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

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter; and the laughter of thirsting gods.
They were dispatched into the Outer Darkness upon that first Day of Exile, there to ravage the foes of mankind until their final atonement. Their Forgotten One gave them remit unbound, to set about the traitor, the alien and the renegade without mercy, and to harrow them in their places of strength. So began their long hunt. They hunt still.

– Chapter 17 Paragraph 98,
the *Mythos Angelica Mortis*, c. M36
‘This is Captain Wilhelm Van Hoyt of the penal ship Imperial Truth, reporting en route to Zartak Primary Penitentiary via Fallowrain. We are code viridis. All systems are secure at this time. Empyrean navigation has progressed exceedingly well since passing the straights coreward of Starshoal. My Navigator reports we may reach Zartak up to a week in advance of our projected in-system arrival date. We are preparing for warp jump within the hour. I intend to take full advantage of these calmer currents while I can. Zartak is not a place I would wish to find myself stranded for any length of time. I commend my ship and my crew to the guiding light of the God-Emperor. This is Captain Wilhelm Van Hoyt, signing out.
CHAPTER I

The screaming marked an end to the day’s toil. The aching noise came from the gargoylemawed klaxons that lined each of the narrow walls, tunnels, sub-surface lines and assembly points of Zartak’s vast mine works. Mika Doren Skell dropped his half-pick into its tool crate, his scrawny limbs trembling with exhaustion. His fingers ached as he uncurled them. The blisters had burst again, and blood was welling up in little, oozing patches to discolour the thick layer of dust coating his hands.

‘Move, inmate,’ barked the arbitrator overseeing equipment reclamation. The armour-plated lawman gestured with the barrel of his heavy combat shotgun, motioning him back into line. Skell bowed his head and fell in behind Nedzy and the others, dropping his magnicled hands. The explosive-primed bonds chafed at his wrists, a constant, aching reminder of five months of captivity. Five months since the cowardly gang boss Roax had ratted him out. Five months since he had arrived in the subterranean hell of Zartak.

‘Argrim’s here,’ muttered Dolar as he dropped into line behind Skell. The presence of his big cell-mate at his back was reassuring. Without him, Skell would have died at least twice already, either in the burrow pits and excavation lanes or trudging back to the prison cells of Sink Shaft One.

He had repaid his cell-mate many times over.

A sudden pain pressed against Skell’s temples, as though the atmosphere in the low rock tunnel had suddenly changed. None of the other inmates showed any signs of discomfort. Skell’s bloody hands clenched into fists.

‘Argrim’s going to try something,’ he muttered to Dolar.

‘You sure?’

‘Yeah. I can feel it.’

Dolar said nothing, but Skell sensed him draw fractionally closer. The line ahead was beginning to divide as ragged prison groups were pulled from the column by shouting overseers and herded down the passages that would lead them back to their cell blocks and hanging cages. The pressure in Skell’s head increased. Argrim and his cronies would strike soon, once the mass of dirt-caked, dull-eyed labourers had been separated and divided. They’d tried it before, and Skell knew they’d try it again. They hated him. Not because he was from the sump-hive of Fallowrain, not because he was one of Roax’s old gang. Not even because he refused to bend before Argrim’s reputation and authority. They hated Skell because he was a witch.

‘That concludes the session review,’ said Warden Primary Sholtz. ‘Are there any questions? Sub-Warden Rannik?’

The words dragged Rannik from the fug of boredom that had gripped her thoughts for the past two
hours. The situation room was silent, the pict screen behind the warden’s lectern blinking, the lumen strips still dimmed. The transcription servitor in the corner clattered to a halt as its auto quill finished taking minutes. The other sub-wardens were all staring at her.

‘No questions, sir,’ Rannik said. ‘A thoroughly comprehensive review, as ever.’

‘Was it indeed?’ asked Sholtz from his perch behind the aquila-stamped lectern. The man’s stony glare was as hard as the blunt-force sarcasm he so loved to inflict on new officers. ‘What a relief to have met with your approval. I shall be sure to tell Judge Symons of your weighty opinion next time we share a holo-briefing.’

The thirteen other Adeptus Arbites sub-wardens didn’t respond, but Rannik could sense their amusement. It made her bristle. She fought down her anger, channelling it into a deferential nod.

‘Perhaps,’ the grizzled warden continued, ‘you could elucidate further upon the last point I raised?’

‘The last point, sir?’ Rannik repeated.

‘Yes, sub-warden. The one discussed barely a minute ago.’

Rannik said nothing. The silence in the situation room stretched to a painful, unnatural length. Finally, a bang at the hatch door broke it.

‘Not now,’ Sholtz snarled, his gaze not leaving Rannik. The banging sounded again. Scowling, the warden deactivated the lock with a flick of his sensor wand. The hatch slid open and a youth in the pale grey uniform of the Precinct Fortress’ Augur Division ducked inside.

‘What?’ the warden primary snapped. The boy threw a hurried salute.

‘Word from Augur Chief Tarl, sir. The sensor relays just chimed. The augur outposts on the system’s trailward edge have detected a lone vessel breaking into real space.’

‘Identity?’

‘We’re still running verification, sir, but initial scans of its keel tag and ident-codes show it’s probably our latest shipment.’

‘The Imperial Truth?’ Sholtz demanded. ‘That would make it over a week early.’

‘Yes, sir, that’s what Chief Tarl said. We have tried to hail it but we aren’t receiving any response. Communications may just be choppy due to interference from the asteroid belt, but they’re definitely registering our messages.’

‘How far out is she?’

‘Just entering the belt, sir. Once she navigates it she’ll be three hours from high anchor.’

‘Gentlemen, we have a situation,’ Sholtz said to the assembled sub-wardens. ‘This session is formally adjourned. Come with me.’

Sholtz left the situation room. The sub-wardens filed out from behind their benches and swept after him in a buzz of sudden, nervous excitement.

‘Bit of good fortune, this,’ Sub-Warden Klenn muttered as they entered the corridor, just loud enough for Rannik to hear. ‘The chief had her cold back there. She’s still making the same old mistakes.’

Rannik forced herself not to respond. She could feel the scorn of the older arbitrators as they clattered along the Precinct Fortress’ darkened rockcrete tunnels, following in the warden primary’s footsteps. None of them thought she was fit to oversee her own sub-precinct, regardless of her exceptional progenium training and indoctrination statistics, or the fact that she’d finished top of her class at the Schola Excubitos on Terrax. In their eyes, in the five Terran months since Rannik had arrived, she’d done nothing to prove she was worthy of holding the same rank as them. She would prove them wrong.
The warden primary burst into the precinct’s Centrum Dominus, buried deep within the fortress’ armoured depths. There was a scrape of chairs and a thud of combat boots as the two-tiered room came to attention, cogitators and scanner systems still humming.

‘Report,’ Sholtz snapped. Chief Tarl strode across from his station at the augur arrays, a yellow message chit in hand.

‘It’s definitely the Imperial Truth, sir,’ he said, giving the ident readout to the warden. ‘Almost seven days ahead of schedule, and breaking from the warp in completely the wrong place.’

‘Comms?’ Sholtz asked, looking up at the vox-banks ringing the Centrum’s gantries.

‘We caught a burst of transmission code less than sixty seconds ago, sir,’ said a ruddy-faced vox-lieutenant, earphones in hand. ‘Unintelligible. There’s been nothing since. The contact is just clearing the asteroid belt now, so the signal should become stronger. We’re keeping all channels open.’

‘Sub-Warden Rannik,’ Sholtz said, turning to the officers who’d followed him into the cogitator-ringed pit at the heart of the Centrum. ‘Operations manual seventeen, chapter one, paragraph one. What is the foremost rule when faced with the unknown or the uncertain?’

‘Prepare for the worst,’ Rannik said. ‘And trust in the God-Emperor, sir.’

The warden nodded.

‘There, you see, even the bluntest blades have some cut if you sharpen them enough. We are arbitrators. We always assume the worst. Master-at-arms.’ He gestured at Macran, the head of Zartak’s Combat Division. The big woman, her shaved skull twisted with old flamer burns, came to attention with a clatter of flakplate.

‘Warden primary?’

‘Issue a priority broadcast throughout the fortress and to all sub-precincts across the planet. Code red, effective immediate. Stand to.’

Blood was dripping onto the floor, slowly. Dolar hadn’t noticed.

‘Dolar,’ Skell said. The older convict started, looking down at him with wide, worried eyes.

‘Your nose,’ Skell said, holding out a rag ripped from the hem of his grubby penal fatigues. Dolar stared at it, uncomprehending. Skell wondered if he was concussed.

‘Never mind,’ he said after a moment, stuffing the rag back into his pocket. Dolar’s eyes became vacant again, and he leaned forwards over the edge of his shackle bunk. Blood continued to fall, drip by drip.

Skell rolled back onto his own bunk and grimaced. Around them the sounds of the prison intruded, drifting up through the cell’s mesh flooring and around the bars of the hatch window – raised voices, the slamming of doors, the buzz of active alarm systems and pict monitors, thudding boots and the rattle of magnicles.

Skell had only been here five months, and he already wished he was dead. At least then he wouldn’t have to dig and grub with his numb, bleeding hands any more. The requirements of the hundreds of mine works branching out from Sink Shaft One were without end. When prospectors had discovered that Zartak possessed a rich strata of raw adamantium-based minerals, the nearest consortium of hive worlds had acted quickly to forge a pact with the Adeptus Arbites, one that both relieved them of a good deal of their criminal underhive and enabled the tithing grade of the new mining colony to triple – much to the delight of the subsector’s Administratum officios. At some point the original miner colonists had vanished and been replaced by the lowest savlar – dregs, scum and the plain
unlucky – of half a dozen miserable, industrialised Ethika subsector planets like Fallowrain or Nilrest. That was why Skell and tens of thousands of convicts like him were on Zartak. To drag raw material for the Imperium’s starships and armies from the hard, black earth.

Dolar had finally noticed his nosebleed, and was ineffectually trying to stymie it with his grime-caked fingers. He was two years older than Skell – sixteen, Terran standard, or so he claimed – yet most of the time he acted no more coherently than a ten-year-old. Only his solid build and his willingness to resort to his fists had kept him alive so far. That, and his partnership with Skell.

‘Something’s coming,’ Skell said, looking at the darkness beyond the hatch window.

‘Argrim again?’ Dolar asked vacantly. Skell shook his head.

‘Something worse. It wasn’t him I felt earlier.’ The pressure from the mine tunnel was still there, like a dull, ever-present headache, pulsing incessantly in his temples. He’d never felt it so strongly before. ‘Is it the things you see in the dark?’ Dolar asked. ‘The things that keep giving you nightmares?’

‘They aren’t nightmares,’ Skell said, scowling. ‘They’re just... I don’t know what they are.’

‘Nothing good,’ Dolar mumbled.

‘Well they can’t be worse than this place,’ Skell replied. He was speaking lightly, but in truth he was afraid. The things he had started seeing in his dreams recently – claws and talons spun from shadows, the crackle of lightning and bitter red eyes – had not brought him any comfort. Worst of all had been the face. It was a skull, a death mask, leering from a void of black. Whenever he saw it, it drew closer, grinning with savage, unblinking intensity.

‘They’re coming for me,’ Skell said, still gazing at the barred entrance to the cell.

‘Not me?’ Dolar asked. Skell shot him a look.

‘All of us.’

Dolar nodded. He always paid attention when Skell talked about the future. Theirs was a mutually beneficial partnership – the larger, older inmate protected the smaller physically, while the smaller guided the larger. Even for someone as slow as he was, Dolar had realised within weeks of their incarceration on Zartak that Skell had a special talent. It was the same talent that had made him such a lucky charm with the older gangmates back in the sump-sink of Fallowrain’s planetary capital, Vorhive. At least before Roax had ratted him out. It was the same talent that always earned him such regular beatings from superstitious inmates like Argrim, whenever the arbitrators were looking the other way. Skell had the Sight. Nosebleeds, headaches, nightmares. Few appreciated it.

‘We need to be ready,’ Skell said. ‘It’ll start soon.’ His body still ached from Argrim’s last attempted murder. The ambush had been sprung just as he’d predicted, when the work gang had been returning from Lower 6-16 at the end of that day-cycle’s labour shift. Argrim, the big, brutal ex-smuggler from Shantry, would have staved his skull in with a concealed pick haft if Dolar hadn’t put him down before he could get swinging. When the arbitrators had arrived, shock mauls buzzing, Dolar and Skell were still on their feet while their three attackers most definitely weren’t. All thanks to Skell’s foresight.

The arbitrators had beaten them all the same.

‘When are they coming?’ Dolar asked, casting a lingering glance at the cell hatch.

Skell didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. An ear-splitting wail made Dolar start, the magnicles binding him to his upper bunk clattering against its metal sides. The red emergency lumen over the aquila-stamped hatch bathed the small, dank space in angry light. There was a jarring thud as secondary blast doors throughout the honeycomb structure of Sink Shaft One’s prison complex thumped shut on auto-
hinges. Dolar stared down at Skell. As the sound of heavy boots thumping past reached him over the screaming of the alarms, Skell swallowed and nodded. He shouted up to Dolar. ‘It’s started.’

The Centrum Dominus was buzzing with activity, operators clattering at their rune banks as they sought to update the data streaming in from the augurs. In the tunnels outside, containment squads could be heard running past from the armouries. Sholtz was reviewing squad dispositions throughout the sub-precincts via the Centrum Dominus holochart, Rannik and the other officers still clustered around him. A shout from Vox Chief Hestel, seated on the upper communications gantry, disturbed the warden’s assessments.

‘Sir, we’re receiving a transmission from the *Imperial Truth*.’

‘She’s just cleared the asteroid belt,’ Tarl added from his station at the augur array.

‘Put it on vox,’ Sholtz ordered, gripping the brass railing running around the holochart. The room went suddenly quiet.

There was a rush of static interference, rising and then dipping from an eerie squeal to a low grumble. Hestel bent over a frequency module, working a pair of sliders. A voice came and went, like a passing phantom. Eventually it snapped into focus.

‘...repeat, this is Captain Van Hoyt of the *Imperial Truth* to anyone who can hear me. We are code black.’

‘Captain,’ the warden primary called out. ‘We read you. This is Zartak Arbitrator Precinct Fortress Alpha, Warden Primary Sholtz speaking. What is your status, over?’

‘Thank the God-Emperor,’ the voice of Van Hoyt crackled back. ‘We have a situation here, warden primary. Multiple prisoner exfiltration attempts, a heavy security breach. I’ve been forced to seal off vital decks and open the airlocks. I am currently barricading the bridge alongside the remains of my security detail.’

‘Is First Arbitrator Nethim there?’ the warden prime demanded.

‘Negative. He’s currently holding out in the enginarium. We have locked our course to Zartak’s high orbit. Emperor willing we can keep the scum at bay long enough to reach you.’

‘Standby, captain,’ the warden primary said, signalling to Hestel to pause the connection. ‘Macran, are the sub-precincts mobilised?’

‘I estimate eighty-five per cent readiness, sir. But my shock troop squads can deploy immediately.’

‘Tarl, how long do we have?’

‘Going off the *Imperial Truth*’s current course,’ the augur chief said, bending over his screens, ‘and assuming Nethim manages to hold the enginarium, she’ll achieve high anchor in a little over two hours.’

‘Sir, should I forward a message to the choristorium?’ asked Hestel.

‘Negative, there’s no need to tax the astropaths just yet. The situation is still developing. Macran, take your teams into the void via the *Divine Retribution*. Intercept the *Imperial Truth* and contain the insurrection. I will continue to communicate with Van Hoyt while you are in transit and pass relevant intelligence on to you. After the suppression has been carried out and the situation is stable I will deploy detachments from the sub-precincts to support the clean-up operation. Use extreme prejudice.’

‘Of course, sir,’ Macran replied.
‘Warden primary, I have a request,’ Rannik said from among the assembled sub-wardens. Sholtz scowled.

‘Let me go with the shock squads. I can provide liaison between you and Macran. Subordinate to her orders, of course.’ Rannik inclined her head towards the master-at-arms. She crossed her arms over her breastplate and glared back.

‘What makes you imagine she’d need you as an intermediary, Rannik?’ the warden primary demanded. ‘Macran is a veteran of twelve code black insurrections and a master suppressor. She is more than capable of heading up the operation and maintaining contact with the Centrum Dominus at the same time.’

‘If I may speak plainly, sir,’ Rannik said, taking a breath. ‘I want to be with the shock squads because I want to prove I’m capable. I understand my status as the youngest sub-warden in this room. Progenium training modules can only account for so much. I wish to show my devotion to the God-Emperor and the *Lex Imperialis* in the fires of an active suppression.’

‘You are impertinent, Rannik,’ the sub-warden growled. ‘The Adeptus Arbites does not operate on such vain whims. You will be assigned to tasks I deem you worthy of. Macran will have enough to think about on board that ship without your inexperience getting in her way.’

‘With respect, warden primary,’ Sub-Warden Klenn cut in. ‘Maybe it would be good to bloody her. This incident aboard the *Imperial Truth* should not be difficult to contain, and if we were to experience a security breach down here on the surface I’d rather know all my fellow arbitrators have first-hand combat experience. One compromised sub-precinct can have dire consequences for the safety of all of our facilities on Zartak.’

‘Let me prove myself,’ Rannik added. ‘The progenium thought I was ready, ready enough to assign me here.’

‘The bowels of an Imperial prison hulk are nothing like the simulation exercises,’ Macran snapped, the faint red glow of the holochart giving her grizzled features a bloody hue.

‘Which is precisely why she needs to experience it,’ Klenn said.

‘Sir,’ called Hestel from the vox-banks, transmission horn in hand. ‘Captain Van Hoyt is still on vox. I believe the prisoners are attempting to storm the bridge.’

‘We don’t have time for this foolishness,’ growled Sholtz. ‘Macran, I leave Sub-Warden Rannik’s assignment up to you. Just intercept that ship before it reaches high anchor.’

Rannik looked at Macran. The flamer-scarred arbitrator glanced from the warden primary to Sub-Warden Klenn, then finally nodded at Rannik.

‘Draw shock kit from the armoury. Shuttle bay fourteen, ten minutes. If you’re not there we’re leaving without you.’

The fore armoury of the *White Maw*, like every level above the slave decks, was almost completely silent. The only noise was the throbbing heartbeat of the warp drives, which shuddered up through the decking plates. The air was alive with the static charge of the active Geller field, the chlorine tang of ozone warring with the familiar scents of bolter oils and preservation unguents.

Bail Sharr, Reaper Prime and Company Master, passed noiselessly down the length of the armoury hall, his bare feet making no sound on the cold metal deck. The few artisan serfs and repair savants still at work in the depths of the ship’s night cycle bowed as he passed, their gaze averted. Sharr
ignored them, his void-black eyes focused instead on the objects the malnourished humans were attending. He passed row after row of empty battle suits, ranked either side down the armoury’s long walls, every one mounted on a steel pedestal-brace.

Each set of power armour was different, each an amalgamation of patterns and designs. Many of them were ancient. The most common parts were from Mark Vs, their surfaces studded with the gleaming brass orbs of the molecular bonding pins that held the worn plates of plasteel and ceramite together. Some bore the hook-nosed helmets of Mark VIIs, others the ancient, circular ceramite banding of Mark IIs, or the vertical faceplate slits and horizontal mono-lens of the Mark III great helms. Only two features united the antique collection. All were painted with the same shade of deep grey, and all bore the same crest upon their right pauldrons – a white shark motif, jaw curling towards tail fin to form a razor-toothed crescent set upon a void of black.

Despite the efforts of the repair savants, the majority of the suits were still visibly scarred, not only with the ancient, swirling honour patterns of exile markings, but with the blows of desperate, bloody and all-too recent battle. The artisans that laboured in the ship’s fore and aft armouries had been working for almost a month, Terran standard, to repair the damage done by the Great Devourer. Still Sharr saw the gleam of bare metal as he passed, noting where armour had been raked and scored by chitin talons and blades or pitted by bio acids and burrower beetles.

The toll the War in the Deeps had taken upon the Chapter’s venerable equipment had been high. The toll on the flesh of its warriors had been even higher. Sharr himself walked with a slight limp, the pale grey skin of his right leg still not fully recovered from a genestealer’s claws. He had refused the offer of an augmetic – the wound was bearable and, Void Father knew, high-functioning bionics were in scarce enough supply as it was. He’d ordered Apothecary Tama to save the replacement for a void brother who needed it.

The Reaper Prime reached the end of the hall. Before him, mounted upon the naked rivets and bare steel of the high wall, hung the faded remnants of the war banner of the Third Battle Company. His company now, Sharr reminded himself. Like the armour of the warriors that had fought to defend it, the heavy cloth bore fresh scars. Unlike the armour, the damage would remain unpatched, a ragged testimony to the fallen. Only the company’s crest – the intertwining shark-and-scythe symbol mirroring the fresh tattoo on Sharr’s left temple – would be woven anew in white. The new honour scroll pinned to the banner’s ragged bottom looked fresh and out-of-place. The ink describing the battle company’s actions during the War in the Deeps was barely dry.

Sharr’s gaze lowered to the object that had drawn him to the armoury during the dead hours of fasting and cryo-meditation. It was another suit of power armour, its hard plates the opposite of the plain white robe clothing Sharr, standing rigid and inert on its pedestal like the other eighty-six suits lining the hall. This one, however, was different. Mostly Mark IV, its pauldron bandings were the colour of bronze, and the exile honour markings inscribed upon its dark grey surface were more intricate – they covered the suit’s gauntlets, vambraces and greaves in whorling, interlocking designs, mirroring the tattoos on Sharr’s own pale forearms and legs. The breastplate bore in its centre an embossed skull and twin lightning bolts, the crest of the ancient Terran Pacification War, the Chapter’s first battle honour.

The helmet was also more elaborate. A heavy, modified Mark III great helm, the vox-uplink strip running along the top had been fashioned into a high, jagged ceramite crest, while the visor plate around the vox-grille was painted with the likeness of a yawning white maw. The Third Company’s
shark-and-scythe sigil was inscribed over the helm’s left temple. Sharr felt his new tattoo, identical to the armour’s marking, throb. The helm’s inactive black lenses seemed to glare down at him in the armoury’s quiet, murky half-light.

The looming suit had its gauntlets resting on the top of a great two-handed chainaxe, the adamantium haft locked to the bottom of the plinth. The flared head of the weapon was uncased, the metal-tipped shark teeth that edged the bare rotor gleaming wickedly. Sharr reached out and touched one jagged incisor. He half expected such a brazen violation to cause the inert figure to leap into motion. The weapon, like the armour, was what the Chapter referred to as tapu – for someone of lower rank to lay even a finger upon it was anathema. But Sharr was no longer of lower rank.

The armour and the chainaxe – Reaper – had belonged to Company Master Akia for as long as Sharr could remember. He had been leading the Third Battle Company through the Outer Dark since Sharr’s days as a voidborn initiate. Like many senior figures within the Chapter, Akia had rarely been seen unarmoured, even among his closest brethren. Sharr himself hadn’t witnessed him fully without battleplate until the day Apothecary Tama had pulled his dead, white remains from its battered casing. Despite the ongoing repairs, the scars and rents of the genestealer broodlord’s claws were still evident across the armour’s grey surfaces.

For two and a half centuries the suit had been Akia. Now it belonged to Sharr. Even if tapu no longer applied to him, the thought of wearing it was an abomination. He withdrew his hand, gazing up into the eye-lenses. He felt the soul of the dead Company Master glaring back.

‘He would not have approved.’

The voice startled Sharr. He turned to find Te Kahurangi approaching. Although the Chief Librarian was fully armoured, Sharr only now heard the thump of footfalls and the whir of sound-deadened servos. Had it been anyone else he would have worried at his own lack of vigilance. Te Kahurangi, however, had long ago established a habit of passing unnoticed.

‘He would not have approved of what, venerable Chief Librarian?’ Sharr asked as Te Kahurangi came to a halt beside him. The wizened psyker didn’t look at him, but gazed up at Akia’s old armour. Both Space Marines spoke in archaic High Gothic, the tongue used by their Chapter since its inception so many millennia before.

‘The former Company Master would not have approved of you standing and staring at his battleplate during the dead hours like some unbloodied initiate. If meditation or cryo-sleep do not suit you then there is work to be done.’ Sharr felt a stab of annoyance. He suppressed it.

‘I came to pay my respects.’

‘There has been time enough for that. As Akia would have said, what’s passed has passed. You are our Company Master now. You must assume your full responsibilities.’

Sharr looked at Te Kahurangi – the Pale Nomad, Chief Librarian of the Chapter. His power armour was even more impressive than that of the Company Master’s. Its underlying surface was a deep blue, and every inch of it, from the boots to the cable-studded psychic hood, was inscribed with a dense knotwork of swirling exile marks. A heavy set of scrimshawed shark teeth hung about his gorget, and more old charms dangled from his vambraces. In his right gauntlet he grasped a force staff of carved bone, the head fashioned into a maw clamped around a sea-green shard of stone. The rock gleamed in the dim light.

‘The Tithing draws near,’ Te Kahurangi continued, turning to face Sharr. ‘The Tithing of a planet you once knew all too well. Are you ready, Reaper Prime?’
‘I am ready,’ Sharr replied forcefully, meeting the black void of Te Kahurangi’s gaze. The face that framed the unnatural eyes was a disturbing mismatch of colour. While much of it was as white as a corpse’s flesh, patches of skin around his eyes, jaw and neck were scabbed a rough, dark grey by denticles, lending his skin a scaly texture. Sharr had recently started to note the first outbreaks of the genetic anomaly on his own flesh, scabbing his elbows and shoulder joints. It was just one of the many afflictions suffered by the older members of the Chapter, and the condition would only degenerate as time passed. With the exception of the slumbering Greats in their white suits of Dreadnought armour, Te Kahurangi was by far the oldest member of the Chapter. Sharr had heard it said that he was only three generations removed from the Wandering Ancestors, the first to have gone into the void, alone, at the behest of the Forgotten One.

‘The company needs leadership now,’ said Te Kahurangi. ‘Your leadership, Sharr. This will be no ordinary Tithing.’

‘So you have said.’

‘The boy must be found,’ Te Kahurangi continued, voice a dry, dead whisper in the armoury’s echoing vaults. ‘The Murderers in the Night have his scent. If the one called Kiri Mate sinks his claws into him the suffering for all will be great. It is not enough to complete the Tithe. We must reach the boy before the heretics.’

‘We will find him,’ Sharr said. ‘And complete the Tithe, for the Chapter.’

‘It will be your first true test as Company Master.’

‘Then I welcome it, void brother.’

Te Kahurangi glanced back down the length of the armoury. ‘Eighty-six functioning suits of battleplate recovered from the War in the Deeps. Seventy-nine void brothers to fill them. And you yourself plagued by doubt at this dark homecoming. Are we enough for the Tithe, given what awaits us?’

‘On our shoulders rests the future of the Chapter,’ Bail Sharr said, looking once again at Akia’s power armour. *His* armour. He laid his hand once more upon the chainaxe’s head. ‘We are Carcharodon Astra, Chief Librarian. From the Outer Dark we come, and when the Red Tithe is over we will leave behind only darkness. Nothing more.’
Day 46, Kelistan local.
I have checked the subsector waystation logs at the request of Gideos. He is convinced something vital is occurring, and has been for days. His nightmares have kept half of Lord Rozenkranz’s retainers awake at night. I couldn’t stand it any more.
It seems his warp-dreams are not wholly misplaced. A penal ship out of Fallowrain checked into a waystation in the spiral arm a week ahead of schedule. Gideos thinks that’s the one which the portents have been showing him. I’m going to need to run further checks before I go to Lord Rozenkranz and request clearance to leave this miserable place. The business here on Kelistan still hasn’t been tied up yet. The local Administratum quill-heads are dragging proceedings out, as is their way. Chasing some rogue penal ship to the edges of Imperial voidspace may be just the excuse I need to get away from this dead-end investigation.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Mem-bank entry log ends + + +

+ + + Thought for the Day: Work earns salvation + + +
CHAPTER II

It was the night before the harvest. A time of breathless, desperate yearning. A time of preparation, and anticipation. A time the Prince of Thorns had come to savour.

Amon Cull stared out of the primary viewing port of the Last Breath. The Prince of Thorns stared back at him – naked, jet hair lying lank about his shoulders, corpse-white flesh puckered with neural ports and scarred by ritual kill-tallies. Cull raised one hand and watched the prince mirror the movement in the crystalflex, all the while maintaining eye contact. The ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, exposing the tips of his steel teeth. The revenant in the void smiled back.

He dropped his hand and looked beyond the nightmarish figure, black eyes refocusing on the dark orb that framed his reflection. Zartak. It was not an impressive sight: a small planetoid, a sphere of green, rugged rock on the fringes of a star system on the fringes of a galaxy. A place easily forgotten. A place well suited to Amon Cull’s needs.

The harvest was overdue. They had dallied, first on Nemisar, then in the Talith System. It had been understandable, given how hungry the warband was for fresh victims. A slight shiver ran up Cull’s spine as he remembered the screams. He’d drawn them out just as his brothers had drawn out what was supposed to be a simple supply raid, lavishing their prisoners with every pain they could conceive of. They’d left a week behind schedule, and only then because the augurs had detected a powerful Naval squadron breaking in-system in a vain effort to intercept them.

Nemisar and Talith had been pleasurable distractions, but distractions none the less. Zartak was where they needed to be. A place of lost and imprisoned souls, sharply concentrated into a dozen mining structures burrowed in amongst the inimical jungles that carpeted the humid orb. Aside from the arbitrators and prison overseers, every single person below was a convict labourer. They were all ripe for the harvest.

The flesh at the nape of Cull’s neck itched. He indulged the sensation, imagining the serrated edge of a combat knife sliding home. At least a dozen eyes staring at his back wished to impale him right there and then, and that was only counting the genhanced ones. Cull delighted in such knowledge. Delighted in the fact that it was their fear of his skill with a blade that kept them at bay.

A sound disturbed the awful quiet of the Last Breath’s bridge, a grating of time-worn alarm bells. Hunchbacked thralls scurried to deactivate them. Cull didn’t need to ask what they presaged. The ship’s augur arrays had detected the Imperial Truth, breaking in-system from its warp jump. Another eight hours would see the penal ship in high anchor above Zartak, joining Cull’s concealed fleet in the doomed mining colony’s orbit. Then, at last, the wait would be over.

‘Armour,’ the Prince of Thorns said. The voice was young, as cold, clean and cutting as a freshly scrubbed razor. The black-robed thralls of his personal retinue hurried to attend him, each labouring
beneath the weight of a separate piece of battleplate. The design was ancient, Mark IV, daubed midnight blue and edged with bands of bronze. The scarred amalgamation of shaped plasteel, adamantium and ceramite had borne the brunt of the Long War for millennia, well before Cull had been conceived. Regardless of its venerable age, the prince had ordered customisations when he had taken possession of it from the warband’s previous master. Jagged spikes now bristled from its pauldrons, greaves and breastplate, and the leering winged skull motif of the VIII Legion was entwined with his own heraldry, the crest of House Cull – a black venomrose and its wicked, poisoned thorns.

Layer by layer, the thralls clothed Cull for murder. The auto-sense links went in first, sliding with familiar little stabs of pain into the neural ports and flesh sockets that penetrated his black carapace. The servo plates and fibre bundles were next, the machine-muscles that would augment the prince’s already transhuman strength. After that, the armour itself, dark as a nightmare, old as the sins of the martyred gene-father Cull would never know. The thralls clamped each part to the electroid sealant strips without speaking, the bridge quiet except for the click and grate of cold metal.

The pauldrons came last. It took two thralls to lift and lock each one in place, their calloused hands bloody from the spines that bristled across the dark steel. The servos in the power armour whirred and hummed as they came fully online. Cull smiled again.

Sentath, his chief thrall and the only human dreg he’d deigned to name, stepped forwards. In his ageing hands he clasped a great war helm. Its visor had been moulded into the shape of a screaming skull, the bone-white a sharp contrast to the darkness of the rest of Cull’s armour. From its sides rose backswept red pinions, fashioned like the ragged wings of a bat. It was the very image of the VIII Legion’s heraldry. The top of the skull was covered in a ridge of bony horn nubs, echoing the spikes that bristled across the rest of Cull’s plate. The deactivated red lenses set into the skull’s sockets glittered a dark, dead shade of ruby.

Cull took the helm from the struggling thrall with one hand, placing it over his head without ceremony. The neck lock hissed as it sealed with his gorget, and the vox-grille wheezed and rattled like a dying man.

For a second he was in darkness. For a second he was cowering once more in the shadows of the palace that he had once called home, eyes screwed tight shut, whimpering as murderers clad in lightning stalked its halls. Then the helm’s preysight activated and the bridge returned, rendered now in bloody crimson. White icons overlaid his vision one by one, blinking into existence as his auto-senses came online – targeting reticules, vital signs, squad designates, ammunition counts, area schematics. He deleted each in turn with a blink-click. They were not needed, not yet. His gaze returned to his reflection in the crystalflex, to the Prince of Thorns, the Young Murderer, Champion of Fear. Night Lord, now midnight clad, ready to kill. Damn the so-called Long War veterans who claimed their young prince was not ready.

‘Shenzar,’ he said, voice transformed into a deep, deathly whisper that rattled from the death mask’s vox-grille. ‘Are the Claws prepared?’

‘Yes, my prince,’ the Terminator champion answered.

With a thought, Cull activated his ancient armour’s power coils. Arco-lightning ignited, sparking and crackling across vicious spikes and snapping hungrily at his nightmare reflection. Cull nodded once, satisfied.

‘Then let us begin.’
Meat parted beneath Shadraith’s blade. He watched it happen in silence, marvelling at the way in which the flaps of flesh came apart with gentle reluctance beneath the slight pressure of the scalpel. Marvelling too at the man’s screams: not unlike a broken grox sow, lowing and tired, weary with the pain that had been heaped upon its meaningless existence. Shadraith wondered sometimes whether, during his previous life, he’d been a butcher or slaughter yard labourer.

Or maybe just a psychopath. There had been plenty of those on Nostramo.

Shadraith removed the blade and straightened, momentarily sated. Between them, the last two hundred and eleven victims had gone some way to easing his communion with Bar’ghul. The ancient daemon had been ignoring Shadraith of late, its messages ever more distant and disconnected from reality. Now, though, the sorcerer could feel the warp creature’s attention upon him again, drawn through the immaterium by the pain Shadraith was bleeding into the warp’s depths.

‘Another,’ he ordered, his voice a dead hiss that rattled from the vox of his horned helmet. Two stooped acolyte-things dragged the screaming man from the slab, struggling as he writhed. Two more heaved another prisoner up onto the rack. He was barely conscious, still under the effects of the phobos gas Shadraith had flooded the ship with before they’d boarded. This one wore the white uniform of a bridge vox-operator. Shadraith stripped it off with short, precise snips of his surgical scissors. He’d removed his gauntlets to make the work easier, his long, clawed fingers stained bright red.

The Night Lord had commandeered the medicae bay of the *Imperial Truth* for his grisly work. It had been the natural choice – it already had all the tools he needed, from incision blades and bone saws to dissection tables and restraint clamps. He’d hung the flayed skins of two dozen of the ship’s bridge staff from the coolant pipes and venting ducts overhead, draping the whole bay in bare, bloody meat. He’d also had his acolytes clog the floor drains so that now, after several days of effort, the blood was lapping around the soles of his boots. The tiled walls, once a pristine, surgical white, had been painted crimson.

Such activities were as much a hobby to Shadraith as they were an effort to communicate with his daemonic ally. It spoke to him of home, of distant, long lost Nostramo, and of better days with battle-brothers who had understood the true talents of the Night Lords. Causing pain and terror had once been goals in themselves. Now they were mere afterthoughts to the likes of Cull and the pack of inexperienced warriors Shadraith was forced to ally himself with. Almost none of them had even been alive during the great and glorious days of the VIII Legion’s liberation, when they had slipped the leash of the False Emperor and painted the stars red. The upstarts were an embarrassment to the Long War, and a testimony to how far the ideals of the Night Haunter had fallen.

They were a means to an end, the Chaos sorcerer reminded himself as he scooped out an eyeball. Soon, with Bar’ghul’s blessings, he would have what he sought. Then he need humour the self-proclaimed Prince of Thorns no longer.

He felt the presence of Vorfex, cold as a long-dead cadaver, slide into the bay. He didn’t look up from his work.

‘We have cleared the asteroid belt,’ the Raptor Claw leader said, his vox-voice cutting through the screaming of the sorcerer’s latest captive.

‘The shields?’ Shadraith asked, leaning a little closer to the struggling, breathless man.

‘Damaged, but still functional. They’ll be enough.’

‘And the vox-array?’
'Intact. We have a full, uninterrupted connection with Zartak. No word from the prince or the rest of the fleet. They’re still shrouded on the dark side of the planet.'

