze moving over the newly scoured heavens. There was a terrible beauty to it – a stark, cold vista that briefly made it possible to forget all the long-ingrained filth and turbulence.

‘Do not look,’ I said, dragging her back from the window.

The lights danced harder, ripping away great sheets of bloody cloud, but I no
longer liked the way they shimmered. The shifting colours became painful, and more tears trickled down my cheeks. The full face of Luna was too bright, too lurid, as if its core had been conjured into detonating. I could hear shrieking, too, out on the night’s wind, and the voices did not sound even vaguely human. I pulled the shutters closed and hurried from the chamber, Jek at my side.

‘What is it?’ she asked, her own eyes bloodshot and blinking.

‘Surely you can hear that,’ I muttered, heading as swiftly as I could towards my command nexus. ‘Something bad.’

By the time I reached the hall, our incoming data-feeds were almost jammed with priority signals. My staff were running between cogitator stands with long sheaves of parchment in sweaty hands. The high armourglass windows were swimming with the same iridescent beams of light, cast from a firmament that was no longer obeying natural laws.

‘Get shutters down over those!’ I ordered, hurrying for the strategium platform. By the time I made it there, Jek had recovered her habitual poise and was filtering the wheat from the comm-chaff.

‘Multiple launches from Terra,’ she murmured, scrolling down long rune-lists. ‘The Adeptus Astartes have been activated. Valoris has issued his own troops.’

I had orders from Haemotalion clogging my own feed – to free up Militarum assets for immediate rerouting to Luna, to shut down all non-essential comms outside the Palace perimeter, to liaise with Valoris’ command to enact immediate lock-down.

‘What’s happening up there?’ I asked, unable to gain any sense from the increasingly panicked series of missives.

‘Unnatural activity,’ Jek confirmed, studying our clandestine channel into Arx’s hierarchy. ‘Massive. They’ve got Geller readings off the scale.’

I leaned on the table heavily. ‘I have to see it,’ I said.

Jek looked at me with some amusement. ‘I don’t think we’ll be of much use up there, lord.’

*Lord.* She hadn’t called me that in days, and it felt wildly inappropriate now.

‘I’m sick of this,’ I said. ‘I’ve watched them all go to war, and pulled the strings in safety. Enough. I have to see it.’

I started to move, and Jek pulled me back. ‘You’re an old, fat man,’ she said crossly. ‘You’ve got no business there. It’ll kill you quickly and do them no good.’

I was too tired to argue. It was probably madness, but then we were all going mad anyway, just as Arx had said. The shutters were coming down too slowly,
and the vivid lights skipped across the interior of my sanctum like a mockery.

‘I’ve lived too long anyway,’ I growled, pulling my sleeve free of her grip. ‘Give the order for my lifter.’

She glared at me for a moment, disbelief on her face. Then she laughed. There was something crazed in all of us, back then – our moods seemed to sway and fracture like the storm-light above us.

‘One more piece of insanity,’ she said. ‘So be it. I’ll come too.’

We boosted clear two hours later. It took that long to reach the landing pads and prep the lifter – a big, old and cumbersome RE-45 based on a long-obsolete Militarum design. We went with a minimal entourage, just twenty guards from my own retinue, plus a Naval liaison officer and some of my signals officers. The wait for lift-off was torturous, though we received precious little information of any substance from Luna during that time. All we could clearly ascertain was that an enemy force had somehow broken through our impeccably organised cordon and made a landing on the satellite, and that our defences had immediately responded and that all hell had been unleashed.

Anything more than that was lost in the general confusion or clamped down on by the military authorities. At times of crisis like this my office was not included in the first tier of communication, and I guessed the Adeptus Custodes themselves, or perhaps even the Imperial Fists, had reserved detailed information for their own use.

So by the time we finally trooped into the crew hold of the lifter we still knew almost nothing about what we were heading into. We pulled clear of the Senatorum Imperialis’ forest of towers and parapets and were soon powering steadily up into the high atmosphere. I felt the thrusters boom just metres below where we were sitting in our restraint harnesses, and began to curse my reckless decision. I was not a natural voidfarer and almost instantly I felt nausea well up within my strapped-tight environment suit.

‘Try using the real-viewers,’ Jek suggested, knowing my weakness.

It didn’t help. All I could see through the heavily fortified slats was a wildly spinning disc, marked by great streaks of fire. I did note just how different the face of Terra looked to how it had done before, its uniform pall of sludgy grey now wracked with the flames raging in its upper atmosphere. I tried – foolishly – to glimpse something of the Fortress of the Astronomican, hoping against hope that it would ignite again and banish the swaths of destruction that now ceaselessly circled the globe.
Soon, though, even those details disappeared as my home world shrunk back, blurring from the lifter’s heavy progress into the void. The howl of the atmosphere ripped away, leaving only the internal roar of our engines. We began to be assailed by challenge-bursts from the hundreds of Naval installations on our route, all of them now watching the approaches to Luna like psy-hawks. I could see approaching void-fighter wings, and guessed just how jumpy those pilots would be.

‘Boost broadcasts of our exempted status,’ I voxed to the pilot. ‘Any trouble, route them direct to my audex and I’ll explain precisely how fast I can have a kill-team locate their families.’

The RE-45 was a blunt instrument, but a fast one once it got going. The dense network of defence stations swam past us, turning slowly under the flickering lights of Luna’s distorted reflective face. Space itself seemed to be alive, lit with ghostly strands of witch-light that scampered across the void.

‘There it is,’ murmured Jek, peering into one of the vid-feeds linked to the forward augur banks.

I had seen Luna many times, and had always been somewhat impressed by its faded grandeur. Unlike Terra it was a quiet, dark realm, dominated by the vast docks that jutted out from its equator. It was a colder place, and had always felt somehow purer to me too, if you ignored the huge volume of contraband passing through it every hour.

Looking at it now, much of it was the same as it had always been, save for a sector high up over our prow. The light came from there, winking like sunlight from a lens. The effect looked less violent than it had been, though it was still incredible that something so powerful could have been generated so quickly.

‘Take us down as close as you can,’ I told the pilot, swallowing the bile that clogged my throat. ‘Immediate visual range, unless we come under fire.’

By then I could already see other voidcraft looming up ahead – twelve Naval monitors with their guns ranged on the terrain below, a strike cruiser in the faded yellow of the Imperial Fists, two larger craft in silver-grey livery, even a grand gold-and-black cruiser bearing the eagle’s-head device of the Adeptus Custodes. Luna was not short of its own defences, but the response from Terra had nonetheless been significant.

We powered on through the perimeter, our status and credentials enough to run the gauntlet of challenges from the bigger vessels. Luna’s eerie dark grey landscape filled the forward viewers, swelling first into a great curve of spires and manufactory, then racing towards us in a new horizon of ancient grime-
streaked towers.

We touched down in a cloud of kicked-up dust. Fearful that my nausea might overwhelm me completely, I pulled the restraints from my chest and staggered down the lowering ramp first.

The pilot had done well, taking us close to the edge of a huge crater set out in the wastelands of Luna’s ship graveyards. We were down among the carcasses of ancient voidcraft, beached long ago and still pored over for scrap. The hulls were titanic, swelling hundreds of metres into the crystal-clear air, their blackened spars skeletal against a screen of clear stars. Above them all, far away from us on a dark horizon, rose the colossal plates of the docks themselves, huge black bars drawn vertically across the firmament.

The air was thick with grit, the product of venerable Mechanicus terraformers burning away at the world’s core. Gravity had never been quite equalised to Terran-normal here, so when we moved we lurched uneasily.

I could already hear the muffled sounds of many boots marching, and the vox-grind cries of orders issued, but nothing as yet of the inferno I had feared. The sorcerous light seemed to have disappeared, but in its place I could perceive the sway and flash of lumen beams, all of them originating beyond the ridge ahead of us.

Jek drew alongside me, and our guards jogged out on either side, guns trained on the summit.

‘What do you expect to find here?’ she asked.

‘Something worth the trouble,’ I muttered, beginning the long slog up the ridge. That trudge alone nearly ended me. The climb was more than a hundred metres in thin air, and by the time I neared the summit I was panting and sweating under my suit. I felt ludicrous. There was no reason for me to be there. I was an official, not a warrior. Perhaps I had been going mad. Perhaps the foetid air of the Throneworld had crushed my sanity entirely, and now I marched to a long-overdue death.

Then at last I reached the peak of the dusty slope. I hauled in great breaths, feeling dizzy, leaning my hands on my knees, before I was able to stand again.

I looked out. Jek stood beside me, and looked out. My guards and my officials, all in their thick suits of protective armour, looked out. Not one of us made a sound. I was, for once, entirely lost for words. Perhaps there weren’t any adequate to capture what we were seeing. We stayed like that for a long time, feeling only the heavy beats of our hearts and hearing the boom of the wind in our earpieces.
Let me do what I can to convey the scene. I fear I will be inadequate to the task, but I will try.

We were staring down a shallow incline, the curving inner face of a wide bowl. It was huge – perhaps twenty kilometres across – and I could barely make out the far side of it amid the dust and drifting smoke. More ship cadavers marked the far outline of the great crater, just as massive as the ones we had marched past, rising like megaliths over the depression.

The landscape was a smouldering charnel-zone, heaped with bodies and choked with the ruins of war-machines, all part-hazed by the drift of smoke. Some of the slain were human troops, clad in the grey of the Luna defence forces, but most were far huger and more ornate – Space Marines, drawn from a dozen Chapters. I saw cobalt and ebony, gold and crimson, all locked together in a vast chequerboard of livery. Amid the dead stood the living, battered and crusted with Luna’s dust, but still moving with that ponderous fluidity that always marked the Adeptus Astartes.

I had never seen so many gathered together. There must have been thousands of them, a war host beyond any I had dreamed of. Most were arrayed in the cobalt of Ultramar, that far-off kingdom I had read so much about but never travelled to. Others strode among them as equals – the Imperial Fists who until that day had been stationed on Terra, and Black Templars, Novamarines, Mortifactors… The list went on and on, testing the knowledge of heraldry I had learned in my distant youth.

It was impossible that they should be here. We had chronicled and listed every last defender on Terra for months, knowing that most of the Chapters were fighting far off in the depths of the void. The ways of the warp were blocked and burning – they could not be here.

But they were not the only ones. I saw bizarre creatures that I had no name for – arcane creations of the Mechanicus, some greater in size even than the Space Marines who stalked beside them. I saw living saints, just like those in the Ecclesiarchy frescos, hovering amid haloes of snaking energy. The thin air crackled with recently discharged plasma, as taut and tense as stretched skin. Even as I watched, three Imperial Fists Thunderhawk gunships rumbled overhead, far more massive than I’d imagined they were. Custodians, taller than all others, could be spied among the vast host, surrounded by the highest heaps of broken corpses.

The slain far outnumbered those who still walked, but these were no ordinary corpses. Even looking at them made my eyes burn – many were embellished
with high serpent helms, and had armour of lapis lazuli and copper, finer than any luxury I had witnessed in the Palace itself. Among them were scraps and slops of unnatural flesh, steaming as if cooked on the frigid air. I was no scholar of the arcane, but I could guess what those things must have been, and there were so many of them – a legion of the corrupt, lying entwined with the corpses of their victims.

In the centre of the crater was a mighty gate shaped into a high arch. There was nothing human in that thing’s construction – it was a mere twist and a skein of bone, glimmering like cold flesh, and yet high enough for a Warhound Titan to have walked through. I could not imagine that it had been there for very long – even in such a desolate place it would have been discovered and investigated long ago – and so this too must have been some construction of sorcery, linked to the residue of the daemonic that littered the crater floor.

It was a place of terror and amazement, an anomaly beyond any I had witnessed in my long career. I might have simply stood dumbfounded before it, drinking in the spectacle, but in truth these marvels soon left little impression on me. The Custodians, in whose presence I had been so cowed on Terra, did not inspire their previous awe. The thousands of Space Marines, our Imperium’s great defenders, gave me only a passing sense of majesty.

That had nothing to do with them. It had everything to do with the presence at their heart.

I started to move again, stumbling down the far slope, moving like a sleepwalker. I heard Jek calling out, trying to hold me back, but I didn’t listen. I was hardly aware of anything around me, and only dimly noticed the blurred outlines of the giant warriors as they laboured. They paid me no attention. I was just one of many functionaries and technicians now descending on the site to study it and make it secure. They could have no conception of whom I served, and even if they did I guessed they would pay it little attention.

I don’t know how long it took me to reach the centre. Probably a long time, dragged out by stumbling. Eventually, though, I saw the xenos gate soaring up before me, and I saw the stars under its arch blur and tremble, and knew I was close.

He was there, waiting. I had no idea then just how far he had come, nor what perils he had mastered, but he was there. He was surrounded by his great and austere counsellors and champions, none of whom so much as looked at me. They conferred among themselves, looking to their weapons, every movement thick with fatigue.
I knew who he was. I recognised the pictures from the devotional tracts. We had been served with those images from childhood, told to meditate on them incessantly, even to pray to them, instructed never to let them out of our mind. Quadrillions had seen those templates of heroism and reflected on the glory that had been, using them as exemplars of the human spirit and hoping, perhaps even heretically, that they would return one day.

I never thought it would happen. I did not believe it possible. I thought the masses were ignorant and weak, and that our salvation could only come from those powers we still retained, not the legends of a half-remembered past.

Alone of all those assembled there, he noticed me limping amid the giants. He looked past the Custodians who stood there, their spears streaked with blood. He looked past the captains of the Space Marines and the grotesque lords of Mars, and fixed me with cold blue eyes.

I could feel my heart racing out of control. The whole place was like an intoxicated dream, a phantasm sent to drain the last sanity from our tortured bodies, and yet I could not deny its reality. When he spoke, the voice was accented strangely, almost unintelligibly, the voice of another age. Despite my attire, he knew instantly who I was from the sigils of office on my environment suit, and was careful to address me with the utmost precision.

‘Cancellarius Senatorum Imperialis,’ he said.

It was only then that any of the others turned towards me. There was a shield-captain close by in burnished gold, one I should perhaps have recognised, but by then it was a challenge merely to remain conscious.

I fell to my knees.

‘The Lord Guilliman,’ I said, using both the given name and the ceremonial one, united in this one soul ten thousand years before.

‘You speak for the High Lords?’ he asked.

I nodded. I could hardly bear to look into that face – there was something both beatific and horrific about it, an abundance of power that was almost obscene.

He was of another age. He was a myth that had died.

He took a single step towards me, extending a vast gauntlet chased in gold and cobalt in order to lift me to my feet.

‘Then it is good you are here, chancellor,’ Roboute Guilliman said. ‘I have been away a long time. Perhaps, if your offices still extend to such things, you would be good enough to show me to your masters.’
They came. The Grey Knights, whom we had always had uneasy relations with, answered our summons. I do not know if it was my request that prompted the order, or if Valoris had been petitioned by others. In any case, we were not so proud that we could not ask for help when it was needed.

There is a profound distinction to be made here. We could both – Custodian and Grey Knight – slay daemons. We were both to all intents and purposes immune to their temptations, and we were both effective against their many strategems. There are two great repositories of lore against the daemonic in the Sol System, our own archives in the Tower of Hegemon and the far greater librarium lodged on Titan itself. We are, as orders, steeped to our very cores in the fight against the Great Enemy. Perhaps, you might say, Chaos is the reason for both of our existences.

And yet we are different. Remember I told you that we were never warriors, not exclusively. We are certainly not an army, and we were intended, in the original scheme, for service in an empire that never came to be. Our cousins in the Chamber Militant of the Ordo Malleus, by contrast, were forged exclusively for this singular war against our most powerful and enduring foe. They have no other purpose. Just like the Space Marines from whose template they were drawn, they are an army, complete and self-sufficient.

We always knew of their existence. There are records, held privately in the depths of our archives, which chronicle their creation. We watched, ten thousand years ago, as He embarked on His last gambit. As the Great Enemy drew close to Terra, we observed the darkening of Saturn’s moon, and knew that one day it
would return, its purpose fulfilled.

Consider what this history means. We know that they came after us, the more junior creation, and yet they were as closely associated with Him as we were. We both of us look to Him and Him alone as our progenitor, and share the same sense, cultivated over the wearing aeons, that we enact His designs when all others falter.

There are some among my brothers who do not see the sons of Titan as much more than specialised Space Marines, to be regarded with suspicion as part of that schismatic breed that caused us so much anguish in the past. A Space Marine may always fail, they believe, given enough time and enough reason, and thus they are all part of the same potentially aberrant strain.

Some think that. Others, and I myself have often speculated in such a vein, cultivate a different misgiving. We know well enough that they were designed as His last great weapon, fitted to an age that He foresaw near the end of His earthly embodiment. What if it were they, not us, who most faithfully embodied His final legacy? You will never hear one of us say as much out loud, but that does not mean the suspicion does not exist. It skulks around the corridors of Hegemon like a foul odour, faint but hard to eradicate.

From the speculum certus we know we were the finest and the most faithful. In the speculum obscurus there is, as always, more doubt.

Such, then, is the cause of the uneasiness between us. In practice this rarely proved an issue, since they were not generally on Terra and we were never on Titan. Now, of course, that had changed. They sent fewer warriors than we asked for – less than half of one of their brotherhoods. Many of the Grey Knights were stationed far from the Sol System, it is true, but still the response felt somewhat paltry. They must have known what it would have cost our Captain-General to make the request, and it was hard to think that the slight was not an intentional one.

It was many days before I was to encounter one of the new arrivals myself. I had been occupied prosecuting the defence of my wall sector in conjunction with Urbo’s forces. Despite our efforts, the unnatural tide of violence had only grown worse. Demagogues surfaced, once buried fast in the heart of the world-city, now raising whole hosts of disciples. Some were truly corrupted, seeded many years ago and now bursting into fruit, but others were merely deluded and desperate, their minds turned by the terrors in the sky and their stomachs empty. Soon the walls were attacked nightly, and our troops were busy emptying their lasguns at the charging hordes.
It was sickening work, and even Urbo became deadened by it. My services were called on to eradicate the masters of this disorder, and I found myself at the heart of wearying fighting, slaying those freely who I had once protected from a distance. Some of the corrupted had become dreadful by then – semi-human creatures with the marks of the traitor on their flesh. The greatest of them had accepted foul gifts, making them both lethal and persuasive to the masses. I slew men with embryonic wings sprouting from their spines, and women with fangs, and half-human-half-beasts.

In time it became clear that the zones south of the Lion’s Gate were deteriorating rapidly. Aside from punitive raids, we lost effective control of most of the populated regions outside the wall, and the old cathedrals became wells of depravity. I hunted freely in those places, as did my brothers, but soon Urbo’s patrols had to be doubled, then doubled again, and still they were ambushed and destroyed by the growing mobs of the damned.

I looked into the skies and saw only the blood-curdle now, a skein of crimson that flecked the skies and made it lurid. We had neither sunlight nor proper nightfall, just a constant glow of madness that chased out sleep and made the holy places seem like the haunts of ghouls. We could neither feed nor protect the innocent who remained in those vast regions of the city, and our inquisitors stalked among the seething hive-spires as if lost on some long-forgotten death world.

Such were the circumstances in which I met Justicar Alcuin. It would have been better, I am sure, had our paths crossed in other times. As it was though, the circumstances of our encounter were very far from ideal, taking place on the night that none can forget – only the second time in history that the Outer Walls were breached by the Enemy, an event which would later be called, by its survivors, the Sack of the Lion’s Gate.

I led an attack company drawn from the best of Urbo’s remaining forces. They were becoming hardened to what they saw by then, and were now able to give me useful support when we encountered creatures of the ether. Two hundred of them took off with me from the high landing stages, exiting the wall under the watchful cover of the defence batteries before heading out into the city beyond.

Our target was the manufactorum zone east of the grand processional, within sight of the Lion’s Gate itself. Once a proud thoroughfare three hundred metres wide used to hosting military parades, it had become a haunted semi-ruin, overlooked by eyeless rows of scorched terraces. We launched repeated missions
to keep it clear, mostly to provide a route for ground forces retreating to the walls from positions further out. During the nominal daylight hours we drove the corrupted hosts back into the shadows, but as night fell and the flames danced more darkly, they always slunk back.

So here we were again, roaring out into the eternal city, clearing the filth from sight of the walls. It felt like trying to scoop the tide away, handful by handful.

I took a Talion gunship in the lead, and the bulk of Urbo’s soldiers followed in their Valkyries. Once beyond the walls we dropped down low, skirting no more than fifty metres over the deserted transit canyons. Vast hive walls loomed up on either side of us, many still sullenly burning, most as dark as pitch. Billions still dwelled inside those sarcophagi, though I did not like to think on how many still retained their sanity. Ragged banners hung from burned-out windows, all inscribed with signs of ruin. It didn’t matter how many we tore down; within hours, hundreds more would reappear.

‘Target approaches, colonel,’ I voxed, watching the massive gates of an old Munitorum works emerge out of the smoggy haze.

‘Prep for disembark,’ he passed on to his sergeants, and the Valkyries dropped even lower.

Urbo and I had formed something of an effective partnership. Once his awe of me had dissipated a little, I discovered I could rely on him to follow a command. Once he’d witnessed me slaughter in the Emperor’s name, he discovered that I could be a killer after his own heart. It is surprising, I find, what connections can be made in adversity.

The gates to the facility were broken, and on either side of them thick bulwarks soared into the flickering air. The entire place was a labyrinth of smelters, forges and assembly lines, built aeons ago when Terra had presumed to manufacture things for itself, afterwards used to recycle defunct military equipment too high-value to destroy and too low-value to export off-world.

Our transports growled under the low lintel, plunging us into a penumbral world of muffled echoes. I was first out, crunching down onto a wet floor strewn with swarf. The rest of Urbo’s men piled out from hovering Valkyries, then sprinted across the resounding floor of the chamber, their lasgun-mounted lumens flashing in the dark.

The place was like some colossal mausoleum, with a high, empty roof that disappeared into gloom. They had serviced Militarum super-heavies in here, I had been informed, and there were still chain-lifters hanging amid the blown shells of dormant machine-clusters. It stank of sour oil and rotting metal.
I could already hear our enemies. They no longer made any attempt to hide their presence in those places, but conducted their depravities as if they were safely ensconced on some world far from our scrutiny. The fact they dared it at all disgusted me – a blasphemy I could no longer show indulgence to.

So I ran hard, delving deeper into the echoing depths. Empty cage-lifts hung like lanterns in the dark, rusting quietly over abyssal shafts. From ahead I could smell the chemical stench of burning and hear the roar of the crowds. I saw cloaked figures scuttle into the gloom, but ignored them – the real prey was ahead, congregating, organising, making ready to surge out against us. Urbo’s troops kept up as best they could, but they soon fell behind. I pulled ahead, driven by my zeal to end this, running faster and deeper into those stinking foundations.

I broke into what had once been an assembly hall. The conveyer belts were still in place, some with the carcasses of battle tanks lurking like monuments. The space was filled now with swaying masses, all clad in the ragged remains of their work-shifts. It was a shrine to corruption, that place – human bodies hung from chains locked into the distant ceiling, twisting amid foetid air, their eyes gouged out and their hands skinless. Huge eight-pointed stars had been graven into the walls with the facility’s own machine tools, then daubed with the residue of slaughter. On top of the smell of engine lubricants I could now detect human aromas – blood, sweat, desperation.

The mob of faces was turned away from me and angled up towards a Mechanicus command pulpit – a hovering mass of intricate metalwork, studded with cables and clattering with extended mechadendrites. That thing had the capacity for perhaps twenty tech-priests, but was now crawling with ten times that number of occupants. They were scratching and clawing at one another, swarming like rats over it, shinnying up the cables and clambering towards the summit.

Atop that pulpit was a single priest in ripped Ecclesiarchy robes, though the old sigils of the Ministerum had been excised and replaced by crude octeds. The priest held aloft a still-shivering heart in two blood-slicked hands, offering it up like a benediction. Bodies of Imperial troops from a hundred different regiments lay strewn over the conveyer approaches, all with their chests ripped open and their ribs glistening whitely. Many more, still living, had been corralled into makeshift cages hewn from the rusting hulls of the tanks, ready to be dragged for sacrifice by the hordes who bayed around them.

All pretence at sanity had gone. The thousands of souls who jeered and cried
out looked barely human any more. Their skin was white, their eyes ringed with black, their tongues a virulent red. Bleeding tattoos had been carved onto their faces with blunt knives, and metal splinters rammed through skin-folds. They were no longer afraid of me, no longer afraid of anything, their systems force-fed hallucinogens and stimulants by the demagogues who had dragged them into this debauchery.

I did not hesitate. I charged into their midst. I tore through them, slaying rapidly and carving a path towards the pulpit. Behind me I heard the first of Urbo’s troops arrive, and the flash of las-fire soon competed with the leaping brazier-flames to banish the shadows. Gnosis whirled in a reaper-pattern, carving through the diseased flesh. They shrieked and they cursed, throwing themselves towards me. Dozens pressed in, then hundreds, clawing out, their eyes locked wide with demented fury.

Not one of them even touched my armour. I surrounded myself with a hemisphere of tattered flesh, an orbit of thrown blood that spun and splattered. I moved ever faster, my pace barely slowed by the methodical killing. I immersed myself in my combat-state of pure concentration. I didn’t see those wretches as individual targets at all, just one vast, many-headed beast standing between me and my ultimate goal. They died so quickly, depressingly quickly, like dry fuel hurled into the furnace.

Heavy weapons cracked out, telling me that Urbo’s ranged-attack squads were in place. Assault teams headed for the cages, aiming to release as many of their comrades as they could, while the bulk of the regular troops engaged the acolytes.