‘Excellent,’ Shadraith said, finally looking up at his fellow Night Lord. Vorfex was one of the few members of the warband he considered to have anything approaching experience. If anything, Shadraith would have sponsored Vorfex to be its leader over Cull, if he had believed he could manipulate the older Night Lord the way he already did the so-called Prince of Thorns.

‘Continue transmitting everything the vox-thieves captured,’ Shadraith told him. ‘And prepare your Claw for the arrival of our new guests.’

‘As you wish, Flayed Father.’

The harvest was about to begin.

Rannik armoured herself in haste. Macran’s shock squads were the best arbitrators on Zartak, and possessed a personal armoury in the heart of the Precinct Fortress’ highest flak tower. The precinct itself was a blocky sprawl of enclosed rockcrete bastions, bulwarks and plasteel baffles, perched precariously on the crag edge of the so-called Burrow, Sink Shaft One, Zartak’s largest penal mine. The sub-precincts that overlooked the other smaller workings sunk into the planetoid’s adamantium-rich crust were far less impressive affairs – generally nothing more than a curtain wall and a squat rockcrete keep. The shock squad armoury alone displayed the disparity between the main fortress and the sub-precinct that Rannik had jurisdiction over.

The carapace armour she unhooked from a reserve locker was far sturdier than her own. A collection of matt-black flakplates striped with yellow hazard chevrons and fitted over polyplastek fibre weave, each part clipped and fastened snugly on top of Rannik’s black bodyglove. She settled the open-jawed helmet in place, adjusted the vox-torq around her throat and snapped down the polarising visor lens. Last of all, she pulled on the suit’s armoured lock gloves.

The weaponry lining the walls was just as comprehensive as the armour. Las and hard round vied with rows of grenade variants and half a dozen types of suppression mace. Rannik resisted the urge to select one of the big, scarred Synford-pattern lockshields from the upper racks. She locked her own autopistol and shock maul to the mag-strips of her armour’s belt and clamped a heavy Vox Legi-pattern combat shotgun and shell bandolier to the block on her backplate.

She gave herself five seconds to take a breath and stare at her reflection in the changing bay mirror. Hazel eyes and a slender, pale young face stared back, capped by close-cropped black hair. 

This is what you wanted, she told herself. Stop hesitating.

She took the grav lift to the tower’s shuttle bay, tightening and settling straps as she waited. With a flicker of annoyance, she realised that her heart was already racing. She’d spent years training and drilling for precisely this moment. Now that it was happening for real, it was supposed to be as simple as any other simulation exercise.

But it suddenly didn’t seem simple at all.

The wire doors of the lift juddered open, and she stepped out into bay fourteen. The screaming of jets and the backwash of idling engines hit her hard. Head down, she forced herself into it. Ahead of her, armoured figures were filing up into the open rear of a Mark IX Triwing Lighter, framed by the backdrop of landing lumens and the starry night sky that yawned beyond the bay’s open blast doors.

‘Wait!’ she shouted, but her words were snatched away by the engine noise. She broke into a jog, grimacing. She wasn’t going to let them leave her behind.
The last figure up the Triwing’s ramp paused at the hatch and glanced back. The cockpit lights lit up her scarred features. Jhen Macran. She scowled as she caught sight of Rannik.

‘Well, come on then, warp damn you,’ she snapped, gesturing through the hatch. Rannik ducked inside.

The last of Macran’s three teams had already filled the shuttle’s hold and strapped into the metal fold-down restraining benches. They looked up as she entered, jawlines grim beneath the edges of their helms, eyes inscrutable behind the black visors of their photosensitive lenses. Macran thrust Rannik forcibly down into the last harness by the hatch and banged the locking rune. The pitch of the shuttle’s engines rose to a painful shriek. Macran tapped her vox-torq.

‘What?’ Rannik tried to shout above the rising noise, then realised what she was telling her to do. She hastily activated the comms device.

Macran sat down on the bench opposite and snapped the restraint over her shoulders. Her voice crackled in her ear. ‘You know Klenn only supported your request to be here because he’s praying some savlar on this damned penal ship splits your head open with a rusty crowbar?’

‘I assume that’s why you agreed to take me with you as well?’

‘If you get any of my men killed, then I promise you Klenn will get his wish. I’ll snap your damned neck myself and dump your body out an airlock. Do you understand?’

‘Perfectly, master-at-arms,’ Rannik said, and forced herself to smile.

As the shuttle juddered with take-off turbulence, she realised she’d never been more afraid in her entire life.

_The boy cowers behind a statue of his supposed great grandfather and screws his eyes tight shut, while his parents die._

_They are not his real parents. His real parents are thieves, or extortionists, or obscura addicts, or blasphemers, or murderers. They are any number of hateful savlar underhivers. He does not know them. He has never met them._

_His adoptive parents were the masters of Hive Apraxis. Lord and Lady of the Venomrose Thorns, the ancient House Cull, Firstborn of the lineage of Saint Yarwain. They are masters no longer. The new rulers of Apraxis are skinning his parents alive._

_Where are you, boy?_  

_The vox-shriek of their leader screams down the hallway, so sharp it seems to cut the child’s ears. The boy whimpers pitiably. The agony of his false parents has long since been reduced to moaning and sobs, echoing through the cold, bare, blood-slashed marble of their palace-turned-slaughterhouse. They have already screamed their throats raw._

_‘You did this,’ whispers another voice, the little one in the boy’s head. He clamps his small hands over his ears, desperate to silence it. Desperate to stop the lightning-clad killers from hearing it. The words still come though, reaching him from inside his skull._

_‘You killed them, Amon. You killed everybody. Don’t you—‘_  

_Remember. The Prince of Thorns started. He realised he’d unclamped his runesword. The curving, Nostramo-marked steel glittered in the flickering light of the teleportation chamber. He blinked, and bared his steel fangs._

_He’d been remembering. That had been happening more often of late. The daemon, Bar’ghul, had been helping him recall the time before the hypno-inductions and murder inculcations. Before he’d_
found his purpose, and taken the mantle of power that was his by right. Before his ascension to the VIII Legion. It was trying to distract him. He thrust the thoughts angrily from his mind.

He found the chamber often exacerbated such memories. The daemon-haunted vault in the underbelly of the Last Breath tended to act as a conduit for the darkest and most blessed moments of a man’s existence. He could tell from the short, sharp breathing and tense postures of First Kill that they too were having similar vision-recollections. Cull found it tended to put his retinue on edge just before an engagement. And an edge was exactly what he wanted from them. Unyielding, honed and cutting.

The canting of the acolytes arrayed in an eight-pointed star around the seven Chaos Space Marines neared its crescendo. The stooped, deformed thralls were all bleeding from their mouths, noses and ears. A few had collapsed, frothing and spasming uncontrollably on the hexagram-marked deck. Normally Shadraith, the Flayed Father, would have led the ritual, but he was still on board the captured prison ship, playing with whatever remained of the crew while he waited for the idiot Imperials to come and investigate.

Cull focused his thoughts as he felt the heavy air of the chamber beginning to vibrate, running counterpoint to the quiet throb of the Last Breath’s masked engines. The shadows that clustered around the edges of the vault had started to stretch and elongate. The ancient, cobwebbed lumen orbs suspended from the ceiling flickered and failed, one by one. With each dousing, the darkness rushed forward to claim more of the fear-laden space. The etchings covering the deck had started to glow with a faint, sickly luminance.

Another acolyte collapsed, then another, their mutated bodies thrashing uncontrollably, their choked cries blending with the chanting. The words of those still standing reached a crest of hideous noise, syllables gibbered and spat out in a rush of palpable terror. Cull gripped the flayed skin haft of his runesword tighter and felt his secondary heart kick in. Adrenaline and excitement flooded his system. The shadows – claws and talons and snapping maws that slid across the vibrating deck – lunged in unison, and the final lumens died. For a second the only light was the glow of the teleportation hexagram, and the unblinking red illumination of seven sets of battle helm lenses.

Then, amidst disembodied snarls, the tearing of flesh and the screaming of the last of the acolytes, those too vanished.

Nedzy was shouting up at him from the cell below, perched on top of his bunk, magnicled hands clutching the mesh wiring that separated them.

‘What’s going on, wyrdling?’
‘How should I know?’ Skell bawled back over the clattering of the alarms. His ears were starting to ache as badly as his forehead.
‘You always know, you little freak! Tell me!’
‘Go blow off some obscura, Nedzy!’
‘They should have stopped by now,’ Dolar moaned from the top bunk, hands clamped over his ears. Skell opened his mouth to shout a reply, then stopped. A sudden, indefinable sense of fear kept the words locked behind his jaw. He rose in his bunk, as far as his magnicles would allow. With the extra height he was able to get a view out of the cell hatch slit.

The tiny space he shared with Dolar was on level forty-three of fifty. When Imperial colonists had first founded the primary mine head, Sink Shaft One, they had burrowed their habitations into the hole’s flanks. The great vertical tunnel digging into Zartak’s core was long exhausted, but was now
the open-air nexus for the Burrow, the latticework of hundreds of secondary mines spreading like a subterranean web from the old shaft. The habitation honeycomb of the shaft itself had been converted into Zartak’s primary prison, its sheer, circular sides riddled with tens of thousands of tiny cells and cages like Dolar and Skell’s, jutting out into oblivion. The slip of vision afforded through the hatch gave Skell a view directly across to the outside of the cells on the opposite curve of the shaft, over a hundred yards away.

It was still dark, and dawn was a long way off. For a while, Skell could see nothing but the flickering of the crimson emergency lights. Then he caught a hint of movement. He squinted, trying to focus.

There were shadows flitting up the far side of the shaft. The emergency lights touched whatever metal plates they were wearing, staining their midnight surfaces like fresh blood. They weren’t so much climbing as darting upwards, strange-looking, archaic packs strapped to their backs offering them a means of propulsion up the sheer flanks of the prison pit. Skell counted seven of them, shadows within shadows. The light caught the flicker and flash of naked steel alongside the darker gleam of their armour.

Skell had seen plenty of killers in his short life. He knew he was watching seven right now, ascending as though from the black heart of Zartak itself, like the sump-sink earth-shades of Fallowrain’s darkest legends, up towards the starry heavens beyond the edge of the pit. Up towards the base of the void shield generator, perched on the opposite side of the sink shaft.

One of the shades paused, latching itself on to an overhanging gable jutting from between two of the prison cells. For a moment it seemed to dangle there, bat-like, inhuman and predatory. A chill ran through Skell as he realised the thing was facing him.

What is it? Dolar shouted over the alarms. He was struggling to lower himself from his bunk to Skell’s height, but he couldn’t get down to the same angle before his magnicles whirred taut and locked. He grunted with the effort.

Skell ignored him. He was shaking. Every instinct was screaming at him to look away from the suspended figure, to get away from the hatch, get down in his bunk, cover his eyes and pray to a God-Emperor he’d never believed in before now. But he couldn’t. For some reason, he couldn’t look away. He felt sick. His skull throbbed.

The flickering emergency lights caught the shade, illuminating its face for the first time. Its head was a winged death mask, its eyes glaring from the pits of bone-white sockets, meeting his gaze and holding it in a vice of cold iron. It was the same nightmare vision he had dreamt about, almost every night since he’d arrived on Zartak.

They have come for you.

As abruptly as they’d started, the alarms snapped off. Their aftershock echoed back from the circular cliff sides of the sink prison, rebounding within the inmates’ throbbing heads. With the alarms went the emergency lighting.

Suddenly, there was nothing beyond the cell but darkness.

First Kill froze. The darkness embraced them, like an old friend. Cull turned away from the cell across the sink shaft from him, his claws tightening around the plasteel gable. The sudden silence after the hammering of the alarms was startling. He blink-clicked Third Claw’s vox-channel.

‘Fexrath,’ he hissed. ‘We’re in position. Begin your assault.’
They caught the *Imperial Truth* on its final approach to Zartak’s high orbit. Sholtz had relayed the good news that the ship’s crew still controlled its weapons systems. That meant *Divine Retribution*, an Imperial Navy fast cutter permanently seconded to the Zartak Adeptus Arbites garrison, was able to get in close before launching her boarding torpedoes.

‘Terminate with extreme prejudice,’ Macran said over the vox. Rannik shifted a shoulder plate into a more comfortable position, cursing the sweat that was running into her eyes behind her helmet’s lens. At least she could blame it on the infernal heat of the torpedo troop bay. The rest of the shock squad were packed around her, four behind and the rest in front. The two lead arbitrators already had their heavy ceramite suppression shields up. The metal tube of the torpedo’s narrow interior was bathed in ugly red light. A jagged warning bell started to clatter.

‘Brace,’ Macran ordered. Rannik just had time to snatch the handrail running along the top of the compartment before an impact battered her back into the armour of the arbitrator behind. She heard the man grunt and curse.

For a second she thought they’d successfully impacted with the *Imperial Truth*’s outer hull. Then she realised the backwards thrust had been the torpedo’s dampener drives kicking in. The true impact occurred a moment later.

This time she was able to stay upright as the false gravity of the boarding craft attempted to drive her forwards. The metal around her shuddered and groaned as the torpedo earthed itself into what Rannik prayed was the flank of the *Imperial Truth*’s bridge mast.

The warning chime shut off, and for a second all Rannik could hear was her breath rasping in her ears.

‘Thirty seconds,’ crackled Macran’s voice. In her mind’s eye Rannik saw the heavy meltas arrayed around the torpedo’s snub prow blazing, the sounds of vaporised adamantium lost in the vacuum of the void. She saw the plasteel and ceramite sheath of the equaliser judder forwards on automatic lock hinges, covering the molten hole bored by the meltas. She heard the thump of compression, felt the magnetic seal shudder through the frame of the boarding vessel. She was suddenly, acutely aware of an itch in her right thigh. The sweat in her eyes stung. The Vox Legi shotgun, held by the stock in her free hand, seemed unbearably heavy.

‘Ten seconds,’ said Macran. ‘Make ready, arbitrators.’ The crack of primed weapons was loud in the close, heated space. Rannik let go of the overhead rail to rack her shotgun’s slide. The motion stabbed a fresh spike of adrenaline through her body.

The warning chime sounded again, just once. The red light bathing the troop bay flashed amber, and then green. There was a crump of door clamps, a rush of steam, a burst of hissing, decompressed air.

The shock squad were shouting. They were going forwards. Rannik was in amongst them, half advancing, half carried along by their black-armoured momentum. The bellowed oaths of the *Statutes Imperialis* were deliberately amplified over the arbitrators’ external vox-beads as they stormed the *Imperial Truth*, but their law-cries fell only on an empty corridor. Rannik ducked in beneath the fused, molten rim of the breach and found herself in the centre of a knot of arbitrators, the front rank holding their shields braced, those behind with shotguns raised.

According to the snap-briefing delivered by Macran onboard the *Divine Retribution*, they would be entering via one of the many service corridors ringing the *Imperial Truth*’s aft bridge mast. As part of the prison ship’s outer shell, the narrow passageways acted as a network for the repair crews and maintenance servitors to quickly reach more important sections. They were narrow, dank places,
rarely visited. Like the exterior veins of most starships, they were considered entirely non-vital, and
provided with only a modicum of dingy lighting, heat and servicing.

It was in just such a dim, confined world of rusting pipes and fungus-choked mesh decking that the
shock squad now found themselves. There were no life signs.

‘Quiet,’ Macran ordered. ‘Reassemble. There should be a grav lift to the inner mast shaft fifty yards
to the right. Felchet, take point.’

The shock squad shook itself into a tightly spaced line, weapons still ready. Rannik kept her
positioning, remembering to keep her finger off the Vox Legi’s trigger. She could do this. She could
show them she was just as efficient, just as capable, as any arbitrator on Zartak.

The tunnel bent continuously to the left, following the curve of the circular bridge mast. It resounded
with the clang of the shock squad’s steel-shod boots and the rattle and grate of their carapace armour.
Rannik tried to maintain her focus, scanning the pipe-lined walls as they passed, shotgun probing the
shadows between the flickering lumen orbs. Macran had told them not to anticipate many contacts in
the outer shell. Going by Captain Van Hoyt’s descriptions, the ship’s escaped prisoners were still
disorganised. They were besieging the bridge and the enginarium, but had failed to capitalise on their
numerical superiority by occupying much of the rest of the ship.

It was a mistake the shock squads wouldn’t let them recover from. They were boarding from five
separate breach points, targeting the starboard weapons batteries, the enginarium, the bridge mast, the
Navigator’s tower and the primary armoury. The ship’s vital parts would be secured at a stroke, and
the breakout suppressed. Macran had warned her teams she expected them to finish the job before the
warden primary’s reinforcements had even made it up from Zartak’s surface.

‘Grav lift secure,’ came the vox-crackle from Felchet, the point man. It was a big servicing chute,
large enough to carry stocks of replacement circulation pipes or sheets of adamantium plating to the
outer hull. The arbitrators filed inside. Macran yanked the activation lever. With a judder and an
unhealthy, grating whirr, the platform began to rise.

As the lift climbed into the tower’s central shaft, reports from the other shock squads started filtering
back over the vox. All four had made successful breaches in the outer hull. Thus far they had
encountered no resistance. In fact, none of the teams were reporting any signs of life at all. The
auspex readings were jagged and full of ghost returns, and heads-up tactical displays kept going dark.
Even as Macran received the information, the vox shorted and jumped, chopped to pieces by static
distortion.

‘Something’s interfering with our systems,’ she said over the short-range vox-torq. ‘The savlar may
have been able to create some sort of jamming device from the main vox-relay. Taking it out will be
our primary objective once the bridge is secure.’

The grav lift juddered to a halt. The arbitrators closest to the door locked their suppression shields
together, forming an impenetrable barrier of ceramite. The doors rolled back.

Another empty corridor presented itself, the only noise the distant throb of the Imperial Truth’s still-
active plasma drives. The shock squad moved smoothly out of the lift, shotguns tracking the flickering
shadows. The bridge mast’s central shaft was far less dilapidated than the outer shell, but the lumen
orbs still seemed to be on the verge of failing.

Rannik tried to focus on maintaining her spacing and watching her zone. She felt ridiculously clumsy
and out of place amidst the tightly drilled formation.

‘Stair shaft, next right,’ came the voice of Felchet.
‘It leads directly to the outer doors of the bridge,’ Macran added. ‘Stay alert.’
There were still no contacts. Transmissions from the other shock squads had ceased. It was as though they’d penetrated a ghost ship, abandoned centuries earlier, listing through the void for eternity. Rannik’s skin pricked, and she almost smacked into the backplate of the arbitrator in front. The squad had come to a halt at the foot of the stairwell leading up to the bridge deck.
The lumen orbs in the shaft had gone out completely. The darkness seemed to deny them, as firm and black as their suppression shields.

‘Stab lumens,’ Macran ordered. The lights flicked on, picking out corroded metal rungs and scabs of dark steam-mould. The beams wavered and shifted with the movements of the arbitrators’ shotguns.

‘Felchet, Hormand, switch out,’ Macran said. Felchet dropped back for the second arbitrator in line to take point up the stairs.

‘Move off.’
The shock squad began to climb, the clanging of boots on plasteel ringing up through the stairwell. For the first time since boarding the lighter in the Precinct Fortress, Rannik felt something besides adrenaline and jaggy combat nerves – a dark, creeping sense of foreboding. Something wasn’t right.
The feeling only grew when she realised what was missing. While the narrow space was still loud with the sounds of the arbitrators’ boots, none of those noises were coming from behind her any more. An icy shiver ran down her spine. She spun, shotgun up, the stab lumen beaming back down the stairwell.

Of the four arbitrators who’d been bringing up the rear there was no sign.

‘We’ve reached the head of the stairs,’ crackled Hormand’s voice. ‘Still no contacts. I have a visual on the bridge blast doors. They’re not sealed.’

‘Wait,’ Rannik stammered over the vox-torq. ‘Stop. Everyone stop.’

‘Damn it, I told you to keep quiet,’ Macran snarled.

‘They’re behind us!’

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know. The… the four behind me. They’re gone. I didn’t hear anything.’

‘Squad, halt,’ Macran said. ‘Sound off.’

Four names were missing from the roll. Rannik stared down at the last landing, bare and silent beneath her. She felt frozen, as though to move would trigger whatever mysterious fate had already befallen those who’d been following her. She realised, with a strange, chill sense of detachment, that her hands were shaking. The little involuntary movements were causing the light from her lumen to waver and dart across the mouldy walls.

Macran was still trying to reach the four missing arbitrators over the vox. None replied. The darkness seemed to creep in around the light of Rannik’s beam, hardening at the edges, like a predator tensing, ready to strike. Eventually Macran cut the vox-links.

‘We carry on,’ she said.

‘But–’ Rannik began.

‘We carry on, sub-warden. Unless you want me to report you to the primary once we get this warp-damned place secured?’

Rannik backed all the way up the last steps. When she finally emerged at the top she found herself in a vaulted atrium. The lumens set into arched alcoves, though weak, were at least functioning. The far end of the atrium was dominated by a vast set of doors, twice Rannik’s height and stamped
with the interlocking ‘I’ and ship’s wheel of the Imperial Navy. The bridge blast doors. The shock squad had assembled before them in a defensive semicircle.

‘Where are the prisoners?’ Rannik asked. ‘I thought you said they were attacking the brid–’

‘Quiet,’ Macran snapped. ‘Hormand?’

‘They’re not locked, sir,’ said the point man as he inspected the door’s brass-rimmed locking panel.

‘Nothing on the vox either,’ Macran said. ‘Maintain firing positions. Shield ranks, brace. Hormand, open it.’

There was a clatter as the shock squad made ready. Rannik took position behind the stooping figure of one of the suppression shield bearers. She couldn’t resist the urge to glance back at the yawning darkness of the stairwell behind them, even as Hormand disengaged the blast door hinge clamp and hauled up the locking rod from its brace in the deck. The heavy adamantium plates rolled back smoothly, automatic hinges whirring.

A foul stench wafted from within. It was immediately apparent that they were all much, much too late.

Bar’ghul’s daemonkin slaughtered the boarders. Shadraith watched them do it, secreted in what had once been the Imperial Truth’s Navigator Tower. He spirit-walked the darkened corridors of the captured ship, observing from the whispering shadows as horrors of pulsing, unnatural flesh materialised from nowhere, tearing apart the Imperials foolish enough to step into their new lair. He’d disrupted their communication nets – both long and short ranged – with vox-thieves, so that each group was unaware of the grisly fate of the others. It was all far too easy.

A greater challenge waited on the surface of the world below, amidst the prison tunnels and mine shafts. Shadraith yearned for it.

*He is our future,* Bar’ghul told him, the words echoing inside his skull. *The weaves of fate have now bound us all together. Find him for me.*

Shadraith had never taken well to orders, daemonic or otherwise. Like all Night Lords, he looked dimly upon the creatures of the warp and their arcane pacts, even as one whose very power was drawn from the maddening sea in which they swam. He had long ago decided that his abilities did not derive from some indecipherable creature’s base whims. It was within him, in the strength it took to harness such horrors.

‘Where is he?’ Shadraith demanded. His consciousness was returning once again to the Navigator’s Tower, to his body, the figure known to his brothers as the Flayed Father.

*Beneath the surface,* Bar’ghul said. The daemon’s voice was distant, as though carried on a faint night wind. *Others are coming to claim him. They must not succeed.*

‘Others?’

*The Hunters in the Void. Your lost brothers.*

‘That means nothing to me. Do not speak in your senseless riddles, daemon.’

*The Pale Nomad and the rest of his mongrel, exiled kin. You have seen him with your foresight. You will know them when he arrives. Find the boy before he does.*

‘I will.’

*And when you do, bind me to him.*

‘And you will give me the powers you’ve promised.’

*Of course.*
Shadraith looked up at the crystalflex observation blister that constituted the tower’s domed ceiling. They had caught the *Imperial Truth* in the depths of the warp, two days out from the midway listening station at Gorgas. Shadraith’s ritual had successfully split the ship’s Geller field long enough for Bar’ghul’s daemonic horrors to overrun the crew. The Night Lords had taken possession of it and broken from the warp in time to check in at Gorgas with vox-recordings falsified through Shadraith’s dark arts. The trap had been baited and set.

Past the crystalflex the stars glittered, a firmament of shining silver on black velvet. Beyond them there was nothing. Here on the edge of the galaxy, among the haunted asteroids and dying stars of oblivion’s edge, the void yawned. What was out there, coming to Zartak through the eternal dark? Shadraith’s mind had been plagued by visions of inky black eyes and pale, dead flesh. Bar’ghul had faced this enemy before. That they had survived an encounter with the ancient daemon was evidence of the threat they posed.

He rose, warp scythe grasped in one gauntlet, the ancient flesh pinned to his armour crackling. He was needed on the surface. The final blow was poised, ready to be struck. Then the hunt for the boy could begin.

Down in the depths of the *White Maw*, the Greats slumbered. There were three of them, three Wandering Ancestors, their bones reduced to ossified cartilage, sealed away for eternity in the adamantium shells of their Contemptors. The ancient Dreadnoughts slept as they had done for the better part of a millennium, the frames of the war machines locked and inert upon a shingle-like dais at the centre of the half-flooded chamber.

Omekra-five-one-Kordi paid tribute to the slumbering warriors. He was one of six Carcharodons kneeling in the lapping water of the Bay of Silence, unarmoured, his plain robes soaked through. The vaulted chambers of the lower decks, carved from great blocks of craggy basalt, were filled with meltwater. Normally the vast room would have been frozen during void travel, the better to preserve its three venerable occupants. The imminent break into real space, however, meant that the thermal cycles had been restarted. Soon it would be possible to awake the Greats, if circumstances demanded. Kordi prayed they would not.

The Fourth Squad Tactical Marine focused his mind, seeking the inner silence that was a key part of every Carcharodon’s pre-battle ritual. All sought such solace. It reminded them of the emptiness of existence beyond the Void Father’s light, of the insignificance of the individual self. War was a frenzied beast, a primal thing of thunderous roars and howls, but it did not last forever. The silence had existed before it, and when war lay down and died the silence returned. The void was the only constant, the certainty of an eternal emptiness.

Kordi let his surroundings melt like the ice that had once entombed the chamber. The chill of the water lapping around his thighs faded, merging with the muted throb of the ship’s warp drives. The presence of the other Carcharodons kneeling either side of him slipped away too. They had all come here from disparate parts of the battle company, each drawn by personal needs. For his own part, Kordi was trying to forget. Flashes of a past life, of sandy shores and clear seas, would invade his consciousness at inopportune moments. It was always the same at the start of a new operation. Even after almost a century, the hypno-inductions and indoctrination drills hadn’t managed to erase all of the boy that had existed before the void had come for him.

Kordi hated the memories. They were only fragmentary shards, but they clashed with the sense of
purpose he now felt as part of the company. He had consulted Apothecary Tama numerous times, but there was no cure. The induction process had been imperfect, as it so often was with the Carcharodons’ limited resources. Kordi had been informed that, Void Father willing, his last few pre-initiation memories would fade with time. Until then communion in the calming presence of the Greats was the only thing that brought him focus.

Kordi let the silence roll over him, his eyes on the three great, unmoving pillars of metal. Their armoured shells shimmered with the murky lumen light that reflected back off the surrounding water, the flickering patterns at odds with their own stillness. The black helm lenses, set low in their armoured shoulders, were dull and lifeless, staring out over the shaven heads of the kneeling Carcharodons with corpse-like vacancy. In his mind’s eye Kordi saw the three creatures within, little more than torn amalgamations of white flesh thick with scar tissue and the denticle scabs caused by their aged, defective gene-seed. Their thoughts were faint and distant, swimming deep below surface consciousness, sliding blissfully through the dark, numbing waters of oblivion. Kordi sought to join them. He closed his eyes, his breathing deep and regular, feeling his heart slowing as his body relaxed in the icy waters.

The woman smiled at him, her arms open, the encouragement warm on her sun-kissed face. He took a few tottering steps. The old man beside him held out a liver-spotted hand, catching him before he fell. Laughter drifted across the golden sands.

Kordi’s eyes snapped open, a snarl twisting his thin lips. The memory blazed through the darkness of his mind like a comet, fiery and sudden. His secondary heart kicked in with an automatic muscle-jolt, and his fists clenched in the water.

The sound of his involuntary anger disturbed the other Carcharodons. Kordi could sense their displeasure, their bowed heads half turning in his direction. He let out a low, hissing breath from between his sharpened teeth, willing the sudden bloodlust that gripped him to subside. Regaining his silence, Kordi stood, nodded once in deference to the Greats, and backed out of the chamber.

The warp jump to real space was drawing close, and with it, the promise of slaughter. If oblivion couldn’t smother the memories of who he had once been, then Kordi would wash them away with blood.
Day 65, Kelistan local.

I have just received word via the astropathic choir from Lord Rozenkranz. He has approved the transferral, thank the God-Emperor. Apparently he trusts Gideos and his nightmares more than I do. I’m leaving Rochfort and the two lexmechanics to continue what little is left of the investigation here on Kelistan. I’m taking the rest of the retinue out to Zartak. Rozenkranz and Gideos have both been stressing haste. I’m more than happy to oblige. The faster I can get away from this mire of politicos and bureaucrats the better.

Signed,

Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Mem-bank entry log ends + + +
+ + + Thought for the Day: A small mind is easily filled with faith + + +
CHAPTER III

Arbitrator Norren snatched at his magnoculars and trained them on the distant treeline, twisting the focus ring. Something was definitely moving out there, just beyond the edge of Zartak’s jungles.

‘Lumens,’ he ordered over the vox. ‘Four point four degrees left of the north gate. Focus.’

The heavy spotter beams flashed on, lighting up a patch of jungle treeline. Nothing stirred.

Norren swept his magnoculars across the area, his free hand grasping the edge of the rockcrete parapet. He was one of a detail of twelve arbitrators assigned to the northern wall of the void shield defences, the command-and-control facility that edged the rim of Sink Shaft One. The shock squad that usually acted as the shield’s primary garrison had been requisitioned for an orbital operation, and the remaining security halved as the warden primary prepared to back them up. The void shield garrison was mostly concentrated on the sink-facing ramparts, above the warren structures and hanging bunk cages of the prison cells. There was no threat from outside, from the jungle encroaching on the northern perimeter.

Or so Norren had been told during the snap briefing. His instincts said otherwise. The heavy-duty lumen mounted on the parapet to his left picked out a ragged patch of fronds, but not the slinking shadow he’d seen earlier. Every monthly cycle a penal section would be requisitioned from the mines to hack back the jungle that was forever seeking to encroach upon the three-hundred-yard kill zone cleared around the edge of the sink shaft. The ground between the rockcrete wall and the nearest trees was bare and fallow, as undisturbed by movement as the jungle itself.

‘What is it?’ Wenston, commander of the north wall detail, hissed as he reached the arbitrator’s side.

‘Contacts?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Norren. Before he could elaborate further his head exploded, splattering Wenston’s black plate armour with brain tissue.

‘Throne,’ Wenston gasped, dropping down beneath the parapet. Norren’s headless corpse slumped next to him. There was a crack and a bang as the lumen blew, hit by another shot from somewhere out beyond the wall. The arbitrators suddenly found themselves in darkness.

‘Contact, contact,’ Wenston hissed into his vox-torq, unclamping his autorifle and flicking off the safety. ‘North wall. Unidentified shooter.’

The rockcrete above him shuddered as it began to take hits, and the boom of heavy calibre discharges reached him across the kill zone.

‘Multiple contacts,’ Wenston correct himself. ‘All forces be advised, the north wall of the void shield is under attack.’

‘Sir,’ Vox Chief Hestel began, leaning over the railing of the communications gantry.
'I heard,' Sholtz snapped. 'The shield is under attack.' All eyes in the Centrum Dominus turned to him. 'We’ve also received an activity transcript from the attendant master of the choristorium,’ the vox chief said. ‘The astropaths are badly agitated. It… it seems as though something’s coming. There’s been a disturbance in their dream-vigils.’ ‘Something means nothing, as far as we’re concerned,’ Sholtz said. ‘Until we have identification for those attackers at the north wall I will not trouble the subsector judges with alarmist reports.’ ‘The void shield garrison are taking heavy fire,’ Hestel said. ‘Whoever they are, they’re well armed.’

And made it planetside without being detected, went the unspoken follow-up. ‘The arbitrator containment section requisitioned from the void shield are already prepping in the shuttle bays,’ Sholtz said. ‘We’ve lost all contact with Macran and the shock squads that boarded the Imperial Truth. That’s a greater threat right now than some jungle scavengers. Tell the garrison at the void shield to get me a proper threat assessment, then I’ll consider whether they need reinforcing or not.’

‘I can’t, sir,’ said Hestel, hands darting over the rune panels and tuning nodes of the vox-bank. ‘What? Why not?’

‘I… I think we just lost contact with them as well.’

First Kill shrieked up over the parapets of the void shield base from their claw-holds in the sink shaft below its walls, the screaming of their jump packs and vox-maws blending with horrific, flawless savagery.

The plan was going well. Sink Shaft One’s most competent defenders had been drawn up into the death trap fashioned by Shadraith from the Imperial Truth. Cull and his Raptor retinue had teleported undetected into the depths of the old mine pit itself, and successfully scaled the exterior of the prison cell layers and hanging cages that constituted its sheer flanks. Fexrath and the two members of his Third Claw, who had been dropped in the heart of Zartak’s equatorial jungle forty-eight hours earlier, had struck the north side of the void shield defences right on time. The garrison, its numbers already reduced with the effort to pacify the supposed insurrection on board the Imperial Truth, had reacted to the sudden attack by scrambling most of the remaining arbitrators to the north wall facing the treeline. That left six men still on the south, overlooking the yawning darkness of the sink shaft.

Six men against the Prince of Thorns and his six ablest murderers. The Imperials all died clutching their ears, forced down onto their knees by the sudden, terrible shrieking of the Chaos Raptors. Cull beheaded one with a flick of his runesword, disappointed by the ease of the kill.

Sometimes there was no room for indulgences. Now was such a time.

The Night Lord’s victims had barely hit the bloody rockcrete before the Chaos Space Marines were launching themselves down towards the shield’s control hub. A void transmission spike lanced the air above the armoured building, a pillar of crackling power rods and lit-up transmitter nodes. An arbitrator was scrambling for the wheel lock of the hub’s south-facing blast door, stumbling and disorientated by the shock of the Night Lords’ aural assault. Cull landed on him from above, the spiked claws of his lower limbs piercing the man’s skull and snapping his spine.

He was first inside the hub. A rockcrete corridor ended in another set of blast doors, successfully sealed by the defenders. An alarm was clattering somewhere. A tech-adept, trailing his red robes,
stumbled out from a side door, and was casually bisected by Skorra’s lightning claws.

‘Breach,’ Cull ordered. Drac, First Kill’s demolitions expert, pushed his way to the fore of the retinue, priming a set of mag-locking melta charges as he went. He paused for a moment to assess the obstruction.

‘Mark XIV Bastion Pattern blast doors, manufactured in Adeptus Mechanicus facilities on… Gryphon IV? Or possibly Voss Prime. Primary locking clamps are either side of the central pin bolt, here and here.’

‘Warp take your damned chatter, Drac,’ Cull snapped. ‘Get it open.’

The Night Lord clamped his twin charges to the points he’d indicated and stepped off to the side. ‘Breaching,’ he said, and triggered the detonator device wired to his right vambrace. There was a split-second of vibration as the directional limpet charges broke down their molecular pyrum fuel, followed by a bass crump as they fired. The melta blasts, channelled directly into the heavy door, bored two molten holes in the adamantium plating. The whole frame shuddered, and a thin crack appeared where the two halves of the door had been sealed together.

‘Golgoth,’ Cull said. The largest member of First Kill shouldered his way past his brethren. With a grunt he slammed his charged lightning claws into the fracture in the doors, and began to heave. Disruptor energy crackled and sparked as the eight blades bit into the metal before they eventually found purchase. There was a low grating sound. Golgoth braced himself, head down, the ancient, patched servos of his customised power armour shrieking as they added to his already mighty strength. After a second of shuddering resistance, the auto-hinges kicked in. With the locks reduced to molten sludge, the heavy doors rolled open.

Beyond them, from behind cogitator banks and power coils, the tech-priests simply stared. ‘Kill them,’ Cull said. The retinue tore into the generator chamber. As they hacked at the screaming, defenceless machine-men, Cull stalked towards the central pillar of power coils, coolant valves and cog blocks. It was the void shield’s primary generator, and the throb of its core filled the air with static charge. The arco-lightning dancing across Cull’s armour snapped and crackled in electric sympathy.

He remembered. The palace in panic. His false father telling him to stay. Fleeing instead, through the halls and corridors, packed with terrified, screaming servants and bellowing royal guards. The rush of demented, reckless glee that had filled him. Bursting into the generator chamber. The old tech-priest, Ativus, trying to stop him. Ramming the ceremonial dagger given to him by his false father on his tenth name day through the old monster’s sole remaining organic eye. Taking his forged gene-key – the one given to him by his false mother, the item that stood for everything that he was not – and using it to begin the palace shield’s deactivation sequence. The shield had gone down minutes later.

That was when the servants had really started to scream.

The last tech-priest died, his pitiful wails cut short by Narx. The Night Lord was the youngest member of the retinue, and its most skilful blademaster – according to the ancient traditions of Nostramo, he held the title of Court Executioner.

‘Find the cogitator keys,’ Cull ordered him. ‘Quickly.’ He switched vox-channels with a blink-click, patching into the communications system of the Last Breath, high above.

‘Shenzar, are you prepared?’

‘Yes, my prince,’ replied the Terminator champion.
‘Stand by.’

First Kill were rifling through the gory remains of the shield hub’s operators, ripping apart blood-stained red robes and cracking open bionic plates. Narx managed to find the brass lever that switched off the alarms. After a few minutes, Drac turned up a memory swipe slate. Xeron found the second. Cull took them both and slid them into the central generator’s cogitator bank.

‘Give me a hand,’ he ordered. Golgoth scooped one severed limb up off the bloody floor, carrying it awkwardly in his heavy gauntlets. Cull pressed the palm to the scan screen and hit the override rune. The throbbing of the generator began to dip noticeably, fading like a dying heartbeat.

‘I can’t fully deactivate it without the correct codes, but I’ve put it into maintenance lockdown,’ Cull said. ‘That will reduce its strength enough for our purposes.’

‘Contacts on the auspex,’ Terron warned. ‘The rest of the garrison are inbound from the north wall.’

‘Much too little, and much too late,’ Cull said, and switched back to the Last Breath’s bridge vox-frequency.

‘Shenzar, now.’

The lumens in the Centrum Dominus went out. It took three and a half seconds for the emergency strips running along the floor to activate. By then the killing had already started.

There was a crack and a rush of displaced air. Five figures were suddenly standing in a circle in the room’s central cogitator pit. They had appeared like some dark conjurer’s trick, hulking warriors bedecked in thick plates of midnight-blue armour, the lightning crackling around their heavy gauntlets mimicking the splitting bolts painted across their breastplates and pauldrons. As the secondary lumens came online, they opened fire.

Sholtz dropped down behind a rank of cogitators, hands clasped to his ears as the room filled with the colossal boom of combi-bolters. A part of him understood that the void shield had been compromised, and that they were experiencing a teleporter attack. Beyond that, everything was raw, mindless panic.

The cogitators shuddered and sparked as they took a salvo of bolts. To his right he saw two augur operators go down, their torsos blown open. One of them was the boy who’d first fetched him from the situation room debriefing. Sholtz fumbled with his autopistol, managing to unlock it from his mag-belt.

‘Sir!’ wailed Augur Chief Tarl. Even as he made to dive into cover beside the warden, a bolt-round hit his right arm. The limb disappeared in a burst of blood and shattered bone, spinning him half round. His screaming lasted barely a second before another round struck his head, blowing away the left side of his face. He dropped.

‘Emperor’s wounds,’ stammered Sholtz, struggling with his pistol’s safety. The weapon was sticky with Tarl’s blood. He could hear Vox Chief Hestel screaming from the gantry, begging for mercy. There was a bang and the pleading stopped.

Suddenly everything was quiet. The warden went still, his heart hammering. The pool of blood spreading from Tarl’s remains reached his knees. He didn’t move. Heavy footfalls thumped across the deck, accompanied by the whir and grate of power armour.

‘What are you?’ stammered a voice. The warden recognised it as Sub-Warden Klenn. There was a crunch, and Klenn started screaming. It lasted for a long time.

The sounds of footsteps grew louder. A shadow fell across the warden primary. He looked up,
shaking, blinking through the sweat and blood. His autopistol clattered to the floor.

A giant stood over him, bedecked in spiked armour. Its helmet was crafted into a bestial snout with two short tusks, like those of a spineboar. Its eye-lenses glared a dark, bitter red. The winged skull embossed on its huge breastplate grinned madly.

As it reached for him with one great, spiked gauntlet, the warden primary finally found the breath to scream.

Something was coming. In all his years as attendant master of the choristorium on Zartak, Andreus Paul had never been so sure of something. His charges, four gamma-level astropaths, were more agitated than he’d ever seen them. They were spitting and grinding their toothless gums, pale, bare bodies writhing in the cords and cables that bound them into their psy-reactive transmission cradles. One would occasionally emit a brief, yelping shriek that echoed back from the chamber’s domed ceiling.

The choristorium was the link between Zartak and the Imperium, the one thread that bound the distant system – teetering on the edge of galactic oblivion – to the rest of mankind. Andreus had been responsible for overseeing the transmission and receipt of astropathic messages at the station for over four decades. In that time he’d experienced three mine uprisings and their suppressions, and more security breaches and smaller riots than he cared count. But never had he witnessed his charges exhibiting such primal, nameless terror. Two were experiencing nosebleeds. One had almost ripped himself free from his neural nodes, and Andreus had been forced to clamp him in place. It was as though the sedated psykers were attempting to physically tear themselves from their life-sustaining cradles and flee the chamber.

Andreus stood at his usual post, the readout lectern that monitored the vital signs and psyk levels of the astropaths. He activated another injection of suppressant stims into all four of them, cursing as R-88E tore away one of his subdermal mem-stabilisers.

‘Warp damn it,’ he snapped, and sent another situational jolt through the cogitator system to the Centrum Dominus. Something needed to be done, and fast. Much more stress and he’d be forced to request permission for a full sedation, and once that happened no messages would be reaching or leaving Zartak for at least twenty-four Terran-standard hours.

The jolt pinged back on the cogitator screen, unsent. A frown creased the attendant master’s wrinkled brow. With a tap of the rune key he sent it again. Again it reappeared. Was the system glitches?

A sound reached him, echoing along the corridors of the Precinct Fortress. A rapid, booming tattoo, like the beating of monstrously large bass drums.

Many of those who held Andreus’ rank had never heard such a noise before, living their whole lives as they did shielded away in their choristoriums. But the attendant master had experienced suppressions before. He’d heard screaming, rabid penal scum beating at the very doors of the astropathic chamber. The attack had only stopped with the arrival of the arbitrator combat reserve. The sound of gunfire had heralded the beginning of the suppression. And that was what Andreus knew he was hearing right now. Gunfire, echoing up from the bowels of the Precinct Fortress.

‘What in the name of the God-Emperor–’ he began to say. He got no further. One of the astropaths, MEL-1E, started to scream. It took him a few seconds to realise that the sounds were actually words. She was repeating them over and over, her head snapping back and forth, as though her sightless eye
sockets could see something in the shadows of the domed ceiling above her cradle.

‘Ave dominus nox! Ave dominus nox! Ave dominus nox!’
The archaic High Gothic phrase sent a chill down the attendant master’s spine. 

Hail, lord of night.

The astropath’s words degenerated back into pure, unadulterated screaming. The other three joined in, drowning out the reports of gunfire. Their vital signs were reaching critical. A warning screen began to flash red. The psyker activity levels were peaking too.

And they weren’t coming from the astropaths.

Andreus gasped as something shifted above him. He looked up to see the impossible. The shadows lurking about the ornate, gargoyle-studded brass dome of the choristorium were moving. They were physically invading the light cast by the lumen candelabra in the centre of the dome, bleeding and shifting down the walls in a manner that defied the possibilities of nature. The orbs began to go out, one by one.

One of the cogitator screens in front of Andreus cracked and burst in a shower of sparks. An alarm started to ring, lost amidst the wailing of the astropaths. The shadows continued to move, weaving and coalescing together to form shapes. Talons. Maws. Leering, snapping beast skulls.

With a howl torn from the warp itself, the darkness fell.

His charges died first. The shadows took them, wrapping them up in razored death. Their screams became gagged and choked as the darkness flowed into their gaping mouths, rending them open from the inside, setting their cradles rocking as they were savaged and torn from their cabling.

Andreus staggered back as dark, insubstantial talons reached for him, coiling like jagged smoke around his readout lectern. The astropaths had gone quiet, as had the distant gunfire. The only sounds now were his panicked breathing, and the slow drip of torn offal from the overflowing remains in the psy-crades.

‘Emperor deliver me,’ Andreus stammered, trying to grasp on to the familiar canticle-words. ‘S-shine down your guiding light, burn away all impurities, s-save–’

The shadows recoiled. Andreus missed a beat, staring. It was actually working. The God-Emperor himself was interceding on behalf of one of His faithful subjects. He took up the prayer once more, his voice firmer now.

‘From the darkness of the empyrean, deliver us. From heresy, deviancy, and mutation, deliver us. Against corruption and temptation, give us strength! All praise and glory unto you, O Master of Mankind!’

The shadows contracted all the way to the centre of the choristorium, twisting as though in pain. Andreus glared at them triumphantly, and drew a breath for the final verse. None could stand before true faith.

The shadows rushed together, as though sucked into a vacuum. The writhing darkness formed into a definable shape, like a figure slowly emerging from a thick swirl of dark fog. Andreus’ words turned bitter in his mouth as the last strands hardened into gleaming, dark battleplate.

A being stood in the centre of the choristorium, woven from the murderous darkness. It was at least seven feet tall, bedecked in power armour and a great, horned helm. It held a long scythe in one spiked gauntlet, wreathed in an eerie blue luminescence. Worst of all was what covered the thing’s armour plates – flayed skins, many of them cracked with age, all sewn together and pinned in place with black iron spikes. Andreus could see shrivelled arms, legs and torsos, and gaping, wide-eyed
face-flesh, hung like grotesque masks across the thing’s breastplate and pauldrons. The very air around the figure vibrated and crackled with dark energy. Andreus’ cogitator screens had all shorted out.

The nightmare warrior advanced towards the attendant master, its stride implacable. Andreus stumbled back, tripping on the hem of his green robes. ‘Please,’ he stammered, desperately seeking something, anything, that would halt the flesh-draped monster. ‘Please, no.’

With a contemptuous swipe, the flayed giant sent the lectern between them crashing across the chamber. Shorn power coils sparked and snapped. Andreus pulled himself up onto his knees, weeping and shaking.

The giant bent over him, his shadow obscuring the last light of the remaining lumen orb. It reached out with its free hand, slowly caressing Andreus’ brow. The attendant master flinched as the thorns studding the nightmare’s gauntlet tugged at his flesh. It spoke.

‘You are alone now, old man. Are you afraid?’

Andreus whimpered. A damp patch was spreading through his lower robes. The nightmare’s grip tightened fractionally.

‘You needn’t be. If you had managed to get a warning away before I butchered your blind slaves, I may have taken revenge on you. As it is, I don’t have the time to flay you. You’ll die quickly. You should thank me for that.’

Andreus moaned. The nightmare clamped its hand over his head.

‘Thank me,’ it ordered.

‘Th-thank you,’ Andreus managed to stammer.

‘Ave dominus nox,’ intoned the nightmare. It crushed his skull.

Two hours to warp jump. Company Master Sharr allowed the retinal scanner of the cryo-chamber to take its reading, remaining still and unblinking. There was a chime as it cleared him for entry. Disengaging locks clanged, followed by a click-click-click as the heavy blast doors – stamped with the Carcharodons oceanic predator crest – rolled backwards.

The lighting beyond was even murkier than elsewhere on board the White Maw. It barely reached the vaulted stone ceiling of the cryo-chamber, and gleamed weakly from the brass ribs that encased the upright tanks lining the walls.

As Sharr entered there was a whirring noise. A dozen hardwired combat servitors, spread across the wide room, turned to track him with their weapons. The Company Master ignored them, and after a moment they jerked back to their original stances like freakish marionettes, their threat-assessment scans complete. The robed attendants scurrying through the chamber’s shadows bowed. The room was silent bar the throb of the energy coils snaking across the deck underfoot.

Around Sharr his brothers slumbered. There were forty in all, half of his company, secreted in the forecastle of the strike cruiser’s armour-plated prow. They slept in individual tanks, their bare, pale bodies hooked up to vitae monitors and nutrient feeds and suspended in clear preservation fluids. Their lower faces were muzzled with respirator masks. It was how most of the Chapter’s battle-brothers spent a great deal of their time in voidspace.

Existing in the lifeless dark beyond the stars was no easy thing. The Carcharodon Astra had been roaming it for ten millennia, cut off from all contact with the wider Imperium. The normal avenues for
recuperation and replenishment utilised by Space Marine Chapters were rarely open to them. The suspended hibernation afforded by the cryo-tanks provided the Chapter with a method of rest between combat operations and training cycles, and helped preserve their strength. Typically, it was the younger brethren and initiates who utilised the tanks the most, overcoming deep void sickness through the meditational activities of their newly implanted sus-an membrane. Older Carcharodons like Sharr tended to find it increasingly difficult to rest, even through the longer voyages. It was said Te Kahurangi hadn’t used his tank for many centuries. Sharr could believe it.

The end of the chamber was dominated by five larger tanks. Unlike the other Carcharodons, their occupants were fully clad in their war-plate. Even inactive, they were an imposing sight – five Terminators of the Red Brethren, warriors of Lord Tyberos’ own First Company.

The central tank contained the commander of the detachment. His name was Kahu. Like the other Terminators, his helmet was mag-locked to his belt, and his lower face muzzled by a respirator cowl. His pale features were a complex network of ritual exile scars, the markings of a truly bloodied warrior. A leather cord hung with the vicious incisors of half a dozen different predators was lashed round his gorget. Even dormant he exuded raw, savage threat.

Sharr had served alongside Kahu before. He knew the warrior’s reputation was well founded. In battle his violence was implacable, ceasing only when the enemy had been utterly annihilated. He embodied the Chapter’s savage relentlessness. He was one of Lord Tyberos’ enforcers, assigned to the roaming Battle Companies to ensure they followed the overall directives of the Chapter and the Nomad Predation Fleet.

There was no doubt in Sharr’s mind. Kahu was with the company not to supplement its fighting power or provide tactical advice. He was present to ensure the Red Tithe was carried out in full. He was the eyes and ears of Lord Tyberos, and his orders would be to allow nothing to interfere with the operation’s primary objective.

Most of the Red Brethren, Kahu included, had been serving the Chapter longer than Sharr. The knowledge did not make his new appointment as Company Master and Reaper Prime any easier to bear. He watched Kahu slumbering for a while, wondering what bloody imaginings were soothing his torpid thoughts. Eventually, he signalled to the serf attendants that waited on his orders.

‘Wake them,’ he said to them, glancing around the chamber at the rest of the demi-company. ‘All of them.’

They started with the Red Brethren. Preset cogitator programs worked dashes of discord into the hibernating minds of the veteran Carcharodons, teasing their deep, drifting thoughts up towards surface consciousness. The temperature of the amniotic-like fluid in the tanks was raised. A pulse began to send increasingly violent tremors through each tank’s framework. Valves in the deck beneath slid open, draining the preservation fluids. The levels lowered slowly as Sharr watched, eventually reaching the upper back plating of the Terminators, and then their scarred scalps. As it was reduced down towards their skull-and-lightning engraved breastplates, Kahu’s eyes snapped open.

They were equal parts black and pitiless. Sharr met them without flinching. His own gaze, he knew, was no different.

Slowly, the Terminator brought his hand up and broke the seal on his respiration mask, pulling it away from his tattooed face. Its removal revealed a vicious, grinning maw, full of razor-sharp teeth. Sharr did not return the mirthless expression.

The last of the liquid gargled down the drainage valve. A light set into scrimshawed skull tokens
above the tanks winked green. There was a hiss as the thick crystalflex plates slid back into the recesses of their brass-ribbed flanks. The Red Brethren stepped out as one, and the deck shuddered.

‘Kia orrae, void brother,’ Kahu said in his serpentine, dead voice, pressing his skull close to Sharr’s in ritual greeting. *Well met.* Sharr returned the gesture, stomaching his discomfort at Kahu’s baleful presence.

‘Kia orrae,’ he replied. ‘It is time for our final preparations, brother. We are two hours away from system re-entry. Te Kahurangi believes the traitors may have already struck. They will need to be destroyed before the Tithing can begin.’ Kahu’s vicious grin didn’t falter.

‘A truly Red Tithe then, Brother Sharr. Welcome home.’

‘The venerable Chief Librarian believes his visions are being realised,’ Sharr added, ignoring the jibe. Around him the other members of the slumbering company were waking, stepping out from their tanks to be robed by the attendants. Many of them, especially the younger ones, moved sluggishly, tense with cryo-cramps and the stomach-churning weakness that came with prolonged void sickness. Soon their pale, dripping, scarred flesh would be death-plated and red-scarred, and the haunting dreams of half-sleep’s depths would be forgotten amidst the thunder of battle.

‘Old Te Kahurangi has his visions,’ Kahu said dismissively. ‘Nothing can be allowed to impede the Tithing. I do not need to remind you of your new duties as Reaper Prime, nor of the importance of the Tithe to the future of the Chapter.’

Sharr sensed the black eyes of many of his brothers on Kahu and the Red Brethren. They were outsiders, what the Chapter called Not of the Shiver, their brutal presence disrupting the natural currents that ran beneath the surface of the Third Company. Sharr held Kahu’s unsettling gaze.

‘You do not need to remind me. Te Kahurangi’s mission will not interfere. The Chapter will be replenished with the meat of this world.’

Kahu nodded, his heavy gauntlet smacking Sharr on the shoulder.

‘I am looking forward to this one, brother. My void dreams have spoken of a great and glorious bloodletting. It has been too long since we faced a worthy foe.’

‘I would not call these traitor scum worthy,’ Sharr said, turning away from the Terminator. ‘And besides, you said it yourself. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with the Tithe.’

The shock squad filed onto the bridge of the *Imperial Truth*, twitching for targets. It was clear they were too late. Nothing lived on the command deck, and the butchery didn’t look like the work of escaped convicts.

‘Primary, we have a situation,’ Macran said into her vox. There was still no response from the Precinct Fortress. The boarding team spread out, shields and shotguns up, probing the shadows.

And the bodies. There were plenty of those, and none of them fully intact. Whoever had killed the bridge crew, they’d been in bloody, slaughterous mood. Even a sub-warden with as little experience as Rannik knew the vicious marks of tearing, decapitation and disembowelment could not have been the work of penal escapees. Something far stronger and even more violent had done this.

Nor were the bodies fresh. The bridge stank of decay. They looked at least a week old, their pale skin tainted, the blood dark and crusted.

‘Focus, arbitrators,’ Macran snapped over the link. ‘I want this place locked down and secured.’

The squad split into fire teams and began to explore the bridge’s inactive cogitator pews, oculus stands, command dais and augur arrays. Rannik, outside of the squad’s usual structure, found herself
without a partner. She headed towards the only section not being immediately probed by the arbitrator teams, the primary communications pit at the foot of the command dais.

She dropped down among the banks of machinery, boots crunching on the crusted decking plates. She realised immediately that something was wrong. The remains of the bridge’s vox-staff lay butchered and rotting in the bottom of the pit. The actual vox-systems themselves, though, were still whirring. Activation lights winked, and the faint crackle of static hissed from hooked-up receiver grilles and mic headsets.

But that was not the worst thing about the pit. The worst thing was the body pinned to the primary transmission hub.

Rannik approached slowly, shotgun aimed. There was a terrible, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Something was nightmarishly wrong.

The body had been spread-eagled across the vox-hub, its head bowed, pinned in place with black nails that bore scraps of parchment Rannik didn’t want to look at. For some unfathomable reason, cables had been torn directly from the hub’s circuitry and surgically grafted into the corpse’s larynx and thorax, and a transmitter node was rammed into its mouth. The body was still half clad in the tattered remains of a Navy captain’s uniform. Rannik realised she was probably looking at Van Hoyt, the very officer who’d been addressing them barely an hour before via the vox on Zartak. She stopped in front of the defiled corpse, trying to fathom how such a thing could be possible.

Van Hoyt’s head snapped up. His eyes were open, raw and wide with pain. He was still alive.

He screamed. The sound tore through the vox, a distorted shriek that made everyone on the bridge flinch.

Rannik fired. It was a reflex action, born from panic. Van Hoyt’s head vanished in a mist of blood and bone. The blasted ends of the wiring that had been inserted into his flesh snapped free.

‘Report!’ shouted Macran. ‘What in the God-Emperor’s name was that?’

‘No contact,’ Rannik said. She was amazed to hear that her voice sounded so utterly calm. Her whole body was shaking, and she still had the shotgun levelled at Van Hoyt’s twitching, headless corpse. ‘Repeat, no contact.’

‘Then what in the name of the Emperor did you just shoot?’

‘The captain, I think.’

There was a thud as Macran dropped down into the pit next to Rannik. She forcefully lowered the Vox Legi and pushed herself into her field of vision.

‘What happened to him?’ she demanded, gesturing at the defiled corpse.

‘There was something wrong,’ Rannik said. ‘I can feel it. I know you can too. No word from Zartak, from the other boarding teams, no survivors. Not even any savlar. We need to get out of here.’

Macran didn’t get a chance to reply. From the shadows of the bridge’s rafters, clawed death dropped, chainblades shrieking.

The arbitrators were caught spread out, half deafened and disorientated by the sudden cacophony of long-dead victims. The howling giants showed no mercy. In a matter of seconds the shock squad’s corpses were joining those of the bridge crew.

One of the towering monsters fell directly down into the communications pit behind Macran. She turned, shotgun coming up, but the nightmare swiped the weapon aside with the flat of its chainsword. It snatched her by the gorget with its other hand and slammed her into the side of the nearest vox-set.

Rannik’s shotgun was up, her body moving on panic-fuelled instinct, but her finger hesitated on the
trigger. If she fired she’d hit them both.

‘Rannik…’ Macran snarled, managing to make eye contact. Then the monster hit her. Its gauntlet punched through her skull, pulping it against the vox and denting the metal beneath. The master-at-arms slumped, leaving a halo of blood where her head had been.

The monster turned to Rannik. Red lenses gleamed wickedly from its fanged skull helm. It loomed well over a foot above her, its armoured form filling the space between the vox-banks.

Something in Rannik’s head told her to cower. It told her to drop her weapon and go down on her face amidst the stale blood and rotten flesh, and beg this nightmare from the shadows for mercy. It told her to do anything she could to stop it from tearing apart her body and claiming her soul.

Instead she screamed, and opened fire. The first blast of the heavy shotgun struck it square in the breastplate. It rocked slightly. Rannik racked the slide and fired again. The monster spread both arms, as much as the pit would allow, intentionally exposing itself.

She emptied seven shells into it. The Vox Legi clicked, its ammunition drum empty. The nightmare was still standing, arms wide. Its breastplate was buckled, pitted and smoking, and dark blood oozed from the cracks.

It laughed.

Rannik dropped the shotgun. A part of her mind, still obeying the instincts drilled into her by her progenium upbringing, told her to reach for her autopistol. She was too slow. With a speed that belied its bulk, the monster cracked the skull pommel of its chainsword into Rannik’s helmet. She was dimly aware of hitting the deck, falling into the embrace of old, cold corpses. Her vision swam. She could see Macran’s body, slumped against a vox-bank. A fist closed around the edge of her breastplate, dragging her back up. Another tore her broken helmet from her head. She felt her legs kicking air. Her eyes were level with the nightmare’s. Their soulless red glare burned into her.

‘You will do,’ rasped the monster.

Her vision went blank, and she knew no more.

Vorfex hefted the body of the Imperial over his shoulder and turned towards the bridge doors.

‘The Flayed Father will want more than just one,’ Kurthen remonstrated as the Raptor bent to wipe gore from his chainblade.

‘This isn’t for old Shadraith,’ Vorfex said. ‘Cull wants one alive. He needs a survivor down on the surface. Someone who knows what happened. When help arrives for them, we need the reinforcements to go where we want.’

The urge to kill the scrawny Imperial was almost overwhelming. Unlike the rest of the humans, this one had done damage. Of course, Vorfex had let the human empty its shotgun into him, more to prove his own strength in front of the rest of the Claw than anything else. The price of his arrogance amounted to a badly scarred breastplate and three minor penetration wounds. He dismissed the damage icons on his visor display. The injuries had already clotted.

He stamped through the slaughtered remains of the boarding team and left the bridge, taking a grav lift down to the shuttle bays. The  
*Imperial Truth*  was in complete darkness now, its shadows echoing with distant screaming. The crew and the boarding parties were all dead, as were most of the thousands of convicts crammed into the prison holds. The ritual slaughterings of the past week had thinned the barrier between reality and the warp on board the vessel, and allowed the daemons of Shadraith’s patron, Bar’ghul, to manifest. Their presence disgusted Vorfex, but the fickle creatures of
the empyrean had their uses. Without Shadraith’s warp magic it would have been impossible for the Night Lords to imitate the captain’s voice and lure a detachment of the Imperials away from their planetside fortress. They would need such talents again before the end.

Cull was clever, Vorfex would give him that much. Clever, and good with his blade. It wouldn’t help him though. He was too ambitious and too arrogant, even by the standards of the VIII. A warrior his age had no right leading a warband in the Long War. Unlike the less patient Claw champions, Vorfex had been pondering Cull’s downfall for some time. He’d found an ally in the Terminator champion, Shenzar. The harvest would offer them the perfect opportunity to seize control. All it needed was careful timing.

Vorfex carried the unconscious human down to the shuttle bay. There the ship’s salvation pods still remained, intact. He strapped the Imperial into one, ignoring the moans as consciousness returned. The deck underfoot shuddered. Vorfex suspected it was the *Imperial Truth*’s starboard battery, opening fire on the Imperial Navy cutter that had brought the boarding parties into orbit. Down on the surface he knew that even now his brothers would be butchering the disorientated, scattered remnants of Zartak’s pathetic garrison. The time for concealment and subterfuge was over, and the games would soon be starting. The Stalk, the Terror, the Kill. Vorfex was eager to join them. The future of the warband hung in the balance.

He punched the directional coordinates given to him by Cull into the salvation pod’s inner control bank, locked and sealed the hatch, and began its external launch protocols. Then, without another glance, he headed back to the bridge. If the bold little Imperial survived re-entry, they would meet again. The thought dulled the already distant ache of Vorfex’s wounds, and caused a smile to tug at his pale lips.

Then the games really would begin.
Day 75, warp time variance approximate.

Gideos is dead. I wasn’t there when it happened. Worren was. He was covered in brains when I arrived in the scrying chamber. That was all that was left of poor Gideos after he heard the mortis-cry. God-Emperor only knows what happened to the rest of him.

Something terrible is occurring on Zartak. The astropath attached to the Saint Angelica swears by it. He seems to be a venerable psyker of some experience, yet even he was half mad and bleeding from every orifice when I saw him last. No wonder young Gideos popped the way he did. What could have caused a soul-shriek of such horrific power?

We’re going to be the first to reach Zartak. I’d still rather be doing this than playing mediator back on Kelistan though. My thoughts go out to Rochfort. His duties there will teach him patience, if nothing else.

Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.
Amon Cull stepped into the Centrum Dominus of the Precinct Fortress, boots disturbing the pool of blood that had spread across the floor. The lumen strips were back on, lighting up a scene of carnage. It brought a smile to the prince’s thin lips.

Shenzar and his Terminator brethren had always taken a commendably direct approach when it came to butchering cattle. The control centre’s staff lay scattered haphazardly across the floor or draped across their stations, bodies blown apart by point-blank combi-bolter fire or reduced to a wide splattering of gore by the blows of power fists, mauls and lightning claws. Cull’s weakening of the void shield had allowed the veteran Night Lords to teleport directly into the Precinct Fortress’ nerve centre. It had always been the best way, Cull thought. Rip out the heart, and everything dies.

The sounds of bolter fire reached him from elsewhere in the fortress. A few more rats being blasted from their holes. Behind Cull, First Kill stood in silence, their own blades and armour still bloody from the night’s work at the void shield generator.

‘You took prisoners for our Talon brothers?’ Cull asked Shenzar, who was now standing in the shadows at the edge of the Centrum Dominus.

‘Of course, my prince. They have begun to nest in the primary chapel. They seem content, for now.’

‘And the garrison commander?’

‘Also alive. He is in the chapel. His thoughts are being flayed by the Talons even as we speak.’

‘We will need him alive should we require more falsified Imperial communications,’ Cull said. ‘In the same way we used the ship’s captain.’

‘I will visit him personally to ensure the Talons do not grow too restless with his flesh.’

The astropaths are dead,’ said Shadraith. Cull had not been aware of the sorcerer’s arrival, but he had long ago stopped showing any surprise when it came to the Flayed Father’s silent manifestations.

‘How loudly did they scream?’ Cull asked, not deigning to look at his old mentor. Instead he bent to inspect a cogitator viewscreen, cracked by the shrapnel from a bolt that had taken off a dead Imperial’s arm.

‘Loudly enough,’ Shadraith said. ‘It will have disturbed the mind of every psyker in the nearest systems. They will not be able to fully ascertain the source until we have long gone. Zartak’s one tie to the Imperium has been severed.’

‘Then we can begin,’ Cull said. He gestured to Shenzar. ‘Signal the Last Breath. Have thralls from the bridge brought down here. These systems will need repairing. They can take whatever parts they require from the Imperial Truth. And find more prisoners for the Talons. We must slake their thirst until we need them. If we need them.’ Shenzar’s horned helm nodded once.

Cull returned his gaze to the viewscreen. The brutal firepower of Shenzar’s Terminators had left...
much of the room’s equipment damaged. The vast screen bank occupying one of the centre’s upper tiers would need to be repaired – roughly a third of the monitors that recorded the footage from the pict-feeds throughout Sink Shaft One were cracked or blank. The remainder showed the warren-like interior of every single prison cell, hanging cage and mining sub-shaft on a constant, shifting loop. Cull took a moment to stare at the mute, grainy black-and-white activities of the thousands of inmates. The vast majority were still locked to their shackle bunks. Many were staring at their cell hatches, or seemed lost in angry or panicked discussion. All had heard the shrieks of First Kill as they slaughtered the defenders of the void shield, and many would have caught the sounds of gunfire echoing from the Precinct Fortress. Cull wondered if they understood that their salvation was at hand. He suspected at least one did.

‘My prince, the override systems have been secured,’ crackled the voice of Kail, leader of the Fifth Claw, over the vox. ‘And the rest of my Claw are in position.’

‘Good,’ Cull said, eyes still on the prisoners. ‘Release them.’

The alarms had switched off as abruptly as they’d started. Skell’s ears ached. He shifted in his bunk, trying to slow his breathing and force down the sickly sense of dread that filled his guts.

‘What now?’ Dolar asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Skell said. ‘I don’t know what’s happening.’

But he did know. Not in a definable sense, not in a way that he could explain. But he understood. They’d come for him, just as the voice had said they would. The things that had terrorised his dreams had manifested into reality.

‘I heard gunfire,’ Dolar said slowly. ‘From above.’

‘They’ll have killed the lawmen,’ Skell said.

‘Who are they?’

‘I told you, I don’t know.’

Dolar shook his head.

A buzz made them both jump. There was a thud and a clatter as their magnicles deactivated and fell away. They looked at each other. Dawn shift was still at least an hour away. Nobody was ever auto-unchained during night cycle.

‘What—’ Dolar began, but got no further. With a squeal of hinges, their cell hatch ground open, its locking system remotely disengaged.

For a second everything was silent. Skell stared at the open hatch, at the walkway beyond, and the far side of Sink Shaft One beyond that, separated by the plummeting chasm of the shaft. The cell hatches and hanging cage grates across from them were open too. Every single one, lining the dozens of levels of the circular prison, had been unlocked.

He heard the first whoops, swiftly melding together into cheering that echoed up and down the shaft. Jared, Glof, Rowlen and Piets, the occupants of the cells either side of theirs, were yelling their own delight. Nedzy and Hollis, in the cell below, were leaping with excitement.

They were free. All of them. And that realisation terrified Skell more than anything else that had happened that night.

It was chaos. Sink Shaft One housed almost a hundred thousand penal convicts. When Kail of the Fifth Claw cracked the Precinct Fortress’ locking systems and automatically opened their cells and cages, every single one saw hope for the first time in a long time. The fear and uncertainty that had settled
over the prison mine like a shroud was snatched away in a few moments of stunned disbelief.

Tens of thousands of inmates made their bid for freedom. Few stopped to think about what was happening. The realisation that others were seizing the moment drove them all out of their cells and cages and onto the walkways ringing the inside of the mineshaft. For a few mad, precious minutes it looked as though the greatest penal breakout in the history of the segmentum was under way.

The killing began almost immediately. The walkways hadn’t been constructed to take the whole of Zartak’s primary prison population at the same time. Men were thrust out over the railings and into the abyss of the shaft, whether by design or simply because of the press of frenzied, grimy bodies. Their individual screams were easily lost in the uproar now reverberating from the towering sides of the great pit. Others were grabbed and flung over the edge, as gang rivalries reignited and old scores were swiftly settled.

With not a lawman in sight, the mob made for the surface. The grav lifts had all been deactivated, so they packed the stairways. Those on the highest levels, who had been first out of their hanging cages, swiftly regretted their haste. At the top of each flight they discovered a single figure waiting – a giant, armoured in lightning, as unmovable as the arbitrator statues that flanked the adamantium gatehouse of the precinct.

That was when the real killing began.

Jarq’s Eighth Claw laughed as they opened fire on the crush that filled the stair shafts. Their bolters annihilated the foremost prisoners, blasting scrawny, dust-caked bodies to steaming chunks of meat and bone. The thunderclap report of their weapons hammered down the shafts, deafening and disorientating those behind as they continued to push upwards. The Night Lords added the sounds of the recorded sufferings from past victims over their vox-grilles to the screams of those being cut down, creating a sonic assault that filled Sink Shaft One with echoes of purest terror.

Some prisoners snatched makeshift weapons, breaking open tool crates or picking up chunks of mine debris. It made no difference. Those prisoners in front tried to go back while those behind, not knowing where the sounds were coming from, tried all the harder to push forwards. Men were crushed and trampled, their bodies broken against the rockcrete walls or plasteel rungs.

The Eighth Claw – the youngest and bitterest in the whole warband – began to advance, firing as they went. In stairwell 8-19 Jaggen disobeyed orders to conserve ammunition and opened up with his flamer, cackling manically over the vox as he flooded the shaft with liquid fire. In stairwell 7-5, Corvax drew his chainswords and leapt into the fleeing prisoners with an ear-bursting roar. His revving weapons and armoured bulk tore, eviscerated and crushed everything he touched, smashing dozens of bodies back down the way they’d come.

It was a massacre, and it was just the beginning.

The sounds of slaughter reached Skell and Dolar as they reached the walkway beyond their cell hatch. Convicts were scrambling past, yelping and jeering, still unaware of what was happening further up the sink shaft. Dolar was dragging Skell by the collar of his grey overalls.

‘We got to go,’ the older inmate shouted over the tumult. When the cell hatch had first slid open, Skell had stayed rooted to his shackle bunk for what felt like hours. Eventually Dolar had hauled him to his feet.

‘You’re actin’ crazy, Skell! Let’s get out of here!’

‘Dolar, we can’t! Just trust me!’
‘Yeah we can! I ain’t staying!’

By the time the monsters made it to the bottom of the stairs and into Sink Shaft One’s prison complex, the tide had finally turned. Even the most desperate of the former prisoners had realised that something terrible was descending from above. They stampeded in the opposite direction, like a grox herd driven wild by the scent of a predator.

The only way out was down.

‘Not the stairs,’ Skell said as they were carried along by the press. He planted his hand on Dolar’s shoulder, urging strength into his command. Dolar’s eyes became glazed as he pushed and shoved at those around them.

‘They’re all dying up there,’ Skell said. ‘Into the mines, now.’

‘Skell!’ bawled a voice. It was Argrim. Skell half turned in the press to see the big smuggler gesturing at him from half a dozen yards back, ruddy face contorted with anger, his short red hair spiked with sweat and grime.

‘You little runt!’ he shouted. ‘I’m coming for you, witch!’

‘Dolar, move!’ Skell ordered, impelling him again. Dolar drove himself forwards into the flood of bodies, single-mindedly forging a path for Skell to follow. Argrim and his accomplices, the wiry kleptomaniac Relly and the one-eyed gangland enforcer Soran, were left struggling angrily against the wild, dirty tide.

‘Take a left,’ Skell ordered, hand still on his cellmate’s back. Dolar stumbled but kept going, turning through a mine subway hatch instead of carrying on towards stairwell 10-1. Abruptly the press of bodies receded. If they wanted to stay alive, they had to stay ahead.

‘Go for the ratholes,’ he told Dolar. The convict was stumbling, shaking his head. The effects of Skell’s willpower were wearing off, and he didn’t have the strength to drive another spike of determination into Dolar’s mind. His own skull was throbbing more painfully than ever, and his nose felt blocked.