I was close to the pulpit by then, and could feel the air thicken, just as it had done in the cathedral of the relic. The screams ramped up, the flames leapt higher. The priest sacrificed another struggling victim on his false altar even as I drew into bolter range, oblivious to everything save the rite he was orchestrating. By then I could see just how many had been slain – there were piles of skulls, blood-streaked and flesh-pocked, stacked up beyond the pulpit like a conqueror’s hoard.

I hurled Gnosis around in a heavy crossways swipe, clearing space to leap. Even as I did so, the air ahead of me cracked open, shriven by a sudden blast of frost-hard energy, flooring those who still howled and capered, and causing the pulpit itself to rock wildly. Five clear shafts of eye-burning lightning speared down from the void above us, crystallising into the outlines of silver-grey warriors bearing force halberds and crackling warhammers. They slammed into
the heart of the enemy, scattering them with the force of their arrival before instantly bursting into choreographed killing movement.

I adapted, assessing how the new arrivals interlocked with my assault, gauging speeds and impacts. Soon we were fighting together, cutting our way higher and hurling the crushed and broken bodies into the conveyers. We closed the gap, vaulting up to the pulpit’s high platform, seizing its crustaceous exhaust vents and hauling ourselves onto it.

My blade was the quickest. I reached the high platform in time to see the priest tear the living heart from a final victim. I cast down the stimm-bulked bodyguards who lumbered to engage me and angled Gnosis to discharge. The human sacrifice was thrown aside, bouncing awkwardly down the slope of skulls.

The priest grinned at me. He held the heart aloft and crushed it between his fingers, dousing his bald head in a lumpy torrent of liquid gore.

‘You see, though, we’ve done enough,’ he told me.

My bolt-shell hit him in the chest, blowing him from the platform. The charge ignited while he was in mid-air, rending him open and sending his severed limbs spinning into the crowds.

The Grey Knights joined me. Their steel-grey armour still sizzled from the extremes of teleportation, and the homer-beacons on their shoulders throbbed with residual power. Four of them bore mighty blades that crackled with neon-blue disruptor charge, while their leader carried a heavy warhammer inscribed with runes of purity.

‘We come too late,’ said their leader.

I turned on him. The hall was now in confusion, the mobs running from Urbo’s advance, throwing themselves into the las-volleyes like startled cattle.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked. We would kill them all now – by dawn, this place would be purged of its corruption. ‘This is ended here.’

His helm was caked in a dirty brown film of blood, all except the lenses, which glowed with blue fire. I could sense the psychic essence radiating from his core. It was like heat, leaking from his every gesture. He was perhaps a head shorter than I was, a little less heavily built. His armour was scoured raw where mine was ornate, and his movements were a fraction slower, though every part of him was suffused with the arcane potency of the warp.

‘Not yet,’ he said, keeping the shimmering psy-field activated over his great hammerhead. ‘Attend, Custodian – now the storm breaks.’

Even before he had finished speaking, the walls began to shake. The heavy
chains swung, first gently, then ever more violently. With a squeal and a whine, the conveyers began to move, their skins drumming. A rumble broke out below us, a grind of earth against earth, almost too low to be heard, but then the reverberations thrummed into our bones.

Urbo’s men kept fighting. The mob kept coming at them. The mortals seemed insensible to this, and yet I could feel it – the build up, the swell and the bulge of something uncurling and extending and thrusting into reality.

This was something cumulative. This was something exponential.

‘You sensed this,’ I said, sounding more accusatory than I had intended.

‘We must leave,’ was all the Grey Knight said.

The walls were cracking. The foundations were shifting. I looked out at the assembly hall, and saw its floor begin to shudder, vibrating like kicked sand.

‘Withdraw,’ I ordered Urbo over the vox. ‘Get out now. Get to your ships.’

His forces instantly complied, disengaging, pulling back the way they had come. I looked up. There were stairs leading up the far wall, hugging the adamantium panels and running sheer to the distant roof. The Grey Knight saw what I proposed, and nodded.

‘That is acceptable,’ he said.

Then we were moving again, leaping from the pulpit and running across a heavy landscape of breaking metal. I felt the decks shatter under my tread. Wherever my boots landed, a red glow was revealed, as if we trod across magma-skin. I could unleash my full power now, and sprinted at full tilt. The Space Marines kept pace, and the six of us swept across the disintegrating hall. As we went, huge chunks of iron fell around us, smashing apart and driving deep into the vaults below. One of the tank husks was struck and tilted straight over into widening chasms beneath.

I reached the stairway and ascended, leaping four steps at a time. We rose swiftly, even as the walls buckled. Blood-red light flooded the chamber now, shafts of it angling from every rent in the toppling edifice around us. I had a vision of the entire structure collapsing as we raced through it, the tonnes and tonnes above us sloughing into a landslip of ruin.

I leapt to one side, my movements governed by intuition, narrowly evading a column that crashed into dust. We ducked and swayed through the disintegrating galleries, showered with clouds of bouncing rubble. The noise became incredible, a roar like the forgotten oceans. I had a final glimpse of the vaults over the assembly chamber – imploding entirely, folding in on the halls below – before we reached the portal to the outside. I raced through it, followed by the
others, even as the decking beneath us fell away and plunged into the gathering vortex of collapse.

We emerged onto a high, narrow bridge into the spire levels and kept running. Behind us, the immense Munitorum facility broke open with blazing shafts of red light, thrust out from its slumping profile of darkness. Slowly, agonisingly, like a mountain being consumed from within, the great buttresses folded in on themselves and the towers crumpled. I heard explosions from a long way down, booms of tortured stone giving into tectonic pressures, and plumes of smoke reared high into the sky.

The bridge began to sway, its moorings pulled from their armatures. Ahead of us was another portal set into the face of a rearing hive-spire with a forked crown. We made for that, swerving and ducking even as molten clumps of metal rained down around us. I had a blurred impression of everything – the towers, the domes, the great defence stations – falling apart, as if all creation were splitting into pieces around us. I fixed on the goal – a wide platform of heavy iron and adamantium lodged high up on the westward face of the forked spire – and shut all else out of my mind. As the bridge finally broke free of its fastenings, we threw ourselves into the air, sailing through fire-flecked winds before crunching hard to the solid deck ahead.

Behind us, the bridge twisted away like a headless snake. Its spine broken, it seesawed as gravity sucked it down into the hungry maw of cataclysm. Another towering veil of dust rose up on the far side of the canyon, lit from within by fresh detonations. The overlapping sonic roar became blistering, overwhelming even my aural receptors and making my vision shake.

I stared out west, over to where the processional avenue led towards the Lion’s Gate. As steeled as I was, as conditioned as I was, I could hardly credit the evidence of my senses. For a terrible moment, caught in that seismic upheaval, I lost any sense of location, of secure grounding. The primordial centre had been cut loose.

The Terra I knew was gone. Gouts of hissing flame burst up from the transitways and the deep canyons, licking the sides of the tottering spires. The blazes were impossibly huge, merged conflagrations that thundered into the airless heights. I could just make out the wall on the far side of the heat-shaken night, blurry from the boiling clouds of burning ash. I could see the pinnacles of the basilicas thrusting skywards like ebony spears. The skies themselves had ignited, aching with fell illumination and riven by the bellowing of inhuman voices. I saw dozens of great edifices, all thousands of years old, dissolve into
blackened dust, broken apart by the rituals enacted at their hearts. An absolute and unearthly psychic hatred, raw and condensed into dreadful purity, flooded across the ancient battlements and towers like the gales of a crashing maelstrom.

The Grey Knights stood beside me, their armour turned deep crimson by the unholy light. Their Justicar looked impassively into the night sky.

‘Shards of Kharneth,’ he intoned, grimly. ‘So they truly dare it.’

We could see across to the old Lion’s Gate void port reaches – huge expanses of rockcrete landing stages and command towers, interwoven with deep chasms where the ship-lifts waited. Even in normal times it was a desolate place, marked for reverence by the Ecclesiarchy and left bare for the winds to scrape against, but now it was a diabolic vision of torment. The great adamantium plates were heaving. Columns of liquid incandescence spat from the ruptures, jetting high into the weeping skies above.

‘The wall,’ I said, preparing to race down from the spire’s flank.

Before I could move, however, an immense boom rang out, striking the spire-faces and shattering their armourglass viewportals. The glittering rain of shards tumbled into cataracts, refracting the crimson aura and splaying it into rivers of rubies.

Out across that immense vista, I saw the columns of flame solidify. Every point of lurid light began to intensify, thousands of them, tens of thousands, until the great plain resembled a starfield of its own, a bloody mirror to the one that cycled above the cloud barrier.

They howled as they were born. I could only watch as they ripped into instantiation, first tens, then hundreds, then more and more until the entire landscape was boiling with daemon embryos. The nightmare infants stretched out, bathed in birth-flames, their bodies extending upwards and outwards, their jaws distended in natal agony, their backs spawning spine-ridged spikes. They opened black-on-black eyes, they lashed with prehensile tongues, they staggered out of flaming cocoons, croaking from vocal cords that were already stiffening and taking up blades that erupted from firming scab-flesh.

They were in ranks. It was an infernal regiment, each one a cohort pulled from the mirror realm, burgeoning and unfolding until an entire war host stood before us. Soon I could no longer count them – a Neverborn army, filling the entire void port from end to end, spilling beyond its bounds and into the chasms and towers beyond, all lightning-crowned, all blood-slick, all screaming blasphemies at the spires of Holy Terra.

Then greater horrors burst free of the world’s shackles among them –
slobbering behemoths with a hundred eyes, iron-collared hounds that slavered and yanked at their thick chains, quasi-mechanical juggernauts with burning eyes and hunched smokestacks; more and more, thrusting up from the tormented earth, exhumed amid cataclysms of fresh etherplasm.

And finally, at the very apex, unfurled the greatest of all. They tore into existence with splintered bellows that annihilated the rockcrete around them, rising up into avatars of swirling detritus, higher and higher, bloating and firming into colossi of burnished muscle and flame-blackened brass. Immense bat wings fused and pushed out and stretched and enfleshed to beat the flame-torn skies, tattered and studded with chains and swinging skull-bundles. Huge heads lifted up high, each crowned with heavy thickets of twisted horns and distended with tusk-crammed, dripping jawlines. Mighty cloven hooves stamped, breaking the ground open into hissing blood-channels. Two-handed axes swung into being, clotting from thick smoke before extending into twin-faced plates of warp-cursed steel, etched with runes of ending and glinting with the reflected stars of another plane. Barbed whips rippled through the flames, vast and curling and lashing with infernal acumen of their own.

Bloodthirsters. Eight of them. Forged in the image of mankind’s oldest fears, the embodiments of battle-rage and the avatars of blood-lust, these were myth-born titans of ruin. When they strode out, the horizon shuddered. When their pinions snapped, the flames thundered back greater. Wreathed in lightning, garlanded in black-edged flame, cloaked in the storm’s surge, the mightiest of the mighty vassals of the Blood God raised their vast jowls skywards, and roared.

The clouds above us erupted, sending hammering channels of crimson rain slamming earthwards. The Neverborn army screamed, lashing out with their hooked blades, a chorus of feral ecstasy unleashed on a world they had coveted since the dawn of history. For a moment it seemed as if the heavens themselves had formed the image of a giant horned face, as vast as the Palace itself, leering in incipient triumph, before the vision was obliterated by the driving blood-rain.

The wall stood beyond them, gigantic and battle-scarred, towering higher than any hive-spire and surmounted by the heaviest concentration of defences in all the Imperium. For the first time ever, I looked at it and saw in truth how fragile it was. It was a creation of men set against the infinite malice of gods. The instantiated host of the Neverborn, the immortal intelligences of the eternal ether, surged towards it now, thirsting to break apart the parapets they had foundered on before.
Before I knew it, I was running again. I was tearing down new stairwells and leaping from platforms, ramping up to full speed. My blade was snarling, setting golden flames dancing amid the bloody dark. Around me came the Grey Knights, silver ghosts in the gloom, their own weapons glittering sapphire.

I knew every one of my brothers would be doing the same. All those on the wall and all those in the eternal city would be racing to face this, to bring their blades to bear, to cut into the warp-flesh that now rose up to extinguish all we had been born to preserve.

And as I ran, only one thought possessed me, animated me, drove me onwards into the opening maw of living perdition.

*We cannot fail again.*
The Black Ship *Enduring Abundance* burned through the void, having taken its intended cargo on board. The *Cadamara* came along in its wake, flanked by a mini-fleet of similar warp-capable ships, a battered collection of largely ramshackle hulls that laboured to remain in the larger vessel’s wake.

I didn’t realise just how close we’d come. I’d been so consumed with survival that I’d never appreciated how remarkable our progress had been – by the time we were intercepted we were within a warp stage of the Sol System. I had to hand it to Slovo. Despite his carping and moaning and physical frailty, he’d steered us superlatively, although whether he’d have been able to negotiate that last treacherous leg was hard to know.

Our proximity to the goal, though, was what had saved us. The *Enduring Abundance* had been on its home world arc, brought back to the centre just ahead of the full impact of what Navradaran, in an echo of Slovo’s words, was calling the Great Rift, the catastrophe that had scissored the galaxy in half. The Black Ship had not been originally scheduled to return to the Throneworld for another three years, but Navradaran had boarded it and given the captain new orders – its most precious cargo was no longer the shackled psykers that raged and sobbed in its holds, but the wardens who guarded them.

But he had not been merely content with that, and had steered the ship on an erratic course back to Terra, taking in every known or rumoured convent of witch-hunters in the subsector before setting the straight course home. The ship had never made it as far as Arraisa, but others had told them of our existence, and so their astropaths had put their minds out into the ether, searching for the
last scraps to recover before they would be buffeted back to their origin. Somehow they latched on to us, and took the chance to reel us in. If we’d outrun them and tried to go it alone, I suspect we’d be dead by now, our skeletons chewed on by gnawers.

I’d never seen such a ship before. It was enormous, more than twenty times bigger than the Cadamara, and obviously ancient. I could hardly read the Archaic Gothic inscriptions over the many cell doors, so mysterious were the cadences and vocabulary. The entire vessel was shrouded, the lumens kept low and the corridors blanketed in darkness. The term ‘Black Ship’ was not figurative – every part of it was formed of ebon metal, faintly reflective, adorned and studded with ward-patterns against corruption. Vast ether-sinks took up the bulk of the lower hull, thrumming with constant Geller processes to discharge and eject the build-up of psychic energy on board. The huge crew – three times what would have been present on a similar Navy battleship, I guessed – prowled the corridors incessantly. Most were human-normal, bearing the unmistakeable mark of psycho-conditioning and wielding strange weapons I didn’t recognise. Some, though, were blanks. And some of those, like me, were anathema psykana.

My first thought was that perhaps I knew some of them. Perhaps there were other refugees from Hestia’s convent. It did not take long to disabuse me of that hope. These were a mongrel mixture of refugees from the League of Black Ships, or Inquisitorial warbands, or such scattered convents as I’d been a part of. There were forty-five of us in total, drawn from twelve different units, each with its own armour and insignias and bitter histories.

Once I’d had a chance to adjust to my new reality, Navradaran had explained the situation. He had been sent out into the void, as had others of his order, following orders from his Captain-General. The ether had been growing more turbulent for decades, and portents of disaster had been growing in intensity. The Sisters of Silence, having been allowed to drift into memory, were being collected together again. The final actions had been taken just in time – any later, and the Rift would have made such a muster impossible. Even so, he suspected many hundreds of convents and Black Ships remained stranded on the far side, cut off from the light of the Astronomican and unable to force passage home.

As for us, we were little better off. The Enduring Abundance had a cadre of twenty Navigators, almost all of them stronger and healthier than Slovo. The entire ship was warded and buttressed against daemonic attack, with a crew of thousands all trained from birth to detect the slightest manifestation of the
empyrean, and so they’d made better headway than us. Even so, Navradaran told me, they could not remain in the void for long. Each jump was escalating in danger, and they’d lost three of their Navigators to madness on the last major haul. He professed surprise that we’d lasted as long as we had, and even more surprise that we’d managed to plot a route in the absence of the Astronomican’s guide.

I didn’t tell him about the map, which remained under guard on the Cadamara. In truth I doubted whether it had been the thing that had saved us at all – Slovo claimed that it had been a poor compass, and that we had made our way largely through luck and instinct – but still I didn’t wish to have its presence disclosed. It was the one thing I had taken from the ruins of my past life, and I felt sure its existence meant something significant, but I would only share that with someone I could trust.

You might think that was foolish, given the situation, and perhaps it was, but you must remember this: I was furious. My anger with the universe, which had always been there, always bubbling under, had burst out now. I saw in the Enduring Abundance just what could have been, had the Imperium not inexplicably lost faith in us. I saw the huge resources, once placed under our direct control, that the old Sisters of Silence had been trusted to administer. I looked at this Custodian’s fabulously decorated battleplate, and saw the astonishing equipment he used, and looked at my chipped armour and thought of my rusting flamer.

Whenever we conversed, always in Thoughtmark, I felt that resentment clouding everything.

You were not fighting, I wanted to tell him. We were here, all the time, forgotten and left to fend for ourselves. You remained behind the walls, treated like gods. And now you presume to gather us to Terra, beneficent and indulgent, as if we had been wilful children ripe for scolding.

I didn’t express that to him, not in so many signs, but he must have detected my latent fury, for he wasn’t stupid. The ship’s armoury was huge, and I was fitted out with better armour and better weaponry. It didn’t wipe away the sense of injustice, but it did make me feel more lethal. I donned myself in golden armour with a rich purple cloak, just as my predecessors had worn, and replaced my old helm with a portcullis grille of pure auramite. I put my flamer aside and took up a greatblade. It was an insane weapon, almost as tall as I was, but the extravagance appealed to me.

All of us aboard spent long hours in training. There were other Custodians
alongside Navradaran, and they worked obsessively in the practice cages. I had to admit they were impressive to watch. They moved incredibly fast for their size, and I guessed they would have taken out that Black Legionnaire on Arraissa far more efficiently than I had. I studied them for a long time, trying not to be too envious, and often failing. I came to hate their quiet, steady resolve. They never complained, they never got angry. Everything with them was polished and reverent, like diplomats somehow siphoned into the suits of warriors. I might have thought they were automatons had I not seen the way they moved a blade. Throne, they were even well spoken, and they treated me with such relentless politeness and consideration that I wanted to scream.

That was the core problem – I needed an excuse to loathe them, and they wouldn’t give me one. So I did what they did, took up my blade, and worked myself into a lather of exhaustion. I absorbed everything I could from them all – the Custodians, my fellow Sisters, even the Black Ship’s senior garrison command – drinking in what my isolation had prevented me from learning across all those years.

I don’t know how long that journey lasted. It felt like weeks, but time in the warp passed as strangely as ever and so that might be wrong. Navradaran was sure the whole time that we were headed back for war. He told me that, over and over.

‘Terra was already on a knife-edge when I left,’ he said to me. ‘There were portents, but they led us astray. The Council was divided, and Valoris could see more clearly than anyone that we were heading for crisis. Hence this harvest.’ He smiled apologetically. ‘My apologies – that sounds disrespectful, but you take my meaning.’

I could have punched his big, elegant face. Now we were needed. Now we were wanted. I suppose that was what Lokk had picked up on, only too late to be useful. The Enemy had known more than we had, it seemed – one way or another someone would have come for us, and only we ourselves had been ignorant of where the tides were headed.

There’s a limit to how much resentment you can indulge in, however. I was a servant of the Emperor after all, and for all Navradaran’s infuriating manner I had no doubt he was right about the time of crisis. The galaxy had split in two and the Astronomican had gone out. Half of me expected to reach Terra to find it already lain waste, not that I would have ever disclosed that thought to my more pious companions.

So on the final approaches, when the Enduring Abundance crashed through the
raging warp like a cetacean wallowing in crude oil, its engines spluttering and its ancient hull creaking, there were no illusions. We suited up, we prepared our blades, we prepped the landers.

We were travelling into the inferno, that we knew.

But nothing could have prepared me, not really. I might not have had a soul, but I had an intellect and I had emotions, and neither of them helped with what we found once we broke the veil.

The *Enduring Abundance* burned inwards from the Mandeville point at full speed, kicking in plasma drives the moment the warp bubble ripped open. The rest of the fleet came through with it, clustered together to make the best use of the Black Ship’s superior navigation and power.

I never saw any of this. I was already in my lander – a heavy slab of adamantium slung under a big launch-claw in the outer hull. I was there with four of my sisters. One of them, Reva, had come from a convent like me, one based on the agri world of Ertecia, and shared much of my slow-burn fury at the way we had been treated. The other three were crew taken from the League of Black Ships, and they professed themselves unable to understand our lingering disgruntlement. They were strange, grim-faced women, and I doubted they’d have been likeable even if they had possessed souls.

I found out later that our ingress had almost ended there, shot to pieces on the broadside of the Imperial cruiser *In His Manifest Constancy*. The *Enduring Abundance*, it seemed, had no intention of slowing down for challenge-hails, and it was only Navradaran’s presence over a frosty vid-link that prevented us being annihilated before we’d even set eyes on the Throneworld.

The entire system, it became apparent, was already in turmoil. The Naval cordon was vast, but something had got to the crews. Ships had collided, defence stations had found themselves overrun by spontaneous outbreaks of madness, energy coils had overloaded and wiped out whole gun-platforms. Most of the truly heavy battle cruisers had already been recalled to Terran orbit, and so a veritable cavalcade of heavy voidcraft was churning its way towards system-centre, streaming back to the source to assist in the incursion that had bypassed all of them and struck at the Throneworld direct.

I couldn’t know any of this, of course, closeted as I was in the narrow, cramped crew bay of the lander. All I could sense was the jaw-break rattle of the pressed-metal deck as the outer doors of the Black Ship began to cantilever open. Under normal circumstances it would have taken us days to negotiate the tortuous
approaches to Terra’s orbital space. Now we were making the entire journey in a matter of hours, propelled by gargantuan engines running at full tilt. It was like arriving at some vast citadel and finding no one was home, the battlements manned by ghosts and madmen.

As the huge roar of the plasma drives began to wind down, we knew we’d arrived. I felt the lander swing away, carried out and down by the enormous extending arms. I could imagine how it looked from the outside – a sliver of metal suddenly thrust from the embrace of the *Enduring Abundance*’s slick black outer armour, tiny against its bulbous hide.

Rune-screeds appeared in front of me, hanging in the air from my armour’s lithcast bead. I still hadn’t got used to these tricks, these little machine-spirit devices that made my current equipment so much better than the dregs I’d made do with for so long.

I only needed to study a few lines.

*Imperial Palace under active assault. Concentration of forces at Lion’s Gate major intersection. Coordinates are being sent to your landers. Defence response under way. Make planetfall and liaise with assets already in theatre. The Emperor guide your blades.*

It was all happening so fast. We had our assigned squads, our lines of command developed over the preceding days. Most of those on board had been in transit for longer than I had, and so the thrust into action had not come so suddenly, but even so I felt hardly prepared.

I looked over at Reva.

*Ready?* I signed.

*Always. You?*

*Of course not.*

She smiled, and I liked what I saw. I couldn’t see her mouth, just her eyes, but they glittered with genuine mirth.

Something heavy slammed out of place below us, and the lander trembled. I had a sudden impression of us hanging like a leaf in autumn, shaking in the cold wind before being torn from the bough.

Then the bolts pulled back, the lander’s thrusters boomed into life, and we were thrown into our dizzying descent.

I slammed back against my restraints, as did my companions. We shook and we juddered, enveloped in the numinous roar of those incredibly powerful thrusters. Soon a greater roar overtook even those, and the hold temperature began to rise.

I switched to a tactical external feed, and a vid-link of our progress flickered
into jerky life across one of the roof-mounted lenses. The forward view was burning. For a moment I thought something had set us on fire, but then realised I was looking at the entire world’s troposphere. The fires were both immense and ethereal, as unnatural as the sham-flames conjured by the shedim but presumably still deadly.

I had a quick glimpse of other craft on our trajectory – tear-shaped interception landers, bulkier armoured caskets like our own, even steeply angled Naval gunships – before the burning clouds raced up to envelop us.

The lander kicked and jumped as it hit the turbulence, and we were thrown about like straw in the thresher. My head slammed against my restraints, opening up a cut that ran from my eyebrow to my cheek.

*First blood to this rust bucket,* I thought grimly, reaching to wipe it away.

We screamed earthwards, and the lander’s guidance thrusters pulled us down and down into a near-vertical dive before eventually kicking into an arresting counterblast. The vibrations became bone-bruising, the noise deafening, the deceleration crushing.

We hit the ground with a mighty crack, and immediately the crew doors blasted open. My restraints shot back into their grooves, and we were moving, springing from our seats and reaching for our weapons.

I was first out, running down the ramp with Reva at my shoulder.

It was then that I first set eyes on Terra, for so long the distant inspiration for all I had ever done. Holy Terra, the home of saints and the seat of He Who Preserves. The destination of all pilgrims and the origin of our species.

I could have vomited. I could have wept, and I would have done both, assuredly, had the madness and the devilry around me not reached out with both hands and tried to kill me.

So I did what I had been brought for. I killed right back.
I do not remember much of that first meeting, high up in Luna’s thin air, surrounded by the starship tombs. I was overwhelmed by his presence, I suppose, as well as by my age and frailty. All I have from that first, brief encounter are the impressions it left on me.

I do not know how long it had taken him to reach us. I never found out later, either. I heard snatches from those who would become the great powers in our new Imperium, and I could scarcely believe them even though I had no reason to doubt the speakers.