‘W-why are we here?’ Dolar moaned. ‘Why are we going down?’

‘Because they’re killing everyone who’s going up,’ Skell said. ‘Just follow me.’

He took the lead. The mine sub-surface was one of the primary routes into the main works, a trio of loco rail tracks that acted as an arterial lane for the numerous mines that branched away from Sink Shaft One’s prison cell blocks, cages and oubliettes. It was broad and high, packed with sturdy girder ribs, studded with devotional seals and bright, hardwired lumen orbs. It had been built by the original colonists, a far cry from the Burrow’s shabby, dilapidated outer workings. Skell took Dolar past the dusty servitor-manned loco rail carriages and on down the tracks, their feet crunching in the gravel. The uproar reverberating through the sink shaft gradually faded, until all they could hear was the buzzing of the lumens, their footfalls and heavy, panting breaths.

Eventually the slowly curving tunnel revealed a rockcrete platform. Skell clambered onto it and helped Dolar up after him. The dust-caked yellow block letters over the entrance read SUB MINE 16.

‘Masks,’ Skell said, unhooking one of the rudimentary filtration kits from the rack next to the entrance. The microscopic adamantium dust that shrouded the lower works was deadly – ironlung killed more of the penal workers each production cycle than all the machine accidents, cave-ins and gang murders combined.

Skell buckled the respiration mask in place and took a slow, sucking breath. The stink of old rubber and someone else’s stale sweat invaded his senses. He tossed a second mask to Dolar.
‘Hurry,’ he said. He was trying to act confident, trying to look as though he knew what he was doing. Trying to pretend his hands weren’t shaking and his body wasn’t slick with cold sweat. He felt sick. He could hardly breathe through the mask’s cloying, sucking embrace.

Dolar fitted his mask in place and followed Skell as he pushed through the plastek flaps and into the sub-mine tunnel. Here the works started to become less permanent. The cutting had a single track for hauling raw adamantium ore up to the rail line. The beams that supported the walls and ceiling were scarred plasteel, and the lumen orbs were intermittent and dim. The devotional texts and daily reminders that perforated the more established tunnels were now few and far between. Dolar slowed as their footing became less certain.

‘We have to keep going,’ Skell urged him again. ‘We don’t have much time.’ As though to underscore his words, sounds echoed down the tunnel from the way they’d come – screams, and gunfire. *Keep going*, urged a thought that was not his own. He pushed Dolar on.

‘They took a left,’ Argrim shouted, shoving Soran and Relly through the mine hatch. ‘I saw the big oaf’s head above the crowd.’

The sounds of screaming and gunfire were getting closer, and suddenly sticking with the mob didn’t seem like such a good idea. Argrim had made a career from following his gut, and right now that instinct was telling him to break from the pack. Besides, when had Skell’s predictions been wrong before? Wherever he was going, that was where Argrim wanted to be.

It was quiet in the sub-surface tunnel. The convicted smuggler scanned the idle loco carriages they passed, wary of an ambush. He’d underestimated the boy yesterday, and not for the first time. He wouldn’t do so again.

‘Got a trail,’ Relly said, gesturing at the gravel between the track lines. Two sets of footprints led off down the subway tunnel, side by side. Argrim nodded.

‘Let’s go.’

Cull watched the carnage on the undamaged viewscreens, fighting the urge to descend into the sinkhole and join the unrestrained bloodshed. Around him thralls from the *Last Breath* were labouring hard to refit the rest of the viewing bank, attending to the snapped orders and tech-psalms being intoned by one of the ship’s hooded hereteks.

‘It is time I addressed the cattle,’ Cull said to the Dark Mechanicum priest overseeing the installation. The cowled figure nodded, its flesh-webbed mechandendrils recoiling back from the Prince of Thorns. The Night Lord held out a gauntlet, and the creature passed him a vox-horn. He raised it to his helm, and paused to take a breath.

‘Murderers of Zartak. Thieves, traitors, blasphemers, blackmailers, smugglers and recidivists. Brothers. Rejoice, one and all.’

Cull’s voice was broadcast via the Precinct Fortress’ uplinks across the automated systems of Sink Shaft One, the cutting words of the Night Lord echoing through vox-bays, over intercoms and across labour gang work channels.

‘Rejoice, for we have come for you. The Eighth Legion, the Night Lords, sons of Konrad Curze. We are the instruments of your liberation. Even now the last of the corpse-worshipping lapdogs who have suppressed and maltreated you are being slaughtered. You are free men once more, at liberty to do whatever you will.’

He paused for a moment, letting the echoes of his voice fade away through the planet’s dark
underworld.

‘In return for your liberty, we ask only that you show us your abundant talents. House Cull’s twelfth harvest has begun. We seek the greatest among your ranks to join us in the Long War against the false Imperium that has enslaved you. Strength, power, riches, immortality, we offer it all, and more. Now is the chance for the true killers to step forward. Now is the time for the strong to take what is rightfully theirs. We shall be watching.’

Cull nodded and the heretek cut the link. He returned his gaze to the viewscreens. Driven back by the butchery unleashed by Eighth Claw, the hordes of escaped prisoners had turned from the stairwells and were instead pouring into the mines of the Burrow, flooding it like a sea of blind, mangy vermin. Cull felt satisfaction flare – it would soon be time for the next phase.

Shadraith’s sibilant voice interrupted his thoughts, and he grimaced.

‘I take my leave,’ said the sorcerer. ‘The boy is somewhere below, attempting to flee. I can feel it. He must be found.’

‘As you will, Flayed Father,’ Cull said, not turning from the flickering display screens. ‘Once you’ve retrieved him, bring him here.’

‘I will,’ Shadraith replied, casting a lingering glare at Cull’s back. ‘Of that you can be sure.’

Dolar wouldn’t go any further. Skell cursed him.

‘If we stop they’ll catch us,’ he snapped. His cellmate just shook his head, eyes wide above the seal of his respirator mask. He was terrified.

They’d made it as far as burrow shaft 28. The claustrophobic dirt-and-rock corridor was one of hundreds of close mining seams, a long, low space scarred by decades of lascutters and pick heads. It was the edge of the Burrow. The only thing that dug further and deeper were the ratholes, crawlspaces exploring the earth for the few remaining untapped strips of adamantium far below the planet’s surface.

Skell could hear sounds behind them, bouncing weirdly down the narrow spaces of the mine – footfalls, and voices. Voices he recognised. Argrim had followed them. Either his hatred for Skell eclipsed his desire to escape, or he simply understood that if Skell was going the opposite way from everyone else, there had to be a damn good reason why.

Skell reached out towards Dolar, who recoiled and pressed himself against one of the timber frames supporting the tunnel. Skell grimaced and pushed into him. His head ached. He was tired. He tried to marshal his thoughts.

‘We’re going,’ he said, gesturing further along burrow shaft 28.

‘N-no,’ Dolar stammered. ‘Didn’t you hear what that voice on the speakers said? They can see us. They’re watching. If we try to escape they’ll know.’

Skell snarled with frustration and punched Dolar’s chest. The blow did nothing.

‘Skell!’ The shout came ringing down the tunnel. He turned and saw silhouettes framed against the brighter lights of the sub-mine. He recognised the voice.

‘Where in Terra’s name are you going, witch?’ Argrim demanded, striding towards them. His two lackeys crowded close behind, all three stooped over in the tunnel’s confines. ‘What’s going on up there? Tell me!’

‘Stop them,’ said Skell. Dolar hesitated. Skell snatched him by the throat.

‘Stop them!’ he screamed, driving the words into Dolar’s dull mind. The convict flinched and cried
out, throwing Skell back off him. Then he turned and launched himself at Argrim.

‘Deal with his pet,’ the smuggler ordered his two underlings. They lunged past Argrim and grappled with Dolar, trying to pin him up against the tunnel wall. Argrim thrust past them, eyes glaring murderously over the seal of his respirator.

Skell ran. The lighting in the burrow shaft was almost non-existent. He stumbled through the semi-darkness, the sound of Argrim’s footfalls gaining on him. He could hear Dolar grunting as he fought, and then his shouts as he realised he’d been abandoned. Skell didn’t look back.

Argrim caught him, snatching the back of Skell’s overalls and making him stumble. The smuggler’s scarred fists struck at his shoulders and dragged him back against the wall, thrusting him into the packed dirt.

‘Little mutant twist,’ Argrim spat, and smacked his fist into Skell’s stomach. The scrawny boy doubled up, the air driven from his lungs. He clutched instinctively onto Argrim’s sides as he sought to keep his feet and find his breath. The smuggler flung him back against the wall, derisive now.

‘You’ve not got much fight in you without your big bonehead, do you?’ He snatched Skell’s greasy black hair, forcing him to look back up the tunnel. Argrim’s two dregs were murdering Dolar. The simpleton was too confused and terrified to fight back. One of the attackers had salvaged the metal haft of a broken pick – Dolar took a good half dozen hits before he fell. Shame and anger rose up inside Skell, choking his rattling breaths.

‘Where are your witch powers, freak?’ Argrim sneered, turning him so they were face to face. The smuggler’s blunt, scarred features contorted behind his mask.

‘Time for you to join your idiot friend,’ he said, raising his fist. With a yell of rage, Skell snatched at him. Argrim froze. Skell’s eyes flared, alive with strange, burning light. His yell became a feral snarl.

‘Your soul is mine now, Wilem Argrim.’ Skell’s grip tightened impossibly, and the bones in Argrim’s hand snapped with a wet crunch. The flood of pain coincided with a flood of nightmarish images driven into the smuggler’s mind.

Argrim started screaming and didn’t stop. Skell released him and he collapsed onto his knees, face contorted behind his mask, eyes staring into nothingness as his mind was ravaged by the horrors of a patchwork monster of dead skins. Skell left him, and began to walk back down the tunnel.

The two minions had stopped beating Dolar when their master’s terror started to echo through the tunnel. Now they simply stood and stared at Skell as he approached, rooted to the spot. Dolar lay face down at their feet, unmoving, blood from his split skull seeping out into the dirt. The witch lights playing about Skell’s eyes flared, and he shot out one hand.

Lightning ignited at the gesture, crackling from the boy’s fingers. A boom of displaced air hammered down the tunnel as the bolt earthed itself into the body of the nearest of Dolar’s killers. It struck the metal of his pick haft first, dancing up his arm and across his body. His screams joined those of his master, and then his accomplice added to them as the lightning arced between the two men, striking them both.

They stood transfixed. Their overalls ignited, then their hair. Their eyes burst from their skulls. Their skin melted from their bones. By the time the lightning released them, they were nothing but blackened, badly cooked offal. The two hunks of meat collapsed to the tunnel floor, steaming. Argrim was still screaming, his throat raw.

Skell paced towards the dead bodies. One of them still clutched the pick haft, his hand now a shrivelled, blackened claw. Skell stooped and snapped it free. It was sticky with Dolar’s evaporated
blood. His broken skull gleamed in the dim light of the flickering lumens. The body twitched. Sparks of electricity leaped and danced up the haft and writhed around Skell’s forearms.

He turned and walked back to Argrim. The smuggler was finally silent, left curled and whimpering in a foetal position.

The white fires in Skell’s eyes had dimmed. He felt dazed, detached. He stood for a moment over Argrim’s cowering form, the broken haft held loosely, energy still snapping and sparking in the air around them.

He shook his head. His nose was bleeding, making it hard to breathe through his respirator. He glanced back at Dolar’s corpse, then down at Argrim. His expression hardened, and he lifted the pick haft.

Cull watched the harvest over the viewscreens of the Centrum Dominus, his jump pack unclamped and laid at his feet. He was seated in the command throne brought down from the bridge of the Last Breath. The pale lighting of the viewscreen banks flickered and broke across his dark armour, gleaming from its metal thorns.

Jarq’s Eighth Claw had driven the escaped convicts back from the surface stairwells. Obeying their primitive mob instincts, the humans had turned en masse for the only other route available to them – instead of going up, they went down, into the Burrow, the warren of hundreds of mines and shafts, which worked outwards from the central sink like a network of earthen capillaries. Most headed to the loco rail lines, hoping to eventually make it through to the works of the sub-precincts and secondary mines that dotted the rest of Zartak’s surface.

They would find no succour there. All the sub-precincts bar one had already fallen to the Fourth, Sixth and Seventh Claws, dispatched to strike the Imperials garrisoning them while the vox-network was still down. The single remaining sub-precinct and mine work held by the arbitrators was only resisting because Cull allowed it to. He had plans for that particular garrison.

His gaze lingered on a viewscreen showing the silent black-and-white bloodshed occurring in a section of the Burrow labelled incline shaft 6. Two gangs of prisoners, each a dozen strong, were setting upon one another with fists and scavenged mining tools. It hadn’t taken long for the mass of escapees to degenerate into murderous rival packs. Cull always found the behaviour of humans fascinating when their social hierarchies were subverted or broken. If Zartak’s convicts had been able to rally around a leader and coordinate a push towards the surface at multiple stair points, they would almost certainly have been able to overrun Jarq’s inexperienced but bloodthirsty Claw and reach the jungles beyond Sink Shaft One’s perimeter.

Instead they acted with no more forethought or ability than base animals. Freed from their shackles, they fled in blind, screaming panic from any threat they perceived greater than their individual ability to overcome. The stronger took revenge or vented their own terror upon the weaker. Old gang groups reasserted themselves. The chaos of freedom made everyone an enemy, and opportunity a snare.

It was in such situations that the strong thrived. When humanity was cut back to its very basics, when it was thrust into an inimical environment and surrounded by fear and threat, it found itself reduced to a purer, more primal state. The weaker gravitated to the protection of the strong, or they were destroyed. The Night Lords had affirmed what Cull had always believed; the only law was the knife’s law, and the only right belonged to those able to take it. Cull had that right now.

He had missed that from his own childhood. Adopted by the ruling nobility, he had gazed from their
towers at the slums below, and wondered where his real parents were. Why had they abandoned him? What criminal lives had they led? Were they still alive? He’d never found out, and he never would. The people of his home world had been butchered a century before, both his real and his adoptive parents dying together. The latter had been flayed in their palace, while the virus bomb unleashed by Shadraith had killed the former. When the VIII Legion had come, the hierarchies of privilege and class had meant nothing. That was part of the reason Cull had deactivated the void shield of his false father’s palace. He had known instinctively that these invaders would not spare the old regime that had made his life into a monotonous lie. He could never have imagined just how right he was.

The bloodshed in incline shaft 6 was over. There were four survivors, now busy scavenging whatever they could from the corpses. One of them was injured, limping. As Cull watched, the other three cornered and killed him as well, before carrying on out of sight of the pict monitor.

Cull remembered how they’d killed the weakest of the aspirants when he’d first started his inductions. The Night Lords hadn’t told them to, but they’d done it anyway. Cull had slit the throat of a boy with a sprained ankle one night, in the bowels of the Last Breath. Shadraith had singled him out for praise. He’d always favoured him. That in itself was a test. It had made the other aspirants hate him. Cull had realised that though. He’d moved to kill each of them in turn before they could corner him. Shadraith had approved. Without the sorcerer’s patronage, he knew he wouldn’t have risen to the position he now held.

He resented that fact. Soon he would change it. Shadraith had become too enamoured with his daemon, Bar’ghul. Killing those who were a liability was a vital part of the warband’s survival. Blood’s loyalty, as the Night Lords called it, only went so far. Such Long War sentiments had no place in his warband. He blink-activated his helmet’s vox.

‘Fexrath,’ he said. ‘Is the void shield armoury open yet?’

‘Affirmative, my prince,’ the Third Claw leader replied. ‘The garrison was well stocked. A pity they didn’t get a chance to use any of it.’

‘Well, let’s make sure someone does. I’ve seen enough of this stage. Begin distributing the weaponry.’

‘As you wish, my prince.’

Cull broke the link, satisfied with his decision. Just as things were starting to settle into a steady cycle of killings and low-key gang clashes, the Night Lords would tear it apart and start again.

By the time the harvest was over, only the strongest would remain.
I have pulled what carto-files and historical slates I could concerning the penal colony on Zartak. It wasn’t much. The limited ability to access central data on board the Saint Angelica is hardly ideal, but all the same, there should be more here. It looks as though some older files have been wiped.

When last surveyed, Zartak was a jungle planetoid, formally designated a cross-tithe Death World/Penal Colony by the Adeptus Administratum. It is the single largest supplier of raw adamantium in the entire subsector. The whole rock is riddled with the stuff, or at least it was before the miners hollowed it out. Most of the works are offshoots of the original sink shaft that’s now used to house the prisoners. The primary Adeptus Arbites Precinct Fortress sits above it, defended by a void shield. There are smaller sub-precincts and lesser works scattered across the rest of the surface, all of them connected by a system of sub-surface loco rails and access tunnels. The historical slates are far less comprehensive. They reference a number of prison riots and uprisings, all of them suppressed. There are some references to colonists before the rock was formally designated a penal colony. I will investigate further while we are in transit.

Signed,

Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Thought for the Day: The simplest way to destroy the future is to forget the past + + +
CHAPTER V

The bridge of the *White Maw* was a sepulchral place. Like an ancient palace lost beneath the tides, its
carved coral walls and pillars reached towards a high vaulted ceiling that shimmered with the light of
the ancient vessel’s energy shields. Silence hung across it like a shroud, disturbed only by the quiet
hum of cogitators, the chiming of augurs and the distant throb of its engines. Many of the pale-robed
serfs manning the bridge’s data pits had had their vocal cords surgically removed in a zealous effort
to imitate those among their masters who had taken the Void Vow of Silence.

The only time that silence was truly broken was during warp re-entry. Earlier the rock-like walls
and worn deck plates had resonated with the urgent canting of the transitional choir, and the buzzing of
gerubim as they flitted overhead swinging their autocensers. The Space Marines occupying the
bridge had joined the chanting, slipping into the High Gothic plainsong with experienced ease. The
ship had shuddered and moaned with otherworldly fear as it ripped itself from the coruscating
madness of the warp, tearing back into real space like an oceanic predator thundering up from the
depths, surrounded by a halo of fading, clawed light.

The augur arrays were still chiming with results as the *White Maw* probed its new surroundings. The
fuzzy, incomplete sea-green display of the Zartak system that beamed up from the holochart in front of
the bridge’s command throne was slowly resolving. Either side of the *White Maw* were six escort
ships, clustered like minnows beside a leviathan, scenting the waters for blood. Only the ragged
distortion of the system’s great asteroid belt lay between them and its only occupied world – Zartak.

And, to Sharr, home. Or at least, once-home. Only the thinnest slivers of the penal colony remained
embedded in his memory. The cold. The darkness. Muscle-ache. Despair. They remained imprinted
on his psyche, long after true recollections of his life as a convict had disappeared.

Sharr felt his anger stir. None of that mattered any more. The Angels of Death, the Void Father’s
anointed, had come for him. He had a new life now. Whoever that boy had once been, two centuries
ago, he was long dead.

‘We’re four hours out from high orbit,’ he said, seeking focus in the familiarity of the tactical
briefing. ‘Initial scans indicate there is only a single vessel currently anchored above the planetoid.
We’re still running identification, but it would appear there was a recent orbital engagement. We’re
reading macrocannon discharges and what may be a wreck caught in the gravitational well.’

Across the display from Sharr the rest of the Third Company’s command structure listened. Chaplain
Nikora brooded in his black battleplate, while Te Kahurangi leaned heavily on his bone staff, flanked
by the strike leaders of the company’s individual squads. Kahu had deliberately positioned himself
away from the others, next to Sharr. The Terminator had donned his helm, its snout painted with the
gaping red maw that contrasted so powerfully with the off-white plates of the rest of his Tactical
Dreadnought armour.

‘Vox transcripts seem to imply Imperial communications on the planet’s surface have failed,’ Sharr continued, a click of a rune inset into the holo’s control panel highlighting Zartak on the three-dimensional display. ‘Beyond a distress signal beamed from a minor installation in the southern hemisphere, there appears to be no contactable Imperial presence on the surface. There may still be survivors underground.’

‘The Night Lords do their work swiftly,’ Strike Leader Omeca-three-nine-Ari, commander of the company’s Scout attachment muttered.

‘Do we have confirmation that they are the ones responsible for this?’ Chaplain Nikora demanded.

‘Nothing beyond my scrying,’ Te Kahurangi said before Sharr could answer. ‘But I have never seen clearer portents. They are here at the bidding of the Kiri Mate, the Dead Skin, and his daemon master.’

‘If you’ve seen it then that’s enough for me,’ Nikora said, his skull helm nodding.

‘It doesn’t seem that our initial plan needs to be changed,’ Kahu said, voice grating from his vox. ‘Secure a landing zone and hunt the traitors into the mines. If they release the prisoners it will only hamper their efforts to hide.’

‘If the facility sending the distress signal still resists then that will become our base of operations,’ Sharr said. ‘If not, we will retake it and make it so. All of Zartak’s precincts are linked via underground sub-surface lines and foot passages. Holding one will provide us with access to the rest. From there we will work our way into the primary mine and flush out the traitors.’

‘Seize the void shield generator and my Red Brethren can teleport into the main precinct and cut off their head,’ Kahu said. ‘That is surely where their master is hiding.’

‘Or it could be a trap. We know these traitors too well. Shadows and trickery are their way.’

‘And destroying them is not all we need to consider,’ Te Kahurangi added. ‘I request the use of Strike Leader Ari’s initiates to help look for the boy. He is already loose somewhere in the primary mine workings. My visions have shown that the Dead Skin is hunting him.’

There was a whirr of servos as Kahu shifted his stance.

‘We surely cannot afford to lend you our full complement of Scouts, Chief Librarian,’ the Terminator said.

‘But we shall, none the less,’ Sharr said. ‘Even with his abilities, the venerable Chief Librarian cannot be expected to scour the whole mine alone. Better that than sparing fully fledged void brothers to look for the child.’

‘The Tithe–’ Kahu began, but Sharr cut him off.

‘Will be completed,’ he said. ‘And the boy retrieved, for the Chapter. At the moment there is no reason to suspect either of those objectives is beyond our grasp. Once we have made planetfall and initiated contact, I will reassess the situation. Until then, the Scouts are at Te Kahurangi’s disposal. Is that clear?’

The assembled Carcharodons nodded silently, although Kahu only did so after a moment’s pause. Sharr caught Te Kahurangi’s eye, and noted his silent thanks. Kahu might demand obedience to Tyberos and the wider edicts of the Chapter, but Sharr had known the Chief Librarian long enough to trust his judgement.

Whoever the boy was that Te Kahurangi sought, his talents meant he was of vital importance.
Rannik managed to pop the release rune on the restraint harness before she was sick. A flood of bile splattered the cracked inside of the salvation pod’s crystalflex viewing port and drenched the rudimentary control panel.

The arbitrator managed to stumble out of the open rear hatch before a second wave of nausea hit, driving her down onto her knees amidst the furrowed dirt. She stayed crouched for a long time, dry-heaving, watching the contents of her stomach seeping into the scorched trail of earth ploughed by the pod’s landing.

It began to rain, the sound of millions of droplets hitting the canopy around her creating a hissing, pattering susurrations. Zartak’s sun was rising above the treetops, leeching colour back into the blackness beneath the boughs of the planetoid’s jungles.

As the rain began to run through the joints in her battered armour she forced herself to rise. The mud underfoot was already a cloying quagmire. Her vision swam, and she held her arms out to steady herself. She drew in a long, slow breath, feeling her stomach finally beginning to settle.

She’d come awake in the middle of re-entry. The salvation pod’s viewing port had been a red blaze of atmospheric flame. She’d been convinced she was going to die, not knowing what to do, trapped in her harness. The fires had faded and the clouds had parted, and the undulating green sea of Zartak’s treetops had rushed up to greet her.

Even with the last-second launch of the dampeners and the restraint harness on full lock, the impact with the surface had nearly snapped her spine and broken her neck. Her body ached, and that wasn’t even counting the injuries she’d sustained on the *Imperial Truth*. It was a struggle just to stay upright.

She glanced back at the salvation pod. Its black surface was scarred and steaming, half buried in jungle muck. Behind her a trail of shattered bark, shredded leaves and sap-oozing splinters marked where the pod had made contact with the canopy, dragging itself a hundred yards through the jungle. She wondered how in the God-Emperor’s name she was still alive.

It was thanks, she knew, to the nightmare creatures.

That knowledge made her stomach clench again. Their attempt to seize the *Imperial Truth* and the ambush which had followed had been entirely planned, that much was obvious. What had turned the former prison ship into a living nightmare wasn’t so clear. Rannik had never encountered anything like the things that had fallen upon them from the shadows of the bridge. If she hadn’t known better, she’d have said they were some sort of dark parody of the tales she’d heard about the god-warriors of the Adeptus Astartes. They were creatures of the Dark Gods though, that much was certain. The whole of Zartak was in grave peril.

A solid click-click made her freeze. She stood in the rain, hair plastered to her scalp, shivering. A voice barked at her.

‘Turn around!’

She did so unsteadily, to find herself staring down the barrel of a trio of Vox Legis. Three arbitrators stood at the edge of the salvation pod’s dirt furrow, the rain glistening from their black helmets and carapace plate.

Rannik tried to speak. Instead she collapsed, slapping into the mud. Her vision spun. She was half aware of the arbitrators approaching, weapons still levelled.

‘Sub-Precinct Twelve,’ she managed to slur. One reached down and grasped the pauldron of her armour with a lock glove. He rolled her onto her back and slapped the mud from her breastplate, revealing her blocky yellow ident tag.
‘Sub-Warden Rannik?’ the man demanded, face unreadable behind his helmet lens. Rannik managed to nod.

‘Welcome back to Zartak, sir,’ the arbitrator said, mag-locking his shotgun to his backplate. He grasped Rannik’s hand. His two comrades took her by the shoulders and hefted her up out of the mud.

‘We saw your re-entry,’ said the arbitrator. ‘We were dispatched from the sub-precinct to investigate. First Arbitrator Jaken thought it may be hostile contacts.’

‘What sub-precinct?’ Rannik managed, struggling to focus on the three men’s own ident tags. ‘Where are we?’

‘Eight, sir,’ the arbitrator said, putting his arm under Rannik’s back to support her. ‘Klenn’s jurisdiction. We’re just two kilometres south west of the outer bastions.’

‘Is Klenn there?’ Rannik asked. ‘Have you heard anything from the Precinct Fortress or the warden primary?’

‘Negative, sir. The last we heard he was at the fortress attending a session review. Comms went down about two hours ago. We haven’t been able to raise anything. The shock squads were being deployed to an unsecure vessel in high orbit. Then everything went dark. I’m guessing that’s where you’ve come from, sir?’

‘It was a trap,’ Rannik said. ‘Not a prison riot. Something has taken over the ship.’

‘Something?’

‘We need to get to your sub-precinct, arbitrator. Help me.’

Supported by one of the three, they made their way through the drenched jungle, following the blips on a handheld auspex. It was slow going. The rain turned the undergrowth into a quagmire and reduced dips and channels into fast-flowing, muddy streamlets. Soaking fronds and creeper vines clawed at them. The arbitrator on point unclamped a machete from his mag-plates and started hacking through the more obstructive sections of the green.

Rannik still felt sick. Her skull was throbbing from the hit she’d received on the bridge. She tried not to think about any of it. Tried not to think about the tortured body of Captain Van Hoyt, wired up to his own vox-system. Tried not to think about how the midnight-clad giant had killed Macran with a single blow. Tried not to question why it had not only spared her life, but returned her to Zartak’s surface just south of a sub-precinct.

Were they already here, on the surface?

The sun was fully up by the time they stumbled into the kill zone clearing ringing Sub-Precinct Eight’s bastions. The central keep rose above them, a squat, thick blockhouse of black rockcrete. They passed the desiccated skulls staked out along the treeline – the remains of those convicts who’d attempted to escape, now serving as a warning to others desperate enough to want to switch the mines for the jungles.

‘Eight, this is recon team one,’ the arbitrator supporting Rannik said into his vox-torq. ‘We are entering the kill zone. Medicae to the south gate.’

They began to slog through the rain-slashed mulch that surrounded the sub-precinct. They were halfway across when a boom echoed from the jungle behind them. The leg of the arbitrator supporting Rannik exploded just below the knee. They both went down, the arbitrator screaming.

‘Contact, contact,’ shouted a voice over the vox. ‘The treeline! Covering fire, now!’

There was a rattle as the arbitrators manning the south bastion opened up with their autoguns, hard rounds zipping over Rannik’s head. She managed to get up onto her knees, glancing behind her. There
was no sign of whatever had shot the arbitrator. The wounded man was writhing in the muck, clutching at his bloody stump. The sight of the injury sent a jolt of adrenaline through Rannik’s body.

‘Help me with him,’ she snarled at the other two. She snatched the man under one arm while his comrade took him beneath the other, and together they began to haul him towards the plasteel gate. The third arbitrator slammed a few long-ranged shotgun blasts into the treeline before joining them in the sprint for the gatehouse.

Just a dozen yards away there was another boom. The skull of the arbitrator helping Rannik burst, splattering the sub-warden’s bare head with steaming grey gristle. She collapsed in the muck next to the headless corpse. The wounded arbitrator was still screaming, bleeding out fast from his severed limb.

‘Move it!’ Rannik heard a voice shouting. ‘Get them inside!’

The sub-precinct’s gate had rolled open. Half a dozen arbitrators thumped out into the rain, weapons ready, joining the blind fusillade that was still hammering from the bastion top. Hands grasped at Rannik and the injured arbitrator, hauling them both into the bastion’s gatehouse. The final member of the recon team joined them. With a thud, the plasteel doors slammed shut.

Rannik regained her feet and put out a hand to steady herself. She was panting. The arbitrator who’d led the team out from the gate had the yellow warning chevrons of an NCO stamped onto his black breastplate. He was speaking into his vox-torq.

‘Wall units, if you don’t have a visual, cease fire.’

The shooting stopped. The wounded arbitrator had stopped screaming too. A medicae had jabbed a throwaway syringe packed with stimms into his thigh, and was now busy tying off the injury.

Rannik cuffed blood and rainwater from her eyes. She was shaking. The arbitrator with the stripes looked at her.

‘Sub-Warden Rannik, I’m First Arbitrator Jaken, acting commander of Sub-Precinct Eight in the absence of Sub-Warden Klenn. With all due respect, sir, I would like to yield that responsibility to you.’

‘Accepted, First Arbitrator,’ Rannik said, speaking automatically. ‘You’ll have to brief me. How many men do you have garrisoned here?’

_We’re all going to die_, her thoughts screamed.

‘Minus Forr here and Pollak out there in the mud, two squads of ten, sir. And five thousand inmates in the mines below. We’ve been on full alert since the vox-net went down.’

‘Are the inmates shackled?’

‘Every one of them, sir, and their magnicles are ready to blow at the first sign of trouble.’

‘Seal off the subways as well. Make sure nothing can get in or out via the underground.’

‘Understood, sir. What exactly is going on out there?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine, first arbitrator,’ Rannik lied. ‘But whatever it is, it’s bad news.’

‘How did you get off the ship?’ Jaken asked. Rannik forced herself to face the man down, trying not to let her fear and uncertainty show.

‘It’s classified. If you need to know, I’ll tell you.’

Jaken didn’t look away, expression inscrutable behind his helm’s visor. Eventually he nodded.

‘Of course, sir.’

Rannik turned her back on him and let out a long, unsteady breath.
Shuttle engines screamed as a trio of gunships circled Sink Shaft One, the dawn sunlight glinting from their scarred, void-worn hulls. They hovered above the Precinct Fortress for a while like scavenger-bills, scenting the humid air thermals of the jungle for fresh meat.

They found it in the fortress. One by one they dipped their wings and dropped off, alighting with an ungainly thud of stabilisers and landing prongs inside the precinct’s landing bays.

Hatch ramps clanged down on the rockcrete and spiked combat boots clattered out onto the bays. The Black Hand had arrived.

Fexrath and his Third Claw met them. The squads of cultist infantry were directed first to the void shield armoury block. There they swapped their old weaponry for freshly stamped Adeptus Arbites autoguns and shotguns, wasting no time in taking serrated combat knives to the Imperial insignia on the stocks.

The Black Hand had started out as an experiment by Fexrath, one which Cull had approved. Harvest aspirants didn’t always perish during the trials, and with the warband forever low on resources Cull had been loathe to kill otherwise able recruits. Fexrath had volunteered to cultivate the most vicious survivors into infantry capable of undertaking tasks the warriors of the VIII Legion would not normally have dirited themselves with. The Black Hand were the result, cultist foot soldiers dedicated to the sadistic narcissism that surrounded the warriors of the VIII.

The weapons not scavenged from the Precinct Fortress by the cult soldiers were crated up and, still accompanied by the baleful presence of Third Claw, shunted down into the Burrow. As the Black Hand spread out into the mines those convicts they came across who didn’t flee were gunned down. It was their misfortune – the Black Hand were only seeking to give out gifts.

Once they’d penetrated far enough into the mines, the crates were unlocked, opened and abandoned. The Black Hand returned to the Precinct Fortress along with their masters.

Only Shadraith stayed behind. The advice of Bar’ghul’s shadow minions had brought him to a sub-surface tunnel leading off from one of the stairwells. It had been one of the first places the flood of convicts had turned to when Eighth Claw had dissuaded them from the routes to the surface. It was littered with dead men, stripped of everything bar their overalls. In their frenzied desperation to escape, many had simply been crushed to death, and those who had passed by had looted them of whatever they’d scavenged.

Finding a trail amidst the trampled bed of the loco tracks would have been impossible for even the most skilled mortal hunters. But Shadraith had immortals on his side. The shadows whispered to him, coiling and darting ahead like eager bloodhounds. They were forever flitting in the corner of the sorcerer’s eye, vanishing whenever he tried to focus on them. They were the nightmares that lived on in memory after sleep departed, and they had the scent, the warp-scent. In days past the voice of Bar’ghul itself would have guided him, but the trickster daemon was being infuriatingly distant now. It had been clear enough – only by tracking down and initiating the boy could Shadraith renew their millennia-old pact. With the daemon’s soul bound to a strong mortal’s flesh, nothing would stop them.

Sub-mine 16. Shadraith passed into the hollowed-out tunnel, his dark, ethereal familiars muttering their encouragement. The bodies were fewer here. The convicts had filtered through the ever-expanding maze of the Burrow like scum through sluices, the packed masses of the upper levels disintegrating into smaller gangs, groupings and desperate, roving individuals. The shadows snatched a few of those unwary loners as Shadraith passed, rending and consuming them in a frenzy of insubstantial black talons and flapping wings.
The Chaos sorcerer paid no heed to their antics. He was getting closer; he could sense it. The warpfires that topped his scythe, grown dormant since he’d massacred the Precinct Fortress’ astropaths, were flickering with life once again. The shadows chittered, excited by the return of their master’s favour.

The Night Lord pressed on, into the bowels of the great mine workings. Inside a section marked as burrow shaft 28 he discovered what he’d hoped to find – bodies bearing the touch of the immaterium. There were two, hideously burned, their blackened remains shrivelled. To Shadraith’s witch-sight the corpses still smouldered with the many-coloured shades of warpfire. The third body was untouched, its skull split open.

_The boy’s friend_, hissed the daemons that clustered around Shadraith. He nodded. The bodies were still fresh, their souls only recently fled. The boy could not have gone far.

The sorcerer carried on down the shaft, forced to stoop. For now the boy was almost wholly unaware of his latent psychic abilities, blind to the power that made him shine like a beacon in the depths of the immaterium. His subconscious had clearly repressed his psychic strength as a means of self-preservation, reducing his gifts to so-called tricks or bouts of ‘luck.’ It was well that it had, or else the Black Ships would have already come for him.

Shadraith could offer much more than the enslavement, torture and sacrifice demanded by the Imperium. Once he had the boy in his grasp he would unlock his abilities and make him realise his full potential, whether he wanted to or not. Then he would have an apprentice worthy of his skills, and Bar’ghul would have a powerful host on the material plane.

The daemon had been clear. All he had to do was get to the boy before the Pale Nomad.

Skell clawed his way through the dirt, his sobs echoing down the packed rathole. There wasn’t room to stand. The main section of the seam had to be crawled through on hand and stomach before it widened out once more into the larger works of the neighbouring sub-precinct mines. That was where Skell had been trying to get to, hoping either to find some sort of order amidst the chaos, or just lose himself in the darkness. He would gladly have taken his prison cell and magnicles over the shadow-haunted underworld he was lost in.

He’d taken an old lumen lantern from a bracket at the entrance to the rathole. Its flickering light was now his only companion, and he was certain the shadows were encroaching on its little sphere with each passing second. His shoulders scraped against the hole’s sides, and after a while he had to push the lantern through the cold, wet dirt in front of him, forced down by the suffocating space.

He kept going, trying not to think about the claustrophobic walls or earth pressing in on him. He could still hear Dolar’s shout, when he had realised Skell was abandoning him. The dreadful noise echoed through his thoughts along with Argrim’s screams. The smuggler’s blood was a dry, brown crust on Skell’s fingers, and he had nothing to wash it off with.

He remembered the wild panic of being pinned against the tunnel wall and beaten, and the horror of seeing what the other two were doing to Dolar. He’d gone blind for a second, and when his vision had returned it hadn’t been his own. Weird images had imposed themselves on his retinas, like the aftershock of a bright flash that left behind spindly, multi-limbed ghosts of radiant light. He’d heard cackling laughter echoing madly around the corridor of dirt. It had been like a dream, except when he’d awoken from it Argrim and his accomplices were dead. Only a lingering memory of exhilaration and unbridled aggression had remained imprinted on his mind.
There was something coming for him. He had to get away, before it found him. The route he was
taking, the one he’d once worked with Dolar, Nedzy and the rest of their labour gang, had been
blocked off. At some point part of the rathole had collapsed. After twenty minutes of squirming
desperately through muck and darkness Skell had come up against a solid wall of packed dirt and
broken timbers. That was when he gave up.

A part of him had known this day would come. He’d been having the dreams and waking visions
since the snatch-squad had taken him on Fallowrain. He’d said nothing of the terrors except to Dolar,
and even then only when he’d realised that he needed his brute strength if he was going to survive life
in the penal colony. Now he’d lost even that.

He was going to die. Or worse. Another bout of sobbing broke out and echoed away down the
rathole.

This time someone answered. A thought intruded into his mind. It was not a separate voice, not the
sibilant death rattle that increasingly spoke to him in the darkest hours of the night. It was subtler,
more of a suggestion, certainly alien but not wholly invasive.

*Keep going*, it urged.

‘I can’t,’ Skell said, cuffing his nose. ‘It’s coming for me.’

*You still have time. If you stay the shadows will catch you. Double back, now.*

Skell tried to obey. He tried to force his tired limbs to work as he pressed through the cramped
semi-dark, pushing with elbows and knees to force himself back down the rathole. It was slow going.
He dragged himself without thinking, as though the suggestion in his mind had spread to the rest of his
body, an otherworldly willpower that compelled him to action. It was at once a distressing and
comforting sensation. The presence had none of the jagged bitterness that accompanied his visions of
fanged shadows and leering skulls. It was not devoid of threat, but its malice was not directed at
Skell. Whatever it was, it didn’t want the shadows to claim him. Right now that was all that mattered.

Eventually he collapsed out of the hole and into the sub-mine shaft he’d entered from, his body
burning with exertion, covered head to foot in cloying grey muck.

*Make haste*, the thought said. *You are stronger than you know.*

Fear drove Skell up, blanking out the pain in his limbs. He stumbled off down the corridor of earth,
in the opposite direction from the route he’d taken. He’d left the lantern at the rathole’s entrance, but
he didn’t look back.

*Have faith, Skell*, said the thought. *Have faith, and keep running.*

Behind him, the lantern flickered once, and died.

Shadraith stopped. He let out a thin, hissing breath from his helm’s vox-grille. Around him the
shadows froze, as though caught in the middle of some illicit act.

*He is here*, said Bar’ghul. The sorcerer shuddered at the sound of the daemon’s voice slipping
around inside his skull.

‘You have not spoken in long enough,’ he replied, his tone barbed. The grip on his warp scythe
tightened.

*I have not had good reason to*, the daemon snarled back. The warp light wreathing Shadraith’s
scythe flared, and the shadows cringed back in fear.

‘Do not so easily forget all I have done for you, daemon,’ Shadraith snapped. ‘You would do well to
recall that you are not my master.’
And neither are you mine, Night Lord. The boy is escaping. The Pale Nomad will do anything to retrieve him. You must take him and properly bind him, so that I might have a house of flesh to reside in.

The sound of distant gunfire echoed down the tunnel to Shadraith. He turned his head towards the noise, his preysight stripping away the darkness.

‘The harvest is progressing,’ he said. ‘Cull has supplied the prisoners with weapons. If a trap is to be set then it must be done now. We need the Pale Nomad’s warp-blessed blood to complete your summoning.’

Go, Bar’ghul urged him. My will is with you. He will not evade you for much longer.

‘About that at least we are agreed,’ Shadraith said, setting off once more. Around him the darkness sprang into scuttling, squirming motion, picking up the warp-scent again. This time there would be no escape.

Sink Shaft One resounded with reports of gunfire. Las and hard rounds, the cracks and bangs echoed up and down statue-lined tunnels, transit ways and haulage shafts, and coalesced like a continually reverberating thunderclap in the central pit.

The prisoners had found the weapon crates hauled down by the Black Hand from the arbitrator armouries. It had taken less than an hour for the more powerful gangs to descend on the equipment like flocks of flesh carrion on dead meat. Now suitably armed with the aquila-stamped weaponry of their former masters, they were busy enforcing a new code of law on Zartak – might made right.

Cull watched the various running battles across the viewscreens of the Precinct Fortress. They were invariably close-ranged, bloody and brief. The side with the element of surprise always won. Only at a sub-surface rail turning point, where a savaged group of escapees from the lower blocks managed to hole up in a stationary loco carriage, did anything approaching a stalemate develop. Cull grew bored watching the standoff and sent one of Fexrath’s Claw brothers to murder the inept savlar who’d failed to wipe out their prey with their first strike. Such incompetence was of no use to him.

The slaughter between the freshly armed gangs was intense. Those who hadn’t yet managed to pilfer any weaponry stood no chance at all. Soon there would be no unarmed inmates left on Zartak, and the next phase of the harvest could begin.

Cull turned his attention to the progress in the sub-precincts. Reports from the three Claws dispersed among the planetoid’s lesser penal facilities indicated everything was still going according to schedule. The convicts of the secondary and tertiary mines were being herded aboard loco carriages in preparation for transportation to Sink Shaft One. After the inmates of the primary facility had been fully harvested, the second wave would follow the first. By the dawn of Zartak’s next long day the selection processes would be nearly complete.

The chiming of augur systems disturbed the Night Lord’s thoughts. The holochart near the middle of the command centre flickered into static-washed life, new signifier runes overlaying themselves across the map of Zartak and the surrounding space.

‘My prince,’ began one of the hereteks newly assigned to the command centre’s sensor systems, but a gesture silenced him. Cull knew.

They were here, and right on schedule.
Day 78, warp time variance approximate.

There was definitely something untoward about the fate of the original colonists of Zartak. Ship cargo returns show at least three vessels – New Hope, Providence and Pilgrim’s Road – were all chartered to transport settlers there. The last records I can find detail their arrival and the founding of the site that would become the primary mine, Sink Shaft One. But after that everything has been erased, right up to when a new charter issued by the governor of the Ethika subsector authorised the Adeptus Arbites to work with the local hive worlds to turn the pre-existing mines into a penal labour colony. By then the original, free colonists who constructed the first works seem to have no longer existed.

Who deleted the files detailing the fate of those first colonists, and what became of them? I pray I can find the answers to these riddles before we reach Zartak.

Signed,

Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

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††† Thought for the Day: A mind free of guilt is a mind devoid of memory †††
CHAPTER VI

The Carcharodon Astra made ready for war.

Where other Chapters would have prepared themselves to the sound of oath cants or warlike boasting, the Carcharodons did so in silence. The fore armoury was filled, the entirety of the Third Battle Company roused from their slumber or returned from their vigils in the White Maw’s long, lonely corridors and substations. The murky air was filled with the grate of battleplate and the whirring of servos as the armoury’s thralls and artisans bedecked the seventy-nine void brothers in their war glory.

Sharr flexed his gauntlet, watching the intricately inscribed ceramite digits respond in perfect sync. He had memorised the chief artisan’s analysis of the millennia-old armour during the weeks of transit. He was aware of the minute lag in the servos of the right leg, that the targeter in the helmet’s left lens occasionally failed and reset itself, and that the bonding-studded left pauldron had been fitted with a lower grade of plasteel than the rest of the suit. Such was the nature of the Chapter’s ancient, reconstituted wargear.

Wearing it for the first time he was also aware of how the armour’s spirit differed from his old suit. The battleplate of the Reaper Prime was redolent with what Sharr could only describe as an underlying, ever-present hunger, not much removed from the savage appetites experienced by the Chapter’s initiates when their gene-changes first set in. Sharr was beginning to understand why Company Master Akia had pursued such direct, savage tactics in the final operations before his death. The need to kill emanated from the wargear. It was the Blindness made manifest, a by-product of the Chapter’s complex genetic heritage.

Sharr donned his crested great helm, allowing its auto-senses to link with his own. They seemed to do so only with reluctance, unwilling to accept their new master. Sharr shook off the unsettling thought. He wondered at how much the shark-and-scythe crest on the helmet’s left temple mirrored the fresh tattoo on his own flesh beneath.

Regardless of who had come before, he was now the Reaper Prime. He was now commander of Third Company.

‘Strike Leader Ari,’ he said, testing the helm’s vox vocaliser. The Scout commander turned from where he was ranking up his carapace-armoured initiates and bowed his head in salute.

‘Are your initiates prepared for their latest blooding?’ Sharr asked, casting his eye over the assembled Scouts. Their appearance was becoming increasingly uniform – they were all shaven-headed, while their skin pigmentation had grown noticeably paler and their irises darker. Some of the older ones had begun to sharpen their teeth in imitation of the full void brothers they aspired to be, while two had even earned the right to their first exile tattoos. All of them had seen at least one
blooding before, and many were on the cusp of full initiation. The fact brought home how vital a fresh Tithing was. The Chapter needed a new generation of inductees.

‘They are ready, Company Master,’ Ari said, casting his black gaze over his charges. Many were still visibly shaking from void sickness. For a second Sharr was reminded of his own days as an initiate, after the Nomad Predation Fleet had plucked him from Zartak’s depths. His grim smile was hidden by his helm.

‘That is well, strike leader. You will report to the Librarium with them. The venerable Te Kahurangi has a special purpose for this Tithing.’ Ari bowed his head once more, and repeated the motto of the Tenth Company.

‘As you command, Company Master. First in, last out.’

Company Master. The title still rang hollow in Sharr’s mind. How much longer would it continue to do so? Would he ever shake off Akia’s blood-red shadow?

Across the armoury the squads were completing their preparations and departing for the launch bays. Other commanders would have taken the opportunity presented by the assembly to deliver some sort of oration, but that had never been the Chapter’s way. Every void brother had been issued with detailed sets of operational and strategic briefings, environmental overviews and opposition analysis. They all knew why they were here and what was expected of them. They would do their duty to the Chapter, the Void Father and the Shade Lord, regardless of what Sharr said to them.

That in itself was a blessing. He didn’t want to have to stand before them in Akia’s battleplate before it had been bloodied. Before he’d proven that he was worthy, to himself as much as to them. He keyed his vox.

‘First Squad, to me.’

Around him his retinue gathered. There was familiarity in their presence at least, a degree of comfort. Strike Veteran Dorthor, with his ancient chainaxe mag-locked to the side of his backpack. Apothecary Tama, who’d upheld a Vow of Silence for almost a century. Red Tane, the Company Champion, who carried the Coral Shield and the Void Sword, both ancient Terran relics that had been with the Chapter since the very first Day of Exile. Brother Soha and his ancient volkite caliver, newly promoted from Second Squad to fill the gap left by Sharr’s own promotion. Signifier Niko, who was reverently lifting the company’s ragged banner from its place upon the armoury wall. All bore the red arrow-tooth marking in the centre of their helmet visors – they were all red-scarred, the badge of true veterans. They had been his battle-brothers for more years than he cared to count. He owed each of them his life many times over.

Yet he couldn’t help but wonder if they too still saw Akia when they looked at him now.

‘Report to bay five, brethren,’ he told them. ‘I must conduct a final briefing on the bridge. I will join you once we reach high anchor.’

‘Is it true, Company Master?’ Tane asked, hand resting on the hilt of the sheathed Void Sword. ‘Have the traitors reached the Tithe World before us?’

‘We shall know soon enough,’ Sharr said. ‘But whether they have or not makes no difference. The Red Tithe will go ahead. We will make sure of it.’ He dismissed them.

The halls and corridors of the White Maw shuddered as he passed through them towards the bridge. The ancient strike cruiser’s weapons batteries were lit, hammering the surrounding space with relentless ripples of macrocannon fire and lance strikes. The fleet was passing through the system’s asteroid belt, and the barrage was necessary to clear a path and break the frozen rocks before they
could do any lasting damage. The strike cruiser’s shields were sufficient protection against the millions of splintered fragments that impacted against it, though occasionally the ship’s internal lighting would dip after a particularly vicious strike.

The squad leaders had assembled once again on the bridge for the final approach briefing. Shipmaster Teko was monitoring the effectiveness of the White Maw’s defensive barrage from the gunnery station as Sharr entered, the green illumination of the diagnostic viewscreens and oculus stands casting his gaunt, white features into sharp contrast.

‘Still no trace of the traitor’s fleet elements?’ Sharr asked as Teko acknowledged him with a bow.

‘None, Company Master. Though our augurs won’t be able to complete a full scan until we’re clear of this damned asteroid field. The only vessel on our displays is the penal ship, Imperial Truth.’

‘The traitor’s main fleet will be concealed. It is how they fight. They could not have crippled the system’s communications by any means other than subterfuge. The fleet must remain on its guard. Once we have made planetfall their most likely course of action will be to separate us.’

‘We will hold station, have no doubt,’ Teko said. ‘The traitors would require a grand fleet indeed to threaten us.’

Sharr knew the shipmaster was right. The vessels belonging to the Third Company, like all sections of the Carcharodons Nomad Predation Fleet, were a mismatch of old and heavily modified classes and capabilities. The White Maw itself was, at its most basic levels, a venerable Exile-era Tyrant-class capital ship. The original design had been both rebuilt and expanded down the centuries. New engine blocks, plasma recyc systems, triple-adamantium bulkheads – the White Maw was a patchwork monstrosity, its capabilities more akin to the battle-barges of more standardised Chapters. Her six escorts likewise displayed the broadest range of class variation imaginable, from the retrofitted Sword Frigate Grey Harvest to the Crusade-era Wrath Hammer Void Revenant. More than half of the fleet had been in service since the first Day of Exile, that dark time when the Wandering Ancestors had been banished from their home world and the ranks of their brethren, and ordered out beyond the galaxy’s edge. Whatever the traitors possessed, they wouldn’t have been able to conceal sufficient numbers or firepower to threaten the White Maw and her company.

‘What of communication with the surface?’ Sharr asked Teko. ‘Have you been able to lock down the distress signal?’

‘Not yet,’ Teko replied. ‘We’ll have a better chance of making contact once we reach high anchor. Local area logs list the signal as being emitted from a minor Adeptus Arbites facility tagged as Sub-Precinct Eight. We’ve not been able to ascertain whether or not the garrison is still holding out, or whether the signal is simply running on loop.’

‘Whether it is or not, we need a base of operations,’ Kahu interjected. ‘It’s in an optimal position to provide us with subterranean access to the Precinct Fortress and the primary mine network. Capturing it would be an excellent starting point.’

‘And that also makes it the perfect trap,’ Sharr said, turning his attention to the massive Terminator. ‘We know that these traitors delight in setting all manner of snares. They lure the unwary or the overconfident to their deaths. Or worse.’

‘Spring their trap and they will have nothing more to threaten us with,’ Kahu pressed. ‘We require a base to operate from if we are to complete the Tithe. Let the Red Brethren lead the assault.’

‘First blood should go to the Company Master,’ said Chaplain Nikora. ‘It’s tradition. Especially as this will be his first blooding as Master of the Third.’
Sharr was glad his helm hid his grimace. As much as he hated being reminded of his new rank, Nikora was right. It was both his duty and his privilege to spearhead the Carcharodons’ planetfall, and Kahu had just laid down an unspoken challenge. Thrust his hand into the jaws of the trap, or let Kahu do it for him.

He knew why the Terminator was doing this. Assessing the situation from orbit and formulating a less risky operational plan would have taken time, time which Kahu didn’t believe they had. The Chapter needed its Tithe quota. Every day the War in the Deeps was costing the Carcharodon Astra more and more. There had been doubts among the other Company Masters that it was right to make Sharr the new Reaper Prime during such desperate times. But there had been no opportunity to debate the promotion. Te Kahurangi’s visions had spurred them on to Zartak. He alone seemed to have fully supported Sharr’s new role, and even then the aged Chief Librarian’s praise was thin.

Kahu was testing Sharr’s dedication to his new role, perhaps on the orders of Tyberos himself. Would he put his life and the lives of his immediate brethren before the Chapter’s objectives? The answer was clear. Kahu was underestimating him.

‘I will purge the Imperial Truth in orbit and then lead First and Second Squads planetside in the initial wave,’ Sharr said, the gaze of his helm’s black lenses sweeping over his subordinates. ‘Chief Librarian Te Kahurangi will follow with the Scout detachment. Kahu and the Red Brethren will man the teleportation chamber and stand in immediate reserve. If contact is lost with me at any point the chain of command passes to Te Kahurangi. Is that clear?’

The assembled Carcharodons nodded as one. Sharr surveyed the rotating orb that represented Zartak on the bridge’s holochart.

‘Trap or not,’ he said slowly. ‘I will wager this particular band of traitors have never fought the Carcharodon Astra before. Nor will they live to fight us again.’

Skell’s nose was bleeding. He wiped it with one grimy hand, pausing to try to catch his breath. He was in a haulage shaft, though where he had no idea. The lumen lights rigged to the bare dirt walls flickered. He felt sick with exhaustion.

Keep going, the thought in his head urged. He stumbled on.

Memories rose up. Roax, surrounded by arbitrators, pointing at him. The man he’d considered his father, the one who’d taken him in when he’d fled the Ministorum orphanage and its mad abbot’s beatings, turning him over to help save his own skin. The memory of the betrayal made him slow, his tiredness redoubling.

Ignore it, said the thought. It’s toying with you.

Another memory reared up, fragmentary and instinctive. A hot bowl of nutrient broth for a stomach that ached with hunger. A worn blanket. A warm smile. A gentle kiss on his bruised brow. The face of the mother he’d believed he’d forgotten forever.

He stumbled to a halt, sobbing. The thought kept speaking to him, insistent.

It’s trying to make you stop. It’s trying to catch you. You have to drive it out and keep going.

‘I’m alone,’ Skell said, fighting back the tears. ‘I can’t go on. There’s no point.’

You’re never alone, Mika Skell. The Void Father is with you, always.

‘I don’t understand.’

You will. Go.

Skell wiped the tears from his dirt-encrusted face, and forced himself onwards.
The *White Maw* was cleared for action. The strike cruiser shuddered with barely contained power, the air heavy with the static crackle of its void shields and the throb of charged lance batteries. Shipmaster Teko had taken to the bridge’s command throne, surrounded by a blur of holo-fields and data readouts. The viewing bay’s blast shutters had been lowered, the space beyond now represented on the viewscreens and oculus displays that dominated the centre of the dimly lit bridge.

Sharr watched the ship’s crew. It was rare for Carcharodons to even notice their enslaved serfs, much less actually note their activities. Certainly the strike leaders assembled behind Sharr were oblivious to the emaciated humans hurrying back and forth around them. Those who manned the *White Maw*’s bridge were the most privileged of the hundreds of thousands of thralls that attended to the Nomad Predation Fleet, their experience and expertise affording them better rations and living quarters. Even so, they were wasted and weak creatures, their grey-and-white Chapter robes hanging limp from starved bodies, their features gaunt. In pale imitation of their masters, they all bore shaved scalps, and some had sharpened their teeth to points. Sharr watched them as they worked vox-banks and augur panels, monitored engine output and prepared firing coordinates, all in deathly silence. Try as he might, the Company Master found he couldn’t differentiate between any of them, old or young, male or female. They were the Chapter’s chattel, their enslavement ordained by the Void Father’s will and permissible under the Edicts of Exile.

‘Reaper Prime,’ said Teko, drawing Sharr’s gaze to the great coral block that was the bridge’s command throne.

‘We are coming up on the penal ship,’ the shipmaster said. ‘Ident scans and the keel tag confirm it’s the convict hauler *Imperial Truth*. What are your orders?’

‘You’ve hailed her?’

‘Affirmative. She is unresponsive. Close-range augur traces have detected only minimal life signs. A shuttle jettisoned from her approximately ten minutes ago, heading for Zartak’s surface. We lost its trajectory on the far side of the ship.’

‘The murderers will already have had their fun,’ Kahu said. ‘It will be nothing but a charnel house.’

‘True,’ Sharr said. ‘But if there are still prisoners on board it would be wasteful to destroy the ship from afar. They may be able to provide intelligence before we make planetfall.’

‘The traitors will have broken them,’ Kahu said dispassionately. ‘Boarding her would be a waste of time.’

Sharr watched the viewscreens. Even without pict magnification the *Imperial Truth* was now clearly discernible, its blocky, unlovely bulk framed by the swirling green-and-white orb of Zartak. What had become of her crew? What now festered on board, in the darkness that had claimed her decks and holds?

‘Boarding her isn’t a waste of time if it renders up our first Tithe prisoners,’ Sharr said. ‘That is why we are here.’

‘You really do want first blood,’ Kahu surmised. ‘Akia’s spirit is strong in you, Company Master.’

‘And I will have it, Kahu,’ Sharr said, ignoring the barbed comparison. ‘Whether on board that ship or on the planet below. Prepare Third and Fourth Squads and the Devourers. And prime the Ursus Claws.’

The Ursus Claws were terrible weapons. *White Maw* possessed two, each capable of being launched from its port or starboard flanks. Both were fashioned like vast harpoons, nearly the size of the escort
As *White Maw* drew alongside the *Imperial Truth* sections of its adamantium bulkheads levered back. On Sharr’s orders the great barbs launched, the plasma thrusters clustered beneath their tips blazing. They arced silently through the void, uncoiling link by link as they powered towards their prey.

The *Imperial Truth* was struck fore of its starboard engine bays and aft of the primary cargo holds. The adamantium tips of the two great spears plunged into the vessel’s outer shell, plasma drives burning out as they drove the Ursus Claws through layers of reinforced bulkheads, service corridors and maintenance shafts. Once the tips had been buried the barbs sprung outwards, hooks the size of super heavy battle tanks digging into the ship’s guts and lodging there with a flare of magnetic fusion. For a second the *Imperial Truth* shuddered, impaled and helpless. Then the Ursus Claws began to pull.

Great rotor coils embedded in the *White Maw*’s flank turned, powered by energy diverted from the ship’s plasma drives. The links connecting the Ursus Claw tips to their housing in the strike cruiser were dragged slowly taut. Little by little, the Ursus Claws started to retract, and with them they hauled the *Imperial Truth*. The prison ship listed, without any propulsion of its own, metal shrieking and groaning as the starboard decks began to buckle. But the Ursus Claws had dug deep – they held.

Sharr felt the assault torpedo around him shudder as it launched. Behind, First Squad stood unmoving, fully armed and armoured, their auto-stabilisers and mag-locks keeping them upright as the torpedo blazed towards the *Imperial Truth*’s flank. *White Maw* had dragged the penal ship in close, close enough to ensure that whatever defensive systems it possessed would be unable to lock on to the Carcharodons assault craft as they tore through the narrow void between the two ships. The chrono display on Sharr’s visor barely reached fifteen seconds before the proximity alarms chimed and the narrow metal troop bay was filled with vicious red light.

‘Brace,’ Sharr ordered, setting his stabilisers to maximum. Just as his armour locked he felt the retro-thrust dampening a headlong collision, moments before the impact itself. He grunted, his power armour absorbing the violent gravitational changes. The torpedo seemed to settle for a moment, then fresh vibrations throbbed through the deck underfoot as the meltas in its prow burned through the *Imperial Truth*’s outer hull.

Sharr unclamped Reaper. Behind him be could feel First Squad’s desire to kill. They had waited long enough. Sharr found himself praying there were no prisoners left alive aboard the ship. Nothing to complicate the bloodshed. His only desire was to slaughter. He thrust the bloody emotions aside, seeking focus. He was not Akia.

But he could kill like Akia. The frag plates on the boarding torpedo’s prow burst with a dull thud, followed by the sound of auto-bolts grating back. The troop bay lighting flickered from red to green. Sharr was already moving as the ramp fell, Reaper a roaring counterpoint to his deathly silence.

Beyond was shrieking darkness. Sharr’s auto-senses picked out misshapen, unnatural forms, further distorted by the fragmentation bursts that had shredded the corridor the torpedo had penetrated. Sharr’s sensors reported the unmistakable, sickening stench of the warp.

The Carcharodon decimated the first daemons to rear up at him from the darkness, Reaper tearing them to globules of shredded meat and black ichor. He stamped down on their writhing remains, his sharpened teeth bared with hatred. The malformed horrors would have torn the sanity of most mortals – even as Sharr pressed on they rose up around him, sucking maws and fleshy appendages writhing and clutching at grey battleplate, nightmares made manifest.
But nightmares meant nothing in the Outer Dark. Sharr cut them apart, Reaper sending gouts of black filth splattering across Akia’s armour. Across his armour. A surge of revulsion drove Sharr on down the corridor, the fury of his great chainaxe filling the confined space. The life essence of the squealing, mewling things infesting the ship was soon dripping from him, an unworthy tribute to the Void Father. This was no blooding; it was an extermination, a culling of something vile. The anger only made Sharr strike harder.

Behind him First Squad followed in his frenzied wake. Dorthor and Red Tane put down the daemonspawn savaged by the Company Master, single bolt-rounds dissolving their unnatural flesh. Tane hadn’t even deigned to draw the Void Sword, unwilling to sully the relic blade with daemonic ichor. Soha was protecting the squad’s rear, his volkite caliver buzzing with power as he reduced the horrors further down the corridor to bursts of fire and ash, the crimson rays of the ancient weapon illuminating the violent scene with bursts of hellish light.

The last daemon came apart in Sharr’s fist, dissolving back into the immaterium. Before him an access hatch lay open. He shouldered his way through it, scanning for fresh prey, his transhuman body screaming silently for more kills.

His auto-senses showed him the slaughterhouse he’d stepped into. What had once been the ship’s medicae bay was awash with blood and hung with bloody skins. The insane abattoir was crawling with hunchbacked, cloaked creatures, cultists that cringed away from Sharr’s presence.

The Carcharodon didn’t hesitate. He added their tainted blood to the daemon ichor spraying from his chainaxe, ripping through their squealing forms. They clawed and beat at one another in their efforts to get away from him, helpless before the grey-plated giant. The rest of First Squad simply watched as Sharr massacred them.

‘No prisoners,’ Strike Veteran Dorthor said, assessing the carnage as the last cultist’s shriek was cut off by Reaper’s howl. Sharr stood breathing heavily, viscera dripping from his ancient armour. He fought to control himself, fought to master the urge to keep killing. To shed more blood. He was not Akia. He was not. He acknowledged a trio of situation reports on his visor, transmitted from the Devourer Assault squads and the Third Tactical Squad as they penetrated other parts of the ship.

‘No human survivors,’ he said, confirming Dorthor’s statement. ‘And no sign of the renegades. Yet.’

‘We’re missing one boarding party,’ Signifier Niko muttered. Sharr realised he was correct.

Fourth Squad had yet to report in.

Kordi killed while the memories came at him. He had been dreaming, though of what it was hard to remember. Sun-drenched shingle and crashing waves, perhaps. It didn’t matter. What mattered was that he was shedding blood, for the Chapter and the Void Father.

Focus. He reloaded, movements smooth, none of his mental turmoil evident in the well-honed actions. He opened fire, his Phobos R/017 bolter joining those of his void brothers. Fourth Squad had penetrated the base of the Imperial Truth’s command spire, their boarding torpedo crushing an access chute. They’d fought their way upwards, through stairwells haunted by horrors of morphing warp flesh and grasping claws. The Carcharodons were splattered with the daemonspawn’s gore, a foul patina that did nothing to slake the simmering bloodlust of the Adeptus Astartes. Strike Leader Ekara’s terse commands were the only thing keeping them in formation, a triple knot of void brothers advancing one after the other up the stairwells, providing each other with mutual fire support.

‘Purged,’ Kordi said tersely, as the daemon that had reared at him from the shadows of the stairwell
came apart. The Tactical Marines pressed on, moving with the fluidity of natural-born predators.

Te Kahurangi was with them. The Chief Librarian had insisted on accompanying the strike up towards the bridge, presumably drawn by some arcane desire or knowledge. He led Fourth Squad from the fore, the green stone tipping his bone force staff lighting the dire, warp-stinking darkness that wreathed the ship.

More fire came from up ahead. Kordi joined the lead void brothers as they engaged a fresh mass of spawn infesting the top of the spire’s final set of stairs. Mass-reactive rounds detonated by the dozen, bass thunderclaps punctuating the wet thump of tearing flesh. Writhing tentacles grasped at the Carcharodons, one sinuous length wrapping around the greaves of Beta-eight-three-Rua and trying to drag him down towards a distended maw filled with needle teeth and grinning secondary mouths. The Carcharodon unlocked his combat knife and, in a silent rage, hacked the boneless limb apart, sawing the razorblade through thick layers of purple flesh and rancid yellow fat.

‘Cease,’ Ekara ordered. It took a few moments for the words to register with Kordi, and a few more for him to stop his automatic fire. Around him the rest of Fourth Squad likewise eased fingers from triggers. The daemons were gone.

The blast doors to the ship’s bridge lay open before them. The inside stank of death.

‘Advance,’ Ekara ordered.

‘Watch all angles,’ Te Kahurangi added. ‘And above.’ The Librarian’s voice was terse, as though he was speaking through gritted teeth. Whatever his warp sight was showing him, it wasn’t good.

The Carcharodons secured the bridge in silence, alert for further contacts. There were none. Kordi scanned the darkness of the arching chamber’s hanging rafters, hung with shadows. His mind saw an endless expanse of clear blue sky, mirroring the open waters below. He thrust the unwelcome memory angrily aside, turning his attention to the gristly remains of the corpses beneath his feet. They were a mixture of Imperial Navy bridge staff and Adeptus Arbites lawmen, united by a single aspect – they had been cut down with bolters, chainblades and worse. It was the work of their dark brothers, that much was certain.

Te Kahurangi was standing on the edge of the bridge’s primary vox-pit, looking down at the carpet of Navy corpses and the body of a single female arbitrator. One headless corpse had been pinned to the vox-hub.

‘We are too late,’ the Chief Librarian said. ‘They have all gone.’

‘Scythe Four, come in,’ said the voice of Company Master Sharr over the vox. ‘Repeat, Scythe Four, come in.’

‘The bridge is secure,’ Te Kahurangi said before Ekara could respond. ‘They’ve already slaughtered the last prisoners. The murderers have done their work well. They’ve used vox trickery and dark sorcery to infiltrate the system.’

‘We have found none of them in the medicae bay either, but evidence of their dark rituals abound.’

‘The Dead Skin was on board. I can sense the lingering pain of his presence, like an aftershock.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘Below the surface, hunting the boy. We must hurry.’

‘I will have Voidspear and Razortooth pick us up from the shuttle bays, and White Maw will destroy this hulk from afar. Send word to Ari to bring his initiates as well. They will accompany you once we reach the surface.’
‘With me, brethren,’ Te Kahurangi said, addressing Fourth Squad. Kordi and the others closed around the ancient Librarian as he departed for the Imperial Truth’s shuttle bays, casting one last lingering look at the headless corpse pinned to the vox-bay below.

‘All void brethren,’ Sharr’s voice clicked over the company-wide vox-channel. ‘New objective coordinates uploading. Lock on to Imperial surface installation Gamma-eight-three, tagged Sub-Precinct Eight.’

Rannik looked at herself in the tiny mirror plate in Sub-Precinct Eight’s ablution cell. The face that stared back at her was nightmarish – the blood and gristle that had caked it flowed in pink lines where the arbitrator was trying to wash it away, plastering her dark hair to her scalp and stinging her eyes. Her hands shook as she splashed more water over her head. She told herself it was because of the cold, and not the fear that still gripped her.

The arbitrators manning the walls reported that the shadows edging the treeline beyond the sub-precinct were moving. The rain had let up, giving way to pallid, watery sunlight, but the darkness beneath the boughs only seemed to have deepened. There had been no more gunfire. The headless corpse of the arbitrator brought down trying to get Rannik inside still lay in the churned-up mulch beyond the south gate.

First Arbitrator Jaken had briefed Rannik in the sub-precinct’s small control room. Klenn, the facility’s commander, had departed for the session review the day before. Word had come through that the shock squads were being scrambled to investigate an unauthorised high-orbital entry. The garrison had been stood to. There had been a blurt of panicked, contradictory messages from the Precinct Fortress, and then nothing. That was when the darkness had started to encroach, in the hours before the dawn. Jaken had triggered the sub-precinct’s distress beacon, and waited. They’d seen the re-entry of Rannik’s salvation pod burning a trail through the morning sky, and sent a team to investigate. The attack on them confirmed what Rannik had feared – the monsters had made it planetside.

She hadn’t spoken of them. She’d told Jaken that the Imperial Truth had been a trap, that the dark forces of the Archenemy had come to Zartak and that they may well be the only survivors still resisting. But she hadn’t said anything of the towering, shrieking things that had fallen upon them from the darkness, how they had been impervious to a whole clip of Vox Legi shells, how they had crushed skulls and snapped necks with the gleeful ease of a child at play.

She certainly hadn’t told them how one, his midnight-blue armour splattered with Macran’s blood, had not only spared her but returned her planetside via the salvation pod. The memory made her want to be sick again. She didn’t know why she’d been saved. Was she tainted? Had some sort of corruption been planted in her soul? She gripped the sides of the sink, head bowed, trying to stop shaking, watching the pink water swill down the plughole.

Jaken wanted to kill the convicts. Rannik had refused, not because she considered it the wrong thing to do, but because she simply hadn’t known what to do. Nothing in her progenium training had prepared her for this.

The ablution cell had been part of Klenn’s private quarters. Rannik had been at loggerheads with the older sub-warden from the day she had arrived on Zartak, but she’d have given anything right then to have him present. She wondered what had happened to her own sub-precinct, to First Arbitrator Nellis and the rest of her men. And what had become of the Precinct Fortress? What was she supposed to do next? Send a force to investigate? Hold tight, and watch the shadows creep closer?
The memory of the slaughter on board the *Imperial Truth* returned, and she shuddered.

‘Sub-warden, sir,’ called Jaken from outside the cell’s hatch. ‘The augur is detecting an entry approach from orbit. Two signals, both Imperial, but the identification isn’t coming up in the databanks. Also, we’re getting returns on a large detonation in high orbit. We suspect a ship has just been destroyed.’

‘I’ll be right there,’ Rannik replied, cuffing water from her face. Looking at her pale, red-eyed reflection, she felt a sudden bout of anger. She was an officer of the Adeptus Arbites. Regardless of the fate that had befallen the rest of Zartak, the situation in Sub-Precinct Eight was stable. It was her duty to keep it that way until the Imperium finally realised what was happening, and help arrived. Whenever that might be. She tugged her carapace plate straight, scooped her newly requisitioned helmet from the bare rockcrete floor and opened the hatch. Jaken was waiting for her.

‘Prime the aerial defence batteries,’ she ordered the first arbitrator. ‘They could be from the *Imperial Truth*, which means they’re not ours any more.’

‘Sir, they don’t appear to be from the prison ship,’ Jaken replied. ‘They check out as some sort of gunship, of a much older pattern.’

‘Do we have visuals?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Rannik strode out into the dirt parade ground set before the sub-precinct’s central keep. The garrison were manning the walls of the rockcrete bastions that ringed the central block. The multi-barrelled Hydra flak cannons that crowned the keep’s roof were inert, their servitor targeting systems not locking on to the friendly signal being broadcast by the approaching fliers.

Rannik took the magnoculars handed to her by Jaken. Whatever they were, the aircraft certainly didn’t look friendly. The viewfinder’s enhanced scopes stripped away the distance and cloud cover to reveal two heavy-looking, snub-nosed gunships streaking towards the sub-precinct, the pallid sunlight glinting from their stubby, grey-plated wings and the barrels of their bristling weaponry. As Rannik watched, one stooped to begin what could only be a descent run, while the other held off in a holding pattern.

‘Lock the Hydras,’ Rannik told Jaken. ‘But don’t fire unless they fire first, or I give the order. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, sir.’

The scream of distant engines rose to a painful pitch. Rannik clamped the magnoculars, and tried to ignore the churning in her stomach. As it drew closer she realised just how monstrously large the descending gunship was. Armour-plated and heavily armed, whatever it was, Jaken was right – it hadn’t come from the *Imperial Truth*.