In future years our scholars may piece together just what the sequence of events was and assign official date-signs to them. My own supposition is that Cadia fell months before we became aware of it, and that the Great Rift opened long before its effects reached us on Terra. Rumours have come to my ears of the links between the events at the Eye and the resurrection of the primarch on distant Ultramar, though I cannot make proper sense of them, and there is much that I suspect would damn me as a heretic were I to pursue it.

All this notwithstanding, it became clear to me that the journey undertaken by the Lord Guilliman had been arduous in the extreme, a crusade that had taken him halfway across the galaxy even as it tore itself apart. Time may have passed for them very differently, I suppose, for when they spoke of that pilgrimage they gave the impression of months adrift on the ether’s currents, fighting enemies I could scarcely comprehend, let alone picture.

He did not speak of that when we met, of course. None of his captains or advisers did. They had just fought a terrible battle in that place, and their speech
was heavy with weariness. I never discovered who exactly it was they fought there – no one who knew would tell me, and I understood enough of Imperial law and custom not to press the matter.

We must have exchanged a few words more. I must have told him who the Lords of Terra were, and what had transpired to bring such turmoil to the world of his creation. I must have tried to tell him something of what we had been trying to do – to bring the Adeptus Custodes into the war, to reform our armies into something that might oppose the Despoiler more effectively – though I wonder if he found such scant musings comical or irritating.

It was hard to look directly at him. I don’t know why that was. It was as if the light reflecting from his face came from a source denied to us, a sun that none who beheld him could see.

He spoke softly. He was reasonable, even solicitous. Every command he gave was issued in the same calm, authoritative manner. All obeyed him instantly, not just the Space Marines who shared his lineage, but the Mechanicus constructs, the living saints who accompanied that strange cavalcade, even the Custodians sent from Terra. It felt then as if we had been waiting for him for a long time without knowing it. Now that he was here among us, a terrible doubt began to lift, for a time at least.

And yet I could not envy him. In rare moments, I would catch a phenomenal degree of pain present in those steady blue eyes. I might catch him looking at the grotesquely over-militarised docks of Luna, or the battle-battered ships hanging in orbit above us, and see a shadow of astonishment passing across a front of patrician reserve.

‘You may find Terra… different to how you remember it, lord,’ I said to him before we made planetfall. Looking back at that, I cringe. Of course it would be different. He had already seen enough of the Imperium to know that, but of course I was extrapolating into a past I only knew from half-understood historical records. I envisioned the world he had come from as a paradise of accomplishment, and of course I might have been wrong about that. Perhaps his pain came from a different source. Perhaps I misinterpreted him entirely. After all, who was I to judge the mind of a primarch? He was as far above me as I was above the spine-roaches that we had allowed to infest the Throneworld’s sewers.

A little later, the Custodian Shield-Captain Adronitus led our delegation to the warship that would carry us back to Terra. I was honoured to travel with them, one of very few mortals who did so. I was surrounded by figures I found daunting to look at, let alone address – Space Marine lords, Mechanicus magi,
Grey Knight commanders. I took my place among them, ignored by all, and silently watched what unfolded.

At that stage, the brutal assault on the Lion’s Gate had not even begun. Before we set off, I thought of the unrest on Terra, the terror in the skies and the visions in the night, and assumed then that we would finally see it all quelled. We passed swiftly from Luna’s orbit, escorted by many ships from the task force sent in haste. Tidings were passed in the strictest confidence to the Sanctum Imperialis and landing permits arranged for the Eternity Wall void port. It felt surreal even to be there. It felt surreal that any of it was happening at all.

Of course, the Lord Guilliman’s procession into the Palace is now a story well known and told many times by many souls. The Ecclesiarchy has issued more vids of this single event than they did over a thousand years previously. Everyone has heard tell of the enormous crowds of well-wishers lining the streets, crying out for joy and reaching out to grasp the hem of his cloak.

Well, it didn’t quite happen that way, at least not as I witnessed it. There were crowds indeed, against all our intentions, for somehow the rumour managed to scamper ahead of us. We came down inside the perimeter of the Outer Palace, far from the worst of the unrest, and so the primarch’s first sight of his subjects was the most favourable it could possibly have been – the scholiasts, the Palace guards, the priests and the ministers of state.

And yet, I could barely look at him during that terrible time. We could not hide just how desperate things had become. He could see for himself the unnatural storms raging in the atmosphere, and witness the darkened profile of the defunct Astronomican fortress. He could see the walls stuffed with defenders and the smouldering, half-derelict stretches of the city beyond the walls. Perhaps worst of all, even when we got him inside the intact precincts, to the holiest and the most immaculate of our citadels, he looked at them as if they were some kind of insult.

I watched it from a distance, my stomach churning to witness a great soul dragged into such a cesspit. I looked around me, at the grime-choked aquilae, at the racks of guns defiling the angel-crowned parapets, at the piles upon piles of heavy defensive works and the squalor that crusted over it all, and the shame of it made me nearly sick.

This was the world we had made. This was the world he had fought for and preserved, and we had made it diseased.

By the time I was reunited with Jek I could not hide my disquiet. She looked at me with concern, and we retired to my chambers alone.
‘Did you speak to him again?’ she asked, desperate for news despite her anxiety on my behalf.
‘A little. Not much.’
‘Then you were right to go.’ She became animated, trying to make me feel better. ‘This is the start of something new. You’re placed well to benefit. He’ll need counsellors, ones who understand how things work now.’
But that was the problem. I had done more than understand it. I had contributed to it. I was part of the decay. We all were.
‘He needs no counsellors,’ I said, sinking onto my fine couch miserably.
‘Really, truly, he needs none of us at all.’

I must have slept, perhaps for only a few hours, perhaps for much longer. I had awful dreams, even worse than I had had over the past weeks and months, and I could feel myself thrashing in my sleep. In the most vivid of them I felt that the chamber around me was burning, the flames streaking up the drapes and crashing into the high ceiling. I saw faces in those flames, inhuman faces with stretched jaws and long fangs.
I awoke to find Jek shaking me.
‘Only a dream,’ I mumbled, coming to slowly. I could see the intact outline of my bedchamber, and the walls were not burning.
‘No,’ she said, her expression terrible. ‘Not any more.’
She dragged me from the couch. My robes were sticky with sweat but she gave me no chance to change them. I noticed as we hurried through the corridors that the light from outside was even redder than before – arterial in intensity, and flashing wildly. The air was hotter than it had ever been, hard to breathe and full of choking grit.
‘What is this?’ I blurted, still disorientated. ‘How long was I out?’
She didn’t answer, but hauled me to a high balcony. We stumbled into the open, and the curtains flapped wildly about us.
I could see the Lion’s Gate void port laid out far below. It was a long way away, screened by shifting palls of ash and dust, but I could see enough.
I staggered, catching hold of the railing. Jek reached for me, holding me up, but she was already trembling, her whole body rigid with shudders.
I had no words. I had no thoughts. I felt like I wanted to scream, but no sound came out. From somewhere, some old instinct that wouldn’t quite leave me, I wanted to ask where Guilliman was, where Valoris was, where the High Lords were, whether we could get our forces into place and do what needed to be done,
but my lips would no longer move.

I just stood there, paralysed, rooted with fear, and said nothing.

We no longer needed to worry about Cadia. We no longer needed to worry about anything. It had happened at last, everything that the prophets had foretold and that we had ignored.

The Eye had come. The Eye had come to Terra.
I had never moved as fast. I had never cleaved as strongly. My muscles, sanctified and gene-wrought, had never responded as perfectly.

Killing is an art, just like the others we excel at. When it becomes necessary, we do not treat it as a duty, we treat it as a vocation. We learn the ways of our opponents just as a painter studies her model, observe the light and the shade, the form and heft, the threat and the opportunity.

I was alone in that hour, as alone as I have ever been. The Grey Knights were always close by, and fought as an unbreakable unit, and therein lay the essential difference between us.

Do not think that we ignored one another – far from it. We saved one another from death many times in those first few decisive moments. This still remains, though – I fought in the way I had been bred to, driving my superlative physical form to its limit, gauging every threat with a microsecond’s precision, relying on the absolute integrity of my equipment.

They, though, were a brotherhood. I had learned their names by then – Alcuin, the Justicar, led the squad. They covered one another’s backs, they roared encouragement, they watched for a momentary slip from their battle-comrades. I witnessed this even as I tore into the heart of the daemonkind, and even as the defence lasers on the wall flooded the eerie scene with dazzling light, and even as the golden attack craft roared overhead to strafe and bludgeon.

I could sense their psychic overspill as they waded into the enemy, blades and hammers whirling. Every physical blow was matched by a corresponding thrust of the mind, and their esoteric halberds flared with the increase in velocity.
Thus we entered the arena of the enemy, like and yet unlike to one another, a lion set beside angels. They screamed at us, many of them greater in stature even than me. By then their witch-birth was complete – their heads had elongated sickeningly, their claws had extended, their legs had firmed into glossy reverse-angled, hoof-terminated striders. They had the mania of victory in those black eyes, fuelled by the legions of their own kind around them. A musk of pure bloodlust clotted the air, heady and overpowering.

Already I could see lesser daemonkind scrambling up the lower reaches of the walls, freezing their grip onto pitted adamantium, forming bridges with their own bodies to allow greater warriors to vault above them. The horde was endless, merged with both heaven and earth, a liquid mass of writhing malignance rammed hard onto the plane of mortal experience.

We both knew what they were, Alcuin and I. We knew, as others could not, that these things were our own psyches made into flesh. We knew that our rage, any rage, fuelled them and made them stronger. They fed from our basest instincts, and so we were doing nothing so much as fighting ourselves. All we had left were the things that remained once rage was purged from us – duty, commitment, resolve.

I punched my fist through the heart of a bloodletter and yanked it from its swelter-chest, then swung around to lance the tip of Gnosis through the neck of another, then crunched my elbow into the spine of a third before spinning to slam my glaive’s hilt into a fourth. I was lost in numerology by then, reaching into the near future, scrutinising everything as I moved, calm at the epicentre of the hurricane. Alcuin forged a path beside me, driving the Neverborn back and slicing them apart with psy-laced blows from his mighty daemonhammer. His troops stayed close, locking and swaying in concert, crying words of denunciation as they struck their blades home.

The daemon was harmed by the weapons of eternity, this we knew. The heavy barrage of las-fire from the parapets, cutting through the blood-rain in boiling volleys, could slow or inconvenience them, but to kill a daemon one had to return to the primordial methods of fist and blade. They had been spawned from our oldest wars and our oldest hates, and we would never drag ourselves away from that primal genesis.

The gate itself was still a kilometre distant, shrouded in burning palls and screened by heavy curtains of inundation. Its summit was aflame, cut open by the massed reports of macrocannons and las-emplacements. Flyers swarmed over it, launched from pads within the Palace, and battle was joined in the skies.
Heavy bolters opened up, driving long furrows into the already deep-scored terrain and sending daemons smashing back into their ravening kind, who tore them open and devoured them before turning back to the assault, their lolling maws dripping with black ichor.

The wall itself was a false protection – the daemons would not halt at it, but given time would swarm and wrench and claw it down. They needed to be met on the field of battle, their hate matched with zeal.

I swung my blade and sent its tip whistling through the midriff of a racing bloodletter, then pivoted to drive the shaft into the jaws of another. They had not laid a claw on me yet, but the numbers were beyond comprehension, and more were being spun from the flames, vomited out into reality, tumbling into instantiation to launch into us.

I saw one of Alcuin’s squad reel as he was struck, his psychic defences momentarily breached, and I interposed myself between him and his attacker, slicing its head from its shoulders before spinning back to face the next one. That left me a fraction of a second shy of where I needed to be, and the first blow cracked into my pauldron, knocking me into the embrace of a fanged and winged terror.

‘Exsilium daemonica!’ cried Alcuin, hurling his hammerhead at the creature.

The air cracked open, sending a searing beam of silver light crashing into the monster’s chest, throwing it deep into the advancing horde where its own kind tore it to scraps before bounding on to reach us.

Then we were fighting again, no time to issue a word of thanks, our limbs blurred, our hearts flooding us with hyperadrenalin, our eyes fixed on the myriad and shifting goals.

All this was the work of seconds. That was all it took for the greater forces on the wall to perceive the danger and react to it. Even in the midst of my combat, lost in a press of strike and counter-strike, my spirit soared to see the response from my beleaguered Palace.

Egress-points opened, wreathed in coronas of heavy bolter protection, exposing the red-raw innards of the wall-fortress, and down from those openings streamed the force that had been kept hidden for ten thousand years. In phalanxes of black and gold, my brothers streamed from the Lion’s Gate in numbers not seen since the War of Shame, their spears glinting in piercing ranks of tempered steel.

I saw banners hauled aloft, the same golden standards we had borne into battle in the Age of Wonder, still unsullied after the passage of millennia. Heavy gunnery platforms dropped from the innards of hovering transports, opening up
with spinning clouds of destruction. Land Raiders in gold and black trundled out from cover, spitting arm-thick beams of las-fire. Italeo was there, leading a charge down the right flank directly into the path of one of the greater daemons. Valoris surged down the very centre, his spear flaming as it cut deep into the enemy hordes. I saw warriors in burnished Terminator plate lumber into contact, their claws cutting the air around them into slivers, and behind them the Revered Fallen, swaggering from the bellies of steaming drop pods, wielding sword and shield and towering over all but the greatest of the Neverborn.

The Adeptus Custodes had issued to war, and the Throneworld reeled now under the massed tread of its most potent sons. The tide of crimson met the flood of gold, and the screams of the dissipated became truly frenzied. The twin armies smashed into a tangled contact, a serried wave of impacts that cracked the rockcrete and threw the blood-rain into whirling vortices.

I fought on, driving myself ever harder, feeling an inexplicable joy well up through my speed-smeared limbs even as I rent and tore and hacked and gouged. I could have cried out loud. I could have lost myself in the moment, for amid the carnage had come a sight from the lost aeons, a fragment of our glorious past made real once more. The Captain-General was there, slaying in majesty. The Ten Thousand were unleashed, pouring their slow-burning fury onto the only enemy that had ever truly mattered.

We had returned.
The fight that day was vile and grim and I hated it.

Remember this – we were immune to the psychic dread cast by the shedim. We did not see them as fearsome or dreadful, just execrable and never-ending, like a continent of vicious slake-worms. The entire scene before us was a pall of sludge, kicked up in dirt, caked in blood and sluiced in a deluge of toxins.

Valerian remembers it differently, of course. All those others who were present remember it differently to us. There’s a philosophical question to be asked here, I suppose – which of us saw things truly? You could try to answer that if you really wanted, but you’d soon be caught up in the kind of tedious theological discussion that the Custodians delight in when they’re not lopping the heads off threats to the Throne.

We never saw the roaring curtains of warpfire, and we never saw the leering faces in the dark. The earth did not glow like magma, it was a stinking mass of rotten asphalt and broken rockcrete. Terra, much to my disappointment, was not a scintillating world of spires and turrets, but a colossally foul sink of dilapidation.

We only had moments to take this in, however. Our lander must have malfunctioned on the way down, or perhaps had been hit by something, for we crashed to earth on the extreme right flank of the erupting melee. As I charged down the ramp I could see a swamp of black and grey glistening ahead of me, and daemons squirming like insects in spoil.

As I have already noted, Navradaran was not a fool. He had dispatched the majority of the landers closer in towards the wall, where they slammed down
just ahead of the advancing lines of Custodians. Those of my sisters who had been brought back to Terra in the months past no doubt marched with them too, interlocking their unique capabilities with those of their counterparts.

That was the very essence of it, you see. That was why the past centuries had been such a miserable mistake. We had been made to fight alongside one another, two halves of a greater whole. The Custodians were individually the finest warriors ever created, but they were not themselves gifted with psychic mastery, and nor could they dissipate the auras of destruction created by the shedim. That was our task. We had always gone into battle alongside them, draining the most potent aspect of our enemy from them, reducing them to the purely physical. I had heard it said that there was nothing purely physical that a Custodian could not kill, and so we complemented one another perfectly.

Later, when I learned more of their ways and had to listen to them tell me over and over again how much they carried the guilt of the past on their shoulders, I wondered if our own role might have been deliberately suppressed. Perhaps it was easier for them to retreat into the Palace while we withered away in the void, erasing the old patterns so they’d never have to be reminded how we used to wage war.

I don’t really think that’s what happened. Bitterness can give you strange ideas, though.

Right then, of course, I had no time to speculate about anything. We were far from any kind of support, lost amid the seething morass of hateful and dangerous shedim. We were hardly defenceless, but there were only five of us and our lander’s bolter-feed would soon run out of shells.

I had to make a decision quickly. I looked at the walls – too far away, despite the advancing lines of defenders. I looked out at the city behind us – just as distant, and aside from some cover, lacking any advantage. I looked towards the centre of the battlefield – an absolute pit of horror, presided over by eight massive *shaitainn* with their bunched arms, withered wings and dripping black horns.

I might have laughed at the pointlessness of it, had I not caught a flash of silver, followed by a briefer flash of gold, more than two hundred metres away through a forest of clutching daemonkind but obviously still fighting.

That was it. That was our best chance of surviving more than a few seconds. I signalled to my sisters, some of whom had seen the same opportunity. We charged into contact, slamming into the oncoming tide of greasy shedim, hurling our greatblades around us in withering arcs.
Throne, but it was terrible fighting. We blunted the worst of their soul-cracking aura, but that still left creatures of iron-bound sinew and steel-pinned teeth. They carried their own crude blades forged from blunt iron, and every time I countered their blows I felt my bones jar.

This was not the task we had been made for. We were witch-hunters, seekers of shadows, fast-moving and lightly armoured. One-on-one we could slaughter these things, but the numbers would get to us eventually.

My blade churned faster, desperately, propelled now two-handed. We formed into a tight knot, fighting back-to-back and pushing as fast as we dared across the open terrain.

They hated us, those things. They hated us even more than the Custodians who so brutally carved them apart, because all the shedim could do was kill our bodies, and that had no appeal for creatures nourished by the torture of souls. I think we horrified them more than anything else. I think we drew more than our share towards us, and that just made me angrier the longer we were out there.

I felt slime splatter across my exposed forehead, and it sizzled acidly on my skin. A cleaver snagged on my calf, biting through my armour nearly down to the flesh. My cloak was ripped into tatters, my breastplate smacked by a blow that nearly upended me.

Sister Jeranda was the first to be killed, bringing up our rear. I didn’t see it happen but I heard the anguished scream. I finished off the mess of slime and scales that was going for my throat before I could turn to see them drag her into their midst and begin the feast.

We couldn’t reach her. I felt my vision go black. I felt my fury roar out of me, spiralling and augmenting.

In another age, I might have cried out that fury, but I still had my vow, so redoubled the savagery of my assault. I ripped out teeth, I broke backs, I stripped the skin from their bones and flung the carcasses aside. We all did the same, fighting in a way that could not last, for we were mortal after all, and those we cut into could do this forever.

But we did enough. We broke fast through the horde, shriving them of their greatest gifts and finishing the task with our greatblades. Soon I could see the object of our endeavours, fighting just ahead of us. I saw the aura of gold and the flash of hard silver light, and knew that we would come among them soon.

Even our proximity aided them. I saw them kill more swiftly and more surely, and saw the daemons fall back before their onslaught. The Custodian was ploughing through them now, throwing shedim aside in great haymaking thrusts
of his guardian spear. Those with him – Adeptus Astartes in archaic plate of silver-grey – blasted them into shrivelled ash. I began to see a way for us to survive this – together, fighting hard to link up with the huge counter-attack even now surging down from the walls.

Then the shadow fell across us all, huge and repulsive. I looked up, and suddenly survival looked a very distant prospect indeed.
In truth, I never saw Aleya fight her way towards me until she was virtually among us. She finds this extremely irritating, though I have since learned that Aleya is angered by all manner of strange things. If I had detected her earlier, it might have changed our strategy, since I became aware in those few moments just what a critical advantage it was to have the Sisters fighting with us.

Valoris was, as ever, prescient in this. Alone of the High Lords he had anticipated the need to restore the structures of the past, and alone of the High Lords he had no prejudice against the non-soulléd. The records will tell a different tale, I suspect. They will announce that the Fenris disaster prompted the Council to act, and this version will reflect glory on the mortal masters of the Imperium. Though the story has some truth to it – the later order originated, I understand, from the same Chancellor Tieron whom I met myself – anyone who understands the vast distances they had to cover and the nature of the warp will know that the programme must have been enacted many months, maybe even years, before that command was given.

In all that followed, I remain struck by how instantly we slotted back into those ancient modes of combat. We needed no exhaustive instruction, but fell into our roles instinctively. They are formidable fighters, the Sisters. I have nothing but respect for the physical prowess they display, although that is not their primary function on the battlefield. They position themselves in the greatest danger by doing what they do – they are more lightly armoured than we, and attract the larger share of animus from the creatures of the warp.

As for ourselves, we had never lost the ability to converse in fluent
Thoughtmark. It was one of the martial disciplines we had maintained over the many millennia, and on that day our prudence was rewarded. Those who marched with the Captain-General from the Lion’s Gate were able to do so in perfect concert, and even for those of us sundered from the main host by circumstance, such as Aleya and myself, our combined methods of controlled violence proved instantly effective.

It was less easy for Alcuin and his battle-brothers. They were all psykers of the most acute kind, and their every waking movement was animated by the warp. For them, the ether and the materium were intrinsically linked, two sides of the same blade that they balanced on effortlessly, and they were accustomed to fighting with the two worlds enmeshed. Even their armour is psy-enhanced, augmenting the cruder biological links used by their counterparts in other Chapters. The arrival of Aleya and her sisters restricted what they could do, and reduced them to fighting as solely physical warriors.

In the circumstances, however, that was a sacrifice I was willing to make. The Grey Knights, even stripped of the bulk of their psychic expertise, were still among the finest fighters I have ever encountered, and they adjusted to the new situation with uncomplaining precision. Robbing the daemons of their most dreadful powers was worth the fractional reduction in my allies’ flexibility, and we all fought from then onwards as if facing beasts, rather than thought-monsters.

Indeed, they yowled like beasts then, the daemonkind. Their exultation was torn from their jaws and their feral glee was replaced by a kind of outrage. They hated this. They hated being denuded of their own realm’s purest dimension and being forced to engage us on mortal terms.

In the moments before I saw Aleya emerge, I do remember finding the fighting suddenly and inexplicably easier. We had pushed hard into that horde’s heart, aiming for the high stages of an old landing pad. Both Alcuin and I had seen the potential of it – a high raised platform, ringed by stairways, commanding a vantage over the eastern portion of the huge battlefield. If we could make that, I judged, it would serve two purposes – to give us higher ground to defend against the endless tide of the enemy, and to make us visible to Valoris’ forces advancing from the north. If we could endure long enough, inward teleportation or airdrop could secure the position, opening a second front against the enemy and dividing them.

We had almost gained that location when the Sisters reached us. Even as I wondered why I was killing the daemonic horde with such fluency, I saw the
woman I would later know as Tanau Aleya driving into them with all the fury of a baresark. She threw herself around in what I might have thought was reckless blood-mania, had it not been so bluntly effective. She did not engage the enemy so much as run through them. My first thought on witnessing such a style of combat was that she would soon exhaust herself, allowing the daemons to take advantage once she tired, but of course that was to miss the purpose of the single-minded charge – they had worked so hard in order to link with us, to form up into a combination that the Neverborn would find impossible to counter.

After that we were fighting together, sliding in amongst one another, dancing and parrying and interweaving as if born to it. Alcuin’s squad must have found the Sisters uniquely unsettling, even painful, but in the thick of that combat they had no choice but to adapt. The ten of us formed into a tight circle of bodies, myself and the Grey Knights taking the brunt of the physical assault, the Sisters directing their null-effect from the shadow of our blades. Whenever one of us tired or made a mistake, another would leap into the breach. We left a trail of slaughter behind us, and finally gained the foot of the stairs. I looked up, expecting to see the platform rear above us, ready to plan our assault on the high position.

Only then did I see what we had attracted, rushing across the fire-swept platform to meet us.

Aleya calls such things by the ancient name, shaitainn. That captures the stature and the horror better than the Low Gothic, I think. It was truly gigantic, far greater than any foe I have engaged before or since. It reared high into the blood-rain storm, its wings lashing like the sails of some ancient galleon. Its cloven hooves sunk deep into the rockcrete with every step, breaking the earth into fresh plumes of flame. Its movements were horrific – bleeding with the same power a Titan has, but bound up in sinew and gristle and bone. Its axe alone was the size of a Dreadnought chassis, and as the blade whistled through the air it left a trail of fire in its wake.

It crashed down onto the platform, threw its muscle-corded arms wide, and roared in challenge. The gale of that roar sent the lesser daemons flying into one another, and even we had to lean into that foul, spittle-flecked storm of meat-rotten breath.

I could sense perversion radiating from its burning heart over the dampening aegis generated by the Sisters. It was like a furnace, a cauldron of boiling and uncontrollable rage. Something about it spoke of eternity, of its near-infinite malice dragged up from the deepest vortices of the hell-plane in which it was
enthroned.

I swung Gnosis round, its blade-edge crackling with disruptor energies.

‘This is His realm,’ I told it, calmly. ‘You feared it before. You will fear it again.’

Then I was moving, vaulting up the stairs, generating the momentum I would need to counter the daemon’s incredible mass.

None of my companions hesitated. They all came with me, racing up the stairs, their blades poised. Alcuin was at my left shoulder, crying out words of fell power and denunciation, his daemon-hammer now psychically inert but still physically powerful. His battle-brothers laid down a rain of shells from their wrist-mounted storm bolters. Aleya was at my right hand, her silence if anything more daunting, her eyes black with fury, and behind her came the others, running in lock-step, charging into the heart of darkness.