There was a rattle as the autocannon emplacements on the outer bastions tracked the flier, its landing prongs extended beneath it. Rannik backed up against the keep’s blast doors to make room as it lowered itself onto the parade square, the down-draught of its shrieking engines battering at her. The arbitrators on the surrounding walls stood ready, shotguns and autorifles raised. Rannik pulled on her helmet, her mouth set in a grim downward turn.

There was a thump as the gunship landed, settling with leaden grace. The engine noise cut back to an idling whine, and then clattered out altogether. The sudden silence seemed to press in on Rannik. Her skin crawled. The heavy front hatch of the gunship directly faced her, as did its black-tinted cockpit and the gaping maw of the cannon that ran along its upper spine.
The arbitrators waited. Eventually there came the thud of disengaging mag locks and a hydraulic whirr as the front hatch began to lower. Bursts of pressurised steam obscured Rannik’s view of whatever lurked within. She realised, abruptly, that she was probably about to die.

The thump of heavy footfalls echoed out across the square. A shadow materialised from within the gunship’s depths. Rannik froze, terror stopping her hand on the butt of her autopistol. It was the same creature that had been on the Imperial Truth, a giant in vast plates of armour. It strode towards Rannik like a colossus, steam wreathing it, its glaring, soulless black lenses pinning her against the keep’s rockcrete.

And yet, something was different. This time the warrior-titan was not armoured in darkest blue, but in grey. Gone were the leering skulls and crimson wing sigils, replaced by a coiling, white oceanic predator. In its monstrous fists it carried a huge chainaxe, its rotor silent and inactive.

It halted at the foot of the ramp. More hulking warriors emerged behind it, spreading out in a semicircle on either side. They were similarly bedecked in grey-and-black battleplate, parts of it inscribed with strange, swirling patterns. A few bore red diagonal lines down the visors of their helmets. Scrimshawed bone tokens and old, jagged-looking predator teeth clattered from leather bands bound around their vambraces and gorgets. Most carried huge boltguns, though one bore a ragged strip of cloth aloft on a pole, all of it faded to obscurity bar a central white crest that mirrored the one on each of the warriors’ right pauldron.

None of the arbitrators moved. Rannik stared. She knew one wrong twitch would see her smeared against the wall of the keep by a storm of mass-reactive bolts.

The first giant to emerge from the gunship, the one with the chainaxe, stepped forwards.

‘Hail, Imperial citizen.’ The voice was a dry, deep rasp, crackling up from the helmet’s vox-grille as though from a great depth. Rannik took a moment to realise the giant was speaking in High Gothic. She cast about for a response, striving to recall her progenium days in Abbot Tarwell’s bitterly cold lingua-chamber.

‘Who are you?’ she asked, knowing she was horribly mangling the translation from Low to High.

‘We are the Carcharodon Astra, servants of the Void Father and the Imperium. We come to your world seeking a Red Tithe, as is our right, granted by the Forgotten One on the Day of Exile.’

Rannik picked up only one prominent part of the giant’s words. They served the Imperium. The revelation didn’t do much to ease her fear. Nothing lately had been as it seemed.

‘We detected your distress signal,’ the giant continued when Rannik didn’t respond. ‘A warband of vile traitors and heretics have beset your world and already murdered many of your brethren. We will assist you with their destruction before we claim our Tithe.’

‘You are here to help us?’ Rannik asked haltingly. The giant paused before replying, as though considering her words.

‘Yes,’ he said eventually. ‘We require full access to this facility, for use as a staging ground.’

‘Is the perimeter secure?’ the giant asked, ignoring the question.

‘Yes. We’ve had contacts though.’

‘We shall begin our deployment. Praise the Void Father, citizen, for the Red Tithe has begun.’

Sharr had forgotten how pathetic humans were. The one before him was clearly stunned at the sight of two squads of Adeptus Astartes, her half-helm failing to hide her slack jaw. The Company Master
blink-clicked his visor’s internal vox-uplink icon.
‘Brother Attika, bring Voidspear down,’ he said.
‘Affirmative, Company Master,’ the Thunderhawk pilot replied. ‘Our scanners are detecting contacts beyond the perimeter of the facility.’
‘I am aware,’ Sharr said. ‘Proceed regardless. We have no time to lose.’
The human was saying something, her High Gothic phrases largely incoherent. Sharr interrupted her.
‘This facility holds penal labourers?’
The human managed to nod. Sharr continued.
‘You will show them to me and my Chief Librarian, when he arrives.’

It had been almost half a decade since Sharr had last spoken to a human that wasn’t a Chapter-serf. The one before him looked no older than a child. From a glance he knew the rest of the garrison were older, but they hardly looked more competent. There was no chance they’d managed to resist the traitors on their own merit thus far. They’d simply been left alive, unknowingly at the mercy of the invaders.

That meant the traitors had wanted the Carcharodons to land here. Voidspear touched down beside Razortooth, the twin Thunderhawk gunships filling the small parade ground. Te Kahurangi led Strike Leader Ari out to join First and Second Squads, assembled around Sharr. The terror emanating from the human before them became even more palpable at the sight of the blue-armoured Chief Librarian.

‘Well met, Sub-Warden Rannik,’ Te Kahurangi said. The human blanched.
‘You know my name?’
‘My brother knows many things,’ Sharr said, tiring of the young human’s stupidity. ‘It is best not to question them. Now, you will show us your detention centre. I must review your prisoners.’
The human Te Kahurangi had called Rannik hesitated, but not for long. She opened the central keep’s blast doors and led them down into its vaults. As they went Sharr ordered the rest of the assembled squads to join the garrison on the ramparts, while Voidspear and Razortooth took to the sky once more. If their dark brethren were planning to strike any time soon, they would not be caught unprepared.

A grav lift took them down to the prison vaults. They had been carved into the bedrock of Zartak itself – the corridors were of jagged, damp stone, and stalactites bristled from the low ceiling. The inmate cells had been burrowed from the rock and sealed off with heavy plasteel bars and grates.
Sharr and Te Kahurangi passed through the vault corridors, Rannik following like a child in the footsteps of adults. After a period of silence, Sharr spoke to his Chief Librarian.
‘Are they suitable?’
Te Kahurangi made a dry grunting noise, not looking at the Company Master.
‘They are terrified. A pall of fear has fallen across this world. The influence of the Dead Skin lies over everything.’
‘And when we have killed him and banished his darkness?’
‘It is hard to say. They are malnourished, overworked. Many already bear crippling injuries. Few are fit for the slave decks, let alone indoctrination.’
‘We will take what we can,’ Sharr said. ‘Sift this place for anything that might benefit the Chapter.’
‘I am only here for the boy,’ Te Kahurangi said.
‘He is worth that much to you?’
You know as well as I how difficult it is to find new initiates for the Librarium. In the Outer Dark, beyond the usual means of recruitment, discovering a suitable young psyker is hard enough. Finding one who is largely untainted is nearly impossible. My brother Librarians have waited decades for this day to come. That is why I am here.

‘And I will assist you,’ Sharr reassured him. ‘As far as my duties will permit.’

‘We shall see just how far that really is,’ Te Kahurangi said. Occasionally as they walked he would pause to peer into one of the cells. The inmates within would gasp or cry out at the sight of the towering warrior. They were universally a bedraggled set of creatures, their grey overalls stained by layers of sweat and dirt, their exposed flesh caked with grime. Sharr wondered whether he had looked in any way similar to them before his own induction. Wondered whether he had shared these very same cells. Such memories were long lost to him now.

‘What is the average survival rate for these wretches?’ he asked Rannik, gesturing through the bars of one of the cell grates. The convicts inside moaned with fear.

‘From when they first arrive?’ Rannik replied in her pidgin High Gothic. ‘Nine to ten months, Terran standard.’

Even the slave berths of the Nomad Predation Fleet did not have such a high rate of attrition, Sharr thought. Still, it was better than nothing.

‘Do you know the boy’s location?’ he asked Te Kahurangi over the internal vox.

‘Approximately,’ the Chief Librarian said. ‘He has allowed me into his mind to an extent, though the strain is great. I have traced his warp presence to a sub-section of the primary prison mine. It is on the other side of the hemisphere. There are a number of access points on the jungle surface I could use.’

‘The traitors have allowed us to get this far,’ Sharr said. ‘This entire place reeks of a trap.’

‘Regardless, you are out of time, Company Master,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘Kahu will brook no delay for the Tithing, and I must reach the boy. The Dead Skin draws nearer to him with each passing moment. I have been able to keep him moving thus far, but I can only do so much from a distance. I must go in person and retrieve him.’

‘Then do so,’ Sharr said. ‘Take Ari and his Tenth Company initiates aboard the Voidspear, and go with all haste. May the Void Father guide you.’ Te Kahurangi bowed his head.

‘What will you do in the meantime?’

‘We’re going to start,’ the Company Master said, ‘by purging the heretics. Once they have been uprooted we can collect the prison inmates and shuttle them into orbit.’

Te Kahurangi stopped, assessing the rugged cell corridor and the heavy prison doors. His helm swung to face Sharr, its intricately inscribed blue plates and black lenses inscrutable.

‘Do you remember this place, Company Master?’

Sharr paused for a moment, taking in Zartak’s gloomy tunnels, before replying.

‘No, Pale Nomad. It is nothing to me.’ Te Kahurangi shook his head.

‘You are lying, Bail Sharr.’

Vorfex crouched on the edge of the jungle treeline and bared his fangs. The air above the little precinct fort was vibrating with the shriek of engines and the passage of heavy gunships. The loyalists were deploying more of their forces to the surface – Vorfex estimated almost a full company’s strength.

His Raptor Claw had come down from the Imperial Truth on Cull’s orders, not long after Vorfex had
jettisoned the unconscious Imperial in the salvation pod and just in time to avoid the ship’s destruction at the hands of the newly arrived loyalist fleet. Since then they’d been stalking the sub-precinct from the jungle edge, like half-glimpsed predators circling trapped preyflesh. They’d made their presence known with the occasional shot from across the clearing, teasing the Imperials with little doses of terror.

Vorfex had just started to contemplate a small murder-raid – contrary to orders – when the auspex had detected incoming fliers. Suddenly everything became interesting again. Cull had been right, damn him – there were Loyalist Adeptus Astartes arriving on Zartak. Vorfex hadn’t recognised their grey-and-black heraldry, though their predator crest had sent a thrill of excitement through the Night Lord’s genhanced veins.

The harvest had gone from a mission of murder and pillage to an opportunity for them to prove that the VIII Legion was still the deadliest band of hunter-killers in the galaxy. And that was the perfect setting for him to assume leadership of the warband.

The Loyalists had already announced their presence by boarding and destroying the Imperial Truth. It had happened while the shuttle carrying Vorfex’s Raptor Claw was still descending from orbit. He’d watched grainy images from the rear pict-caster as the prison ship buckled and split apart beneath the firepower of the newly arrived Imperial fleet. The Flayed Father would be incensed that the death-haunted ship had been wrecked, just when he was close to finishing its transformation into his own little pain-wracked warp nest. Vorfex didn’t care. He despised the trickery of the Dark Gods almost as much as he hated the weakling, lapdog Imperials. There was only one will in the galaxy he obeyed, and that was his own.

Another gunship rose from within the sub-precinct’s outer walls and burned away to the north. The Claw leader opened a vox-channel to the Precinct Fortress.

‘My prince, this is Vorfex. They are still deploying at the point you predicted. Armour has started to arrive. I estimate a company-sized force, no more, no less.’

Cull’s voice crackled back over the link.

‘Understood. Watch then, brother. Only withdraw if threatened.’

‘The Claw is hungry, my prince,’ Vorfex said, testing Cull’s limits.

‘It matters nothing to me what your Claw desires, Vorfex. Soon we will all hunt. If you cannot hold position and keep your Claw in check, I will find a champion who can. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, my prince,’ Vorfex lied, battling to keep the resentment from his voice. He broke the link.

The Claws were returning to their new home. They came with the sub-surface loco carriages, packed with terrified meat. From all of the outlying sub-precincts and secondary mines, the Night Lords assembled, and brought their fresh prisoners. The new arrivals were unloaded en masse into the Burrow, to join the remaining Sink Shaft One inmates still competing for survival among the shadow-haunted tunnels and pits.

The Night Lords fleet had withdrawn from the dark side of Zartak to the cover of the asteroid belt. The warband was assembled beneath the surface in its entirety, the last remnants shuttled down just before the Loyalists arrived. Now they need only wait.

The Imperials holed up in the last defended sub-precinct had sealed off the subterranean routes linking their smaller mine works to the larger ones of the Burrow. Cull watched via the viewscreens as the separating blast doors ground slowly open. The first armoured figures emerged through them,
bolters at the ready, moving with the lethal fluidity of born predators. The Night Lord grinned to
himself. Soon they would discover who the real predators on Zartak were. He activated his vox and
opened a channel to the whole warband.
‘This is the Prince of Thorns to all Claws,’ he said. ‘You may begin.’
Day 79, warp time variance approximate.

We have reached the waypoint station at Gorgas, following the path of the rogue penal ship. Progress has been slow. The tides of the empyrean are against us and I fear we shall arrive on Zartak after whatever events currently unfolding there have ended. Quite what we will find, only the God-Emperor knows.

I have used the opportunity afforded by the brief break back into real space to contact superiors and subordinates alike. Rochfort has finally been able to conclude matters on Kelistan. My Lord Rozenkranz is still urging haste. I informed him of the mystery of the missing colonists on Zartak, and forwarded him copies of the files I have thus far compiled from the Saint Angelica’s limited databanks.

Hopefully his higher clearance levels and access to the Ordo Librarium on Mitquoll will give him a better chance of discovering the truth behind these strange events.

We are poised now to return to the warp. Before us lies the edge of Imperial voidspace, and beyond it, black, endless nothingness. I am starting to regret the glee with which I accepted this assignment.

Signed,
InterrogatorAugimNzogwu.
CHAPTER VII

It began with the Stalk. The Claws had come together in the network of mines spreading out from Sink Shaft One before shutting down all of their armour’s secondary systems. The bitter red glow of helm lenses faded, and the arco-lightning that snapped and crackled across the war-plate of the veterans shorted out. They melded with the stygian darkness, only the faintest whirring of dampened servos betraying the silence. Truly, they had become the night.

Vorfex and his Raptors had crouched amidst the dirt and the undergrowth of the surface for long enough. Damn Cull and his arrogant orders; the Raptors needed to kill. The meat they’d been fed on the bridge of the *Imperial Truth* had been a pathetic morsel, and the fact that Vorfex had been forced to save the life of one of the corpse worshippers still rankled. He would achieve nothing on the surface.

So his Claw had descended into the darkness to join their brothers. There were none more adept at the art of the hunt than his Raptors. They joined the Stalk, the first of three combat phases that the warband had long ago perfected. Slowly and patiently, the Night Lords located their enemy’s positions and moved to encircle them, slipping through the shadows with the unhurried precision that spoke of complete self-confidence. After they were in position the Terror would begin. The flare of arco-lightning, the screams of a thousand victims, the bark and hammer of weaponry, vox scramblers, distortion blasts and stun grenades – they would flay the minds of their enemies in a burst of purest, maddening terror.

Only then would they move in for the final, sweetest phase – the Kill.

Vorfex smiled as he reviewed the location of his brethren in the darkness around him. They would make prey out of those who believed themselves predators.

‘*Area secured,*’ Strike Leader Nuritona’s voice crackled over the vox. ‘*Junction nine-three is clear.*’

‘Acknowledged,’ Sharr replied. ‘Hold position. We are joining you.’

The tactical brethren of Third Company’s Second Squad had led the descent into the tunnels linking the sub-precinct to the primary mine works. They had encountered no sign of any enemy presence. Nuritona had halted their advance at a subway intersection, the single largest point connecting the two underground networks. Sharr had received a vox-message from Te Kahurangi moments earlier saying that he too had begun to descend into the underground, far to the north. The company’s Scout detachment was fanning out ahead of him, splitting up to hunt for the boy.

That was no longer Sharr’s concern. The primary mine had to be purged, and as quickly as possible. Only then could the Tithing begin.

He led his command squad down, first via grav lift and then along winding, narrow passages of
rock, dirt and creaking plastecel. Down into the echoing embrace of Zartak’s inner dark. There, he found Nuritona and his Tactical squad waiting.

‘Possible contact ahead,’ the strike leader said, greeting his Company Master with a deferential nod. He was standing in the shelter of a packed, rusting ore skip, while his void brothers had spread out to all sides of the junction, crouched behind rusting rail maintenance carriages and track-changing gears. The air was cold and heavy, as though the sub-surface tunnel was holding its breath.

‘Possible contact?’ Sharr repeated. It was rare for the grizzled commander of Second Squad to deal in anything other than absolutes.

‘Affirmative. The shadows are playing tricks on us. There have been auto-sense malfunctions. I suspect some sort of advanced scrambling device is in effect nearby.’

There were few things in the galaxy capable of distorting the senses of Adeptus Astartes power armour. That alone was evidence enough that their enemy was close.

‘Nothing on auspex?’

‘Not yet.’

‘They know we’re here,’ Strike Veteran Dorthor growled. The command squad were assembled around their Company Master, scanning the darkness for movement. Signifier Niko had retracted the haft of the company’s banner by half in order to accommodate the ancient standard underground. Red Tane’s grip on the mag-locked Void Sword looked tighter than ever.

‘They’re waiting for us,’ Sharr surmised. ‘And I would not want them to grow bored. Hold your positions.’

He stood. The loco rail route going directly to Sink Shaft One led away from him. The lumen strips wired overhead had failed further up the tunnel, the track underfoot laddering off into darkness. A slight draught from some distant exhaust shaft stirred the ragged strips of the devotional readings nailed to the walls. Sharr’s lenses probed the shadows, but picked up only phantom returns and error blips. Nuritona was right – something was deliberately disrupting their visuals.

But sometimes the absence of the predator was a confirmation of its presence.

‘Company Master–’ Dorthor began, but Sharr cut him off.

‘Wait. They won’t strike unless they think I’m isolated. We must spring their trap.’

He advanced down the tunnel, alone. He sensed rather than saw the shadows shift and move, the darkness closing in around him like the creeping hunger-ache of cryo-sleep.

‘Company Master, if you go any further we’ll lose track of you,’ Dorthor said over the vox. ‘The auspex is beginning to malfunction.’

Sharr didn’t reply. His armour had started pumping combat stimms through his transhuman body, the injections automatically triggered by the spike in his heart rate. His saliva tasted coppery, and his muscles had started to burn with adrenaline. Reaper suddenly felt lighter, the great chainaxe grasped easily in both gauntlets.

Something thumped in the gravel of the track bed behind him. The noise was gentle, and had been perfectly timed to coincide with Sharr’s next step. A normal human would have missed it. But Sharr was far from a normal human.

He triggered Reaper and swung. The chainaxe howled into life, its adamantium-tipped teeth revving with sudden fury. They parted the chill air as Sharr turned on his heel, and then grated against the blades of a chainsword in a shower of sparks.

The Raptor that had dropped down behind Sharr recoiled at the force of the impact, even its auto-
bracing power armour not able to absorb the force of the Company Master’s blow. Sharr followed up with an overarm swing. The Raptor, its own weapon now whirring to life, parried, and the two chainblades juddered away from one another, more sparks flying.

With a shriek, the rest of the Night Lords attacked. They’d been concealed around the edges of the tunnel, scuttling along the walls and roof space like huge, spiked arachnids. Now their jump packs flared and their vox-grilles shrilled with the screams of all the innocent, defenceless victims they’d murdered down the centuries. They came at Sharr from every side, lightning claws cutting the dark, chainswords roaring.

For a few desperate seconds the Master of Third Company stood alone. The flickering lightning threw the combat into hellish, blinking monochrome, like a stop-motion pict-feed. A spin turned aside a lunging chainsword. A set of ignited claws clashed off Reaper’s haft. Another bit grooves into the Carcharodon’s right pauldron. A third chainblade jarred off his backpack. A serrated combat knife nearly worked its way through his gorget.

Then Red Tane reached his side. Contrary to Sharr’s order, the Company Champion had risen from cover at the junction and followed him. If he hadn’t, the Reaper Prime’s first true blooding in his new role would have been his last.

The Void Sword took the first Raptor to attack Sharr in the lower back, beneath the brass-bound jets of its archaic jump pack. The unknown metal of the black blade parted the heretic’s power armour as surely as though it were wreathed in a disruptor field, severing the spine and dropping the Chaos Space Marine instantly.

Tane was already moving on, the refractor charge in the Champion’s Coral Shield cracking as it deflected a pair of lightning claws. The Void Sword came up, and a limb tumbled across the rail track, spurting dark blood.

Sharr managed to swing back in time to avoid four claws as they slashed for his helm. He thrust Reaper blindly into the shadows around him, teeth gritted. His senses were on a knife’s edge, the urge to kill triggered by the potent concoction of stimms and raw battle fury thundering through his veins. The Blindness was calling to him. He fought back against the desire to swing Reaper indiscriminately, maintaining his defensive posture and parrying with the weapon’s scarred adamantium haft. The rest of the command squad would be on their way. He only needed to survive until they arrived, and he couldn’t afford to lose control in front of them, not in his first real combat as Company Master.

Red Tane wasn’t so inhibited. The Champion derived his strength from the seemingly unique way he was able to blend instinctive blade work with the close combat savagery that was the genetic inheritance of the Carcharodons. Every blow was carefully placed, delivered with a sheer, brute strength that even a hulking veteran like Kahu would have struggled to match. By the time the rest of the command squad reached Sharr’s side the Company Champion had put down another of the clawed nightmares.

It took a moment for Sharr to realise that the remainder had gone. The tunnel was suddenly empty. With typical efficiency, Strike Veteran Dorthor put a bolt-round through the helms of the three dead traitors lying at their feet.

‘First blood to you,’ Sharr said to Tane, who had gone perfectly still in the centre of his kills. He could hear the Space Marine’s heavy breathing over the vox, and knew he was struggling to let go of his own bloodlust, now that the killing – so sudden and so savage – was over. The Blindness was a
danger to all of them, not just Sharr.
Yet Tane need not have bothered trying to contain himself. From the route leading back to the
junction there came the roar of an explosion and the crash of falling earth. The tunnel leading back to
the sub-precinct had collapsed, and the trap was sprung.

‘Vorfex!’ Cull had demanded over the vox. ‘Where is he?’
‘Sub-surface, my prince,’ Artar had replied, commander of the Fourth Claw. ‘One of the Loyalists
triggered the ambush while we were still engaged in the Stalk.’
‘Warp take his soul,’ Cull had snarled. ‘He wasn’t supposed to be below the surface.’
‘The corpse worshippers are fully aware of our presence now.’
‘Proceed immediately to the Kill, before they regroup,’ Cull had ordered, and had switched
channels. ‘Drac, blow the charges.’

When the Loyalists’ leading Tactical squad had first entered the mines from the prison vaults below
Sub-Precinct Eight, they’d thoroughly scanned the route for explosives and traps. The auspex,
however, hadn’t been able to penetrate the thick layers of rock around the tunnel or, more specifically,
the layer between the route taken by Sharr and his brethren, and the lone rathole that wound above it.
During orbital scans prior to the start of the harvest, Cull had realised that the rathole’s presence
made the entrance to the sub-precinct the perfect trap.
The Night Lords were far too large to make it down the rathole, but the human cult infantry of the
Black Hand weren’t. Ever since they’d seized control of Sink Shaft One, three of them had spent
hours packing the narrow space with explosives, overseen by First Kill’s demolitions master, Drac.
The result was that when the charges were blown, the pressure of the blast split the bedrock between
the rathole and the tunnel beneath, and caused a collapse that cut the mines off from Sub-Precinct
Eight.

Of that last fact, Sharr was almost immediately aware. The ear-clap sound of the explosion was still
echoing away down the junction’s tunnels when the blast of smoke and debris came hammering
through from the direction of the sub-precinct.

What came after was worse. From further down the rail line, and from the two other tunnels leading
to the junction, bolters barked and spat.

‘Retreat,’ Sharr ordered tersely, turning away from the fire-streaked darkness and back towards the
light of the junction. They ran, bolts kicking up gravel and blasting chunks of dirt from the walls on
either side. Sharr felt one round crack hard off his left pauldron, denting the ceramite outer layer and
the weaker plasteel beneath. Another detonated when it clipped his backpack, and a third struck fat,
angry sparks from the loco rail running beneath his boots. The rune representing Soha on his visor
display flashed yellow, and he heard the weapons expert grunt in rapidly suppressed pain as one
round punched through the armour and then the flesh of his left calf. Sharr slowed his sprint a fraction
to ensure they didn’t leave him behind.

Fire was whipping into the junction from the darkness at the mouths of the two other adjoining
tunnels, the heavy muzzle flares revealing little but darting, red-eyed shadows.

‘Auspex is down,’ Strike Leader Nuritona said as Sharr and his team dropped into cover beside him.
The packed ore skip shuddered as bolt-rounds punched through its far side and detonated impotently
within.

‘The tunnel has been collapsed, Company Master,’ came the voice of Strike Leader Ruak of Third
Squad. He’d been tasked with following First and Second into the junction, but had been left cut off on the sub-precinct side of the tunnel when the explosives had detonated.

‘Can you break through?’ Sharr demanded.

‘We’re scanning it now. It’s likely we can, but it will take time.’

Time the traitors weren’t going to give them. The weight of fire from their unseen attackers was increasing. Sharr suspected they were receiving reinforcements. Even as he formed the thought there was a whump and a frag rocket streaked from one of the adjoining tunnels with a firecracker shriek. It hammered into the gravel half a dozen yards ahead of a rusting, disused loco carriage, riddling it with shrapnel and setting the whole thing rocking on its rails.

A counter-attack was Codex procedure for dealing with such an ambush, but it was clear Nuritona had already tried that while Sharr had been pulling back to the junction. The bodies of two Carcharodons lay out in the open, their grey, dust-caked armour splashed with bright red blood. Occasionally one of the shadows firing from the tunnels would deliberately aim at the splayed bodies, making them twitch. Manic laughter accompanied each fresh hit.

‘We need to draw them into the open,’ Sharr said to Nuritona.

‘If we attack they’ll cut us down,’ the strike leader said, his eyes on the bodies of his two Tactical brethren.

‘We don’t attack. We withdraw.’

‘To where? They’ve blocked off the only route from here back to the sub-precinct.’

‘The mouth of the tunnel will have to do. That will draw them out into the junction.’

‘There’s no cover in the tunnel,’ Dorthor warned. ‘We’ll be decimated.’

‘And we’ll suffer the same fate if we try to hold them here unsupported,’ Sharr said. ‘Withdraw your squad by combat teams, back up the tunnel to the sub-precinct.’

The Carcharodons pulled out. The first half of Nuritona’s Tactical squad began to lay down a barrage of covering fire, sending bolts slamming blindly down the tunnels they were being attacked from. As they did so the second half rose and, kicking up gravel from the rail beds, made for the collapsed route back to the sub-precinct. They took hits as they went, hard rounds cracking off ceramite or drawing blood from weak points in their mismatching suits of grey armour. Yet they made it into the darkness of the tunnel without any fatalities.

‘Brothers, covering fire,’ Sharr ordered. The command squad opened up as Nuritona led the second half of his Tactical Marines after the first. Sharr unlocked his Umbra-Magnus bolt pistol and sent a stream of rounds down the mouth of the nearest tunnel. He doubted he was hitting anything, but that wasn’t the point. There was an ululating crack as Soha fired his volkite caliver after Sharr’s hard rounds. The incandescent spear of energy exploded harmlessly against one of the tunnel walls, but the snap-shot of blazing light illumined a glimpse of their attackers as it passed them by – leering skulls, dark battleplate and bloody, vicious claws. Te Kahurangi’s visions had been correct.

One of Nuritona’s Tactical Marines went down as he ran, a bolt penetrating his right side and blowing away part of his lower torso. Nuritona doubled back from the mouth of the tunnel and dragged his fallen brother through the gravel by both arms, shots striking and sparking around him.

‘Our turn,’ Sharr said as the two made it to the temporary safety of the tunnel entrance. ‘With me.’

The command squad broke from behind the bolt-riddled skip, firing as they went. From the sub-precinct tunnel those Tactical Marines nearest the entrance to the junction opened up, once more drilling streams of semi-auto into the confounding darkness.
Despite its logic, retreat still felt anathema to Sharr. He could almost hear Te Kahurangi’s voice scolding him for such foolish thoughts. He was the Company Master now, not some proud, nameless, raw-toothed initiate in the Tenth. It was Akia’s bloody spirit speaking, not his own.

A bolt punched through the electronic sealant strip binding Dorthor’s vambrace, passing through the flesh of his elbow without detonating. Another almost split Tama’s white helm in half, while a third caught Niko behind the right knee plate, reducing his sprint to a pained limp. Typically, Red Tane made sure he was the last to withdraw, backing away from the junction with the Coral Shield raised, its refractor field flaring as it absorbed a barrage of bolts. Sharr snatched him by the backpack and hauled him forcefully the last few yards into the tunnel.

‘Push up as far as you can go,’ Sharr ordered Second Squad, gesturing for them to press against the collapsed earth a few dozen yards further up. He could hear the scraping of hands and blades from the other side of the hard-packed obstruction. ‘Ruak, report.’

‘We’re making progress, Company Master. Another ten minutes and I estimate we’ll be through to you.’

‘Ten minutes is too long.’

‘Brother Fellik has suggested we wire our krak grenades—’

‘Negative, we’re directly on the other side now. No grenades.’

‘We’ll keep digging.’

Sudden silence fell across the junction, broken only by the click-snap of magazine catches as both sides reloaded.

It didn’t take the traitors long to respond to the Loyalist withdrawal. They could taste victory, and they knew the grey-clad Imperials on the other side of the artificial collapse would be digging their way through the dirt and rock to support their brethren. Crouched at the entrance to the tunnel, Sharr saw the first of the heretics emerge into the lumen light of the junction. Their power armour was deepest blue, banded with bronze and gold. It contrasted with the bone-white and blood-red of the grinning winged skulls which adorned their breastplates and pauldrons.

The Chaos Space Marines spread out, occupying the battered cover scattered across the junction. They moved with a fluidity every bit as graceful and predatory as the Carcharodons, their sprints short and controlled, one group always holding and covering while the other repositioned. Within seconds a few had found an angle on the tunnel opening and were sending shots scything up it. Bereft of cover, all the Carcharodons could do was crouch against the sides of the dank, narrow space.

Sharr estimated they had less than a minute before they started incurring casualties. He could see the Night Lord with the ornate tube of the missile launcher that had fired the frag rocket earlier, moving up under the covering fire of his brethren. One missile down the tunnel would slaughter them, or bring the rest of the rathole above down on their heads. A single clutch of grenades followed by a bout of full-auto bolter fire would turn any survivors into ragged meat. In their current position – hemmed in, and with their backs to a dirt wall – there was nothing the Carcharodons could do but die.

That was what Sharr wanted the traitors to believe. He keyed his vox and blink-clicked the uplink connection for the White Maw.

‘Kahu,’ he said. ‘Strike.’

Kahu’s Terminators materialised in a flare of teleportation lightning and a thunderclap of displaced air. Suddenly, five giants in slabs of off-white adamantium occupied the empty rail-turning platform at
The tunnel around Sharr reverberated as the Red Brethren opened fire. A hail of rounds from Incaladion-pattern storm bolters and a Mark II Absinia heavy assault cannon mowed down the two nearest traitors. Their brothers responded with the speed and force typical of Adeptus Astartes. Within seconds a counter-barrage of bolts was cracking off the Terminators’ Tactical Dreadnought armour, hitting them from all sides.

‘Forward,’ Sharr voxed.

He led First and Second Squads back out into the junction, Reaper roaring monstrously in his hands. The nearest traitors, scattered across the space where the loco tracks met, turned their attention back on them, but too late. One dropped his bolter and swung up a chainsword as Sharr swept into a lunge, but the motor had barely started to spin when Reaper crashed down into it. The Carcharodon’s great overhead blow sheared straight through the attempted parry and down into the traitor’s skull, carving all the way to his breastbone in a shower of churned-up blood and gore. Sharr tore Reaper from the corpse and swung a haymaker at another Night Lord, who was scrambling back as he triggered his own chainsword. Reaper’s bloody teeth bit air, but Red Tane was already going past Sharr. The Void Sword took the heretic where the lower part of his breastplate met the upper, running him through.

The Night Lords counter-attacked. They drew blade and bolt pistol and hurled themselves into the fray, the synthesised screaming of their torture victims looping maddeningly over their vox-amplifiers. Kahu’s Terminators, not content to keep up their fire from their exposed position at the centre of the junction, waded in with their power fists ignited. Within seconds it became clear why the white-armoured veterans bore the title of Red Brethren – the great, pulverising blows of their disruptor-wreathed fists punched through power armour and flesh alike, swiftly painting them in streaks of dripping red. Like so many red butchers, they tore the Night Lords apart.

‘They’re retreating,’ growled Nuritona over the vox. Sharr saw that he was right. The rearmost heretics were melting back into the darkness of the tunnels, dragging their fallen with them, a few pausing to fire into the combat and keep the Carcharodons from exploiting the gaps opening between the withdrawing squads.

‘Do we pursue?’ Nuritona voxed.

‘Negative,’ Sharr said, though his transhuman body screamed otherwise. The Blindness beckoned, that silent, suicidal ennui that made up one of the darkest parts of his Chapter’s twisted genetic inheritance. He fought to keep it in check, his grip on Reaper’s haft tight.

‘It may be a trap,’ Dorthor said, sensing his commander’s strain. ‘We don’t know their numbers or dispositions, and they are masters of this type of warfare.’

Sharr’s response was interrupted by another shriek, louder than all the others. Two dark, spiked shapes rocketed from one of the tunnels, their jump packs flaring. The surviving Raptors, the ones that had first sprung the ambush, had returned.

They made straight for the Red Brethren. One actually managed to draw blood, its lightning claws plunging through a Terminator’s thigh plates before the massive warrior’s power fist dashed it to oblivion. The other, its breastplate pitted and buckled by what looked like close-range shotgun blasts, lunged at Kahu himself, gauntlet snagging the predator teeth hanging around the Terminator’s gorget. The leather band snapped as the traitor pulled away from Kahu’s lunge, and the Carcharodon’s great power fist crushed only air.

The traitor seemed to think twice about his rash assault, pirouetting mid-air with the grace of an
avian predator before powering away from the vengeful Terminators with his jump pack. Storm bolter rounds shredded the space around him and scored off his armour, but none found their mark before he vanished back down the tunnel.

The Raptors’ sudden aerial assault had given the rest of the Night Lords the seconds they needed. They melded once more with the darkness, leaving only the echoes of their captured screams behind. Nuritona’s Tactical Marines started after them, gripped by the early stages of the Blindness, but a snarled command from the strike leader halted their pursuit. The blood-frenzy drained from their genhanced bodies, gone as surely as if it had never been there at all.

‘We should pursue,’ Kahu said to Sharr, striding through the carnage to stand before the Company Master. ‘Otherwise my presence here is wasted.’

The anger in the Terminator’s voice was barely restrained. Chapter combat doctrine specified that the Red Brethren’s place in teleport reserve should only be utilised when a crucial operational juncture had been reached. They were the killing blow, the axe that finally lopped the head from those judged guilty, after they had been bloodied and broken. Instead they’d been utilised in the first skirmish, and one of their number had been injured.

Sharr took a calming breath before answering.

‘You have my thanks, brother. Without your intervention we would all be dead.’

‘You were cut off?’

‘Yes, Third Squad is clearing the debris as we speak.’

‘How can it be that our vanguard was so easily trapped?’ Kahu demanded, the criticism in his voice clear.

‘The speed of our deployment has made our reconnaissance capacity minimal at best.’

‘You should not have surrendered your Scout detachment to Te Kahurangi then.’

‘Do not question my judgement, Kahu,’ Sharr said. ‘Not until you have something worthy to complain about.’

He could have gone further. The reason he had been forced to walk into a trap, initially alone, had been because of Kahu’s demands for speed. If the Terminator had wished to act as the killing blow then he should have permitted Third Company more time to prepare. He said none of that however, merely holding the black glare of Kahu’s visor lenses. Eventually the Terminator turned away.

‘We are committed now,’ he said.

‘That we are,’ Sharr agreed. ‘The advance continues.’
Day 89, warp time variance approximate.
We have just broken from the warp in-system, spinward of Zartak’s star. The empyrean has played its tricks again – we have arrived far earlier than expected. The Saint Angelica’s augurs are still performing scans, but thus far have been unable to detect the presence of any other ships in the vicinity, or any signals emanating from the surface of Zartak beyond a weak distress signal that seems to be coming from a secondary prison facility. There are traces of what may be several substantial wrecks locked in the planetoid’s orbit, and other evidence of recent void combat. We are also detecting the trail of what can only be described as a recent fleet-sized warp jump. I suspect we are too late. All communication channels are dead. I will order the Saint Angelica to chart a course through the system’s outer asteroid belt once the final scans have been completed and uploaded. Emperor only knows what we’ll find once we get there.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Mem-bank entry log ends + + +

+ + + Thought for the Day: Temper inquisitiveness with the desire to do His Will + + +
CHAPTER VIII

The darkness had betrayed Shadraith.

For the Night Lord, the shadows were always full, always crawling with sharp talons and bestial faces, always busy with murmurs and lies and disembodied, inhuman chittering. They were the source of his strength, the essence of Bar’ghul, the black-clad trickster, a daemon born from darkness and the untruths that lead to death.

The tangled depths of Sink Shaft One had held no secrets from him. The shadows had brought Shadraith this far, guiding him like faithful hounds through the labyrinthine passages of rock and dirt that constituted Zartak’s man-made underworld. They had never let him down. Until now.

Entering a section of mine works listed as Lower West 7, Shadraith’s connection with his daemonic wraiths had started to falter. A different presence had intruded through the warp, driving away the guiding whispers. The shadows that Shadraith knew and coveted were now gone, replaced by an altogether different kind of darkness. It was the oblivion of the void, an aching space of nothingness entirely free of any essence, daemonic or otherwise. It swallowed the Chaos sorcerer like the maw of some great, hungry leviathan, stripping away all the certainties that had led him to this world in the first place.

For the first time since the powers of the Dark Gods had unlocked his innate psychic gifts and granted him the foresight once possessed by his martyred gene-sire, Shadraith found himself truly alone. The sorcerer raged, taking out his fury on the convicts unfortunate enough to stumble into his path. His warp scythe was soon red and wet. Its ethereal flames smouldered.

He was lost. There was only one being on Zartak who could have done this, one being with the learning and experience to challenge Shadraith’s prodigious abilities. Shadraith had never encountered him in person, but Bar’ghul had. The Pale Nomad, the one known to his battle-brothers as Te Kahurangi. The daemon had clashed with him on three previous occasions, through different mortal allies. According to Bar’ghul the Space Marine Librarian was ancient by the standards of those weaklings still clinging to the False Emperor. Shadraith admitted that he had underestimated him. Nothing, mortal or otherwise, had been able to sever his link with Bar’ghul before.

The Pale Nomad was also, according to Bar’ghul, his brother.

The Chaos sorcerer worked to restore contact with his daemonic ally. In the miserable void-dark that encompassed him he collected the essence of life itself – blood. Like some nightmarish troglodyte-king, he dragged the victims who wandered unwittingly into his path into a cavern of bored-out rock and flayed them, ripping flesh from bones and pulping internal organs into a gory paste. His armour was soon befouled with a vile layer of blood and mud. He tore the old, leathery skins from him and slapped the fresh ones in place, the stretched flesh carved with new, blasphemous
runes and sigils. All the while he canted dark phrases beneath his breath, words even he had never dared use before, ones that would have turned the stomachs of his own Night Lords brethren, let alone any sane mortal.

He was being reborn. In his fury he was binding himself closer to the being he only ever acknowledged as ally, never master. Slowly, the darkness that encased him began to fill again, the lesser daemons and familiars that guided him returning as they overcame the Pale Nomad’s trickery. Shadraith would find the boy. Afterwards, he would find Te Kahurangi too, and he would peel his brother’s pale skin from his meat and bones, inch by inch.

Skell woke. He didn’t remember falling asleep. His last thoughts were of stumbling from a sprint to a pained, slow limp, his body exhausted, his mind frayed by the experiences of the past day. His body had simply given up.

For the briefest moment he had no idea where he was. Then reality came crashing back. He surged to his feet and cried out at the cramps that had worked their way into his cold, tired body while he’d slept.

He was in an abandoned vent backtunnel, the tight space moaning with the humid atmosphere channelled by large rotor-fans down into the mines from Zartak’s jungle. The eerie sound made him shiver. He was caked in mud and grime. He’d lost both his shoes at some point in the cloying ore-mire of South 16. Hunger clawed at his belly like a rabid beast, aching and desperate.

For a second, all he wanted to do was lie back down against the wall. For a second, he didn’t give a damn about anything that had happened. About the throbbing in his skull. About the nightmares, both real and imagined, that were stalking him. About the prison escape, and the horror of Dolar’s death, and the greater horror of what he’d somehow done to those who’d killed him. The tiredness, the cold and the hunger overcame all of his remaining instincts for self-preservation. He’d been running for what felt like his entire life.

Keep going, said the thought.

‘Get out of my head,’ Skell shouted. The words bounced and echoed up the exhaust tunnel, the lonely shriek of a madman. He clamped his calloused hands around his skull, willing the pain to go away, willing the voices to cease. All of them. He’d had enough. He thrust the alien thought from his mind.

It tried to resist. It tried to stay buried in his head, muttering its rasping suggestions, seeing through his eyes, hearing through his ears. Skell would not permit it. With a shout of unadulterated anger he banished it, throwing it back into the bottomless oblivion it had risen from.

His headache receded fractionally. The realisation rekindled a small ember of determination. They didn’t control him, not yet.

He began to move. The backtunnel was no place to stop – it was too cold and too exposed. This section of the upper works was unfamiliar to him, far removed from the pits he had spent the past five months excavating. But he could tell he was getting closer to the surface. The air being blown down to him was fresh with rainwater and the smell of overripe fruit. Next to the stink of stale sweat, rubber and grit it felt like salvation.

One of the exfiltration mine heads had to be close. He dragged his respiration mask back on and limped out of the backtunnel, following the dimly lit signs and plastek-sheathed notice boards.

They would not take him, neither the voices in his head nor the nightmares stalking the tunnels.

‘Wait.’
Te Kahurangi spoke the word with great difficulty, the sound issuing from his helmet’s vox as though through gritted teeth. Aleph-seven-seven and Aleph-one-sixteen came up short, crouching in the brackish water.

The slurry vents of North E-6 were partly flooded, the bottom of the wide tunnels swilling with water discoloured a muddy brown by the sediment carried down from the surface into Zartak’s porous depths. The trio of Carcharodons moved through the knee-high water with a grace that belied their transhuman build, their motions causing barely a splash or ripple.

Despite still being mere Scouts of the Tenth Company, Aleph-seven-seven and Aleph-one-sixteen knew their business well. Like the other Scouts now dispersing throughout the tunnels around Te Kahurangi, they’d been combat-effective for almost a decade, and had been bloodied on two dozen occasions. Both had the beginnings of their first exile markings, the dark, jagged tattoos spiralling in loops up their bared forearms and across their pale, shaven scalps. They were on the cusp of becoming full members of the Chapter, leaving behind the number designates all Scouts were known by in favour of a true void name, swapping their grey carapace plates and black multiweave fatigues for the coveted power armour of the nine Battle Companies. The fact that they were typical of the Scout detachment assigned to Sharr’s command showed just how badly the Chapter was in need of fresh blood. There had not been an effective Tithing for the better part of a decade.

To Te Kahurangi there was little difference between Aleph-seven-seven, Aleph-one-sixteen and the younger initiates who were scouring the other tunnels. The ancient Librarian had seen many like them rise and fall, from their first wild, ash-blind blooding to their eventual attainment of the rank of void brother, their promotion to strike leaders and even Company Masters, and their deaths. They all died, eventually. It was said by some that the Adeptus Astartes were immortal, that age alone could never carry them away from their duties to their primarch and their Emperor. Whether they were or weren’t was in itself an ephemeral debate. They had been bred for one task alone – to persecute the endless wars in mankind’s defence – and that guaranteed that no matter how skilled they were, one day they would fall.

Te Kahurangi knew that he too would die, perhaps soon. The thought did not concern him. What concerned him was failure, failure to ensure the survival of his Chapter after he was gone. That was the only task left for him now. To achieve it, he had to retrieve the boy, Skell. But Skell had just driven him from his thoughts.

The Chief Librarian stood motionless for a moment, the lumen lights reflecting from the turgid water and shimmering across the intricately inscribed blue plates of his power armour. The green stone embedded in the top of his force staff was dark and dead, the bone that clasped it no longer throbbing with warp energy. He had lost the connection, and with it even a vague sense of where Skell was in the seemingly endless labyrinth.

The Scouts probed the gloom ahead, bolt pistols and their long, serrated combat knives in hand. They had already dispatched a gang of half a dozen convicts who’d stumbled into their path. They’d been armed with aquila-stamped las weaponry presumably pilfered from their former captors, and they’d been foolish enough to attempt to use it on the Space Marines. Their blood was now crusting on the initiate’s blades, armour and deathly white faces.

The gang had not been the only prisoners they’d encountered. There were others still fleeing in ones or twos, many of them unarmed, desperate to simply get away from the mad, mindless bloodshed that was emanating from the central works. They’d let them live, on Te Kahurangi’s orders. They were
here to take a Tithe, not purge the colony. The Chapter needed fresh meat, and once the nameless Scouts had assisted their Chief Librarian, they would help to harvest it.

Te Kahurangi slowed his breathing, reaching out with his wandering spirit-self once more. The tendrils of his consciousness found nothing but pain, anger and murder, none of it specifically linked to Skell. With the unthinking desperation of a cornered animal, the boy had psychically lashed out and driven the Carcharodon’s guiding influence from his mind. He was alone now. Within hours he could be in any part of the primary mine works.

The Pale Nomad recalled his thoughts and refocused them on the beacon of hatred and arrogance emanating from nearby. The Dead Skin was still confounded by the glamour Te Kahurangi had woven about him. The traitor had ignored the advice of his daemonic ally, and underestimated the Chief Librarian. Te Kahurangi and his brethren understood a darkness nothing like that enjoyed by the foul VIII Legion. The Carcharodons knew the blackness of oblivion, a place untouched by the vile emotions that gave birth to the daemonspawn the traitors now courted. The yawning maw of the psychic void summoned by Te Kahurangi had swallowed the sorcerer, blinding him to Skell’s presence.

But he was fighting back. Just like Skell, the Night Lord was trying to throw off the influence Te Kahurangi was casting through the mines. The Pale Nomad struggled with him mentally. His mind was being assaulted on two fronts – while the Dead Skin turned his attention towards breaking through Te Kahurangi’s psychic barriers, his unspeakable daemonic ally was striving to make contact with him once more, drawn by the Chaos sorcerer’s increasingly bloody, violent sacrifices.

Te Kahurangi knew he wouldn’t be able to keep them separate for much longer. He could barely even move forwards through the mine workings any more, rooted to the spot by the mental strain of keeping them apart. Once the sorcerer was again able to call upon the aid of the daemon, the boy would be well within their grasp. Te Kahurangi was almost out of time. His only hope was to press on, and pray he stumbled across Skell before the traitor.

‘Continue,’ the Chief Librarian said. Wordlessly, seven-seven and one-sixteen moved off once more. They didn’t get far.

The Fifth and Seventh Squads received their first blooding on Zartak at traverse SC7. It was near the start of Third Company’s drive towards Sink Shaft One. With the junction secured by Sharr and Kahu, the grey-clad combat squads started to filter into the mines proper, first via the larger, wider arterial routes and loco rails, and then in smaller fire teams amongst the ore shafts, exhaust corridors and grub-burrows.

The void brothers of Fifth Squad stayed together. Even with their auto-senses thrown into occasional bouts of jittering discord by the disruption of the traitor’s arcane scrambling equipment, they were still entirely aware of the enemy occupying traverse SC7, a secondary route through the mines of Mid-South. Void brother Sigmus-three-eight-Torrik, taking point along the secondary tunnel section, reported contacts ahead: unaugmented heretic infantry, roughly platoon-sized in number, clad in dark blue robes and fatigues, with their hands and forearms painted black. They wore bug-eyed gas hoods, and carried freshly seized Adeptus Arbites weaponry.

The enemy infantry appeared to have halted, either to rest or regain their bearings. They were occupying an ore shuttle waystation, its single lumen strip the only lighting in the whole corridor. The space it picked out was little more than a scoop in the traverse’s rock walls. A lone statue, crudely
carved into the heavily armoured likeness of an arbitrator overseer, had been knocked into the dirt.

Strike Leader Kartli, commander of Fifth, knew exactly what was about to happen. He paused for a
moment to check that the Devourers of Seventh Squad – the company’s Assault Marines – were in
position, then gave Torrik permission to engage.

The Carcharodons launched their assault without a word. The only sound was the thumping of boots
on the dirt of the traverse floor, and the rapid whirring of servos. Hearing the sounds approaching
from the darkness ahead, the heretics snatched at shotguns and autorifles.

Only when he burst into the flickering patch of light cast by the waystation’s lumen did Torrik trigger
his unclamped chainaxe. The monstrous roar of the close combat weapon reverberated from the
corridor sides. The closest heretic only managed to get a single shot off with his new autorifle as he
fumbled with the unfamiliar safety, the hard round pinging uselessly from Torrik’s breastplate. Those
behind couldn’t fire at the Carcharodon without running the risk of hitting their comrade. They opened
up anyway, turning the lead traitor to a ragged puppet of blood and meat before Torrik had even
reached him.

The Carcharodon powered on through the mess, smacking it against the corridor’s rock wall with a
grisly crack. Still, the Space Marine didn’t utter a sound.

Torrik let his venerable chainaxe be his battle-cry. Half a dozen slaughtered heretics joined the first
member of their cult-squad within the space of a dozen seconds, hacked to crimson oblivion by the
blur of saw-toothed death that Torrik had become. Shots struck him, fired wildly as the humans sought
to scramble back and put more distance between themselves and the silent grey butcher. None
penetrated his scarred battleplate. The hammering of discharges in the narrow confines only served to
leave the heretics dazed and confused.

The extra room offered by the waystation allowed the rest of Fifth Squad to bloody themselves.
Chainblades ripped and tore, splitting flak armour, flesh and bone with contemptuous ease. The
heretic’s viscera painted the floor, walls and ceiling a dripping, steaming red. It was over in seconds.

Except, in truth, it had only just begun. As the stamp of Strike Leader Kartli’s boot brutally cut off
the last scream, the rock wall at the back of the waystation erupted inwards. Brother Pelu, caught too
close to the blast, was pulverised by a blizzard of stone, his flesh hammered to a pulp within his
buckled and broken power armour. The rest of the squad stumbled, the shock wave of the blast and
the wall of dust and grit forcing them to activate their auto-stabilisers.

The instant the breach had been made, fresh screams filled the underground space. Shadows darted
through the swirling dust, their hateful red eyes burning bright amidst the gloom. Bolters barked,
muzzle flares catching reflections in the dirt haze that now choked the traverse.

Brothers Lorro and Marcu, the closest to the breach after Pelu, went down immediately amidst a hail
of bolter fire. Reacting to the ambush, Kartli signalled Fifth Squad to withdraw back the way they’d
come, into the darkness beyond the waystation and its bloody remains.

Such shadows meant nothing to the Night Lords. With their preysight activated they pressed eagerly
out from the adjacent reverse corridor where they’d been lying in wait, triggering their chainswords
in the anticipation of a brief and bloody hunt in the dark. The roaring of the blades in the narrowness
of the corridor was enough to mask the approach of the real hunters.

The Carcharodons of Fifth Squad turned suddenly at bay, meeting the Chaos Space Marines head on.
The crash of ceramite meeting ceramite and the savage teeth of chainblades locking against one
another set the very bedrock of Zartak shaking, dislodging dirt from the ceiling and causing the lone
lumen back at the waystation to blink and crack. Too late, the traitors realised that, in their eagerness to follow up on enemies they thought they’d outwitted, they had in turn exposed themselves.

The Devourers of Seventh Squad had spent the better part of an hour digging out a rathole that wound its way through the dirt and rock above traverse SC7, running parallel to the larger corridor below. They had been aware of the presence of the Traitor Space Marines using their human devotees as bait, and had used the moment they had blasted in from the neighbouring corridor to detonate their own krak charges, dropping down through the resulting hole into the traverse corridor further up from the waystation. Kartli’s withdrawal had pulled the traitors out into the corridor with their backs to the newly arrived Devourers – Seventh Squad wasted no time in closing the distance with the rearmost heretics.

Both of the Devourer squads of the Third Company had left their cylindrical jet engine Mark II jump packs in the sub-precinct base. There was little use – and even less space – for such ancient technology deep below the earth. The Assault veterans of Seventh didn’t need their cryogenic fuel canisters and coolant systems to savage their enemies, especially when they caught them with their backs turned.

Seconds after the counter-ambush struck home, the traitors realised what was happening. They understood they were caught between an enemy they’d underestimated, and that they were outnumbered more than two to one. They fought with the savagery of the daemons they refused to worship, back to back, armour scraping the sides of the narrow traverse, matching the Carcharodons blow for blow, blood for blood.

The Loyalists would not be denied though, not this time. Between them Fifth and Seventh Squad slaughtered every single traitor. The final one, caught between them, was torn limb from limb, the pre-recorded screams issuing from his vox-caster silenced with a savage blow from a clenched gauntlet. The twisted metal grille sparked and smoked amidst the blood pooling across the traverse’s uneven floor.

Throughout the carnage, the Carcharodons hadn’t uttered a sound.

There was a Predator at junction 44-5. Its armour was deepest blue and its hull was covered with the remains of rotting cadavers, snagged with coils of rusty razor wire. Its turret autocannon and sponson heavy bolters spat death at the Carcharodons, the reports echoing back like thunderclaps to accompany the white bolts of lightning painted onto the tank’s plasteel plating.

The armour had been hull-down behind the broken, overturned remains of a loco carriage, its shape distorted with rubble and grit from a nearby waste chute. The heretics had deliberately destroyed the junction’s lumen orbs, plunging the open space into darkness. It made little difference to either their preysight or the Loyalist’s auto-senses, but it filled the underground with the stab of muzzle flashes and the glint of helmet lenses. In such conditions the Night Lords thrived.

The Carcharodons of Fourth Squad had been caught out by the presence of the battle tank lurking in their midst. The Third Company’s own heavy armour was still on the surface, bolstering the meagre defences of the sub-precinct in case of an overground assault. The Predator’s opening heavy autocannon salvo had bisected Fourth Squad’s anti-tank specialist, Brother Omecra-three-three-Ungu, leaving his missile launcher lying useless in the rail grit a dozen yards in front of the armour’s position.

Strike Leader Ekara had gone to ground along with the rest of his Tactical Marines, occupying the
waste skips and haulage conveyers scattered around the four-way tunnel junction. The Predator was not alone – it was supported by two sections of cultist infantry – but their autogun fire was little threat to the Space Marines. The tank, however, was a far more serious problem. A concentrated burst from its turret cannon battered an ore deposit crate to jagged, bullet-riddled oblivion, tearing through the metal and the spoil within to wound the void brothers crouched behind it, Kiri and Rua. At the same time the twin heavy bolters mounted on the Predator’s flanks tracked back and forth between the other Carcharodons’ positions, the machine’s ancient battle-spirit keeping the Loyalists expertly pinned.

‘Keep their infantry down,’ Ekara ordered, unwilling to yield the fight. The void brothers either side of him, Kordi and Haru, opened fire on the cultist positions arrayed around the tank. Auto rounds and las-bolts snapped back, trying in vain to penetrate the Carcharodons’ power armour.

Ekara voxed in for support. Sharr, monitoring the advance from the first junction, dispatched the closest reserve element – Tenth Squad.

Even by the standards of most Carcharodons, Strike Leader Waraki was a bloodied veteran. The Tenth Squad commander divided his void brothers into two combat squads and, using the heads-up schematic display uploaded to the visors of the Third Company from the sub-precinct’s database, outflanked the heretics from both sides. The five Devastator brethren coming from the south struck first, a krak rocket from a Proteus-pattern missile launcher screaming from the darkness of the haulage tunnel. It struck the Predator’s left side just above its sponson, ricocheting upwards before splitting the air above the tank.

The Predator’s turret immediately began to traverse, its crew suddenly presented with a greater threat than Ekara’s Tactical Marines. As it did so the second half of the Devastator squad opened fire from the northern tunnel. A lascannon bolt slammed into the tank’s engine block, punching with ease through the fifty-five-millimetre armour. The quad Mark II adaptable thermic combustor reactor detonated spectacularly, gutting the ancient battle tank and sending out a wave of twisted metal laced with the meat of the victims that had once adorned its hull.

The echoes of the detonation were still clapping down the adjoining tunnels when Ekara led his squad up out of their cover, storming the cultist infantry while they were still reeling from the Predator’s fiery death. In barely a minute, junction 44-5 was in Imperial hands once more. Ekara took Fourth Squad on into the darkness, while Waraki and Tenth Squad resumed their holding positions, another tally added to their long list of kill-notches. Slowly the Carcharodons were closing in on the core of Sink Shaft One. The traitors would have nowhere left to hide, and once they had been purged the Tithing could finally begin.

In borehole 23, Kahu and his Red Brethren engaged first a mob of armed prison escapees nearly a hundred strong, and then a small traitor band withdrawing from a brief but vicious engagement with the Devourers of Eighth Squad in Upper 9 South.

Kahu led the initial slaughter of the prisoners with uncharacteristic reluctance. Killing them went against the very reason for the Third Company’s presence on Zartak. Corpses couldn’t be Tithed.

Regardless, the humans had chosen to resist, terrified of the massive, white-armoured monsters that rose up out of the grav lifts from the depths of Lower 9. Almost all of them had procured firearms, no doubt supplied by the heretics seeking to plunge the underworld into further anarchy. The bravest among them opened fire as they started entering Upper South’s largest borehole shaft, a great tunnel of rock with surfaces left uneven by the biting work of a Triplex Phall megaborer.
The Terminators cut down those who resisted with controlled bursts of storm bolter fire, seeking to conserve precious ammunition. The initial flight of the prisoners from the seemingly unkillable metal giants was checked when the Chaos Space Marines, withdrawing from a separate engagement, appeared at the far side of the borehole through an adjoining boltspace. The resultant massacre left the tunnel carpeted with human corpses, blown apart or decimated by chainswords and power fists.

Kahu’s Terminators carried on into the Night Lords. Unable to disengage, they fought back all the harder. Brother Eti, who had been wounded in the thigh by the lightning claws of a Raptor at the first junction fight, was brought down by two of the heretics, who instinctively focused their attacks on the weakest target. He was the first of the Red Brethren to fall on Zartak.

He would not be the last.

Kahu almost single-handedly destroyed the remnants of the heretic squad, his power fist a weighty blur of actinic energy. By the time it was over he was splattered from helm to boot in dripping viscera, his fist painted bright red. They held the position until a combat squad from Ninth could come and remove Eti’s body back up to the sub-precinct, to retrieve both the Terminator’s precious gene-seed and his equally precious patched and reworked Tactical Dreadnought armour.

The advance continued.

The Prince of Thorns watched the destruction of his warband from the viewscreens of the Centrum Dominus.

He seethed, claws clenching and unclenching. The Loyalists had systematically broken the pict recorders in every tunnel, junction, shaft, chute and level they’d come across, but he could still see enough to know the first clashes had gone against the VIII Legion.

Much as they might refuse to admit any responsibility, the reason for the setback was as clear as it was simple. They had underestimated their enemy. The warband was young by the standards of most Chaos Space Marines – Cull himself had only faced fellow Adeptus Astartes on four occasions before. Each of those four had been from Chapters of a similarly recent Founding, and each time the ancient advice of Bar’ghul, delivered by Shadraith, had led him to victory. The daemon had warned him not to be overconfident. He hadn’t listened.

These Loyalists were different from the ones he’d outwitted in the past. None of his Claw leaders reported having ever encountered them before. Even Shadraith was seemingly without answers, practically abandoned by his pathetic daemonic patron. Their fighting style was not one Cull recognised. If anything, it seemed eerily like the Night Lords’ own doctrines. The brethren of the Red Knights – a young successor to the Blood Angels – had displayed a violent savagery when Cull had engaged them in orbit above Quelos, and he had heard of the brutality of the Space Wolves. These grey-clad Loyalists matched the bloodthirsty violence of both Chapters, and yet there were unsettling differences. Reports from the Claw leaders claimed they made no noise in combat. Nor was their bloodlust in any way unrestrained. While apparently eager for hand-to-hand combat, they seemed to retain complete tactical awareness. Twice Cull had watched in silent fury as Loyalist squads had refused to take the bait and follow up on retreating cultist squads that would have led them into carefully laid ambushes. And on the single occasion where the Night Lords had gained the upper hand – where Artar’s Fourth Claw had managed to split and outflank a Loyalist squad that had pushed too far ahead of the support in the tunnels either side – the corpse-worshippers had broken from combat and disengaged. Their close combat fury was matched only by their discipline and self-
control.

That combination had put the Night Lords on the back foot. In the space of four hours they’d been driven into the inner workings of Sink Shaft One. Perhaps Cull had been foolish to assume his young warband were the supreme hunters, but he was not prone to making the same mistake twice. He had sent orders to all Claws to disengage and withdraw towards the prison cell catacombs, taking with them all the savlar and escapee convicts they could find. They would be corralled with the loco shipments brought in from the outer mines of the captured sub-precincts, and then unleashed, en masse, back upon the Loyalists. Once the horde of prisoners collided head-on with the advancing Imperials, the dynamics of the subterranean war would change.

‘My prince.’ The dire voice of Shenzar disturbed Cull’s thoughts. He twisted, looking back to see the veteran Claw leader entering the darkened command centre. Behind him came two of his Terminator brethren, flanking Vorfex. The Raptor’s Claw-kin were all dead, and soon he would be too. Cull rose to face the disgraced Night Lord, hand on the hilt of his runesword.

‘Knees,’ he ordered. One of the hulking Terminators placed a hand on the Raptor’s pauldron and forced him down. There was a clang as ceramite struck rockcrete. Vorfex’s crested helm had been removed, and was mag-locked to Shenzar’s belt.

‘You deliberately disobeyed me,’ Cull said, voice as cutting as the edge of his rune-inscribed blade. ‘You have brought disgrace to us all. It is only because of your many past services that I am going to give you a clean death.’

‘Before my prince renders judgement, may I offer him one thing?’ Vorfex said. The Raptor was wise enough to keep his head lowered. The Prince of Thorns snarled.

‘Your covering of the retreat from the junction does nothing to absolve you from either your arrogance or your stupidity, Vorfex. I expected better from one so experienced. You no longer deserve to bear the heraldry of the Eighth Legion.’

‘It was not only for the sake of the other Claws that I re-engaged,’ Vorfex said. ‘The Loyalist Terminators are spearheading their assault. If we are to overcome them we will need to call upon everything we have. Even our lost brethren.’

Slowly, the Raptor raised one hand, the palm of his gauntlet open. As he did so, he looked up at Cull for the first time. The Prince of Thorns stared at the item the Raptor was holding, before reaching out to take it.

It was a little bone token, the razor-tipped tooth of some long-dead predator.

‘What is this?’

‘I took it from one of their Terminators,’ Vorfex said. ‘Consider it part of my atonement, and a token of their destruction.’

And Cull understood. He smiled. The dark creatures the Night Lords had brought with them to the surface could only be unleashed at the right time and against the right opponent – they were far too dangerous to wake for anything less. Now, however, was the perfect opportunity. The tide was about to turn.
Day 89, warp time variance approximate.
We have attained high orbit above Zartak. Scans of the hulks in orbit have also been completed, though our systems are struggling to identify all but one of them. They are mostly of ancient design and unclear pattern. What parts we have identified have been heavily modified. It seems one is the Imperial Truth, though why and how she came to be destroyed remains unclear.
I have decided our time will be better spent on the surface. I am taking the retinue to the Adeptus Arbites facility identified by the distress signal still being beamed from the surface. No other communications have been picked up at all, not even from the primary arbitrator garrison in the Precinct Fortress. It would be unwise to go there direct without some knowledge of what in Holy Terra’s name we are getting ourselves into.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.
CHAPTER IX

There were voices echoing down ore pass 3. Skell couldn’t make out the words. The underground played with sounds, bouncing them from walls and ceilings or sending them slipping down from connecting shafts and through rock crevices. Skell would sometimes hear footsteps approaching and would dart down a side tunnel, only to have the noise pass him by without anyone appearing. Whispers dogged him too, seemingly issuing from the very shadows that slunk around the edges of the lumen orbs, strung up on wiring nailed to the close dirt walls alongside the work rotas and devotional parchments. More than once, the boy thought he saw the darkness shift and move of its own volition, and such eerie illusions had started occurring with greater frequency over the past few hours.

He tried to put it down to his hunger and exhaustion, but he knew that wasn’t really the case.

The voices he could hear now didn’t belong to phantoms. They sounded more tired than malicious, and were accompanied by the scrape of weary feet drifting up from traverse 9A. Skell suspected they were fellow prisoners, though the last thing he wanted was to risk being snatched by one of the fear-maddened gangs that now infested the underworld. Carrying on down the ore pass and taking a haulage side route would have been a simple enough way of avoiding them, were it not for the fact that Skell’s instincts, the part of his mind he’d long ago learned to trust, told him something else was coming in the opposite direction.

He was trapped.

Shadraith could sense the return of his patron. The darkness was full again, and the shadows once more obeyed his commands. They leapt ahead, darting through the tunnels like birds of prey, unhooded and released to the hunt. The Chaos sorcerer advanced in their wake, his own stride bearing fresh purpose, clad in his wet, new flesh.

The boy was close. He could feel it. This time he would not escape.

Te Kahurangi leaned heavily on his staff, trying to marshal his strength. He’d sent seven-seven and one-sixteen ahead while he paused at an ore waystation. They were running out of time, and he was slowing the young initiates down. His visions had left him drained, and the efforts of stopping the Dead Skin from discovering the boy’s presence had proven too taxing. He could no longer blank the sorcerer’s mind or keep him from the whispered advice of his daemon. Now his only hope was the Scouts assigned to him by Sharr, combing the tunnels all around.

His initiates had moved far up ore pass 3, out of sight of Te Kahurangi. At the far end of the tunnel they finally made contact.

Skell froze. His hesitation had cost him. Pinned by the realisation that he’d been trapped, he could
only watch helplessly as the gangers came up from traverse 9A, rounded a corner and spotted him.

‘Don’t move,’ barked a voice. He tried to take a step along the ore pass, but instead found himself down on his knees. All the exhaustion that had dogged his blistered footsteps over the past day rushed up at him. He heard the sounds of running feet and scuffling in the dirt. He slumped. A rough hand snatched him by his ragged overalls and rolled him onto his back.

‘Just some runt,’ said one of the figures, silhouetted by the dim light. The muzzles of half a dozen autorifles gaped at him.

‘Kill him?’ suggested another, thinner voice. ‘We’ve got enough mouths to feed.’

‘Yeah, he looks near enough dead anyway.’

‘Wait,’ said a voice Skell dimly recognised. ‘I know him.’

‘So what?’

‘He sees things. Like, before they happen. He once got his cellmate to kick off a fight so we were all hauled out of a fresh seam-work in Lower South Eleven, right before the whole thing caved.’

Skell realised who it was. Nedzy, the gangly obscura addict who’d shared the cell below his own.

‘You tryin’ to say he’s witch-touched?’ asked the thinner voice. ‘All the more reason to put one through his head. He’s like those freaks that killed all the lawmen.’

Skell looked up at the silhouette of Nedzy and opened his mouth, willing the words from his parched lips.

‘He’s trying to say something,’ said one of Nedzy’s accomplices.

‘Hey, what’s that moving up there?’ said another.

‘Down,’ Skell whispered.

Nedzy’s head exploded.

Scouts seven-seven and one-sixteen killed the escaped prisoners with a quick burst of suppressed shots. The six gangers went down almost as one, a series of thuds the only sound to mark their deaths. Silence settled once more over ore pass 3.

Wordlessly, the two Carcharodons initiates advanced to the bodies, pale ghosts in the half-light. One-sixteen maintained overwatch, his modified Stalker-pattern bolt pistol up and braced as it probed the darkness leading down to traverse 9A. At his feet, seven-seven knelt among the still-twitching corpses. Not all the bodies on the tunnel’s floor were dead.

‘Movement,’ one-sixteen said. One of the bodies was trying to rise. One-sixteen reached out to check for vital signs, but as he did so he locked eyes with it. The boy’s eyes flared with an unnatural white light. An arm shot up and clamped around the Scout’s wrist, the grip diabolically strong.

‘Chief Librarian, the boy–’ one-sixteen managed to vox. A scream filled ore pass 3 and, as one, the shadows rushed them.

The Dead Skin was here.

The Scouts had found their quarry, but too late. Te Kahurangi began to move, drawing strength from his force staff with a muttered litany as he sprinted up ore pass 3’s steep incline. As he went a hellish shrieking tore down the confined space. The lumen orbs strung along the walls shattered, plunging the corridor into darkness. Te Kahurangi’s infrared overlay triggered automatically, the green inner glow of his force staff’s channelling stone providing a pale, aquatic luminescence.

Cursing, he carried on, drawing reserves of strength from the psy-active bone. So intent was he on covering the ore pass that he almost missed the bodies.
There were eight. Six were the grimy corpses of escaped convicts, each bearing two small, clean entry rounds indicative of Stalker-silenced bolt shells. The other two were seven-seven and one-sixteen. They had both been disembowelled by a viciously sharp weapon, their grey carapace armour split, their faces frozen in pallid expressions of shock. To Te Kahurangi’s warp sight, the flickering remnants of ethereal, pale blue flames were still visible around the hideous wounds.

He replayed one-sixteen’s final message from his vox-log. The boy. He’d been here. The Librarian cast about, his auto-senses penetrating the darkness. Nothing. He thrust out his astral projection, scouring the nearest tunnels for the warp traces of memories and emotions. He found only cackling, mocking darkness. He was too late.

They had taken him.

The monsters had turned the Precinct Fortress’ chapel-barracks into their nesting place. Cull entered the once-sacred chamber with Golgoth at his side, his runesword drawn. Even through his death mask’s filters the stink of butchered, bisected meat was almost overpowering.

All was darkness within, the domed space filled with small clicking noises and low, pathetic whimpering. Cull triggered his preysight. The dark runes on his sword’s blade glowed gently. His clawed boots bit into flesh, and bone snapped beneath his armoured bulk. Golgoth unsheathed his lightning claws.

The floor of the chapel was a carpet of corpses, the original flagstones lost beneath a twisting tangle of limbs, torsos and heads, all torn and pale. As the two Night Lords stepped deeper into the semicircular room the clicking noises intensified, bouncing around the bloody stonework of the defiled space.

The preysight of the Night Lords picked out a figure at the chapel’s far wall, where the circular half of the room met its straight side. The man was bound to the top of what had once been an altar dedicated to the Imperial Truth, a heavy marble slab that had borne a pristine white covering and the sacraments of mankind’s deluded faith. Now it acted as a restraining table for the last living arbitrator in the Precinct Fortress, the gold aquila, the chalices and the reliquaries smashed and discarded among the corpses around it.

The figure on the altar moaned as he heard Cull and Golgoth enter, blind in the chapel’s death-choked darkness. He’d been stripped of his armour and bound with chains wrapped around the marble block, splayed and helpless. Fear radiated from him. Once he had been the commander of the arbitrators on Zartak. Now he was being kept for when the warband would require his voice – bound by Shadraith’s dark rituals – to trick any Imperials that arrived in-system before the Night Lords left.

Cull stopped in the centre of the chamber and looked up.

There were creatures in the chapel’s rafters. They had been Cull’s brothers once. They hung upside down from the gilded beams of the half-dome ceiling, the wicked talons of their lower limbs dug deep into the plasteel, and their arms crossed over their chests in slumber. They wore power armour not dissimilar to that borne by the rest of the Night Lords, except their war-plate was warped and more elaborate, fashioned into screaming mouths and twisting spines. Their helms were elongated with backward-sweeping horns or flared crests of ceramite, giving them the angular, sleek appearance of birds of prey. On their backs they carried jet nozzle jump packs like those used by First Kill or Vorfax’s Raptor Claw, except these had brass-ribbed wing extensions that hummed softly with idling warp-charge. Their fingers ended in horrific razor-edged talons, each as long as Cull’s
As Cull halted in the centre of the chapel the dormant eye-lenses of one of the creatures flared into life, two pinpricks of red light stabbing the darkness. The figure chained to the altar cried out in pathetic fear as the monster unclamped itself from its perch. With a grace belying its heavy armour, the thing turned as it dropped. There was a crunch of pulverised meat and splintered bone as it landed in a crouch in front of Cull, its sword-talons splayed among the flesh of its victims. It looked up at the Prince of Thorns with dire crimson eyes, helmeted head cocked to one side. A low clicking emanated from its beak-like vox-grille.

‘I have something for you, brother,’ Cull said, his voice echoing in the nightmarish chamber. The other creatures above had awoken as well, their gaze boring into the two intruders. Cull held out his gauntlet, an object clasped between his forefinger and thumb. It was the razor-tooth given to him by Vorfex.