As I reached the summit I leapt high, bracing my spear to meet the scything path of the great axe. The blades impacted – hell-wrought iron against Imperial steel – and the shock wave screamed out across the entire battle-plain. I crashed to the ground, thrown wide by the blow, only to be replaced by Alcuin who slammed his warhammer into the daemon’s leading greave. His battle-brothers threw themselves in close, hacking and thrusting with their great blades before pulling clear to send volleys of sanctified bolt-shells punching into its hide. The Sisters charged alongside them, cleaving at the daemonic flesh even as their aura swelled up to deaden its fearsome power.

I raced into contact, only to see one of Alcuin’s warriors crushed by a single kick from the creature’s spiked hoof. It swung around again, vast and ponderous, slamming the axe-blade down where two Sisters were retreating. The iron head plunged deep into the earth, throwing both from their feet and sending burning cracks snaking across the platform.

It was colossal, a soul-crucible fuelled by veins of molten lead and driven by a core of inextinguishable venom. Our blades barely scratched its flesh, our blows barely halted its heavy rampage. Every pendulous swing of that axe was more than lethal, unleashing forces capable of levelling whole fortresses and against which our armour was as potent as parchment. If we were to have any chance to end it we would need to dare the impossible.

I sprinted harder, throwing myself high and reaching for the daemon’s brass-disc hauberk. I grasped on to its iron-studded belt with my left hand and plunged Gnosis with all my strength. The blade drove deep, causing a fountain of scorching blood to gush out, splashing against my visor and making me gag
from the stench. The daemon bellowed and jerked around, trying to throw me loose, but I gripped tightly to both spear and buckle.

I heard Alcuin cry out then as he smashed his warhammer into the beast, I caught a blurred glimpse of the Sisters racing to carve fresh wounds into its exposed flesh. I twisted Gnosis, trying to drive it under the creature’s immense ribcage and prise bone from sinew. Just at the last moment I saw it release one claw from the axe shaft, ready to seize me, and I yanked Gnosis free, dropping down beneath its twisting bulk and swerving from the outstretched talons.

By then the lesser daemons had raced back after us, scrambling up the slope in a skittering wave of crimson flesh. Two of Alcuin’s warriors had to turn to hold them back at the head of the stairs, fighting furiously even as a Sister rushed to their aid, further diminishing our assault.

The greater daemon stamped down again, pulverising more of the tortured rockcrete. Its axe whistled across, the rune-marked head igniting as it hurtled into one of Aleya’s troupe, bisecting her cleanly and sending the bloody fragments spinning into the masses below.

Four null-maidens remained standing, four Grey Knights, all now pressed hard and carrying wounds. I spun in towards the monster again, knowing that only another close-range blow could possibly harm it. It felt like assauling a living mountain, albeit one that gyrated and thundered and brought down the fires of hell. The platform was slippery with blood by then, dragged down from the unholy rain, and it fizzed and popped against the ever-kindled flame.

I jabbed another deep wound into its veined thigh before darting away from the swing of the axe. As the head screamed past me I twisted and turned, slamming Gnosis down on the great iron shaft of the weapon. The impact was horrific, jarring my arms to the bone and nearly shattering them, but my blade broke through its tortured mass, severing the shaft in two and showering me with flying splinters.

The creature roared with true fury then, turning on me. A vast fist punched out, catching me full and sending me flying across the blood-soaked platform. The world spun around me, and sharp pain speared up my right leg as the bones smashed and armour rent. The monster loped after me, shaking off assaults from Alcuin, its blazing red eyes fixed on me. I twisted Gnosis round in my fist, swinging it up even as the daemon swept out of the flames.

It held the stunted axe, its shaft now broken and little more than a stump below the iron blade, high above its horned head, the muscles on its chain-draped arms taut. I saw its jaws foaming with bloody saliva, its unholy flanks shimmering
with sweat, its wings spread wide like a death shroud over us all. I tried to rise, stumbling on my useless limb, and realised then that I would be too slow.

I looked up, saw the axe head hurtle down, and knew, with all the certainty of my long training, that I could not evade it.
The shaitainn was a brute. Its essence was so powerful and so profound that even our combined aura of suppression was only partially effective. At times, as we fought it, I even got brief flashes of what it must have seemed like to those with souls – a living furnace, a fire devil, a bull-horned beast that burned and burned and never went out.

But the rest of the time was bad enough. It was foetid, like they all were – the clotting aroma of slops and putrescence. It was a thing of death, steeped in the corpses of those it had ended, and the aroma clung to it like plague-musk. I was taken aback by the size of it, the sheer bulk of the thing, and our charges felt little more than suicidal.

That was before I saw the way the others fought, though. It pains me to say this, because I shared a mutual, unavoidable loathing with the knights of Titan and still find Valerian’s endless piety utterly maddening, but they were magnificent. I came to realise that my observations in the practice cages on the Enduring Abundance fell far short of the mark – in true combat, they were breathtaking. Alcuin’s squad were far faster than I would have thought possible, and the way they combined into a tight-edged force multiplier gave us killing potential far beyond our paltry numbers. They were everything I had been schooled to admire in the Space Marines – implacable, focused, absurdly violent.

Perhaps Valerian outstripped them by a fraction, but then there was only one of him, and in that armour he was always destined to catch the eye. I still remember seeing him leap up at the shaitainn’s chest and plant that ridiculous spear right into its heart. I could have laughed out loud at the audacity of it. Not only that,
but he succeeded in getting out again, trailed by the black strands of the creature’s ghastly innards. Perhaps only we Sisters could see just how badly he’d wounded it then, for we didn’t have to cope with the phantom flames and the sham-roar of fractured psy-voices.

Of course, they would not have done as well without us. Four null-maidens acting in concert can generate a formidable dampening aura, and it crushed the spirit of the shedim. They became slower, they became weaker, and even their blood-mad lord was stripped of its monstrous braggadocio. We did our part with the blade, too. We hurt it, and that felt good. Every time my sword sliced a chunk of grey skin from the shaitainn’s greasy back my heart rejoiced. I was never going back to my flamer, I resolved then. This was far more rewarding.

Once Valerian broke the axe shaft I thought, dangerously, that we might have a chance. Reva was still alive and fighting beside me, and we rushed forwards, beating even Alcuin to the chance to land a blow.

Things moved too quickly after that. I saw Valerian take that pile-driver punch direct to his torso, and thought he must surely have been obliterated by it – the daemon’s fist was almost half as big as he was, and he should have been smashed into pieces. Instead, he just spun away, battered and broken but still grasping his blade and very much alive.

It wouldn’t stay that way. The shaitainn was maddened by the mauling of its weapon and raged after him, raising its axe-stump two-handed. The thing could move incredibly fast when it wanted, almost as if it could slip between time-states. In his half-crushed condition, there was no chance of Valerian evading the coming lunge.

By then Reva and I were running, acting on instinct, throwing ourselves after the huge creature in a frantic attempt to haul it back. I pounced, knowing I was too far away. I was nowhere close to damaging it seriously, but its trailing leg remained in range, and I somehow got my greatblade at the right angle and drove it down and down through the creature’s straining thews, parting the pale grey strands of slickened muscle until its movement ripped the hilt from my gauntlets.

That wouldn’t kill it, of course. It wasn’t even the greatest of the wounds we had already given it, but it was pushed into its weight-bearing leg, just above its huge ankle bone, and even for a warp-forged horror, that was a bad place to take a skewer. I extended all my null-energy into that strike, willing the warp-spun flesh to part and implode. My blade did the rest, blazing with blue flame as it burned within the wound.
The entire limb twisted and buckled, and the shaitainn missed its target, slamming the axe-head down a fraction to the right of the prone Valerian and crashing, overbalanced, to the earth. The shock was massive, smashing the already blown asphalt and sending clods of it careening. Its mighty head thumped to the ground, for the first time down at our level, and its wings sagged into crumpled tangles of tattered leather.

That was all Valerian needed. I saw him sweep up from the wreckage of the creature’s fall, haul his blade over and spin it in a single movement. Crying out loud from the pain and exertion, he drove the spear point-first through the daemon’s throat, powering it with both arms until it almost disappeared into a mire of burning, bubbling ichor.

Alcuin was only a fraction of a second behind, leaping high before slamming his daemonhammer into the creature’s ribs, and then the rest caught up. We forgot ourselves entirely then in that orgy of slaughter, piling into the enormous, stricken frame as if it were so much meat, knowing that it could still come back from the most incredible wounds and determined to stop that happening.

At the end, we stood, all of us, drenched in foul fluids, panting hard, dotted amid the ruins of its cyclopean corpse. Valerian limped towards me, and only then could I see the damage he’d taken. I marvelled that he could stand at all, let alone still wield that spear.

‘That was well done, Sister,’ he said, the first time I ever heard him speak. It was like hearing something out of a devotional vid, the voice of a martyr sent to comfort the masses, and I instantly found it annoying.

There was no respite. The Neverborn still came at us, leaping over the corpse of their lord, as hungry as ever to rip out our throats. The sky was lit with the criss-cross of las-beams and mortar trails. The daemon army was still enormous, still assaulting the walls, still raving and bellowing and tearing. The entire Palace was half obscured by the dust they kicked up, and we were isolated, set on an island amid that sea of wrath.

And yet I could see that the momentum had shifted. Heavy aircraft had been launched and were pummelling the ground-locked daemons with punishing volleys of incendiaries. The Ten Thousand were making ground, driving into the enemy and encircling the great shaitainn. The air still burned and crackled, the ground still trembled, but I could see an end to this. Something had happened to break the daemons’ advance, though even now the matter remained poised.

But we were still alone, and still surrounded.

*Back to it*, I signed wearily, taking up my blade once more.
Once I would have been killed for witnessing what I witnessed then. No matter my rank, no matter the situation, I would have been dragged into an eyeless gaol by the Inquisition’s henchmen and ended quietly in the dark. I’d seen old warrants, copies of orders signed by commanders on distant worlds cloaked in euphemistic terms referring to sterilisations and clearances, but really signifying, I knew, death camps and mind-wipes. That was the penalty for looking upon the true face of our greatest Enemy, and for millennia there had been good reasons for the sanction.

We had to deny what we were facing, or the fate that had fallen Terra over the past months would have befallen all worlds many years ago. We had to lie to ourselves, to the trillions spread across the void, lest we all went mad with fear. The people could not be allowed to know what was waiting for them on the other side of the barrier between life and death. Even the best of us could not be allowed to know. That precept extended to the greatest military figures of our ages, the most powerful cardinals, and, yes, even the High Lords themselves.

For those like me, gifted with influence and resources and access to secrets, there was always speculation. We spoke of the ‘Great Enemy’, and we had all heard rumours of what that truly meant. As I have said, the existence of the Grey Knights was an open secret to the High Lords and their close counsellors, as was the purpose of such bodies as the Ordo Malleus and the Deathwatch. We knew the words, we knew the terms.

But it is one thing to have a partial understanding of the nature of our foes, and it is one thing to read half-garbled accounts of strange doings on the other side of
the galaxy and speculate on what they might mean, but it is another to see with one’s own eyes the full unmediated horror of reality.

Looking out that night on the battle for the Lion’s Gate, I could appreciate the wisdom of those who had proscribed even the very mention of the diabolic from our waking lives. They were cautious, those early drafters of the great law, and they were sensible. They knew that only a very few could be trusted with such truths, that most were not strong enough. I had never doubted that wisdom, and so had never truly abused my office to delve into matters that were not within my limited remit.

As I watched then, I realised I was weeping. I was crying uncontrollably, racked with a terrible fear and a horror that clutched at my bones and chilled them to ice. I was so far from it all, high up in the most secure pinnacles of the Senatorum Imperialis, surrounded by Palatine Sentinels and accompanied by Jek, and still the sight overcame me entirely. I wanted to pull away, to turn from it and flee deep into the vaults beneath. If I had given in then, I might have tried to burrow my way down to the Throneroom itself, to fall prostrate before the only one of our race who had ever seriously stood up to the nightmares of eternity.

Somehow, I forced myself to stay. After all, what I witnessed then was being observed by millions of soldiers on the walls and by thousands of appalled scholars in their great towers. The conflagration could be seen for miles. We saw the clouds break with deluges of bloody rain. We saw the sky crack and the flames shoot up from the earth. We saw those flames twist and grow and spew forth creatures of such dazzling maleficence that the only response was to scream out, or cower down out of view, or remain rooted in disbelief and crippling fear.

That was the moment when the old precept changed. We could no longer pretend, and we could no longer hide. Terra was not like those other worlds – its billions were not easily erased from history, and if we had slaughtered all those who saw the daemons cavort on that night we would have had an empty Palace and a silent Council chamber.

I knew I would only be a spectator, but I felt it important that someone tried to remember what happened, and that we did not leave the record of it to the warriors we had built to be capable of fighting such monsters. All of them – the Custodians, the Space Marines, the Sisters of Silence – had been hollowed out to make them stronger. They were no longer truly human, any of them, and such was their sacrifice – they were both better and worse than we were, and I would
be damned if they and only they became the arbiters of history in this, the
Imperium made to shelter humanity.

By the time I reached my vantage, the battle was already at its peak. I witnessed
Valoris lead his columns into the very heart of the heaving mass of invaders. They poured out of the Lion’s Gate before spreading into hundreds of tiny points of light, mingling with the oncoming cohorts like liquid. I refused the offer of a visual augmenter, knowing that close-up images might haunt me forever, and did my best to watch without losing control of my faculties.

For a long time, it seemed to me, the battle was horribly poised. The defence
lasers on the walls laid down such a blistering curtain of fire that it made my eyes stream just to witness it, and we sent flight after flight of gunships strafing the enemy ranks, but the only truly effective counter-attack came from those warriors on the ground who could bring their ancient weaponry to bear up close.

The worst to witness were the greatest of the daemons, those mighty roaring creatures of flame that strode across the battlefield like flesh-bound towers. I could not even glance at them directly, and merely hearing their roars, even from so far away, was physically painful. Those things led the charge against the Lion’s Gate itself, and when their sorcerous fire met the barrage from the lascannons the resulting inferno was like the voidborn destruction of stars.

Some of them were cast down by the Custodians, working in conjunction with whole phalanxes of null-maidens, and the many brutal duels between daemon and defender were horrific to witness. But they could not all be stopped, and I could only watch as the gate itself was finally breached, its towers torn down and its guns silenced. I watched the brazen doors crumble under the relentless onslaught, and saw the first of the behemoths pass through the portal.

Even at such a time of unsurpassed destruction, nothing I lived through then was worse than that sight. I saw the vast creature stride across the threshold, its whip of flame curling about its bloody torso, its obscene head splayed open in a roar of triumph. I saw the ancient defences stacked around it slide into heaps of burning rubble, and saw the defenders buried alive even as they ran from their stations in terror.

I do not know what would have transpired if he had not been with us that night. I like to think that Valoris would have rallied his troops, thousands of which were still contesting the great void port expanse beyond, and pulled back to defeat it. I like to think that, if he had somehow failed in that, the mortal defenders, who still numbered in the millions, would have been able to staunch the assault with the sacrifice of their own lives.
In the end, neither was needed. The Lord Guilliman came at last, hastening down from the heights of the Sanctum. He brought with him all those he had been able to gather from his already war-wearied task force – companies of Space Marines from many Chapters, the living saints with their haloes of gold, the last of the Grey Knights summoned from Luna. That force, so small in number compared with the deluge of monsters that had spilled through the gate, took them on.

You will never hear an account of that battle, not as you will hear accounts of his triumphant return to Terra, nor the great crusade that followed those days. You will never hear how Roboute Guilliman fought the greater daemon atop the ruins of the Lion’s Gate as the skies rained crimson tears around them. You will never read of how the two of them duelled amid the screams and the rearing flames, each testing the other to destruction, teetering on the edge of the treacherous precipice while the hordes of damnation seethed below. You will never hear how the monster nearly ripped him apart with a single lash of its whip, or how his brow glowed with the light of the sun when he fought, or how in the end he drove his sword into the daemon’s chest and clean out the other side. You will never hear how he choked the life from that unnatural leviathan with his great gauntlets, then cast its body down from the pyramid of debris to break apart on the bloody dust below.

I watched it all through my tears, and felt no shame in that. My knuckles were white on the railings; my heart was hammering like a child’s. I watched Guilliman fight, a scene dragged straight from the age of legends, and for a moment I imagined I could have been there, right at the start, when it was the Warmaster’s armies breaking through the walls.

You might think me fortunate to have seen such things. If you had asked me in my youth what I would have given to see a primarch take the fight to our greatest enemy, I might have told you that I would have happily died for the privilege.

But just then all I felt was a kind of numbing grief. For so long we had been in moral stasis, rehearsing old stories and drawing strength from them. We laughed about the primarchs returning, mostly because we knew it would never happen. Now that it had, I felt empty. The dream had not become reality; reality had become like a dream.

More than the gate was destroyed on that night. As I watched the columns of smoke rise into the storm-light and saw the vengeful Custodians pursue the screaming daemons far from the burning walls, I knew that the victory had only
been fleeting, and that the real change had already taken place.

We had grown used to keeping our fears at arm’s length, locked behind Cadia’s distant barrier. Now, with the faltering of the Astronomican and the waning of our long watch, we would never again be able to lie to ourselves about the nature of what we faced. If they could strike at us here, they could strike at us anywhere. No walls would be too high, no protection too complete, no hidden citadel beyond their reach.

I turned away then, unwilling to see the final carnage unfold. My hands were still shaking, my cheeks moist. I felt empty, like a dried-up husk thrown from the fire.

The Palace still stood. It was everything else that had been ruined.
I did not leave that battlefield until the weak sun was high in the sky and the clouds glowed a dirty pink. Slaying the bloodthirster was only the beginning, and there were thousands of lesser daemonkind still to contest. The creatures of the warp loathe and fear one another far more than they do us, and so the killing of their master did not daunt them. If anything, it freed them to commit even more reckless acts of ferocity. They surged up the stairs and streamed across the platform, yowling and bounding with abandon.

We might yet have died, had we not remained close to one another. My fighting was badly hampered by my wound, although my sinews reknit and my bones reformed even as I still wielded Gnosis, such was the resilience of my gene-wrought body. Alcuin was the linchpin in those moments, and had been given fresh vigour by the sight of the daemon’s demise. He led the counter-assault, smiting the Neverborn with a viciousness that I doubt any other could have matched just then. He truly hated those things, and I must admit that it made him brutally efficient.

We took more losses, though, and as I looked out at that ocean of detestation I suspected our resistance would only last a finite time before it was snuffed out.

We were lucky, I suppose. Or, as I do not strictly believe in *luck*, we must have been favoured yet by His gaze. I had begun to think of myself as being somewhat beyond His consideration since my failure at the Throne, and thus did not look for any especial indulgence from the ways of fate, but our duel with the bloodthirster had been noticed. Valoris had dispatched cadres of our finest warriors to engage all eight of them, and he himself had led the charge against
those at the heart of the horde. Just as I began to think we would be overwhelmed at last, golden lifters braved the blood-rain and the fire-lightning to deliver Terminator-clad brethren to our side, as well as the Contemptor-entombed Ynnades, who strode from his attack craft surrounded by a glittering force aegis and waded into the daemons with disdainful majesty.

Then I knew we would survive. I took it upon myself to protect the Sisters of Silence, whose efforts in reaching us, and then warding us, had been exhausting for them. Only three remained alive, including the one who had downed the bloodthirster and saved my life.

I swore to myself that she would not perish, and that if I lived that day I would find a way to repay the debt of honour to her. That was, in hindsight, a strange thing for me to think. I was not used to having significant dealings with those not of my own kind, and in any case we did not generally indulge in such concepts of honour debt as I am told that the Wolves of Fenris do. Still, it gave me a purpose and a balance to my fighting.

So we saw out those grinding hours. The platform was held, and more troops were airlifted in, and then we were able to push down the stairs again to retake the plain below. Valoris led a second counter-assault following the destruction of the last greater daemon, and after that we could hammer our way out towards the perimeter of the old void port.

I killed more creatures of the enemy in those hours than I had done over hundreds of years previously. Despite my wounds, I found the combat – as Navradian might have said – invigorating. It gave me pleasure to see those things crushed beneath the heel of my spear. It gave me pleasure to feel my body pushed to its limits. I felt a strange sense of release, as if long-invisible fetters had been lifted from my arms, letting them move with greater purpose and vindication.

By the time the sun was high in the sky, we knew the fighting would soon be over. The daemons were fleeing, flickering back into their own realm even before our spears could plunge into their translucent bodies.

To my surprise, I found that I almost regretted the cessation of violence. By the time I sent Gnosis hurtling into the last neck of the last kill, I felt no elation of any sort. All I felt was a curious ache of withdrawal, of something being snatched from me before I could fully understand it.

This was the disturbing factor. I wanted more.
Even then, there was no rest. In the hours that followed the battle for the Lion’s Gate, the prudence of the Arx Doctrine became fully apparent, as our preparations meant we could readily ferry thousands of battle-hardened troops to staunch the gaps left by the Custodians’ sortie. We could mobilise our Titans to hold sentinel within the Inner Palace, and airlift even greater numbers to hold the line inside the gate’s remains.

It became clear we would endure. The greater daemons were destroyed, the lesser still hunted down. We had taken fearful losses – we would be assessing the damage for weeks afterwards – but the unthinkable had been averted by the narrowest of margins. Soon activity within the Palace shifted, and there were suddenly inquisitors everywhere. I saw vulture-like ships hovering over the fields of slaughter, and strange figures wearing uniforms even I didn’t recognise stalking through the drifting smoke. We were doing what we always did after such events – trying to smother them, to erase them, to push them out of our minds.

That exercise was more futile then than it had ever been, and so there was an even greater unreality to the days that followed. Our labours remained intense, but the focus shifted. We rebuilt as best we could. Huge teams of reclamators and engineers were sent to the defence lines, only to be held back from the worst of the combat sites by Inquisitorial agents, and fresh fighting broke out between rival hoarders of secrets.

There was a mood in the Palace that we had fallen as far as it was possible to go. The Astronomican remained dormant, limiting our communication with the
wider Imperium. Our planetary defences, so painstakingly constructed over so many centuries, had shown they could be bypassed with trivial ease, and so covetous eyes began to be cast over the millions of troops locked up in the ranks upon ranks of high-orbit defence stations. In the shock of the assault on the wall, very few remembered the plight of the immense world-city beyond, which remained restive, fearful and starving.

Even within the hallowed precincts, every face was grey and every back was hunched. I saw men and women who had once worn chains of pearls and cloaks of platinum-thread who now looked little better than over-dressed beggars, wandering through the empty halls as if they had forgotten their own names. The cavernous refectories were empty, the chapels echoing.

At the time of our worst crisis we had not needed to worry about the chain of command, since the Captain-General and Lord Guilliman had seized the initiative so forcefully. Now, though, those matters suddenly became pressing. The High Lords had failed in their most sacred duty of all – protecting the heart of power – and in centuries past that had always resulted in swift punishment and a change of personnel at the high table.

I avoided contact with my masters at that time, though, and immersed myself in doing what I could to help with the restoration of the Palace systems. I issued requisition commands and lent my services to those commanders still retaining regiments capable of deployment. I signed warrants for resupply and passed on execution mandates to the Arbites. I think, looking back, I was in some kind of shock. Jek said later that I was like an automaton, moving from one task to another and barely saying a word to her or anyone else. I lost weight, which in normal circumstances might have been welcome, but back then just made me look haggard.

My memories of that period are fuzzy, and I do not recall much of the detail. One episode stands out, though. Irthu Haemotalion had ever been a thorn in my side, and so it was with much irritation that I responded to a summons from his much-diminished private staff and travelled halfway across the Palace to find him.

He had always been a sallow figure, but now he looked positively ghostly. I tried to imagine how he felt about the recent disasters. He was the Master of the Administratum, that stupendously vast edifice that controlled the flow of information between systems and the centre. More than any of us he traded in communication, the endless tide of parchment that was our empire’s oxygen. Now, though, he was blind and near powerless, cut adrift from his own servants
by the madness of his astropaths and the impossibility of void travel. Other High Lords, like Arx or Fadix, could still use their curtailed networks of control and subterfuge, but Haemotalion’s realm was the visible Imperium, its scholars and its scriptoria, and that had been revealed as perhaps the most fragile Adeptus stratum of them all.

We walked together in the cloister of an old oratory set within his sprawling private estate, its stonework caked in spidery lichen. The skies above us still burned with that mournful ember-glow, and every so often we would look up at it, fearful that the blood-rain would start again. Haemotalion, a tall and gaunt figure beside my waddling frame, twitched as he walked, a nervous tic I had never noticed him suffer from before.

‘You’ve been hard to reach, chancellor,’ he said.

‘Apologies, Master. There’s been much to attend to.’

‘No doubt. But this is a time for the Council to remain strong. We must rebuild, and swiftly. And yet, there have been disturbing rumours.’

I looked at him. I genuinely didn’t know what they might be. ‘Oh?’

Haemotalion pressed his lips sceptically together. ‘You want me to say it? You want me to say the words? Very well. Your friend, the primarch. That’s the problem. What are we to make of him?’

I had no idea. No one had any idea. There were no precedents. The last living primarch had disappeared into myth thousands of years ago, and even the great archives of the Lex did not stretch back that far.

‘He is the Lord Commander,’ I ventured.

‘He was the Lord Commander. He was many things. He was part of the rebellion that brought us so close to annihilation he curtailed his own power to prevent it happening again.’ Haemotalion sniffed. ‘They’re still saying this brings us a new dawn. I fear it only brings the old night back.’

I didn’t have an argument. Just as it had been before my mad obsession with the Adeptus Custodes, I had reverted to being a cipher for the views of the powerful.

‘Do the others feel likewise?’ I asked.

‘Some do. There’s been too little time to form a consensus.’ He stopped walking and drew closer. ‘He’s no longer within the great halls. They tell me Valoris took him down to the heart of the Sanctum. I’m informed he’s still there. They say he’s descended into the Throneroom itself.’

I looked at him steadily. ‘If any can do so, surely it’s him.’

‘None of us ever ventured it.’

‘Did you ever wish to?’
The Master was in no mood for humour, however bleak. ‘He’ll take control,’ he said. ‘That’s the danger. We’ll win this battle, only to see Terra taken from us. And what then? Another Great Crusade? A purge of all we’ve striven to build? You can see it, I trust. The danger.’

I remembered how I had felt on Luna, witnessing that pain of recognition in Guilliman’s eyes. I found myself thinking that a purge of all we had striven to build might be no bad thing.

‘Now, perhaps, you understand the folly of what you were trying to engineer before,’ the Master said, starting to walk again. ‘You would have sent the Custodians into the inferno at Cadia, just when they were needed here. Without them, we’d have lost the Lion’s Gate. The enemy might have breached the Inner Sanctum. You’ve played a reckless game, cancellarius, and need to remember where your loyalties lie.’

Perhaps he sensed my shell-shocked state and so felt able to speak to me thus. I would never have tolerated it before.

‘The Council must remain strong,’ he repeated. ‘While the Lord Guilliman remains within the Sanctum, we have our chance to act. I have already agreed with Pereth to forbid all fleet movements off-world. Arx has instructed those close to her to cordon off the sites on Luna and begin to limit the fallout from the Lion’s Gate encounter. We can have a million more troops here within days if the orbital defences are now deemed overmanned. They all owe their allegiance to us. The Titans are within Raskian’s purview, as are the skitarii maniples in-system, and he’s with us.’

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. We had been reduced to this, it seemed – squabbling over the conduits of power even as the Throneworld disintegrated into starvation and lawlessness and our walls were heaps of daemon-infested rubble.

‘With respect, lord, I do not think this is the time to–’

‘This is the only time we will ever have. He is a primarch. You know your forbidden history – they were fratricidal lunatics, prepared to tear the entire galaxy apart to pursue their feuds. We designed the Lex – he designed the Lex – precisely to stop them doing it ever again. He cannot take control.’

I smiled grimly. ‘And how would you stop him? He was once the commander of a Legion.’

‘The Legions are no longer here, though, are they? They’re gone into history, just where they ought to be.’

‘Not all,’ I said.
Haemotalion nodded. ‘You are right. One remains. One Legion, the Emperor’s Legion. You did what you could to bring it under our control, I suppose.’

‘That was never my intention.’

‘Valoris is one of us now, and he must be made to see reason.’

I remembered how the Captain-General had been, back in the crypt when I had dared to try to impose my will on him. He would not suffer himself to be a pawn in our games. That was why they had resisted being dragged to the table for so long. He must have known of this danger, or seen something like it coming. We had prided ourselves on all our activity, rushing around with our edicts and our policies and thinking the Custodians moribund relics of a long-gone age, but they had played the quiet game more perfectly than us and now held the balance of power in their etched gauntlets.

I remembered what Valerian had told me.

_We are not a part of your Imperium. We involve ourselves within it only if we deem that His will demands it._

‘They won’t work for us,’ I said. ‘Not now, not ever, and I was never trying to achieve that. All I wanted was to see them set free.’ Harster’s face still haunted me. ‘I wanted to see them take the fight to the enemy.’

‘Then you’ll give him all he wants,’ said Haemotalion. ‘You’ll give him the crusade he lusts for, and the blood-tide will rise so high we’ll all drown in it.’

‘I’ll give no one anything,’ I said, growing impatient. ‘You see anything in my hands, Master? I’ve lost it all. We all have.’

He grabbed my shoulder, forcing me to face him. ‘He’s only one soul, and he’s not been here long.’ He twitched heavily, and I felt his body spasm through my robes. ‘They say that this Imperium is a rotten corpse, a shell of what it once was. I’ve never believed that. We’re greater now than we’ve ever been, and these trials are no different to the ones we overcame before. We’re harder, we’re tougher, we’ve faced the dark for longer than he ever did. His age is over. We’re the inheritors of the mantle.’

I looked into his eyes, and saw how poorly they focused now.

‘He can’t take this from us,’ he said. ‘He can’t be allowed to.’

When I next spoke, I did so carefully.

‘Then what do you wish me to do?’ I asked.

‘Support us. Keep the cordon in place, resist the Adeptus Custodes being dragged into this. If he wants to launch a crusade of his own, let him kill himself alone out there. He must not become the new Lord of Terra. Valoris must remain with us.’
I don’t know whether he believed all of that. Perhaps he truly thought that Guilliman would usher in yet more destruction, or maybe he only feared for his own standing in this new Imperium. All I knew was that I had been convinced of something back then, driven by a force that it took a long time to recognise.

Haemotalion had done me some service, albeit unintentionally. As I listened to his desperation, I felt some of that resolve return.

I hadn’t been wrong. Not entirely. This was not about the Council, and not about the primarch. This was about what Valerian had said. This was about His will.

‘I serve the High Lords, as I ever have,’ I said, looking the Master of the Administratum in the eye, knowing that it was now a lie and unable to feel a shred of guilt.
In the days after that, we counted the cost.

Close to four thousand of my brothers had been committed to the fighting at the Lion’s Gate, and more than half of them had perished. Those were staggering losses for us. We had not absorbed such pain since the Secret War of ancient memory, and I remember reading the tally of the fallen with astonishment. Tribune Italeo was one of those who had perished, falling even as he slew one of the greater daemons. Other names I knew well were on those lists, some I mourned greatly for in the months that followed. A few of the gravely wounded were taken to the Tower of Hegemon to be interred into Dreadnought sarcophagi, though the practice had become so rare for us that there were not enough chassis for all those who needed one, and thus we lost souls who might have still served.

The grief was real, but our capacity to fight, as well as our resolve for it, was undiminished. In this we were not like the Adeptus Astartes – we did not have settled companies and Chapters that were led by irreplaceable individuals. To a certain extent we were islands, able to work together when the war demanded but otherwise entirely self-sufficient. We retrieved the armour of our fallen comrades, we gave them honour as we took the bodies down into the hallowed tombs of remembrance, and then we turned our minds to what came next.

I recalled the exchange I had had with Chancellor Tieron. Those old debates had felt esoteric at the time, a distraction from our ancient duties and rituals, but they preyed on my mind now. We all knew that the Captain-General had taken a place on the High Council, something that bound us more closely to their
deliberations than before, but we did not know where that would lead us. So much was changing, and it seemed inevitable that we would be caught up in it somehow.

By then I had also heard about the Lord Guilliman. News of his return had spread through the Palace quickly, first in hushed whispers, then in increasingly confident tones from the mouths of those who knew the truth. Few had laid eyes on him since his triumphal entry to the Sanctum, and it was widely believed that Valoris had now taken him to the Throneroom, where the two of them remained closeted for many days. An adjutant had been assigned to him, the new tribune Colquan, Italeo’s replacement, who would act as liaison between him and the Captain-General, but otherwise he served as little more than a background presence, a legend that had not yet stepped fully into the light.

Some of my brothers had witnessed him fight during the height of the battle of the Lion’s Gate, of course, though they said little about it, and I had little interest in finding out more.

A primarch was a primarch. We preceded them, just as the Sisters of Silence preceded them. We knew the truth of what they had done for the Imperium, both for good and for ill, and also we understood what role our Master had intended for them in the beginning, as well as what He had hoped for following the apocalypse of the Siege. If one of that fraternity had indeed returned to bolster our flagging defences then that could be welcomed. Our duty would remain as it had always been – as it had been before the Legions had been created, and as it had been after they were dissolved.

For myself, I had other priorities. Once my wounds had healed and my armour was repaired, I did what I had sworn I would do, and sought out Tanau Aleya.

I found her in quarters set aside within the Palace specifically for the returned Sisters of Silence. They were ancient buildings, once used to train and garrison the thousands of null-maidens of the Imperium, but more recently used as a fortress for the Inquisition. There was talk of reinstating the archaic Somnus Citadel on Luna in due course, but that was not something that could be done quickly, and so for the time being the new arrivals were herded together here, where the need was greatest.

It took me some time to locate her cell within that huge and ramshackle edifice. The Inquisition had burned all their records on leaving, as well as destroying or removing many of the old chamber furnishings, leaving the fortress dark, dank and cold. Servitors were everywhere, hauling machinery and lumen-banks, power coils and supply canisters. The sound of turbo-drilling echoed up from the
foundations, and I saw huge void shield generators being winched into place by heavy cargo-lifters.

Some of the fortress’ new occupants had served with Imperial institutions for a long time already, and so the adjustment needed for a life within the new dispensation was small. They retained their own armour, mostly still bearing the sigils of individual Black Ships, and carried weapons marked by heavy use. Those Sisters made the sign of the aquila as I passed them, and I returned the gesture of acknowledgement.

The sensation of being surrounded by so many null-souls in such a confined space was, I admit, unnerving. The effect was cumulative, and the further in that I went, the more I became aware of the strange sense of numbness in the filtered air. I had noticed it less during the heat of battle, but now, with something like normality restored, I could begin to understand why it had been so easy for them to slip away from us. It was hard to be around them, to tolerate the vague and nagging sense of wrongness that they exuded. I resolved to concentrate, to overcome such quintessentially human weakness. I was supposed to be beyond such things, after all.

Eventually I found her down in the very lowest level, where the ceilings dripped with rusty fluids and the air was thick with mould spores. Those chambers looked more like gaol cells than spaces in which to meditate. Knowing the identity of the previous occupants, it was likely that they had been.

When I entered, she was staring at a piece of stretched leather placed between staves of iron. She was so intent on her study that she didn’t hear me approach, and I was reduced to that most human of gestures – a faint cough.

She looked up, her face a picture of irritation. She must have recognised me, but I received no welcome.

*What do you want?* she signed.

‘To give you my thanks,’ I said. ‘And to register my debt to you.’

I was not sure whether to use Thoughtmark or speak out loud. The first seemed presumptuous, the second incongruous.

*For what? And why? It was just fighting.*

When I had last seen her she had been near collapse from exhaustion. In the days since the battle she had obviously been fed and given medicine, her armour hurriedly repaired, the foul blood burned from her sword and the steel sanctified by priests, but she still looked drained.

‘It was a mighty deed,’ I said, ‘to cripple that beast.’

*It wasn’t a beast, it was shedim. You’d have done the same for me. It doesn’t*
make us soul-siblings.

The degree of resentment in her voice took me aback. Maybe I had become too accustomed to either awe or fear from those I served – to be faced with irascibility, that was novel.

‘Forgive me, Sister. My presence here is unwelcome.’

She turned on me, her eyes flashing. Yes, shield-captain, your presence here is unwelcome. It has been unwelcome for ten thousand years. Throne damn you, I wonder you have the nerve to face me at all.

I could hardly keep up with the blur of her fingers then – anger made her gestures rapid and slurred.

_I saw the way you fought out there_, she went on. _I’ve never seen anything like it. You must have killed hundreds. So why were you here, and why were we there? Why were we left to fester, and you given all this to revel in?_

Her fingers were stabbing now, jutting towards me like physical accusations.

_So the war’s come to Terra now. I might even be pleased about that. Maybe it’ll stir you out of your damned laziness, though I fear it’s too late for that now._

I may have misinterpreted some of that diatribe. My suspicion is that Thoughtmark contains several expletives in its lexicon that I was unable to decipher; however, the core of her meaning was perfectly clear.

‘You must have suffered gravely,’ I said, doing my best not to antagonise her further. ‘Where were you stationed?’

_Arraissa. Heard of that? No, of course not. You’ve been stuck in the Palace so long you’d barely be able to find your way to the front gate if your menials didn’t hold your hands._

She was wrong about that. I knew precisely where Arraissa was – an industrial world deep in the heart of the Segmentum Solar, one of the many hundreds that comprised the productive centre of the Imperium. It raised Militarum regiments and supported a range of sub-Mechanicus-grade manufactures, as well as being a minor pilgrimage centre for the adherents of the Cult of Saint Eutrosius. I felt it politic not to point this out, though. I doubt it would have improved things.

I drew closer to her. Something about the map she was looking at disturbed me. The script was written in an ancient dialect, one that I recognised from my studies in the forbidden archives. _Where did you obtain this?_ I signed.

She looked up at me. _You can read it?_

I took a closer look. The more I read, the more concerned I became. Over the centuries, my scholarship had encompassed a wide range of theological subjects.
I had become versed in many languages now forgotten by the wider Imperium. Some of them, I suspect, were spoken nowhere save those places only we and our ancient enemies could still go.

‘This is a tongue of Lost Cthonia,’ I said out loud. ‘A dialect that had died out long before that world was destroyed. It is the gravest heresy even to possess such a thing. If the Inquisition knew you had it–’

*What does it mean?*

My eyes passed over the swirls, running down arcane patterns that eluded sense. It was a representation of the warp, that was plain enough, although I had always believed such things were of limited use – the empyrean changed all the time, mutating itself and twisting into new forms. A fixed diagram would only be of service at a specific moment, and to be able to predict the warp’s future form was beyond even the greatest of our prognosticators.

Some aspects, though, I could decipher. Star systems were marked in Cthonian script, given figurative names that I could deduce from my knowledge of the stellar cartography around the Sol region. The more I looked, the more became evident.

*This is an invasion scheme,* I signed, switching again to Aleya’s mode of discourse. *Centred on Terra, marking eight cardinal conduits through which a fleet could pass. Here are the worlds, all within a single warp stage, all sitting at the mouths of secure ether channels.*

Aleya had lost her earlier irritation, and now looked at her map with hungry eyes. *S– thought it must be something like that,* she signed, using a name-form I didn’t recognise, *but he couldn’t read it. Can it be used?*

I committed the schema to memory. Even as I worked, I was contemplating what must be done with it. If accurate, this was of the highest value, and notice should be sent to the High Lords without delay.

*Where did you get it?* I signed.

*I broke up a cabal. The Circlet, they were called. The last thing I did before the galaxy began to break.* She looked up at me. *The Black Legion were on their heels. They were involved in this thing, working through mortal cults across void-stations.*

*It must be taken to the Council, then. If an attack is planned–* She glared at me. *I suffered to retrieve this. My convent suffered – we were being picked off. If you know where these places are, we go there now. We burn them before they burn us.*

She was utterly serious. The muster of null-maidens was only just complete.
The attack on the Lion’s Gate had only just been seen off. Our forces were in disarray and gathering significant numbers for a fresh assault on such flimsy grounds would be difficult, probably impossible.

But I could not ignore the threat. Aleya was not wrong about what she had – this was surely part of the same grand assault, a fragment of the same strategy that had conspired to fracture the skein of the warp and silence the beacon of the Emperor. Our enemies knew we were half-blind and reeling, and so they would strike close, and strike soon. If this truly were evidence of where they would make their first move, then it needed to be used.

She noticed my hesitation, though. That was the most legitimate of the many criticisms that we endured in the years to come – that our long and patient vigil had made us too cautious, too bound to old rites and unable to react decisively when the need arose.

You say you owe a debt to me, she signed, rapidly and forcefully. Discharge it, then. Show me how to find these places and take me there.

I felt something unusual then, watching her thrust those flickering signs of Thoughtmark at me. At the very least I ought to have found her presumptuous, and at the worst guilty of the gravest disrespect, but instead I found myself unable to suppress the twitch of a smile. I admired this woman. I admired her lack of deception and her genuine fervour. By the Throne, I even admired the way she conversed, not that I expected that the sentiment would be readily reciprocated.

Nothing about what she demanded was simple. We were in flux, the Captain-General was with the Emperor Himself, as was the Lord Commander Presumptive. The High Lords, in whose names the Imperium was still theoretically governed, were fully detained with the many tasks of recovery and rearmament. To do what she asked required influence that I did not possess.

But there were ways around most obstacles. Dwelling in the snake’s nest of the Palace for as long as I had done had taught me that.

‘I know a person to whom this could be taken,’ I said. ‘If we do so, may I suggest, with all possible respect, that you leave the talking to me?’
I never for a moment believed that he would actually do it. I was merely taking out my frustrations on him in that cell, trying to make him feel as bad as I did, and yet he listened to me, and then he even did as I asked. Perhaps he really did believe all that talk about debts of honour, or maybe he saw the true danger of the map in a way that I did not – in any case, it forced me to look at him with rather different eyes.

In truth, my desire to hunt down the planets on that damned flayed parchment was as much about getting off Terra as anything else. In my short time there I found the place almost unbearably depressing. I was not seeing it at its best, of course, and I appreciated that the war had come suddenly and brutally to its walls, but even so my rancour towards it only intensified the longer I was there.

There was never an apology. No official from the High Lords ever came to us and expressed regret for the way we had been treated. We were simply thrown into that hideous fortress, given our orders and expected to form ourselves into an army that had not fought together for many thousands of years. They were fools, all of them, the High Lords – blind fools that were unworthy of our service.

My only allegiance, in those days, was to Him. That, and that alone, never faltered. I swore a vow that I would avenge my sisters in His name, but not in the name of the Council and not at their bidding. Everything I would do from that point onwards would be framed within that prism of vengeance, and I looked forward ferociously to the coming of the enemy to the Throneworld so I could visit such pain on them as they had on me.
I never thought that Valerian would give me a route to this revenge, nor that it would happen so swiftly. He stood there in my cell, with his soft, patient voice, ignoring my repeated insults and studying that infernal parchment as if it were a fascinating but harmless piece of interesting illumination. Most infuriating of all, he proved impossible to provoke. Hatred seemed to have almost no purchase on him, as if it were an emotion he simply couldn’t understand.

Later, after I had spent more time in his company, I realised just how close to the mark that judgement was. It was actually more a case, I think, of his having no conception whatsoever of pride. He had no ego to bruise. He saw his entire life as a pure expression of service, and wished for nothing more than that. His only ambition, of any kind, was to serve the Throne more perfectly. If he had been ordered to throw his armour away and stand in the path of daemonic arrows, he would have done so without complaint. That was the key difference between him and, say, a Space Marine. A Space Marine was a creature of incredible internal pride, a warrior breed of such bellicosity that they would go to war – and had done – over matters of martial insult or the resentments of their flawed primarchs. Valerian would never have done that. In that distinction, I felt, was both his greatest strength and his most profound weakness.

We went from the cell, taking a pictuer image of the map and leaving the original in its stasis field. As we went, I could tell that he was communicating, sending urgent requests for a meeting ahead of us, even as he kept up the flawless stream of Thoughtmark with me. We passed into finer parts of the Palace, with high stained-glass windows and gold-chased columns. I saw few warriors but many menials and even more Adeptus scribes, all racing from one task to another like a herd of startled bovines. The scale of it all was numbing rather than impressive – an endless warren of chamber after chamber, hall after hall, linked by a filigree of bridges and transit arches that wove through the toxic air and turned the mind.

He guided us expertly, walking swiftly but never hurrying. His wound, which I had thought might have been terminal, was by then hardly in evidence. His powers of recuperation, I surmised, were as impressive as his ability not to take offence.

Soon we had entered some truly grand regions – basilicas and mansions that piled atop one another in a bacchanalia of cumulative construction. Through narrow portals I caught glimpses of the very centre of it all, the colossal Sanctum Imperialis itself, rising against the northern horizon like some continental landmass, part masked by the haze of distance. I wondered briefly if we would
go anywhere near it, and my interest was piqued. Hestia had always told us that only two orders were permitted into the presence of the Emperor Himself – the Custodians and ourselves.

One day, I thought to myself. One day.

But then our path turned away from it, and we were climbing into ostentatious rooms lined with mirrors and hung with thick tapestries. The luxury was obscene – just one of the many artefacts that littered those galleries could have been ransomed for the annual tithe of an entire planet. The courtiers that we passed by in those places I found repugnant. They bowed low to Valerian, and to me, but I found the shallow subservience disgusting. One woman had the temerity to flash me a timid smile, so I shot her a Thoughtmark stun-gesture that sent her reeling into a table full of glassware.

At the end of it, we found ourselves ushered into one of the most opulent rooms of all, a veritable magpie’s nest of ancient objects and antiquaries. I looked around at it all, trying to gauge how much coin it must have taken to assemble.

Soon afterwards, heavy doors at the far end of the chamber opened smoothly and two figures entered. One was a woman, fairly young with a clever face and a dancer’s erect bearing. The other was a man, older, with a heavy paunch and thick lines under his eyes. Neither of them looked like they’d slept for a long time, and their fine robes couldn’t hide a certain quiet desperation. The man greeted Valerian with warmth, though.

‘Shield-captain,’ he said, holding out both hands. ‘This is an unexpected pleasure.’

‘I wish it were under better circumstances,’ Valerian replied. ‘Chancellor Tieron, this is Tanau Aleya of the Sisters of Silence.’

*Honoured,* Tieron signed.

‘I will be swift,’ Valerian said. ‘Is this chamber secure?’

‘Come, now.’

‘The Sister has evidence of imminent attack on worlds within a single warp stage of Terra. I have images to show you, ones that I am prepared to vouch for. The targets are all in close proximity, and might be reached and defended if a task force were launched soon. The High Lords should be informed, and arrangements made for immediate response.’

‘Have you informed your Captain-General?’ Tieron asked.

‘He is with the Emperor.’

The chancellor nodded, understanding what that meant. He looked at me. *Where did this evidence originate?*
Hellion Quintus, I signed back. Though that matters little. They have knowledge of the coming state of the warp, and have isolated eight open conduits leading here. All of them are so close as to be virtually on top of us.

Tieron looked pained by that, as if those tidings could possibly have been unexpected. I don’t know what he thought the enemy would do after coming so near to destroying the Palace walls – a secondary assault would always have been on its heels.

‘Grave tidings indeed,’ he said, moving awkwardly over to a chair and sitting flabbily in it. ‘And they come at the worst possible time.’ He looked up at Valerian. ‘You remember our old dealings with that issue of Dissolution? You remember how that went?’ He shook his head. ‘If only that were still the most pressing matter on my table.’

I shot a quick glance at his companion then. She had not been introduced, but I could tell that she was more than a functionary. They were a unit, these two, and she radiated a quiet, steady intelligence.

‘The High Lords have shut down the system,’ Tieron said, wearily. ‘They’re recalling every remaining scrap of defence to the Palace and forbidding off-world movement. The Master of the Administratum is scared. He’s scared of the enemy and he’s just as scared of Guilliman, and he somehow thinks that both can be fended off by hoarding our remaining forces. So let me give you a brief answer to your question – there will be no counter-attack, not from the Council. While the Astronomican remains dark and the balance of power here has yet to be decided, no ships will launch from Terra.’

The fools, I signed.

‘An astute judgement, Sister,’ said Tieron. ‘But they’re close to losing everything now, and that makes them reach for poor policies.’

‘You will inform them, nonetheless,’ said Valerian.

Tieron laughed. ‘I’ll make it a priority, though it won’t make any difference.’ He rubbed his eyes. ‘The Lord Guilliman is here now, and that cannot be altered. When he emerges from his commune with the Emperor he’ll be the undisputed Lord Commander of the Imperium, and nothing Haemotalion can do will stand in the way of that. Until then, though, we’re paralysed, locked into old power games that we should have grown out of generations ago.’

Valerian absorbed this quietly, as if he’d expected the news. I took it rather less well.

Then damn them all, I signed. If they won’t recognise it, we’ll act without them. ‘They’ll come after you, if you try,’ Tieron told me.
Let them.

‘And such action would, of course, be outside the law.’

You truly think I care?

The chancellor chuckled. ‘Careful. I’ve spent my life defending that law.’ He glanced back at Valerian. ‘See, when I tried to see the Lex changed in Council, it was the strangest thing I’d ever done. I still can’t explain why I did it, unless…’ He searched for the words. ‘Unless it reflected a greater design than mine. Perhaps my mistake was to interpret it too literally. The Lex did not need to be changed, because it’s clear now the Lex is destined to be dismantled. But the idea, the idea – that was important.’

He looked down at his hands.

‘To set the Ten Thousand free,’ he murmured. ‘To unleash the Talons of the Emperor. The Council will never allow it. Guilliman might never allow it. I now think that, if it is the right thing to do, you might have to seize the chance yourselves.’

At that point, I do not think Valerian was close to being convinced. He was still so bound to his lifetime’s devotion to duty, interpreted as the labyrinth of rules and customs that had always given him purpose. I was already preparing to storm out, to find some way of getting off-world and forcing the issue myself, but then Tieron said something else that did the seemingly impossible.

‘I have come to believe,’ the chancellor said, ‘that in failure often lies our best sign of truth. I failed in the Council, and only now see that I was cleaving to a doomed course. The harder I pushed, the more I was resisted. I couldn’t cross the threshold. I should have taken that, I think, as a sign to examine my instincts.’

Valerian suddenly looked shaken. He still said nothing, though those words had clearly struck some kind of chord.

I, though, was impatient to be going. It was clear we would not receive any help from this source, and if Valerian could merely give me the names I needed there was nothing to stop me taking matters into my own hands.

We have to act ourselves, then, I signed, uncaring what the chancellor might make of that. We have to defy the law.

The Custodian turned towards me slowly, and it took him a long time to force the next words out. I could see something of his difficulty even then, but now that I know more of him, and now that I know more of the world he inhabited for so long, I think I understand just how impossibly hard it must have been to express them, and that makes me admire him very much for what he did just then.
Indeed so, Sister; he signed, unusually awkwardly and with none of his usual fluency. I believe, all things considered, you may be right.

I went back to our makeshift fortress. Valerian took his leave almost immediately, offering nothing but his word that he would return with the means for me to realise my goal. Looking back, I find my attitude towards him incredibly trusting. We had been thrown together by the slenderest of chances, but already I found it impossible to imagine him failing to do what he said he would. There was something almost childlike about his attitude to truth, though it was probably reckless to rely on it so much at the very beginning.

I was, though, consumed by the urgent need to act on what we had found. My quest to return to Terra had always been part of a greater mission – to discover those responsible for the destruction of my home – and I shrugged off any lingering fatigue to pursue it with renewed energy.

I knew that time was short. The locations identified by Valerian were very close, almost within spitting distance of Terra itself. If the enemy had arrived at those places already then we were barely beyond the range of their guns even where we stood, and I could understand the High Lords wishing to reserve all our forces for where the final assault must surely come.

If I had thought about things more clearly, I would have realised just what a mad game we were playing. There was little chance of us mustering more than a token strike force in the time we had available, something that could be cobbled together quickly and hurled into the face of an oncoming armada. It was all fairly suicidal, I suppose, and a part of me realised it from the beginning. I had no complaint with that – I would have died a hundred times over just for the chance of facing the Legion that had brought destruction to Arraissa – but I wondered then what Valerian’s attitude must have been. He would not, I thought, have risked his life just for the sake of a vow made in the heat of battle. His devotion to the Throne would override any sense of personal honour he might have cultivated. So why was he doing this? Something that Tieron had told him must have tipped the balance, but whatever it was the sense of it had passed me by.

Do not look for any more justification than that. Perhaps there was always an element of madness in what we planned, motivated by exasperation with the High Lords and exacerbated by my still-hot heartache. I will not apologise for it, and I would have done the same thing again in exactly the same way. I was built to fight, to be a hunter rather than the hunted, and it disgusted me that so many
of our allies preferred to remain behind the walls rather than sally out beyond them.

So when I got back to those dank and crowded cells, I sought out Reva first. We had conversed often in the days since being thrown together, and I had discovered a woman after my own heart. She was fearless, devoted to her highest duty, and was – most importantly – contemptuous of those who gave us our orders. We had even joked about stealing off-world before the true chance came, but under our sarcasm had always been an element of real desire.

I found her in the half-built practice cages, pirouetting and thrusting with the greatblade we had both taken as our signature weapon. She had recovered her full fighting potential rather more quickly than I had, and now moved with a ferocious grace again. I watched her for a while, letting the impression of it sink in, before she noticed me, pulled her leather training-helm from her head and came towards me.

*You look serious,* she signed.  
*Can we discuss something?* I responded.

She looked at me quizzically, as if worried she might be the subject of a jest, but then her smile died. *Any time,* she signed.

Persuading her was easier than I had feared it might be. We all knew that battle was coming anyway, and the chance to steal a march on it was appealing to her sense of adventure. The ban on off-world movement was something that chafed with all of us – until so very recently we’d been effectively banned from coming anywhere near the Throneworld, so to be shackled here was yet another indignity we yearned to throw off.

*We will likely not return from this,* I signed, to be sure she understood.  
*You say they are Black Legion,* she countered. *If that’s right, then I care not.*

We began to spread our message, working only with those we reckoned would be sympathetic. We avoided those who had served in the League of Black Ships, for their loyalty to the Adeptus Terra was absolute and if the High Lords had told them to remain on-world then they would do so slavishly. The most promising recruits were those like us, the cast-offs and the long-term renegades, many of whom had suffered from raids similar to that launched against Arraissa and also burned to avenge them.

I don’t know, even now, whether those many attacks were all linked to the Circlet. It may be that the Black Legion saw us as unique threats to their general strategy and made sure to finish as many of us off as possible before we became aware of it, or it may be that we were simply *there,* isolated and ripe for the
taking. For myself, I think there must have been a connection. I cannot think it random that those from whom I took that map were also working with those who ransacked my convent, and it was this artefact that remained our only link to what was already unfolding.

By the end, we recruited thirty-two of our number; thirty-two Sisters who were so disillusioned with our treatment that they would willingly become involved in a raid that was both illegal and likely to result in our swift deaths. I found that both heartening and moving. We had all lived our entire lives in an Imperium defined by fear and the foolish adherence to central authority. One ironic consequence of our neglect by that authority was that we had never been infected by its most pernicious effects, and were as close as any of our species ever came to having a mind of our own.

The hour came. We armed ourselves and marched en masse to the hangars. We were lucky that our fortress was in such disarray – there were few guards on station, and little more than an ad hoc mechanism for summoning and discharging landers. Some token resistance was offered from the garrison commander and a scattered squad of his troops, but a very gentle application of our more unpleasant null-projection techniques soon had them vomiting energetically over the rockcrete and clutching their migraine-split temples.

I had still not heard from Valerian. I never doubted his honesty, but it occurred to me that he would have run into far stiffer resistance than I would have. Perhaps he had failed in securing the void transport that he’d intended to. I began to consider whether we would have to make use of the semi-ruined Cadamara, which still hung in high orbit but was only barely void-worthy. Erefan would still take an order, I knew, though Slovo might be a different matter. I didn’t even know for sure that he remained on board, or even if he were still alive.

I voxed the Custodian over the classified channels he had given me, then took my place in the lander. We boosted the thrusters and took off, clearing the open hangar exit and pulling steeply up into the atmosphere.

I looked out of the armourglass portals as we ascended, watching the spoil-grey sprawl of Terra spread out beneath us. The scars of the battle were clearly visible, a black straggle of burned earth that spread out for many square kilometres. For a brief moment I had a perfect view of the Palace itself, that colossal accumulation that was more continent than city, and realised only then just how vast it was. The place must have housed millions upon millions of defenders, against which our hastily assembled band was almost infinitesimally
unimportant.
But it wasn’t, of course. A part of me knew that even then.
We pulled into orbit, and the view from the portals sank into inky black. Voidcraft were clustered there in huge numbers, more than would normally have been the case, since so many had been pulled back from outer-system patrol. Immediately Adeptus Arbites system runners began to hail us, and a Naval destroyer bearing the ident Superlative began to turn towards our locus.
I saw the challenge-hails multiply on our forward augurs, all of them demanding a full-stop and transmission of exemption credentials.
We were a long way from the Cadamara. Reva looked at me, and I knew what she was thinking.
Maintain course and speed, I signed to the pilot.
The destroyer fired up its engines and began to glide towards us. I saw its gunnery panels lever open, and detected seven more enforcer gunships enter the vicinity of our sensors.
We had seconds before those hails turned into shells. Reva looked at me again. I began to speculate on whether this would be the shortest raid in Imperial history, calculating whether we could boost our way to the Cadamara before we were hemmed in and turned into atoms.
Just then, though, something much bigger swam into our visual range – a ship of such outrageous, vulgar ostentation that it could only originate from the Adeptus Custodes. It was arrayed like a land-based fortress, piled with crenellations and outsized thruster housings and glinting with dirty gold.
Valerian’s voice crackled over the comm.
‘Recommend coming aboard with all haste, Sister,’ he said. ‘They won’t fire on us yet, but we do not have forever.’
We guided the lander into the voidship’s open hangar, slipping under a lintel of heavy brass. Every surface of that ship was ornate and gilded, broadcasting the majesty and heritage of its occupants. It was huge too, covered in weaponry the like of which I had never seen before, and which I guessed dated back a long way. That ship might have been the oldest thing in orbit, though it must have been among the least powerful of the Adeptus Custodes’ formidable arsenal.
Valerian met us at the hangar, clad in full armour and accompanied by nine of his brothers. It was a paltry band in terms of numbers, but in truth more than I had expected.
‘The sodality of the Palaiologian Chamber,’ he announced. ‘My brothers of war. They have vowed to aid me.’
I bowed to them, unsure what that meant. Had they been ordered to accompany us? Or did they choose to follow their shield-captain? Surely it was the latter, for this went against everything they had sworn to uphold. I wondered what he had said to convince them.

Ten, I signed, almost without thinking.
Valerian smiled. ‘It will be enough.’
In anyone else, even a Space Marine, I would have called that arrogance; with him, it was never possible to be sure.
I felt the ship’s walls rumble as the plasma drives kicked in. We began to move, heading towards the inner core of the vessel.
‘This is the *Chelandion,*’ Valerian told me. ‘A ship under my authority. Not the greatest in armament, but it will serve to get us there. We have the service of three Navigators, and they understand the risks while the beacon remains silent.’

*Have you studied the map further?* I signed, knowing that there was little I could do to decipher it. I was reliant upon him to dictate our course, given that of all of us only he understood the script and could make the link to the real planetary systems.
‘Vorlese is closest,’ he said, reaching the blast doors and opening them on to a bright-lit corridor beyond. ‘I consulted the almanacs, and engaged the Tarot for guidance. It is a well-defended world, the home of three regiments and a Naval battle group. It may stand yet, and if so we will aid those who yet resist the enemy.’

*And if it's fallen already?*
‘Then we will die, extracting what cost we can before they move closer to the Throne.’

*How far, then?* I signed, anxious to get into the warp. Now that we had launched this thing, I would not be at ease until we reached our destination.
‘We still have to clear orbit, and that will not be easy, even for us.’ He gave me a tolerant look, one that spoke of forbearance. Naturally enough, I found that infuriating. ‘But we will achieve it, Sister. And after that, we are in the hands of fate.’
I did what I could to aid them. I called in a few favours from those I could still trust – a dwindling band by then – and prevailed on High Lord Pereth to look the other way as they boosted clear of Terra’s clogged local space. Jek was as diligent as ever, working furiously behind the scenes both to hide our involvement and to ensure that the right palms were greased. Our union of convenience, which had originated on a professional basis, then deepened through a mutual terror, had now become something more profound. We were certainly no longer master and adjutant. Perhaps right and left hand would have captured it more accurately.

So we achieved a small thing for them – the Chelandion cleared orbit and made the warp. Once they were away, we returned to that vortex of paranoia and disorder that passed for the Imperial administration at that dark time. The Council was riven between an increasingly despotic Haemotalion and a rump of more reasoned voices, all of them occupied with overlapping and competing attempts to claw back some level of control over the Palace’s vast and complex machinery of government.

As the days passed and no repeat of the great daemonic incursion took place, some achievements were accomplished. A temporary defence line was re-established over the ruins of the Lion’s Gate, and rebuilding even began. Punitive raids were launched into the burned-out wreckage of the eternal city, and several hab-zones were tentatively retaken by forces loyal to the Throne. We established contact with a number of other contiguous regions where order had never quite been eradicated, and the prospect of resuming our old habits of iron
control began to dangle tantalisingly before us.

Throughout all of this, I remained preoccupied with that final conversation with Valerian and Aleya. I had little doubt that my words had been instrumental in their decision to subvert the Lex and take ship. Such a thing had never been heard of, and if the truth of it were ever to emerge then my life would likely be forfeit. I didn’t care too much about that, of course, but I did remain anxious that my intervention might not have been the right one. After all, what did I know of the Emperor’s Will? How could I even begin to offer opinions about such a subtle and obscure subject? If I had ever had any claim to importance, it was as a politician, not a scholar. I wondered often if I should have stuck to what I was good at.

I consoled myself that, despite the precedent being broken, the possible harm done was slight. It was a single ship, no more than that, just a way for me to spite Haemotalion’s knee-jerk ban and allow those who had fought bravely the right to find their own path to death. If the Sister was right about a coming assault on that ring of worlds then they would be swept aside by it, just as Harster had been, though at least they would end their lives as he had done, on the offensive.

Another concern made itself apparent during those days. Once the terrible shock had worn off, whispered voices began to be raised concerning the assault on the Lion’s Gate. Clearly it had been the work of some power of nigh-infinite malevolence, but if so then it was something of a mystery why it had failed. For all the terror it had inspired, the creatures had not got close to the Eternity Gate, and I felt that even in the absence of the Lord Guilliman they would never have done so. Was it merely a statement of intent, then, to show that no worlds were beyond their reach now? Many began to advance that thesis, taking some comfort in the fact that we had nevertheless endured it. I, though, continued to have nagging doubts, as if we were missing something important and dangerous, though I could not quite put my finger on it.

I might have made more of both doubts, had two things not happened that once again turned everything inside out. The first was the great development that we had all been fervently hoping for – the Astronomican’s signal flickered, then went out again, then finally re-emerged. I heard the news first from Kerapliades, who voxed me triumphantly as the first signs of return began to flow into the astropath’s choir-towers. At first I hardly dared to believe it, but the Master of the Astronomican himself issued official confirmation soon afterwards, sending the news via secure channels to his peers on the Council and their senior
advisers. The fortress lit up, and great columns of pent-up energy snarled around its iron crown as they had done before.

Jek and I both raced to the balcony of our tower and looked up into the skies, which were already beginning to clear. It was impossible not to cry out with relief and elation at the dissipation of that oppressive curtain of bloody swirling. Never had I been so pleased to see the familiar steel-grey shroud of our old poisons return to enclose us, and we embraced and kissed and laughed like fools.

I never discovered the cause of the Astronomican’s failure, nor understood the means by which it was eventually restored. It may be that Raskian had been able to resolve some mechanical problem, either in the Throne itself or the mighty conduits that linked it to the fortress, though he never claimed credit for it if he had. The resumption of the beacon may have had something to do with Guilliman’s sojourn in the Throneroom, although he also never spoke about what he had seen or done in there, at least with me, so that whole episode must remain pure conjecture. Whatever the reason, though, its return gave us more than a means to reconnect with a sundered galaxy – it gave us hope again. Even when we discovered the full scale of the disaster inflicted upon the far reaches of our Imperium, and truly understood the nature of what would come to be called the *Cicatrix Maledictum*, the very fact that we had proof of His continued presence among us was enough to banish the worst of our despair.

In the short term, though, the Astronomican’s recovery only gave us more problems. We had already lost scores of astropaths to the effects of the Great Rift, and many weakened survivors were killed when the great psychic torrent burst back out into the universe. Information on the state of the Imperium was still scanty at best, and it took time for us to gather any data on just what had taken place during our blindness. The more we discovered in those early days, the more we realised just how bad things had become for us. There was no hope of recovering Cadia. Other warzones, such as the great meat grinder of Armageddon, had also passed far beyond our ability to stabilise. The supply of Black Ships, on which the

Throne’s creaking mechanisms depended, had been critically disrupted both by the turmoil in the warp and Valoris’ unilateral co-option of the Sisters of Silence. Survival had been achieved, that was for sure, but it began to look as if we had done nothing much more than that.

But then, just days after those events, came the second great turn of fate. The Lord Commander returned at last from the hidden Throne, ready to resume the work of his great commission. In years to come that day was marked with nearly
as much reverence as the long established Sanguinala, signalling the very beginning of the Indomitus Crusade and the titanic effort to recover what had been lost. At the time, though, we had little inkling of any of that. Indeed, the entire enterprise was almost derailed before it had even begun. Despite what had taken place on Luna I had not expected to be a part of any of it. Once again, in a development that perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised by, I was entirely mistaken.

I had gone to visit the man who had started it all, Kerapliades, in his citadel of dreams.

The Master of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica dwelt in one of the stranger domains within the Palace, a haunt of warp eddies and psy-shunts set under a great dome of black glass. Many of those within the structure were blind, a result of the soul-binding that scarred all astropaths, and most of the rest were tainted in some way by the wearing effects of the empyrean. Uniquely among the Palace’s many fortresses, the hundreds of heavily armed guards within Kerapliades’ realm were chiefly there to keep an eye on those inside, rather than out.

As I hurried to meet the Master, I could see the toll that had been taken on this enormous and secretive kingdom. Most of the cells were empty, there was blood on every deck, and the sound of repeated screaming could be made out coming from the pit-levels below. Those I passed in the narrow, turning corridors regarded me with the hostility of the besieged from under heavy cowls.

Kerapliades met me in his command nexus, a blister of armourglass and Geller-shielding placed high up on the north rim of the Scholastia Psykana’s curving outer perimeter. Hundreds of scribes, many hard-plugged into baroque stations of wheezing complexity, worked away in near silence, their augmetic fingers clattering on runeboards. Black-armoured sentinels with beast-snarl face masks prowled across galleries and bridging gantries, watching every move the scribes made, forever poised for the first twitch or spasm of possession.

‘So here we are again, chancellor,’ the old man said dryly. Like all of us, he looked preternaturally decrepit, even more so than he had before.

I bowed. ‘You were right,’ I told him. ‘About Cadia.’

‘We get signals from it now.’ He shuddered. ‘You don’t want to know what’s in them.’

We walked across a long curving span that vaulted over lines of scribe-pits.

‘And the anathema psykana are back,’ he croaked, limping and leaning heavily
on an iron cane. ‘They were part of my purview, in the old times.’

‘Perhaps you should have fought to keep them,’ I said.

‘No doubt. Though we struggle to hold on to what we still have, and I am not stupid enough to pick a fight now with Valoris.’ He shot me a cynical glance. ‘I don’t really like to see Custodians on the High Council, Tieron, despite the necessity of it. They have strange ways.’

You can talk, I thought.

‘You’ve studied the data I sent to you?’ I asked.

I’d kept my promise. I’d made facsimiles of the information Valerian had brought me and distributed it to all those I could still trust on the Council. I had little hope of countermanding Haemotalion’s cordon openly, but there was still the chance of building a coalition against it, and in any case it needed to be seen. If the next invasion was coming via those routes then we were wasting precious time in power plays when we should have been racing to prepare.

‘I did, and found it most absorbing,’ Kerapliades answered, leading me to a high curved doorway. Everything in that place was elliptical and elusive, just like its occupants. ‘In fact, that’s what I wished to speak to you about.’

He made a gesture with his bony right hand, and the door swished open. Beyond was another dome, twenty metres high and windowless. A great iron orrery clanked and wheeled inside it, driven by concentric mechanical tracks. The interior of the hemisphere glowed with lumen-points and the trails of hololith projections. It was a planetarium, of sorts – a mystical representation of physical space, enhanced, I guessed, by psychic augmentation.

I barely noticed any of that, though. Waiting for us in the centre of that infernal machine was Guilliman, alone and dressed in the ancient robes of his office. Even out of armour his aura of command was effortlessly and absurdly dominating, and I found myself dropping to one knee before I was even aware of it.

‘Chancellor,’ the primarch said in acknowledgement, then nodded at Kerapliades. ‘The Master tells me this thing originated with you.’

At first I didn’t realise what he meant, but then noticed how the planetarium had been calibrated. The hololithic lines strung out before us looked very similar to those on the image Aleya had discovered, and I recognised the eight nodes surrounding Terra at the centre.

‘I still don’t understand it,’ I said. ‘Not really.’

‘We are no longer blind, chancellor,’ said the primarch. He looked different to how he’d been before – his noble face was heavily lined now, as if rapid ageing
had somehow taken place. When I had first encountered him he had looked like a prince, full of furious energy. Now he had the grizzled aspect of a warrior-king, a monarch weighed down with understanding that was no doubt dreadful. ‘These are the eight cardinal nodes of a warp circlet around Terra. They describe the only channels safely usable for sizeable fleet movements at this point in time.’

‘And the enemy plans to use them,’ I offered, going on what Aleya had believed. ‘They will approach through them, strike at us here.’

Kerapliades shook his head. ‘It’s too late for that,’ he said, flicking a finger at the swirling diagrams circling overhead. One by one, the nodes went out, fading from red to black. Seven were lost immediately. Only one, the closest of them, remained faintly present. ‘Those worlds have already been taken, seized from us while we were blinded.’

I turned to Lord Guilliman, suddenly anxious. ‘Then why do they not push on?’ I asked. ‘They’re so close, a mere warp stage away. They’re looking right down at us – why do they wait?’

‘Because attack is not their intention,’ Guilliman replied. He turned away from the orrery and fixed me with those frigid blue eyes, and as ever I found it almost impossible to return the gaze. ‘They know I am here. They know what I intend. Now that the Astronomican burns again, they know I will launch the crusade that will liberate the stars. Time is of the essence now, for every hour we delay leads to more worlds lost, and yet time is precisely what we do not have.’

‘They’re taking those worlds, not to use as staging points, but to turn into the bars of our cage,’ said Kerapliades. ‘You see what those signals represent? They’ve done something there, used some device to shatter the warp conduits. Once they control the planets they’re making the ether go dark.’

Guilliman looked back up at the wheeling points of light. ‘Those are not the routes they need to get in, chancellor,’ he said. ‘They are the routes we need to get out. They are throttling us before we can even begin.’

I suddenly understood it. The daemonic attack – it had been to keep our attention here, to make us believe that Terra was the target, and that the enemy already had the power to assault our walls directly. But they didn’t, not yet. They still feared Guilliman, and now bent all their efforts on keeping him hemmed in, preventing the coming counter-stroke that still risked throwing their wider plans awry.

‘Then what can be done?’ I asked, looking from one to the other urgently. ‘What can be done?’

‘One world remains,’ said the primarch, his face grim. ‘While it holds out, we
have a path to the open galaxy. You see it yourself, chancellor. That world is Vorlese. When it falls, we are trapped here. The crusade will be critically delayed, and a thousand other worlds will fall before we can overcome the barrier.’

‘Then we must launch! Launch everything!’ I cursed myself then for not doing more – the need had been there for days, but as ever we had been too slow, too cautious.

‘It is already too late,’ said Guilliman, looking at me carefully. ‘Vorlese cannot hold for long enough, even if we launched our ships this very moment. We know who assails it, and there are no defences there capable of resisting them. Unless, of course, you know different?’

Of course they knew. They knew about the Chelandion. They knew about everything I had done and were merely waiting for the confession.

‘They cannot be enough,’ I murmured, suddenly realising what Valerian had travelled into. ‘They cannot possibly hold.’

‘You would have earned death for your actions, chancellor, were the Lex still in force,’ said Guilliman, breaking into that long stride of his and beckoning for me to follow. ‘But it is not, and the Council itself is now dissolved. There are forces under my command that even the gods remain unaware of, and I am anxious to show what they can do. We depart within the hour. If you still hold my father to be divine, you might pray that your Custodians are as proficient as they themselves believe, for they are now the thread on which our fate hangs.’

Everything had already been planned. Everything was already in motion. If I had needed any further proof of the Lord Guilliman’s power, here it was, and Haemotalion had been right to fear his intentions. The crusade was already under way, and any attempt to frustrate it was now entirely pointless.

‘But, lord, why tell me these things at all?’ I asked, scampering to keep up.

He never broke stride. I don’t think I ever really saw him at rest from that point onwards, for his soul was a soul of fire, voracious and dynamic, and he knew the penalty that would be paid for inaction. I guessed then that even as the Lion’s Gate was under attack he had been planning this response, though I would later discover that he had been formulating the broad strokes of it for very much longer than that.

‘Our crusades have always required the services of mortals, chancellor,’ he said by way of an answer, offering me one of those flinty half-smiles. ‘I will need a remembrancer for this, just like the old days. Consider yourself fortunate – I choose you.’
I had time to reflect on my decision during our travel within the warp. I drove myself hard, aiming to recover my full spectrum of physical movement and banish the last evidence of my injury, but even so there were still moments of unavoidable reflection.

I never doubted my choice. That is the surprising thing to me. I never doubted that I had done what I needed to. Everything on Terra prior to the Great Rift had been pushing me away from proximity to the Throne. I do not just mean my failure at the threshold, which was the most dramatic manifestation, but also the increasing distance I had felt from the Sanctum itself, from its laws and its history and its rituals. Heracleon told me my name had figured in dreams. I had no reason to doubt that now, but I, and he, could have been mistaken about what it meant, just as Tieron had said.

To leave was a kind of madness, perhaps, but the sages of our species have always known that truth and madness are close relations. I never regretted what I did then, even though I remained certain that it would be the end of my mortal existence.

My brothers of the chamber came with me out of duty, and did not share my vision. I gave them the choice to remain on the walls, but they were content to take my command. As Aleya would remind me many times afterwards, our breed were not given to flights of imagination – we required a clear sense of purpose, of rightness, and only within those strictures did we aspire to the status of demigods. I no longer think of that limitation as weakness, even though I suspect she does. We are what we are, the guardians of the flame, not its
kindlers.

The journey was as difficult as I expected. The Astronomican remained dark, and our Navigators struggled to make good headway. The span was short, such that in ordinary times even the lowliest of their breed could have made it in a single stage, but we were forced to drop into real space frequently to gain our bearings and make complex triangulations with both the physical stars and the arcane map references we still retained. I demanded much from them, just as I did from myself. One of the mutants sickened badly, and for a while his life was in the balance. I made him work. I took no pleasure in that, but the need for progress was acute.

You might ask what I expected to achieve by this. For Aleya, the answer was obvious – revenge for the wrongs done to her. Even if she did not meet the ones responsible for the destruction of her home, she would encounter those of the same Legion, and that was enough.

I had no desire for vengeance, though, and never have done. With me, the motivations were threefold. I have already alluded to the sense of rightness that I felt when considering this course of action, knowing that it formed an argument in the long debate about where our best place was within a galaxy of eternal war. Second, there was the debt of honour I had made to Aleya, who had now taken this concept up with some enthusiasm, reminding me often, I think in jest, that she had saved my life and thus had me under her obligation.

And there was a third consideration. I remembered how I had felt on that battlefield after the destruction of the greater daemon, a feat far outranking any I had achieved before. I remember how much I had wanted that feeling to continue.

I could no longer deny it to myself. The exercise of arms had become more than an intellectual pursuit, one conducted only in the furtherance of my sacred duty. I heard the old complaints made against us, that we had never experienced the war as others had, and for the first time the barbs found some purchase. For all our valour in the hidden conflicts we had always conducted, it had taken the daemon army arriving on Terra to remind us what we had once dared to measure ourselves against.

So the moral imperative was there. The great heretic philosopher of M2 Emanule Qant had said that one should act only on that maxim that one could also wish to be a universal law, a credo I had never fully understood before. Now I believed I perceived the truth of it, even in an age when all laws were eroding before our eyes and the full spectrum of morality had been subsumed into the
moribund category of duty.

Forgive these rambling thoughts. I warned you of my penchant for theology. The short answer is, of course, that I have no short answer. I only had the dictates of my soul, of which I remain certain.

Aleya thinks little of such speculation.

_You talk too much_, she signed to me once.

_Not something anyone could accuse you of_, I replied.

We broke the veil as close as we dared, knowing that speed would be of the essence. I had my armour lifted into place, I donned my helm and took Gnosis into my fist once more. The weight of it was an assurance. My brothers did the same, as did the anathema psykana. There were more of them than us, and their weaponry was more varied. Whereas we carried guardian spears only, they bore flamers, greatblades, even chainswords.

A little over forty of us, then, to contest the conquest of a world. We could not be faulted for our ambition.

As the _Chelandion_ accelerated I studied images of our inward attack run on the bridge-mounted image banks. Once past the Mandeville threshold, we powered swiftly towards the system-centre. For a long while, there was no sign of any other ship. This was not surprising — with the collapse of the Astronomican’s beacon, we assumed that warp travel had all but dried up across the Imperium, leaving our space-lanes empty.

Only when we came within visual range of the planet itself, a sapphire-and-pink orb of considerable beauty, did evidence of the enemy become apparent. There was a single battleship in low orbit, surrounded by shoals of lesser craft and a huge cloud of floating debris. I recognised the profile of the master vessel immediately — an Executor-class grand cruiser, looming in gigantic splendour, though twisted and changed by its time spent in the Eye. Its vast flanks were black, ridged with brass, bearing the octed on heavily oxidised ablative plating. Any Imperial craft had been reduced to components in that debris cloud. Aside from a phalanx of escorts, the remaining vessels looked to be landers descending on the world below in steady procession.

‘So you were right,’ I told Aleya, sitting opposite me in the lander’s crew bay.

We had no chance of engaging it directly and surviving. Even alone, an Executor was virtually a line battleship, built to survive voidwar encounters against whole squadrons of destroyers, and the _Chelandion_ was both out-powered and outgunned. We had expected that, however, and our attack plan did
not alter.

‘Signs of heavy assault on-world,’ came the clipped voice of my master of sensors, an indentured menial of our service with shaved head and eagle-sigil tabard. ‘Fighting detected across northern continental mass, considerable destruction, orbital defences in ruins. Seventy conflict sites identified by augur, more coming in.’

The escorts had already locked on to us. The Executor was beginning to turn, and I watched its forward lance begin to churn with a clot of blood-red energies. ‘Good,’ I said, studying the schematics of the ongoing invasion. ‘Less of them to encounter on board. Enact attack run, as outlined. Keep us alive for just a little while.’

We ramped up speed, and the plasma drives thundered. Across short distances I judged we had the advantage – our engines were far more advanced than the colossal power trains employed on those behemoths, even if that edge would likely only prove temporary. We took hits from the escorts – black-hulled close-attack craft with spiked ventral ridges and close-packed las-fire arrays. Macro cannon batteries began to flicker as the cruiser wallowed into closer range, sending hailstorms of shells fizzing past us.

I departed the command dais. Aleya came with me, and we joined the others on a heavy platform set back from the main arch of the bridge. The deck rocked beneath us as we were hit again, the impact stressing our forward void shielding and making the real-viewers crackle.

We ignored the lesser craft, speeding through their cordon and absorbing their punishment. The Chelandion powered straight towards the Executor, and soon I could begin to make out the detailing across the cruiser’s ancient lines. Everything had been mangled, tortured, flexed into colonnades of grotesquery. Every gun barrel was a gaping maw, every hull plate was disfigured with hammered-out eyes or claws or teeth. The black mass of its hide was mottled as though covered in a patina, the accumulation of centuries plying corrupted depths. Even its void-movements were sinister, as if crabbled by the laws of physics it suddenly and unwillingly had to obey.

The Black Legion, Aleya signed.

I looked at her. Her face was already twisted into hatred, an expression only part-hidden by her mask.

‘We will be among them soon enough,’ I said.

The volume of fire picked up. The Chelandion shuddered, hit again by a brace of well-aimed shots. I saw warnings flash up on the status of our void shields.
For the time being we had evaded the great lance weapons, but the Executor itself now swelled hugely, filling up the forward augur lenses like a cliff-face of burnished metal.

We fired back. A single shot, concentrated on a single location, high up on the cruiser’s bridge level. The technology behind that beam was far beyond anything possessed by either the enemy or our own regular armies, and a blue-white column of searing energy pierced straight through the cruiser’s shielding, blowing a ragged hole amid an explosion of released static.

It was all we needed.

‘Now,’ I commanded.

The teleport chamber blazed into cold life, flooding all of us in columns of spitting witch-light. For a split second we were nowhere, ripped from the heart of the engagement and flung into the netherworld of the warp. I heard a sound like rushing water, booming in my ears, covering an undertow that might have been screams.

Then the world of the senses crashed back into solidity around us. We rematerialised within the cruiser’s bowels. The walls were concave and serrated, as if we were in some immense black ribcage, and spiked columns soared up towards a many-tiered hammer-beam roof hanging with stalactites of iron. The metal was dank, glistening with condensation, and the inner atmosphere was as hot as a furnace. Sparse red lumens barely broke through a thick miasma that swayed and undulated with something like sentience. I could smell a range of overlapping aromas – hot metal, old blood, the rotten-fruit stench of primordial corruption.

My helm-cogitator immediately scanned through the decks, giving me a three-dimensional schema to navigate by. I could already hear brazen war-horns sounding in the depths. The distant report of cannon fire continued, indicating that the Chelandion still lived. With the Emperor’s blessing, it had hopefully now pulled clear again and run for sanctuary further out, but we had passed close by on that infiltration run and the ship had no doubt taken heavy damage.

One reading on that schema made no sense to me. It was as if the scans dropped off a cliff when trying to probe a whole section of the lower hull. Something huge was masked, cut out as if physically excised. Instinct told me that was what we had come for, and I gave the order.

We moved out, our weapons glittering in the darkness, only to find the enemy coming for us. They had reacted with predictable speed, charging down the ship’s clanging corridors to engage the boarders in their midst. They were
legionnaires, for the most part, lumbering out of every corridor-mouth in a thudding chorus of heavy bootfalls, bolters booming, chainblades revving, vox-augmitters roaring. Their black-lacquered armour glinted, a livery that sucked the meagre light into itself as if famished for it.

We swept into close-combat, Custodian and anathema psykana against heretic Legiones Astartes. My spear hurtled, trailing golden paths within the miasma. I saw Aleya tearing into them, kicking out with her armoured boot even as her blade danced. The Sisters had no daemonic aura to contest here, and so fought just as we did – warriors tempered in the furnace of physical conditioning, immune to fear, faster and stronger than all but the mightiest of our peers in the Emperor’s service.

But the foes we faced were nigh as deadly. The rawest of them were hundreds of years old, the first among those who had marched with the Warmaster in the lost age, steeped in the cruel tutelage of the Eye and now advancing under the Despoiler’s colours. They had been bloated, changed and ravaged by the gifts of their gods, made both stronger and wilder, the heralds of a new age of ruin. This was their place, and they crashed through the clouds of vapour with a swagger of assurance.

I slammed into the first of them, a thick-set champion with a tusked and bloated death mask, his lenses as red as coals and his armour draped with sheets of flayed hide. He punched his chainblade into me, and Gnosis met the lunge halfway, turning it back before the energy fields exploded in snarls of flame. I lashed out with my gauntlet, cracking into his gorget-seal, then switched my blade back to drive it under his breastplate. He was fast and he was strong, but I had ended many of his kind in hundreds of Blood Games. I knew the way they fought, I knew their doctrines and their habits, and so I thrust a final time, propelling Gnosis up into his lungs and ripping through the power pack beyond. The reactor cells, warped and corroded as they were, imploded noisily, burning him from the inside.

I cast his spasming body aside and advanced further, fighting my way out of the hall and into the warrens beyond. My brothers came with me, as did the anathema psykana. Every step became bloody and laboured. The oncoming legionnaires clogged the narrow corridors, barrelling into us and dogging our movements. I felt my muscles burn, my auranite flex under the blows, my spear shiver at every impact.

The Sisters slew with hatred in their eyes. Their speed and force came from anger now, just as it had done on Terra. They were giving themselves no quarter,
risking all just for the chance to hurt those who had hurt them. In such confined spaces they were formidable, almost elemental, able to use their lighter frames to race into gaps and pull away from danger.

We were different. We fought as we had always fought – methodically, precisely, falling into the numerology of the near future and racing ahead of mortal thought. These warriors were used to slaughter, either in the Eye against their own kind or against the mortal defenders of His realm, but we had been made to hunt them. That was perhaps the darkest of the many secrets we carried – that from the very beginning, from even before the Great Crusade itself, we had been prepared for this and engineered to surpass them. To the galaxy at large these warriors were the greatest of His created weapons, the apogee of His martial genius. We considered them only as our natural prey.

So I laid them low. I tore through them and I ripped them apart. I cracked their armour open and I pulled their flesh into ribbons. My brothers did the same, working in perfect silence, each consumed with his own study of murder. The legionnaires cursed us in tongues long dead, repeating mockery that had been old even at the time of the Siege, but we made no response, and their fell weapons ground up against our shimmering auramite blades in cascades of thrown disruptor-light.

More were arriving all the time to repel us, coagulating like cells in a bloodstream. I guessed that even greater numbers were being summoned back from the surface. There might already have been hundreds on that ship, and after a certain point those numbers would tell.

But not yet. I had the signal on my augur, and it drove me onwards. Deck by deck, corridor by gore-drenched corridor, we burned our way towards the goal.

That was the only thing that existed for us then. We were lost in that cloying dark, burrowing even deeper, going so far that soon light itself became a memory. I felt the entire structure close in around me, sensed the malign resonance of its tonnes and tonnes of corrupted metalwork, its ancient devices and its warp-infused chambers, and for a brief, heretical moment was reminded of that other catacomb, the one where I had been repelled.

But there was no threshold that could bar me here. I was out, I was free, and now vengeance slavered at my heels.
I let Valerian guide our path within that ship. All I wished to do there was cause as much damage as possible.

We took losses from the very beginning. The first of our number fell in that rib-sparred hall, caught by heavy bolter fire and sent spinning into the murk. Even once we gained the corridors we were hard hit, for those enemies were relentless. They stank of blood and they were brutally hard to down. If we had not had the Custodians with us we would have fared much worse, but even they were tested by what they fought.

It mattered little, for I had what I wished for in those moments. I could look my foe in the eye and test my blade against his. There were no duels of honour in that desperate struggle as there might have been in another age, for we only desired to inflict hurt. We ganged up on them, swamping them in those tight, claustrophobic corridors before taking them apart in combined enactments of revenge. Our relative lack of bulk was even an advantage then, as we could crowd in close, cutting at their airways and smashing their eye-lenses.

The Custodians set a punishing pace, and soon we were delving deeper, forging a path down into the engine-levels where heavy machinery thrummed and yammered. The entire ship was a haunt of semi-fused shedim, locked into the molten metal and spitting blasphemies at us as we ran. When I could, I shattered those fixtures, enjoying the shrieks as we cleaved daemon-iron from its mounting. I had no concern for my own safety, for I knew well enough we would die in that place, but every corpse we created still felt like a benediction, an offering on the altar of our long suffering. I thought of my sisters on Arraissa
when I killed. With every life I ended, I signed another name, matching the corpses to those who I still remembered.

Eventually we neared the very base of that huge vessel, down in the ballast sumps where the air was thick with carbon dioxide and the decking throbbed with enginarium-heat. Our band had dwindled under the constant counter-assault, and even one of Valerian’s chamber had been killed at last, his head smashed in by a power-fisted brute with a daemon-blade. The rest fought on after that without the merest change in demeanour – their blows remained just as metronomically perfect, neither faster nor slower, an exactitude of tick-tock slaughter.

It was only as we neared our destination, the place that Valerian had selected as the one where we would make our stand, that I felt something nag at me – a numinal drag, like a sudden flex of high-grav, slinking through the mire of semi-light. The corridors slipped by in a blurred orgy of close-packed carnage, and the drag became more pronounced, until I felt like I was heading into something at once totally new and also horribly familiar.

We finally fought our way into a high chamber with a heavy pair of saw-toothed blast doors on the far side. Valerian dismantled a legionnaire guard single-handed, spinning bodily into him before breaking his neck, while we jointly took care of the rest. Then we laid charges against the doorway, dozens of them, and blew it into sprayed fragments.

On the far side, a great cylindrical well gaped ahead of us, a circular shaft that disappeared into the body of the vessel above us and out through the lower hull below. The volume of it was colossal, over a hundred metres in diameter and far higher. When I looked down I could see straight out into the void, and the shining disc of Vorlese’s upper atmosphere glared back at us from behind a glitter of void shielding. Electric force snaked up and down the shaft, catching on feeder vanes jutting out at regular intervals. For a moment I was seized with a powerful lurch of vertigo, realising that we had raced onto a precipice over the infinite.

I looked up. Something vast was suspended above us, held tight by massive chains the diameter of Rhino transports. It was truly gigantic, a long shard of black stone that led right back into the heart of the ship, faceted like a crystal, humming and yanking against its bonds. At first I didn’t understand what it was, only that it was so big that half the entire cruiser must have been hollowed out in order to carry it.

Then I suddenly knew why I felt the way I did. Perhaps no other mortal would
have experienced quite the same sensation, for that thing, that immense rod of dark stone, was the same as I was. It was a null. A blank. A sink and a dissipater of psychic force. I was a lone individual, capable of projecting my unique repellence only a few metres – this thing must have had the power to deny the warp over a vast range.

I didn’t fully understand what purpose that could serve, but I could begin to make a guess. This ship had come halfway across the galaxy bearing this null cargo, retrofitted purely in order to carry it, racing far ahead of the great armies of the Despoiler in order to bring it into position here. From the gap in the cruiser’s hull I could even see the carnage wrought below us on the planet’s surface – a vast scar cut into the pristine terrain, hundreds of square kilometres burned and secured in preparation for what was to come.

It would launch. The shard would be hurled down at the world below. And when it did, this system would go dark. Already I could sense an enormous build up of power around us, and saw red marker lights race down the long shaft to the aperture at the hull’s edge.

_The chains!_ I signed, frantically, seeing that the great fixings where the shackles met the inner wall would soon blow, loosing the shard to plunge planetwards.

The concave surface of the shaft was riddled with stairways and access platforms, latticing the walls all the way up. Above us was the first of many anchor-points for the chains, swollen into a huge bulkhead that jutted far out into the emptiness. I raced up the nearest stairwell, a rust-thick ladder that wound its way up within a metal cage, Reva hard on my heels.

Just as I got close to the summit, the first bolter fire ricocheted in, smashing through the rotting steelwork and smacking hard into the wall sections beyond. More shots rained down, and I glimpsed legionnaires emerging from access points above us, below us, across the far side of the shaft. Motorised gantries began to creak across the gulf, ready to link the two sides up, and more kill-squads clattered across them, poised to throw themselves right into us.

I kept going, slipping and stumbling, my hands struggling to grip the rungs as the bolt-shells ripped past. We were horribly exposed, open to ranged fire, and once the gantries slammed home the enemy would be free to assault directly. There was almost no cover, just the webs of scaffolding and access ladders, which would do little against fury such as theirs.

I reached the bulkhead, hauled myself through a wide access port and heaved up onto its summit, a flat plane of weathered adamantium no more than ten metres across. Before me stood the chain’s anchorage, a swollen tangle of
rockcrete the size of a Land Raider that pinned the first of those enormous great links to the inner wall of the shaft.

Reva emerged beside me, racing across to the bulkhead’s perimeter, firing all the time from her bolt pistol. I took the last of my melta charges and slammed them against the mooring’s bolt mechanism even as the warning klaxons sounded for its release.

Then I was hit on the shoulder, thrown to the floor and dragged along by the momentum. I had a brief impression of the whirling abyss below, and saw the bright disc of Vorlese blurry at the bottom of the shaft, before a firm gauntlet seized me and hauled me back. I found myself staring up at Valerian’s helm for a brief moment, then he vaulted past, firing bolts from his guardian spear and shielding me from further hits.

My melta charges blew in sequence, fusing the massive links to their housing in a sequential burst of roaring plasma. Runes flashing over the arcane machinery suddenly flicked to red, and the heavy chain went taut, kicking out sparks and shaking the entire bulkhead platform. By then others of us had made it to the same vantage, and we clustered there together, Custodians and Sisters alike, firing into the oncoming legionnaires and using what scant cover we could to shield ourselves from the storm of incoming shells.

From below, from where we had emerged, I heard the clang of fresh fighting breaking out – eight of my sisters and two of Valerian’s chamber had remained behind to hold the doorway, and now fought back desperately against the charge from the corridors beyond. More projectiles thudded into the metalwork around us, detonating in splinter-bursts and punching clouds of powderised rockcrete high into the air.

I crouched down, keeping my blade in one hand while I reached for my pistol. Valerian stood beside me then, his heavier armour absorbing hits that would have pulverised mine. Even as I opened fire I could hear the muffled cries of my sisters as they were cut down one by one, the only sound that had passed their lips since the Vow. I saw a Custodian hammered back by a whole welter of heavy impacts, his battleplate bludgeoned into bloody craters and his spear shattered.

The chain still held taut. For as long as we held that bulwark, the shard could not release. I watched the tortured links stretch and spark afresh, straining against the melted armature and opening cracks up in the rockcrete. The mooring locked fast. It would need to be cut loose at close range now before they could complete the launch, and our enemy knew it.
I pushed my back into the charred mass of melted ironwork, firing steadily at the legionnaires who trundled to engage us. We were sitting targets where we were, hemmed in against the bulkhead’s outcrop, our ammunition running down rapidly and our armour already dinked and scored. There were so many of them now, pouring out of every opening, their red lenses glowing amid dark helms, their cursed language echoing against the soaring adamantium walls.

The first of them reached the end of the looming gantries and leapt in among us. Valerian met him with his spear, slicing him almost clean in two then kicking him over the edge. More piled in after that, and I switched back to hauling my blade two-handed.

We were dying. There were fewer than twenty of us left by then, clustered around that burned-out mooring, our backs to one another and fighting hard. Dozens more legionnaires crashed down from the fully extended gantries, and beyond them came dozens more – the tide was never-ending, a storm surge that would overwhelm us sooner or later, no matter how many of them we slew first.

And then came the strangest thing of all. As I swung my greatblade to meet the next challenge, I heard Valerian chuckling softly. He had already dispatched another legionnaire and was wading straight into another. I had never heard him laugh before. Even as I locked blades with my own enemy, I found the whole thing strikingly surreal.

‘Hold fast, anathema,’ he told me, his spear whirling around him in those glorious golden parabolas. ‘This is where it ends. Let us make it a stand for the ages.’

He was elated. I could hear the battle-joy in his voice. Everything I had thought about him was wrong, it turned out – he was capable of moving beyond himself, of escaping that infernal tomb on Terra and becoming so much more.

This was a new age, I thought then. We had lived to see it dawn, and had fought for its survival. Death in that cause was not a tragedy; it was a privilege.

So I spoke. I did it. What use were vows then? They had never helped me before.

‘By His will alone,’ I said out loud, fighting hard, relishing my final words as they slipped from my lips.
Let me tell you what manner of commander the Imperium now had.

The safest course of action, once we had burned through the warp into the Vorlese System, would have been to destroy the enemy fleet instantly. We had the guns for it, and we knew what its purpose was. As we emerged into orbit and saw that ruinous squadron at geostation over the cleared site below I fully expected the lances to be ignited.

That’s not what he did, though.

‘If they live yet, they deserve more than martyrdom,’ he said, making ready to lead the first of many boarding parties into the grand cruiser.

And so he went into combat himself, a primarch leading his own force of Space Marines, the like and profile of which I had never seen before. Our battleships scattered the enemy escorts and zeroed their mighty cannons onto the main prize. Once the grand cruiser’s shields were crippled, hundreds of them teleported into contact, sweeping through that corrupt old hulk like a storm wind and scouring it down to the metal. Their orders were to seize the vessel and retrieve any of our own who still survived within it.

I understood then why so many would follow this leader. You may have heard of his reputation for calculation and cold strategic mastery, but that only tells part of the story. In an inhumane age, he reminded us of what we had lost.

I was permitted to take a shuttle over once the enemy ship had been secured and the worst of the fighting was done. I never wish to find myself in such a place again – every rivet of it was sickening, resonant with the same latent horror that the daemons had brought to us on Terra. I had to cover my mouth as I
was escorted down through those dark, humid corridors, choosing not to look into the many chambers that we passed lest I see something that would turn my mind.

Guilliman wanted me to see the site of the final battle for myself. He wanted me to see the great shaft, and the remnants of that pylon hanging from its heavy chains, just so it would be clear how close we had come. Had the device been deployed, warp transit through the Vorlese node would have been impossible, crippling the crusade before it could have begun and delaying it for years.

At that stage we did not fully understand how they were able to do it, and the shard’s origins would only be discovered later. For aeons, it turned out, these objects had been embedded in the soils of Cadia, part of a poorly understood network that had held the Gate open since time immemorial. The Despoiler’s seizure of that world had finally destroyed its great pylons, allowing the Eye to spill at last from its boundaries and infect half the galaxy. Only splinters of those original sentinels were recovered, mere fragments of the occult nexus that had once existed to hem the tides back. They were taken from Cadia, tempered on dark forges, bound by fell sorceries and augmented in blood-soaked rites until their original power was twisted into that of pure ether-destruction. Just one such shard was now capable of extinguishing the warp’s touch from an entire planetary system. And if that system lay at the centre of a warp conduit, then the conduit was lost too.

There was a dark irony to that. For so long we had benefitted from the esoteric properties of the Cadian pylons to keep our enemies restricted. Now, having burst his bonds, the Despoiler had turned the wreckage of his old cage into weapons.

Of course, back then I knew nothing of that, and assumed we had merely stumbled on some arcane instrument of unknown provenance. As I gazed up the mighty well towards the suspended splinter of dark stone, though, I could sense the wrongness of it, as if it were sucking all life and hope into itself. I remembered how I had felt when Aleya had first been brought to me, and perceived the resemblance.

I do not truly understand that repulsion, even now. The warp was the source of so much anguish for us, and yet its absence generated perhaps the greatest abhorrence of all. I suppose that is the tragedy of our kind – we are like moths to the candle, bound inextricably to the thing that destroys us. I see no solution to that riddle, and wonder often if He ever truly did either.

Perhaps the Custodians know more than we do. If so, of course, they would
never speak of it. They have changed in some ways, but many things remain the same.

I did not expect to lay eyes on Valerian again. In the event, though, I was surprised. He lived, as did two others, including the anathema psykana who had come with him to see me. The captain of Guilliman’s Space Marines told me that they had been discovered still standing, their bodies run through with wounds, their armour shattered, but they were still fighting. By the time I arrived at the site, perched high up inside the curving wall of that abyss, the medicae teams were already taking them away. The piles of bodies around the bulkhead and the smashed ruins of the rockcrete beyond were testament to their extraordinary resilience.

I could not share any words with him, though – he was unconscious, his ravaged face hidden behind a rebreather and his broken limbs covered in metal struts. His black cloak had been burned away, leaving him only with his battleplate of gold. Even in that comatose state, I thought how much more of a warrior that made him look – less of a hieratic guardian of the Palace, more like the Adeptus Astartes. Perhaps they would do away with those black robes now – I think they’d earned the right to cast them off.

The Sister of Silence was similarly wounded, as was the one other living Custodian. They were all borne away reverently, and as they were taken the power in the cylindrical chamber was finally drained down, ending the threat that the shard posed. Their true victory had been more profound than that, however, for it was clear that no others could have hoped to have held that ground for so long under such sustained attack. More eloquently than any argument in the Council, that defiance had made the case, and against all my pessimism, the effects of Dissolution came about in the end. In Council they would call it the Vorlese Precedent, the principle of deploying the Custodian Guard for those rare actions where their unique talents could best be employed and where no others could serve. They like to give these things such names. It makes them feel, I suppose, that they still have control.

The wider battle was not yet over, of course. Hard fighting lay ahead to recover the planet below and secure it against further assault. The enemy had stretched himself to the limit to strike at us so close, but we could not be sure that another host would not come on the heels of the first, and so Guilliman ordered a steady stream of reinforcements to join us over the coming days. Vorlese would be made into a fortress, one through which hundreds of warships would soon pass.
We had lost one great sentinel world; soon another would rise to take its place.

I observed what I could of those preparations, unsure exactly of how the old remembrancers had done things and feeling far too old to be a good example of the breed. In my mind’s eye the great chroniclers of the past had always been younger, full of a dynamism that I had never really possessed. By the time we broke the veil back to Terra, however, I had data-slates full of material, all of which I diligently compiled into my account and placed in the archives.

This is what you are reading now, of course, supplemented by the oral testimony of others. I trust that it will be found useful, even as the Indomitus Crusade burns its way through the stars and war kindles like never before. So much relies on this, and our survival as a species still hangs in the balance. I do not truly know whether Guilliman is the saviour many think him to be, but I remain uniquely fortunate to have met him, even for that briefest of times.

In the event, that short excursion was my one and only experience of such service. I was not strong enough for the rigours of a full-scale campaign, and respectfully declined the offer of a second posting as remembrancer. Terra was and always had been my true home, for all its insanity and degradation.

More than that, though, I realised I had been distracted by all this for too long, lost in my old roles but without my old powers. All things change, and all things fade, and to fight against the waning of that light would have been hubris, not defiance. The Council of High Lords would remain in place, albeit with somewhat altered personnel and much reduced power, and someone needed to massage their egos and corral them into line.

Not me, you understand. The new cancellarius, as you will no doubt know, was Jek, and I could not have thought of anyone more suited to the task. I flatter myself she had had a first-class tutelage, though I suspect that in due course she will leave me far behind. In the interim, I offer what advice I can, hoping I do not overstep my bounds, and am spending more and more time with the collections of finery in my chambers. They allowed me to keep that room as it was, and I find the artefacts a comfort. I made it to exhibit the best of us, and I would not want some officious scholiast breaking it up and sending the vases to the furnace.

I feel age creeping up on me now. I will not undergo yet more rejuve treatments, for I suspect that this galaxy is becoming something I will not recognise soon. Darker years lie ahead, just as they always have, and stronger souls will be needed to face them.

But I was blessed to witness those days, despite their horror. I was blessed to
see the primarch return, and the Adeptus Custodes rise up from their long vigil to bring vengeance to the far reaches of the galaxy.

For so long I had doubted my worth, never shaking off the faint drag of shame that had dogged me since childhood, but I could look back now on my part in that great change and feel some satisfaction. They would make a difference now.

Valerian is among them, I believe, as is Aleya. Somewhere out in the void they are slaying, he with equanimity, she with that ever-burning anger. Perhaps they even serve together. I hope I will see them again before the end, though I am reconciled to the fact that I will probably not.

Things will unfold as they will. Experience has made me more accepting of that.

I no longer entertain the darkest of thoughts. I have learned, I think, to trust a little more. I have learned to let things go.

Most of all, I no longer doubt.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Chris Wraight** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the Primarchs novel *Leman Russ: The Great Wolf*, the novellas *Brotherhood of the Storm* and *Wolf King*, and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Inquisition novel *The Carrion Throne* and the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, as well as the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*. For Space Marine Battles, he has written the novels *Wrath of Iron* and *War of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.
An extract from *The Horusian Wars: Resurrection.*
The dust wind sang as it blew through the ranks of silent Titans. Cables rattled against armour plates, and war banners rippled and snapped in the rising gale. Beyond the dust clouds the last light of the sun was fading to an ochre bruise.

Koleg paused in the shadow of a Battle Titan and looked up. The machine towered into the billowing dust. Vast guns jutted from its shoulders and hung in place of arms. A web of chains bound it to the ground. Koleg could see red beacon lights winking high on the Titan’s carapace. The wind gusted and the chains creaked as the god-machine flexed against its bindings. Koleg lowered his gaze. The shadows of more Titans hung against the curtains of dust. Machines from three Legions had come to the muster, and now stood on the plains as the storms rolled in. Beyond the god-machines, taller than any of them, stood the Reliquary Tower. Generations of pilgrims had raised its walls, block by block, until it stood higher than the mountains that rose behind it. A statue of a robed and haloed woman capped the tower’s top, sword reaching up to the shrouded sky. The fires burning in the statue’s eyes blinked as the murk rippled across its face.

‘Halt and identify!’

Koleg turned at the sound of the voice. Ten figures closed on him, spears levelled over the top of linked tower shields. Lightning crackled around the spear tips. Eye slits glowed in closed helms. Koleg glanced at them, as his mask-visor detected the active weapons and blinked to crimson, outlining each of the warriors in amber.

*Secutarii*, thought Koleg, *the guardian companions of the Titan Legions*.

He nodded at them.

‘Identify,’ came the voice from the warrior at the centre of the shield-wall. Static growled against the wind as a speaker amplified the words. ‘You have ten
seconds to comply.’

Koleg nodded again, and raised his hand, palm up. The lightning wreathing the spear tips crackled. He tapped the ring on his second finger, and a cone of light leapt from his hand. The stylised ‘I’ of the Inquisition rotated in the blue glow, glittering as its image caught the dust blowing through the projection. The lightning vanished from around the spear tips and the shield wall parted. One of the warriors stepped forward, silver weave cloak snapping in the gusting air.

‘Your pardon,’ said the secutarius. ‘You were not logged as having crossed the security cordon.’

Koleg snapped off the projection. He stood, hands in the pockets of his storm coat.

‘No,’ he said.

Koleg’s eyes twitched up. Shapes were descending through the dust-covered sky, lights blinking on tails and wing tips. His visor zoomed, picking out the silhouettes of the aircraft in glowing amber lines. A booming roar split the air as the chained Titans sounded their warhorns in greeting. Koleg felt the wind shear as the wall of sound punched through the rising gale.

Koleg watched the shuttles and gunships sweep low overhead. He clenched his jaw and his vox connection buzzed to life in his ear. He paused, listening to the ping and clatter as encryption cyphers activated.

‘This is Sentinel,’ he said. ‘The last pilgrim has arrived.’

‘We hear you,’ came the reply. ‘Join us.’

‘Acknowledged,’ said Koleg, and the vox-link clicked to silence. Above him the gunships were banking to circle above the ground at the Reliquary Tower’s base. One of the shuttles slid to a halt in mid-air, attitudinal thrusters burning orange to violet. Koleg began to walk towards the landing field, coat snapping in the wind. Dust lightning cracked in the gloom above the Titans’ backs. Arcs of white light ran down the nearest god-machine.

‘You should find cover, sir,’ called the secutarii alpha from behind him. ‘The storm’s coming.’

Koleg kept walking.

Secutarii Hoplite Alpha-34-Antimon watched the man walk into the clouds of dust. The systems in his helm cycled and tracked the man’s body heat for several seconds. The man was leaning into the wind, hands in pockets, movements purposeful but not hurried. He might have been out for a stroll rather than moving inside a vermillion-grade security cordon on a planet being used to
muster a crusade-strength force. Alpha-34-Antimon did not like that; it was against the necessary order of things. The universe existed in divisions of type and authority. The nameless man in the storm coat should have been subject to the power of a greater person, and so on, until the line of authority reached the Omnissiah Incarnate himself. He should not be able to simply walk beneath sacred war engines without permission or care. He should not have been able to answer Alpha-34-Antimon’s challenge with silence.

He could, though. It was his right. He was under the protection of one of the inquisitors who were gathering in the Reliquary Tower, and that meant that he fell under no other authority.

The Inquisition was the left hand of the Emperor, a law utterly unto itself and subject to no limit or check on its authority. It stood apart, an exception to the order that bound every part of the Imperium. Its members, and by extension their servants, could do what they wanted in whatever way they wanted. If he was being honest, that lack of definition and limit bothered Alpha-34-Antimon. He had never seen an inquisitor, but he could not shed the distrust that clung to the thought of them.

In the distance the man in the storm coat was blurring behind the veil of dust. Alpha-34-Antimon turned away, and allowed his emotion-regulation implants to strip away the traces of annoyance from his thoughts.

<Unit resume patrol pattern chi-45.> The binaric command clattered across the vox-link, and the rest of the unit shifted into a diamond. He took his position amongst them, spear tilted up towards the sky. <Progress,> he signalled, and the unit walked out of the shadow of the Titan.

The wind beat against Alpha-34-Antimon’s shield. The pistons in his left arm clenched against the blows. He was not comfortable. The connection to the other secutarii units nearby was fuzzing his nerves. That was unusual. There were several hundred secutarii patrolling around the feet of the Titans. The data-link between the dispersed units passed through the god-machines, and should have been good for 21,456 kilometres in these conditions. It wasn’t though; the connection was as good as non-existent.

Alpha-34-Antimon felt a sudden surge of isolation batter his emotion-regulators.

Ball lightning flashed and rolled across the shoulders of the nearest Battle Titan. The wind was strengthening. Dust was all around the secutarii now, thick and ochre, rattling against armour plates and shields. The silhouette of another Titan emerged briefly in front of them before sinking behind the ochre veil.
Static popped across Alpha-34-Antimon’s sight as his vision enhancers fought against the rushing gloom.

They had one more circuit to make before they withdrew to shelter. After that the full force of the storm would break, and nothing except the god-machines and the Sisters of Battle would remain outside.

He was forcing himself forward against the wind when something flashed in front of him: a brief fizz of brightness, and a shadow. He stopped, eye lenses whirring as they tried to focus on the rolling haze. The rest of the squad had halted with him, and he could feel their action queries queuing at the edge of the squad data-link.

<Ground level electro-discharge,> said the squad’s beta.

Alpha-34-Antimon did not reply. The flash could have been a static arc from the dust, but there had been the shadow, and for an instant he had thought it a figure standing in the dust veil, like a smudge of ink on cloth. He waited.

Nothing moved.

After eighteen seconds he signalled the rest of the squad and began to move. The data-link to the other secutarii in this area was still down. If he could not get a clear connection soon, he would have to–

<There!> the binaric cry snapped out.

And there it was again, a mass of tiny blue arcs snapping around a dark smudge in the sand storm. His eyes tried to zoom, but kept sliding off the shape as though it was not there.

<Diamond formation,> he signalled, <ready spears, fields to active.>

Light wreathed the tips of spears as the squad slid into formation. Their shields touched. The air around them shimmered. The swirling dust buffeted against the edge of impedance fields. Alpha-34-Antimon stood at the tip of the diamond, his own spear levelled at the blur of static. He could not tell how far away it was; it seemed to be both still and closing fast.

<Anomaly…>

<Anomaly…>

<Anomaly…> the sensor data blinked. He fired a priority alert signal into the data-link. It vanished into nothing.

‘Halt and identify!’ His voice roared from the speaker mounted on his chest. The wind caught the challenge and spun it away.

<Ready discharge,> he linked to the squad. The energy around the spear tips began to spiral.

A second spark-wreathed shadow appeared next to the first, then a third, then a
fourth. The rational machine part of Alpha-34-Antimon had time to recognise the humanoid outlines running against the wind, and that they were not in the distance but just a few paces away.

<Fire!> he commanded. Actinic light whipped from the tips of the spears. The figures running from the storm leapt, legs bunching beneath them, strips of frayed cloth streaming behind them. Energy burned through the dust cloud, but the ragged figures were not there. Alpha-34-Antimon looked up as a figure clad in tatters leapt through the air above him. He had an instant to catch the impression of a mask of stitched cloth with torn holes for eyes. Then the attacker’s feet struck him in the chest.

His armour cracked under the force of impact. He was falling, the ragged figure descending with him. Gears in Alpha-34-Antimon’s legs screamed as they tried to keep him upright. He hit the ground. Distortion burst across his sight. The rag-swathed figure was above him, a crystal punch-blade raised to strike. Alpha-34-Antimon twisted and began to rise. The ragged figure dived sideways, rolling and stabbing back at Alpha-34-Antimon as he straightened. The punch-blade touched his impedance field in a spray of sparks. He brought his tower shield up.

Binaric screams filled Alpha-34-Antimon’s data inputs. Systems and organs in his torso were leaking blood and oil. Around him the dust wind blurred with the shadows of figures stabbing, falling, dying. His squad was dying. He could feel their data presences blinking out in his awareness.

<Attack under way, maximum threat alert,> he shouted into the data-link. Silence screamed back at him. The figure before him pivoted and backhanded its punch-blade into the shield. Alpha-34-Antimon stabbed his spear forward, but his enemy was gone, spinning wide and lashing out again and again. Lightning flared from the tower shield. Alpha-34-Antimon bunched his muscles and pistons and rammed his shield forward as the next blow fell. The figure staggered, seemed to falter, and Alpha-34-Antimon triggered the charge in his spear. He lunged.

The masked figure rolled forward as fluid and fast as water, and the punch-dagger cut through the armour of Alpha-34-Antimon’s right arm just behind his spear hand.

All sensation vanished. Silence held him. The swirl of dust around him rolled back, and he realised he must have fallen backwards onto the ground. The ochre clouds were receding down a dark tunnel.

Weak and treacherous flesh, he thought, and then those thoughts were a fading echo following him down into oblivion.
It took five minutes for the neurotoxins to finally silence his heart. The cognitive implants in his skull stopped functioning ten seconds later. By that time the rest of his squad lay beside him, their bodies already gathering shrouds of dust. Their killers had passed on, their ragged shapes blurring into the wind as they ran beneath the shadows of the chained Titans. Behind them the wind front swept in like the breath of a wrathful god.

Cleander von Castellan watched the scene slide across the viewport, and took a gulp of wine from his goblet. ‘Augment view, ship identification and ground atmospheric readouts.’

‘Compliance,’ droned one of the servitors wired into the machines which ran along the back of the viewing platform. Cleander waited, listening to the murmur of gears turning.

The dust storms of Ero moved across its face like spirals of dirty spun sugar. Clouds trailed from the main mass of each storm, reaching back across the deserts to the margins of the oceans. Beside the swirls of cloud even the city sprawls and ocean platforms seemed insignificant, small totems of mankind’s hubris in the face of nature. Star ships hung above the planet, winking with reflected light from Ero’s young, bright sun. There were hundreds, and even as Cleander watched, another constellation of vessels rose above the horizon. At this distance even the macro haulers were just pinprick glimmers against the black.

He took another drink, and let the heat of the wine spread down his throat. The smell of fire spice filled his nose. It was not a good vintage. The harmonies of alcohol, fruit and spice were poorly balanced, and the taste was as crude as it was potent. He enjoyed it though, maybe because of its unapologetic lack of refinement. It was simply what it was. With every year added to his life he found that he liked things which were straightforward more and more, and also found that they were increasingly difficult to source. The situation beyond the viewport was one example of something that was far from simple.

‘Greetings and lies to all who have eyes,’ he sang into his glass. ‘Farewells and good wishes to all who give kisses…’

Holo-projectors flickered to life beneath the viewport. Luminous green data spread across the image of the planet and high orbit. The names of the warships came first, flashing in rings around the specks of light that were each vessel: Lord Absolute, Fire Child, Blade of the Light Eternal, Last Son of the Sword, Rebuke Eternal. On and on went the titles, each as struttingly aggressive as the
last.

Cleander snorted to himself. There was something crass about having to scream the nature of such vessels so bluntly, as though kilometres of armour and the ability to reduce cities to fused glass were not indication enough that these were warrior queens of the void.

Forty-seven ships of war lay in this portion of Ero’s orbit alone. Another fifty-two hung out of sight above the planet’s other hemisphere, and more would be arriving from the system edge over the coming days. That was without the macro transports and bulk haulers, which hung beside the warships in shoals. Regiments of soldiers, maniples of Titans, companies of Space Marines – all coming together to save this corner of space from cataclysm. That, at least, was what most of the commanders of those forces would say. From where Cleander sat, the view was rather different.

‘Enough fire to burn the stars from their settings,’ he muttered to himself.

‘You should be on the bridge,’ said Viola from behind him. He did not bother to turn and look, even though he had not heard her enter the observation gallery.

‘The conclave has not begun,’ he said, and took another sip of wine. ‘Koleg signalled that the last shuttle was just touching down. There’s time yet before I need to stand by the helm and look commanding.’ He frowned as his eye found the edge of one of the largest dust storms. Atmospheric data scrolled beside trace arcs highlighting wind currents and trajectories. ‘Magnify feed on the operational area,’ he said.

Another murmur of gears and a square of hololight formed over a section of the planet. The image inside the square fizzed to monochrome green and then magnified. A curve of mountains marched around a wide plateau. The edge of the storm was already pouring into the bowl formed by the highlands, filling it like water pouring into cupped hands. The image magnified further, blinking in time with the click of the projectors. Tiny shapes began to form and then grew in clarity.

The Reliquary Tower rose from the centre of the image, its lower bastions already lost beneath the leading edge of the dust clouds. Titans encircled it, their vast size made small by distance, and blurred by the folds of dust. Beyond the mountains, he could see the edge of the tent and prefab cities that the Departamento Munitorum had created for the millions of troops and stores that had come to Ero. The camps extended across the scrublands of both continents and grew in size and population with every turn of the planet. In the dry language of the Administratum it was ‘a Primary Grade Mustering – subtype
Gamma”, but every man and woman who had answered its call knew what it truly was: the birth of a crusade.

‘We should launch the gunships now,’ said Viola.

Cleander glanced over his shoulder at her. His sister’s face was impassive, her eyes still and fixed on the port and holo-projection. Long, ivory hair hung down the back of her red dress coat. The silk of the cravat around her neck matched her white hair, and the gold thread of her waistcoat caught the light as she turned slightly, the stitched patterns gleaming briefly. She was two decades his junior, young by the long lives of their dynasty, but her poise and control made her seem the senior whenever the pair appeared together – at least, that was what Cleander had always thought.

‘You chose to wear your sword,’ he said nodding at the brass hilt resting beneath her left hand. Her face twitched and her left eye briefly flashed chrome. She was watching some other stream of data from one of the ship’s systems through the subtle augmetic.

‘Launching squadron out of port launch bay Juno,’ she said. Cleander saw a trio of runes flash at the side of his display as three of the Dionysia’s brood of gunships entered the orbital sphere. Viola glanced behind her to where Kynortas would be waiting dutifully in the shadows. ‘Call the household cohorts to full readiness, and set alert condition throughout the ship.’

The master of arms bowed his head and withdrew, his movements somehow silent despite the bulk of his gilded pressure armour. Cleander watched him leave. Ever steady, ever loyal Kynortas knew better than to wait for Cleander to confirm the order. Cleander von Castellan was the head of the dynasty, the master of this ship and paymaster of every one of the souls that served on her. He was the absolute lord of this domain, but Viola was the power around which that domain turned. Every line of credit, store-master, informer network and trade contact was hers.

‘So your thought was less of a thought, and more you telling me about something you had already ordered,’ he said.

Her left eye cleared, and she glanced at him. The emotion in her eyes was somewhere between contempt and frustration.

‘You should prepare,’ she said, and began to pivot on her heels.

‘The gunships need to keep above the atmosphere,’ he said. ‘Wind speed and particle density will strip them down to their engine blocks if they hold station in the storm.’ Viola paused and looked at him, eyebrow arched. ‘And of course you have already issued that order,’ he said.
He looked back at the projection and porthole, and rubbed his eyes. ‘This is getting more complicated by the day, and it’s not yet even begun. There is enough materiel here to kill a civilisation, and enough power and influence to order it done. And here we are… Any one of those ships could hammer us to gas and slag if it chose. I am reading one hundred and four near-atmosphere patrols. Our credentials have been demanded and checked fifteen times since I started talking, and you know that if any one of them failed we would find out what it’s like to be a lone ship facing a battlefleet. We are insects playing with the anger of giants.’

He took another swallow of wine, and smacked his lips. Viola frowned, eyes flicking to the goblet and then away.

‘Haven’t you had enough?’

Cleander snorted. She was right of course. What they were about to do needed a clear head. Not for the first time, he was glad that Viola was there to be what he could not be. He wondered what the fate of his family would have been if the two decades that separated them had been reversed, and she had been the elder. Would he have made the same mistakes without the weight and privilege of being the head of the family? He doubted it. The fortune of their forebears would have remained tied to the solidity of earth and stone. The Dionysia would have wandered the void at the command of another master. He would not have seen the light of weeping stars, or held the wealth of dead empires in his hands. And he would not now be preparing to do something very ill-advised.

He swallowed the last of the wine and stood, shrugging into his dress coat as he turned from the view.

‘All right,’ he breathed out, and reached down to pick up his own sword from where it leant against the side of the chair. He unwound the sword belt from the scabbard and fastened it around his waist. He rolled his shoulders, feeling the familiar weight of both weapon and coat settle. Reflexively he shifted the eyepatch over his left eye socket, and began to walk towards the door. ‘All right, let’s start this dance.’

Viola raised an eyebrow and then fell in at his side.

The sin-marked warrior looked up at the stone face of the saint, and felt tears she could not shed come to her eyes. Saint Aspira, Saviour of a Hundred Stars, towered above, arms spread as though in peace and victory, the folds of her cloak falling away from sculpted armour plates in translucent folds of marble. Golden rays haloed above the saint’s head. Each blade of metal hung on hair-thin
wires, so that they seemed to float like spears of frozen sunlight. The tip of the statue’s raised sword almost touched the apex of the great dome above. Gilded eagles spiralled through painted storm clouds on that curved ceiling, lightning clasped in their claws. The saint’s eyes looked down from beneath the raised blade, unblinking in a stone face of perfect, holy serenity. Beneath that gaze the penitent warrior knelt, and bowed her head.

*I am broken,* Severita thought. *I am a stain on existence. I should not exist. I should not be here.*

Around her the space extended away to meet the columns which encircled the statue-capped tomb. Bronze candelabras rose from the tiled floor like trees, their branches blazing with flame. Black prayer pennants hung from the edge of the walkway which ran around the dome’s base. Slender figures stood on that walkway, as unmoving as statues, their crimson armour catching the stray threads of candlelight. Severita had seen those red sentinels as soon as she had entered, and had felt their eyes touch her as she had crossed to offer prayer to the Saint. She could feel the judgement of their eyes as though their gaze burned the hessian of her robe from the sleeveless bodyglove beneath, and sliced through her brand-scarred skin to open her soul to bleed onto the black mirror of the floor.

‘Sacred Master of Mankind, forgive my presence,’ she whispered, bowing her head. ‘Do not withhold punishment from this, your failed servant. Exalted mistress, who walked the path of swords and ashes, may my deeds wash clean the stain of my existence. Great saints who have shown the way, please—’

‘Severita…’ The voice was soft, but its gentle force was enough to pull her out of her deepening pool of prayer. She held her eyes closed for a second, adding the incomplete litany to the tally of her sins that looped without cease through her thoughts.

She looked up, and the cowl fell back from her head to show the henna-stained ‘X’ that divided her face into quarters. Josef looked down at her. He wore the off-white robes of a preacher, the hood thrown back from his heavy face. Green eyes glittered from beneath bushy eyebrows. Tufts of steel grey hair circled his bare scalp and ran down his cheekbones. Mountain ranges of fat and muscle shifted as he raised a hand as though in casual greeting. He looked more like a labour boss poured into vestments than he did a priest.

‘The last of them is about to arrive. We should be with Covenant,’ he said, his voice a soft rumble. He glanced up at the shrine, then bowed his head. ‘Your forgiveness for interrupting your prayers.’
'I will add it to my chain of penance,' she said, and rose, bowing to the statue of the saint for a long moment before she backed away and turned. Josef gave a shorter bow, but she could feel the frown on his face.

‘It is for the Emperor to burden us, not ourselves,’ he said.

‘I bear no burden that I have not earned,’ she said, coldly.

He gave a low snort but did not reply. Severita’s eyes swept the chamber, suddenly aware that the stillness she had felt during her brief devotion was not reality. Hundreds of figures moved around the chamber edge, flowing around the pillars in tight groups.

These were the inquisitors and their entourages. There was a towering man in layers of black velvet, face hidden by a checked executioner’s hood, bending to speak to a pair of twins in form-hugging leather bodygloves. Here was a woman in battered scale armour sweeping along at the head of six cloaked figures who scuttled on chrome pincers. Beside them were others, some surrounded by throngs of retainers like courtiers come to the command of their king. Except that no single power beneath the God-Emperor could command these men and women. Their power was absolute, unchecked by anything except each other, and limited only by their own choices. Covenant had said that forty-one of his peers had answered the call to conclave, and that this would be the greatest gathering of inquisitors in the Segmentum Tempestus for a century. Severita had only seen one inquisitor in her life before this moment, and that was the man who she served in penance. To stand in the presence of so many souls who stood one step below the God-Emperor was almost overwhelming.

She watched the throng for a moment, marking the way they moved, the way they watched each other in turn. Suspicion and tension danced in the spaces between groups, and flickered in their glances. Beyond them, standing in crimson-clad stillness, were the Battle Sisters of the Bloody Rose. Their faces were bare, expressions fixed beneath dark hair. Eagle tattoos and the stylised rose of the order marked their cheeks. That same rose gleamed in silver and gold on the red lacquer of their armour. Arcs of oiled machinery haloed their heads and clamped close over their ears. Tiny purity seals dotted the blunt metal, showing where each of the skull-locks had been checked and blessed. The Order of the Bloody Rose had agreed to host this conclave of inquisitors, and to guarantee the safety of all those present, but while they watched over the gathering they would not be allowed to hear what was discussed, or know the secrets that would be spoken between the servants of the Holy Ordos. Every one of the Battle Sisters within the Reliquary Tower wore skull clamps that allowed
them to hear only the vox security channels. To do otherwise would have meant every Battle Sister present being put to the test, and cleansed by mind-blanking or bolt shell. The Imperium could not afford to waste such warriors. Not now. Not with the light of hell swallowing the stars in the sky above this and hundreds of other worlds.

‘This makes you uncomfortable,’ said Josef.
‘What is there to take comfort from in what we are doing?’ she said, turning to look at his wide face. His eyes were steady.
‘I did not mean what we are here to do.’ He jerked his chin at the crimson-armoured Battle Sisters.
‘Being here, them being here…’
She shook her head.
‘I am not one of them anymore. I have no illusions as to my place and duty.’
‘I never doubted that. I just thought it must hurt, and that you should not take the weight of that pain as well as all the rest.’
‘I am the worst of sinners, Khoriv. There is no limit to my penance.’
Josef raised his eyebrow, folding his hands into the wide sleeves of his robe. After a long moment he turned and began to walk with heavy steps in the direction of the high doors set in the chamber’s far wall.
‘Come,’ he said. ‘It is about to begin.’

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