The creature crouching before Cull came closer, armour plates clacking, leaning in towards the tooth as though trying to catch its scent. After a moment its gaze returned to Cull.

‘I release you to the hunt,’ the Prince of Thorns said.

The creature bowed its head and stood, the suddenly humanoid motion at odds with its formerly avian stance. The clicking noises emanating from it and its twisted kin intensified, accompanied by a build-up in the throbbing emanating from their corrupt jump packs. The creature made a vicious scything motion with one clawed hand, the razor-talons cutting the air mere inches from Cull’s breastplate. The others mimicked the motion of their leader, their unnatural claws parting reality with violent slashes. Warpflame ignited around them, a sudden, roiling conflagration of blue and purple that forced Cull to step back. For a second the chapel was lit by a howling vortex as unreality bled into the material universe through the tears torn by the talons.

The flames flared and disappeared. The Warp Talons were gone.

As the screaming of the terrified arbitrator rebounded around the now-empty chapel, Cull and Golgoth departed.

Kahu cut down the last of the heretics with a burst of mass-reactive rounds, the storm bolter shredding the fleeing figure.

‘Kill confirmed,’ he voxed. ‘Room secure.’

They were another step closer to securing the next junction, and with it the final tunnel route to the core of Sink Shaft One. The false silence returned in the wake of his report. His Lyman’s ear and auto-senses were combining to cut out unnecessary background audio, in this case the splitting clatter of the ore-sifting machinery that dominated the chamber they’d just cleared. It was one of the main underground refinery points, the part of the mining process where the vast tonnage of grit and earth indiscriminately hauled up by the megaborers was sifted for the precious adamantium that made the mines of Zartak so profitable. When the first colonisers had arrived extraction had been a far simpler process, the bedrock of the planetoid rich with untapped minerals. Rapacious sub-strip mining and bore-purges had led to far cruder methods as the overseers sought the last remaining deposits, wringing every ounce of the precious ore from the worthless dirt that hid it.

The sifting belts were a vital part of this process. They took the earth hauled in on the loco rails and ran it through a long chain of hydro-grates and crusher maws. The waste was reduced to liquid mud and the rock pulverised, before all of it was drained out into the silage shafts. All that remained
afterwards were solid nuggets of pure adamantium, gleaming in the bright stab lumens of the sorting belts.

Whether the forces of Chaos had struck so quickly that no one had had the chance to turn the machinery off, or whether it had been reactivated on purpose, Kahu didn’t know. The engines filled the rock-cut room with clattering discord and occasional bouts of venting steam, misting the air, heavy with the stink of cut and crushed rock.

The room lay off from a junction intersection the Red Brethren had been advancing towards. Usually the company’s attachment of Scouts would have taken the time to cleanse it while the Terminators pushed on towards the primary objective, but since Sharr had surrendered the use of the initiates to Te Kahurangi it fell to Kahu’s First Company elite to divert their advance.

Kahu cursed Sharr as he reloaded, auto-senses probing the steam-wreathed, rusting engines and roller belts for anything he’d missed. Over two dozen heretic infantry with their black-painted hands and gas hoods lay scattered across the floor, their bodies broken apart by storm bolter fire. The rest of the Red Brethren had spread through the large room as they’d purged the last survivors, each one a lone rock, impervious to the small-arms fire of the cultists.

‘Forgotten One give me strength,’ Kahu said as he finished his assessment of the captured chamber. Slaughtering cultists was a waste of the Red Brethren’s skills, yet they had been left with little choice. The Scouts were with Te Kahurangi. The section of tunnels that constituted their main objective – junction 11-1 – were the last before the final arterial routes around Sink Shaft One could be breached. Seizing them would initiate the last phase of the operation to retake Zartak, and once that was completed the Tithe could finally begin.

Thus far the Night Lords had proven themselves entirely unable to match the speed and ferocity of the Carcharodons’ offensive. Kahu had noticed the numerous violated Mark VII power armour patterns among the enemy dead – he surmised that the warband they were facing was a recent one, full of new, unstable recruits and recently turned renegades. They would have been unprepared for the veteran Carcharodons. If Sharr hadn’t mishandled the operation by giving vital forces to Te Kahurangi for the psyker’s indulgent hunt, they would probably even now be storming the lower vaults of the Precinct Fortress.

‘Squad, regroup,’ Kahu voxed to the rest of the Red Brethren. Over the past day and a half they had truly embraced their name. Blood befouled almost every inch of their scarred armour, forming a dark, reddish brown crust over the white battleplate. The First Company squad closed in on their leader from across the chamber, stomping through the steam like baleful, implacable revenants. The noticeable absence of Brother Eti, who had fallen battling through borehole 23, still pained Kahu.

‘Orders, brother-sergeant?’ asked Naroti as he closed with his sergeant.

‘The objective remains the same,’ Kahu informed the squad. ‘Secure the final junctions. With the larger tunnels under our control the whole battle company will have a staging post for the final assault on the sink shaft. Brother Maro, take—’

Kahu got no further. An icy shriek filled the chamber, drowning the noise of the sifters and piercing even the Space Marines’ audio filters. Before any of them could respond the air above ignited as blue flames blossomed from nowhere. The shrieking grew louder as five figures clad in warped power armour tore from the fires. Claws wreathed in unnatural flame, they fell on the Red Brethren.

Kahu didn’t have time to vox a warning before the first creature struck him. It came down with its back-jointed lower limbs extended, its claws punching deep into both pauldrons. Kahu rocked under
the impact, only the immense weight of his Tactical Dreadnought armour and auto-stabilisers keeping him from being thrown over. He lunged up at the shrieking monster, but his power fist only passed through the dissipating blue flame left in its wake – the thing had turned its downward impact into an upward thrust with the help of its corrupt jump pack, leaping out of Kahu’s reach.

‘Void Father take you all,’ the Terminator spat into the vox, bringing his storm bolter up. ‘Brother Tuvo, we need–’ He was cut off again as the creature struck once more, its talons cracking one of his helmet lenses and drawing blood from the torn plates of his buckled left pauldron. Kahu unclamped his boots and stepped back, giving himself room to swing properly. This time the traitor had overcommitted, and his crackling fist jarred one of its limbs as it attempted to pull away. Its thrust took it backwards rather than up, skittering across the grille floor like some sort of darting, clawed predator.

Across the chamber the other corrupt Night Lords were setting upon Kahu’s three battle-brothers, their talons raking through the Red Brethren’s plate. The Terminator armour was little protection against the unnatural razor-edges of the traitors’ talons. Maro was already on his knees, slashed and bloodied, while Naroti had backed into a sifting belt, his fist’s disruptor field shorting out.

Kahu opened fire on the Night Lord that had attacked him. The target lock overlay of his remaining lens struggled to track the creature as it soared upwards, the burst of bolts eventually clipping one of the wings of its jump pack. It lost altitude as abruptly as it had gained it, sparks bursting from the Chaos-tainted backpack. Kahu lumbered forwards, servos grating. His storm bolter’s magazine block clicked empty, but not before he’d managed to put the last two bolts through the thing’s breastplate.

As it faltered he snatched one limb with his fist. The Night Lord lashed out, warpfire blazing where the claws struck the Terminator’s reinforced battleplate. For a second the two forces vied, energy snapping and sparking between the locked combatants. Then Kahu clenched his fist, crushing the Night Lord’s limb and smashing up through its crested helm. The traitor burst apart in a shower of burning meat and molten armour, liquidised by the savagery of the Carcharodon’s strike.

The rest of the Red Brethren were struggling. A glance at the vital readouts showed warning sigils over Maro and Tuvo’s combat designates. Naroti was flashing yellow, wounded. Kahu locked on to him, half hidden by steam and a rattling sift-belt conveyor at the far end of the chamber. He broke into a heavy run, reloading as he went.

Another Night Lord struck Kahu from behind. He fell, carried forwards by his own momentum. The floor buckled beneath him. He grunted as he fought to right himself, servos whirring shrilly as he pushed himself back up onto one knee. It took several precious seconds. Seconds he knew he did not have.

Pain lanced through his lower back, and warning runes burst out across his damage display like new constellations. He grunted as he felt the long talons slide free, the anti-pain stimms kicking in with a bio-jolt.

He found his feet just as another creature landed in front of him, its claws punching into the floor for purchase. It slashed towards his gorget. He parried the blow with his power fist, energies cracking as the two weapons recoiled from one another. The one behind him struck again, this time plunging both sets of talons into his back, beneath his shoulder blades.

Kahu ignored the warning displays and vital readouts telling him he was dead. His lungs were both punctured and one of his hearts had burst. He threw the last of his strength into a lunge towards the clawed fiend in front of him, clutching at it with his fist. It darted back effortlessly, and the one behind
hamstrung him with a wicked flick-snap of its claws. He crumpled, his servos failing, slamming down onto his back. Blood choked him. Naroti’s display signifier had turned red. He fought to rise once more, tried to will his body into action, tried to rekindle the slaughterous fury that had driven him successfully through so many engagements. But nothing moved. His armour was as dead as he was. It had become his tomb, bearing him down as assuredly as any sarcophagus slab.

Darkness fell. His remaining lens, flickering on the last of the armour’s power reserve, refocused. One of the things was crouched over him, warpfire flowing across its twisting, spiked plates. It cocked its head to one side, like a curious skyfowl come to watch its paralysed prey die. A low clicking sound issued from its vox-grille. Then, after a moment, the flames around it flared. It made a sharp cutting motion with its talons, pouncing upwards. The roaring conflagration consumed it. When the flames died, it and its kin had vanished, gone as swiftly as they had appeared.

As Kahu died, the adamantium sifting engines clattered on, oblivious to the blood dripping from their endlessly rotating belts.
Day 90, Zartak local.
We have just secured a landing zone in the Adeptus Arbites facility listed on the carto-holos as Sub-Precinct Eight. The place is completely deserted. There are, however, numerous signs of armed conflict. The armoury has been broken open and emptied, there are spent shell casings on the battlements and dry blood stains in the medicae bay. Even more curiously, the ground within the sub-precinct has been heavily churned up by large treads and what looks like landing prongs. It seems as though tracked vehicles, presumably heavy armour, was landed here. Sergeant Worren also identified sets of boot prints that I believe could only belong to warriors of the Adeptus Astartes.
We are preparing to descend into the prison levels, and then the mines beyond, if we still find no trace of life. A few members of the retinue, most prominently cryptanalyst Serith, have strongly advised sending word to Lord Rozenkranz and awaiting his directives before venturing any further. While deferring in such a manner is tempting, I will not shirk from my duties – I know I have sufficient clearance and authority to proceed for now, and besides, I would not wish to overly tax the Saint Angelica’s astropath again. The man barely survived Zartak’s mortis-cry.
We carry on, into the darkness.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.
CHAPTER X

There was no response over the vox. Sharr tried again.

‘

Red Wrath, this is Reaper, come in.’ Still no reply, just the hiss of background static generated by the complexities of the underworld’s twisting terrain. The command squad were assembled in the last junction taken by the company, Sharr’s brothers watching the shadows warily as the Company Master coordinated the final push towards Sink Shaft One over the vox. The urge to join the lead Tactical squads in their assaults was almost overpowering, but Sharr resisted. There was more to command than a bloody blade. That was something Akia had started to forget towards the end. It was not a mistake he would make.

‘We’ve lost all contact with Kahu,’ he said to First Squad.

‘Maybe just subterranean interference,’ Dorthor said.

‘Regardless, the Red Brethren need to be found. If Kahu has pushed too far ahead he may have been cut off.’

‘I doubt there are many things that could cut off the Red Brethren,’ Niko interjected. Sharr didn’t reply. Te Kahurangi’s transmission icon had just lit up his visor display.

‘This is Reaper,’ Sharr said, accepting the vox connection. ‘What news, venerable Librarian?’

‘I have failed, brother,’ said Te Kahurangi. He sounded exhausted. ‘The Dead Skin has the boy.’

Sharr bit back a curse. ‘He is lost to us then?’

‘Not yet. It will take time for the traitor to complete his rituals. If we can get to him before the daemon’s essence is bound to the boy’s body, we may still have a chance. They will have taken him to the Precinct Fortress.’

‘All the more reason for us to continue our assault towards Sink Shaft One then,’ Sharr said. ‘We have lost contact with Red Wrath. I have halted the advance momentarily while we try to re-establish connection.’

‘I will return to you with Ari and the Scouts. They will help find him.’

‘Then we shall proceed for now,’ Sharr said. ‘We have stalled for long enough. Join us as soon as you can.’

‘Acknowledged, Company Master.’

Sharr cut the link and turned his attention back to scanning for the Red Brethren. He wasn’t getting any vital signs from the Terminators on his visor, but that meant little – according to the blinking displays, he and half his command squad were dead anyway. The scramblers being used by the Night Lords were rendering the Space Marines’ auto-senses half blind.

Sharr blink-deleted the conflicting displays, feeling his anger flare. Kahu and his Terminators had gone too far. The First Company veterans had taken their desire for haste beyond the understandable
and into the realm of foolhardiness. The last vox-message from Kahu had stated he was moving to purge a sifting plant before the final junctions leading to Sink Shaft One. The Terminator had made little effort to hide the fact that he believed Sharr had made a tactical misjudgement sending the Scouts in support of Te Kahurangi, or the fact that he’d be reporting as much to Lord Tyberos once the Tithe was over. Sharr tried the vox one more time. Still nothing.

‘Orders, Company Master?’ asked Dorthor. The grizzled strike veteran was prompting him, Sharr realised. A decision had to be reached – wait for Te Kahurangi and the Scouts while trying to re-establish vox contact, or move up immediately and find the Red Brethren.

‘We advance,’ Sharr said to his command squad. ‘Lock on to Kahu’s last recorded position. Tenth Squad will replace us in reserve.’ He switched to the company-wide communications frequency.

‘In the event that my vox goes offline, Strike Leader Nuritona has command.’

Terse acknowledgement clicked back over the link. The squads of Third Company had adopted hold and overwatch positions while the advance sat poised, strung out through strip-seams, megaborer tunnels and loco rail lines west of the final junctions before Sink Shaft One. Sharr could sense the quivering anticipation in even the most experienced of his squad leaders. They’d all caught battle’s scent, the heady tang of blood and weapons discharge. They were eager to slaughter this overconfident enemy. They wouldn’t have to wait much longer. Sharr switched back to the inter-squad vox-frequency.

‘Dawn Tide formation,’ he ordered, picking a combat spread that would enable the fastest movement-to-contact. ‘Brother Tane on point. Let’s go find them.’

The Tactical Marines of Fourth and Fifth Squads were holding an extended line of haulage tunnels and ore sinks either side of what had been Kahu’s advance route. Breaking from their positions to investigate the Red Brethren’s sudden silence would have left Fourth and Fifth in turn dangerously exposed, and create gaps in the Carcharodons’ battlefront. That was almost certainly what the traitors were hoping for, Sharr knew. He led First Squad in silence down the traverse tunnel that ran between the two Tactical squads, coming out at the small, secondary junction next to the sifting chamber. The rattle and clatter of the room’s active machinery echoed down the tunnels around them. Sharr nodded for Tane to proceed after the Champion paused at the entrance to the sifting chamber.

Inside, they discovered that their worst fears had been correct.

The Red Brethren were dead. There was no evidence as to what had killed them, beyond their horrific slashing injuries. Whatever had cut through their battleplate, it had done so in spite of the inches of ceramite, plasteel and adamantium rods.

‘The gouges look similar to lightning claw wounds,’ said Red Tane, kneeling beside one of the slain giants.

‘Too vicious, even for those,’ Dorthor said.

‘Warp creatures?’ Niko surmised.

‘Maybe we’ll never know,’ said Soha, volkite caliver buzzing with energy as he scanned the steam-shrouded room.

‘I suspect we will,’ said Sharr. He’d found Kahu. The Terminator was on his back near the middle of the sifting chamber, the mesh grille underneath buckled and sticky with his blood. Sharr contemplated the dead lenses of the warrior’s helm.

‘He was overconfident,’ Niko said, the shadow of the company’s battle standard falling across the dead Carcharodon as he joined Sharr.
I should have stopped him,’ Sharr said. ‘He was still under my command, even if he was from the First Company.’

‘He answers to none but Lord Tyberos,’ Niko said, giving a small shrug.

‘He’s answering to the Void Father now.’

Apothecary Tama set to work, the buzzing of his drill and the carbon-alloy reductor saw built into his narthecium rising above the clatter of the surrounding machinery as it cut towards Kahu’s geneseed.

‘Each of them died alone,’ Soha observed, looking across the chamber. ‘Spread out. What could have taken First Company veterans by surprise?’

‘Not this scum, that’s for certain,’ Red Tane said, the Company Champion stepping distastefully over the cultist corpses to join Sharr. Dozens of the heretics littered the room, blown apart by bolt and power fist, but they had clearly not been responsible for the Terminators’ deaths.

There was something down here, Sharr realised. A set of hunters even more vicious and cunning than the Carcharodons.

‘White One,’ he voxed to Strike Leader Ari. ‘What is your location?’

‘We are just moving into your tunnel section with the venerable Librarian, Reaper.’

‘Red Wrath is dead. Take a squad of your initiates and converge on my position. We must retrieve their bodies and the blessed Tactical Dreadnought armour before we proceed.’

‘Affirmative, Reaper, I am locking with your signal now. Sifting chamber nine.’

‘This stinks of warp trickery,’ Dorthor growled, stalking across the chamber to join the rest of the command squad around Kahu. ‘Nothing else explains how the Red Brethren could have been taken by surprise.’

‘The heretics underestimated us,’ Sharr said. ‘Kahu repeated their mistake, and has paid the price. We will not do the same.’

‘No contacts for over an hour,’ Dorthor said. ‘Not even the human prisoners roaming the tunnels. They’ve all gone – cultists, convicts, the traitors…’

‘Something is coming,’ Sharr agreed. ‘Venerable Te Kahurangi failed to secure the boy before the heretic sorcerer reached him. They have likely removed him to the Precinct Fortress. That remains our objective.’

‘The company has suffered. The Tactical squads are barely above fifty per cent strength.’

‘Our instructions from the Nomad Predation Fleet were clear,’ Sharr said. ‘This is a Red Tithe. It will be completed, even if you and I are the only void brothers left to perform it.’

Dorthor held his gaze for a moment, grizzled synth-flesh unreadable behind his helm’s beaked Mark VI visor.

‘As you say, Company Master,’ he said eventually.

‘You have squad command,’ Sharr said, turning towards the sifting chamber’s exit. ‘Keep the room secure until Ari and the Scouts arrive.’

‘Understood. Where are you going?’

‘To pray.’

Torrik and the rest of Fifth Squad were securing a loco storage bay when the darkness caught up with them.

The blood of cultists and traitors was still red on Torrik’s chainaxe as the Carcharodons moved into
The echoing cavern. It had been carved from Zartak’s lower level mines with great megaborers, left as a space to accommodate reserve carriages for the rail systems. Those engines covered the tracked floor of the cavern, most of them draped in heavy storage tarpas. Torrik and his four void brothers moved among them silently, their advance slowed to compensate for their malfunctioning auto-senses. Strike Leader Kartli had divided Fifth into two combat squads to better fulfil their new role – combing the side bays and lesser tunnels in the rear of the new battlefront established by the rest of the company. Kartli himself led the first squad, Torrik the second. They’d been hunting down stray cultists and prisoners while the rest of Third Company prepared for the final push towards Sink Shaft One. It was inglorious work, but work the Carcharodons did well. To the likes of Torrik, praise and acknowledgement had never been things of any worth. In the Outer Dark there was only the endless silence of the void. The Wandering Ancestors had given up on the weakness of human glory when they’d entered into their great exile. Never again would their descendants seek it.

‘I heard something,’ voxed brother Loa. Torrik paused between two carriages, his chainaxe unclamped but inactive, his senses probing the ever-present darkness of Zartak’s underworld.

‘We are not alone,’ he said into the vox. ‘I can feel it.’ Ever since entering the storage bay he’d been plagued by a presence in the shadows, only half felt but certainly not imagined. To warriors so attuned to the darkness, the sensation of being hunted was a curious one – unsettling, alien. The Carcharodon keyed his vox again.

‘Combat squad, converge on my position.’

Cull was beginning to understand why his Claws had struggled. These loyalists were unlike any he’d encountered before. They bore a curious resemblance to the Night Lords themselves, but where the VIII Legion delighted in the terror they caused, these grey killers seemed to be without any emotions at all. For a moment, crouched in the concealing darkness of the loco carriage’s interior, Cull found himself wondering where they had come from, and why.

It did not matter. What mattered was that they were challenging the Night Lords. And Cull had long ago learned how to deal with challenges.

The Stalk was complete. First Kill, finally released from the Centrum Dominus, had worked its way through ratholes and burrow seams to infiltrate the rear of the loyalist positions. Cull knew he had to offer them something. They had been patient for so long. Besides, unleashing the Warp Talons had left him with a deep-seated desire to kill. Simply watching the fighting from the Precinct Fortress was no longer enough. He needed the challenge. He needed to overcome it.

There would be no Terror after the Stalk. As a tactic it was rarely of any use against the Adeptus Astartes, and even less so against these mysterious grey warriors. Cull went straight to the Kill.

‘Strike,’ he ordered.

First Kill attacked. The Loyalist half-squad was still rallying to the centre of the carriage storage bay. They reacted to the ambush with the same silent ferocity Cull had seen over the viewscreens. But First Kill was hungry. It would not be denied.

Narx drew first blood, as ever. The violent young executioner tore from where he’d been concealed behind the gutted engine block of a decommissioned loco hauler, his power sword crackling. The Loyalist who had been passing by reacted immediately, bolter coming up, but Narx was faster. His blade bisected the bolter, and as the Loyalist went for his chainsword the executioner opened him with a callous backward swipe.
Golgoth had been lurking among the straining support struts of the cavern’s ceiling. His jump pack flared as he landed, but even its retro thrust barely dampened the impact of the hulking Raptor. Grit and dirt exploded around him as he came down behind one of the Loyalists, energy blazing across his wicked lightning claws. The grey Imperial hammered a burst of bolts into the Night Lord at point-blank range, but the traitor’s modified armour turned them aside in a shower of sparks. Laughing, Golgoth tore into the Loyalist, his hideous strength rending the Space Marine apart in just a few slashing blows.

The Dark Twins, Xeron and Terron, were confounding the third Loyalist, caught between two disused carriages. One Night Lord would dart from the shadows and lash out, the blow parried by the Space Marine’s revving chainsword. Another would strike a split second later from the opposite side, dealing a minor blow to one of the weak points in the Loyalist’s patchwork armour. They were bleeding him, one slash at a time.

Cull burst through the side of the carriage he’d been concealed in with a full-throated roar, steel crumbling beneath the forward thrust of his jump pack. The final Loyalist turned to face him, bloody chainaxe revving. Cull’s runesword met the weapon, jarring back off the spinning teeth. The Night Lord turned the half-slash into a short lunge that grated to the side of the Loyalist’s breastplate. As expected, rather than try to regain his defence the Imperial attacked, driving himself into Cull’s exposed guard. Cull responded in kind before the Loyalist could cut upwards with his axe, the two killers locked together in a deadly embrace. Cull found his helm inches from the Loyalist’s. The black lenses facing him were utterly soulless and unreflective, a contrast to the prince’s hateful glare.

The Loyalist headbutted him.

Cull went back, his skull ringing. The sudden blow bought the Loyalist only a split second, but it was enough for him to rake his chainaxe across Cull’s breastplate. The Prince of Thorns snarled as the blades bit deep, chopping through ceramite and almost splitting the skull embossed over the Night Lord’s breast.

Cull reacted with the same lightning reflexes that had left every challenger he’d ever faced dead at his feet. He lashed out with his left hand, grasping the wrist of the Loyalist and pinning his chainaxe off to his right side. In the same breath he drove his runeblade at the Space Marine’s lower torso. He felt the warrior’s arm twitch in his grip as the Loyalist attempted to parry, but the Night Lord held his guard open. There was a crunch as the runesword punched through the Loyalist’s stomach, the sigils inscribed across its blade glowing darkly. The Space Marine doubled up, gutted, his spine pierced. Cull released his right arm and struck him about the helm with his gauntlet, knocking him to one side even as he twisted his sword free. The Loyalist fell to his knees. A last contemptuous swipe of the runesword sent his head tumbling across the rail bed in a jet of blood.

The Dark Twins had finished with their victim, a final blow from Terron cutting the legs from beneath the dying warrior. Even with his genhanced body, his dozen wounds would bleed him out in minutes. Alone among First Kill, Drac hadn’t engaged. The veteran demolitions expert had watched it all from the top of one of the carriages, content to let the rest of the retinue have its fun. It had been finished in barely a minute.

‘Our claws are still sharp,’ Narx said. He’d tugged one of the shark tooth vambrace bindings from the Loyalist he’d killed, intending to keep the curious charm as a trophy. Golgoth was going from one Loyalist corpse to the next, plunging his claws through the upper chestplate, ruining their gene-seed. Cull watched the blood dripping from his runesword for a moment, savouring the patter as it fell upon
Zartak’s dark earth.
‘This will show them who owns the night,’ he said, finally lowering the blade.
‘Incoming contacts,’ Drac said from his perch, scanning the auspex. ‘Hostiles.’
Cull knew they could not afford to linger. Other Loyalists would surely be responding to the ambush, and if the next phase of his plan was to be successful he needed to get back to Sink Shaft One.
‘We go,’ he said, locking his sword. ‘With me, brothers.’
Armour powering down to vital functions once more, First Kill returned to the Stalk. They merged with the shadows, leaving only death behind.

On their way to the sifting chamber First Squad had passed a works chapel. It was a thing of bare necessities, a tiny chamber carved into the rock of the tunnel wall, barely wide enough to accommodate Sharr. The Company Master stooped as he entered. Inside, a dozen flickering lumen sticks were the only source of light, set into little niches either side of the effigy that had been hacked into the rock wall with power picks and lascutters. It was a crude representation of an armoured man, his featureless head surrounded by carved lines representing the glow of radiant glory. He stood with sword planted atop an orb that was doubtless supposed to represent Holy Terra.

Sharr went down on both knees before the image, lowering himself slowly. His power armour’s servos whirred, and his knee plates grated where they met the bare rock of the chapel floor. He made the sign of the aquila across his breastplate before looking up at the figure once more.

The Emperor. To the miserable convicts of Zartak, a distant, uncaring god on a planet none of them would ever see. To the Adeptus Astartes, the great primogenitor and mightiest leader mankind would ever know. To the Carcharodon Astra he was Rangu, the Void Father, sire of the Forgotten One. Like the Carcharodons, his vigilance was eternal, a beacon in the night, the bane of the encroaching shadows. Sharr’s Chapter had left humanity for the emptiness of the Outer Dark when He had still walked among mortals, and they would not return until He did so once again. Only with the coming of the Forgotten One could the Edicts of Exile be overturned, and the Chapter’s eternal crusade in the darkness be brought to an end.

Sharr knew that some, like Te Kahurangi, did not believe such a thing would ever happen. He did not share the Chief Librarian’s pessimism. The Carcharodon Astra were a faithful brotherhood, even by the standards of the Adeptus Astartes. Their creed was an old one, older than the superstitions and misbeliefs of the current Imperial Cult. Theirs was not some blind faith based on hollow praise and lavish donations. Their memories of the Emperor were of a living, breathing titan, and Terra was far more to them than some distant hub of galaxy-spanning bureaucracy. Their connection to it was ancient and primal. It had sustained their loyalty and their determination for ten thousand years, amidst the loneliness of the Outer Dark. When they had first been banished, none had expected them to survive, let alone remain united as a Chapter. But survive they had, their disparate heritage bound by their faith in Him on Earth. Nothing could shake that.

‘I have not seen you at prayer since you became Company Master.’
For a moment Sharr thought Te Kahurangi had slipped the words directly into his mind. Then he realised that the Pale Nomad was actually standing just beyond the chapel’s hatchway. He resisted the urge to react, keeping his gaze fixed on the Emperor’s graven image.

‘I prefer to speak to the Void Father in private.’
‘You prefer to confront your memories of this world alone,’ Te Kahurangi said.
‘They mean nothing. The solace of silence is a blessing.’
‘It is,’ the Chief Librarian admitted. ‘It still distresses Chaplain Nikora that we worship privately, even after all these years. I suppose it is harder for the initiates to understand the depths of our Chapter’s doctrines if its veterans so rarely appear at the devotional services.’
‘They will learn in time,’ Sharr said. ‘Solitary contemplation offers the best opportunity for revelation.’
‘Chapter three, verse eleven,’ Te Kahurangi said, aware the Company Master was quoting Beyond the Veil of Stars, one of the foundational texts written by the Shade Master during the first Days of Exile.
‘What do they intend for the boy?’ Sharr asked, eyes not leaving Rangu.
‘The worst fate imaginable. They will use him as a conduit to channel the daemon that the Dead Skin serves. The creature’s darkness already infests these mines and clouds my visions.’
‘You have seen the fate of Kahu?’
‘I have.’
‘What killed them, Pale Nomad?’
‘Things that once counted themselves as our brothers,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘Twisted and deformed in body and mind by the Dark Powers. They are more beasts now than transhumans. They are loosed upon us like hunting animals.’
‘The Void Father alone knows what manner of vile pacts these traitors have wrought,’ Sharr said. ‘It is ever the same with the worshippers of the Dark Gods. But we have overcome their kind before, and we will do so again.’
‘Not if the Dead Skin completes his ritual,’ Te Kahurangi warned. ‘If his daemon is bound to the mortal plane even I will not be able to stop him.’
Sharr didn’t reply, his attention turning to an incoming vox-transmission from Strike Leader Kartli.
‘The traitors are behind us, Company Master,’ the leader of Fifth Squad said. ‘They have ambushed and destroyed one of my combat squads in the loco carriage bay, Lower West Six.’
‘Can you track them?’
‘They have already withdrawn, and pursuit will likely expose the remainder of my squad.’
‘Rally on Tenth Squad and await further orders,’ Sharr ordered.
‘They are stalking us,’ Te Kahurangi said.
‘And we them,’ Sharr replied. ‘Like two predators. We are poised on the brink of the final offensive. Sink Shaft One is almost within our grasp.’
‘For better or for worse, Kahu locked us into this course of action.’
‘Was it truly Kahu?’ Sharr said slowly. ‘Should I not have overruled him if I thought this plan was ill-conceived? I am failing the Chapter and the Void Father, Chief Librarian.’
‘If you truly believe that, then you will,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘But you have not failed them, not yet. Do not allow your imagination to become reality. Defeat is currently only in your mind.’
‘Akia’s bloodthirstiness has consumed me,’ Sharr admitted, finally rising. ‘A part of me was eager to follow Kahu’s course of action. That is the truth of why I did not overrule him. It is Akia’s bloody spirit that haunts me, not my memories of Zartak. They are long lost.’
There was a crack as Te Kahurangi struck the stone floor with the base of his force staff.
‘Akia is not the master of Third Company. Kahu is not the Master of Third Company. Even Lord Tyberos is not the master of Third Company. It is you, Bail Sharr. It is to your credit if we succeed
here, and to your dishonour if we are defeated. None but you can be held accountable, regardless of
the outcome of this Tithing. That is the weight of the duty you took on when you swore your new Void
Vows, both as the master of this company, and as the Chapter’s new Reaper Prime. It is your sacred
duty to see the Tithe through. The darkness arrayed against us would break you while you struggle to
uphold your new burden. Will you let it?’

Sharr turned to Te Kahurangi. He filled the chapel, his grey, black and brass armour gleaming in the
flickering light of the little lumen sticks. For a moment he stared at the blue-plated Chief Librarian,
saying nothing. For a moment he could have been Akia, on the brink of a bloody outburst.
‘These traitors have avoided trial for too long,’ he said. ‘Their sentence is overdue. I will render
judgement, and the Third Company will be my axe of execution.’

Shadraith dragged the cords tighter, the leather biting into the boy’s wrists. Skell was unconscious,
hanging limp between two rune-inscribed rods driven into the middle of the Centrum Dominus. The
Chaos sorcerer had inscribed the cogitator pit with sigils in chalk and blood.

He’d already force-fed Skell a dose of nutrient paste. He was malnourished and weak. He needed to
be strong if he was going to play host for Bar’ghul. The Chaos sorcerer was muttering to himself, his
voice rich and dripping with dark energies. He’d drawn the curving blade of a ritual dagger, its
handle crafted into the silver coil of a multi-fin. The shining blade was etched with the spiral-and-eye
crest of the God of Change. He stood behind the boy, towering over him.

Shadraith had desired this for longer than he could remember. The power his pact with Bar’ghul
would bring him was worth any sacrifice. The warband would be his, and with Cull bent to
Shadraith’s will their strength would only grow. All he needed to do was complete the ritual. He
could feel the shadow daemon’s attention fixed upon him from beyond the veil, the air above the
bloody symbols on the floor shimmering as reality buckled.

Shadraith was aware of Shenzar and his Terminators looking on with cold disgust from the shadows
on the edge of the Centrum Dominus. He ignored them. They were relics. Their blind mistrust of the
true power of Chaos and their idiotic refusal to harness it for their own ends was all that was holding
the Night Lords back. Shadraith would change that. He would change everything.

Formerly, the muster point on the edge of Sink Shaft One would have been the place for the largest
work gangs to be brought prior to boarding the servitor-manned loco rails for the deepest levels.
Now the confluence of cell corridors writhed with a sea of scabbed, grimy flesh and tattered rags.
The prisoners that had been released into the mines had been dragged back by the Night Lords as they
withdrew in the face of the Loyalist advance.

‘How many?’ Cull asked Fexrath, commander of Third Claw.

‘Warp knows,’ the champion said. The humans were pushing and shoving at one another in their
desperation to keep away from the towering killers, crushing the rearmost ranks back against the
gantries and plasteel bars ringing the edge of the shaft hole itself. Screams and wails cut the air. The
sounds only fed the Night Lords’ murderlust.

‘Some of these are worth harvesting,’ the Claw champion added. Cull followed his gaze, noting the
prisoners among the mob who weren’t all cowering before their captors. Some had the courage to
face them down, refusing to hide among their weaker fellows. Those were the ones the Night Lords
had come for.

‘If they survive,’ Cull said. The prisoners had been herded together here and at half a dozen other
points on the westernmost curve of the sink shaft. They probably assumed they were about to be slaughtered. If it weren’t for Cull, that was probably what would have happened.

‘There’s enough,’ he said. ‘Send them. All of them.’

Something moved at the far end of the tunnel. Kordi, in the vanguard of his squad’s advance, came to a sharp stop.

‘Halt,’ he said. Behind him the Tactical Marines of Fourth Squad crouched against the rough-hewn walls of the burrow seam.

‘Possible contacts,’ he said, bringing his boltgun up. ‘Assume overwatch.’

The squad waited. Kordi had heard something, something more than the false sounds that eternally echoed through the old mine’s honeycomb labyrinth, the sounds that were automatically filtered out by his armour’s auto-senses. Voices, and the patter of unarmoured, running feet.

‘Contacts confirmed,’ Kordi said, bouncing the message through to the command channel.

‘Do you have a visual?’ asked Strike Leader Ekara. Since being caught cold by the Predator tank in junction 44-5, Fourth Squad had been eager to atone for its losses. Ekara was being careful, his orders reining in his more bloodthirsty, less experienced void brothers. They could not afford to suffer more losses.

‘Negative,’ Kordi replied, his senses probing the darkness at the end of the burrow. He’d switched his retinal display to infrared, the shadows painted in dead shades of black and blue. The sound grew louder, and the earth began to vibrate. Something was definitely coming.

‘Make ready,’ Ekara ordered. Kordi’s grip tightened on his venerable bolter. He felt the battle-hunger flare in him. His lenses scanned for a target lock.

Abruptly, he had one. Life signs burst into the burrow, appearing on his visor as a riot of violent reds, yellows and greens. Figures, packed so tightly that their individual body signatures melded into one amorphous mass of heat traces, swarmed up from the darkness. They were stampeding straight along the burrow seam, like a herd of grox triggered by the scent of a predator, apparently blind to the battle-scarred squad of Adeptus Astartes ahead.

‘Prisoners,’ Kordi said. ‘Coming this way. Unarmed.’

‘Hold your fire,’ Ekara ordered.

‘They’ll overrun us,’ Kordi warned.

‘We’re here to Tithe them, not gun them down,’ Ekara said. ‘Brace yourselves.’

Kordi activated his stabilisers, attempting to fathom what in the name of the Void Father could have resulted in such a critical mass of bodies being funnelled directly at them.

‘Reports of similar mobs coming in from every front-line squad,’ Ekara said, listening to the vox chatter of his fellow strike leaders. ‘The tunnels are full.’

It wasn’t an advance, Kordi realised. The prisoners weren’t attacking them. They were trying to get past them. He pressed himself into the dirt wall between two of the plasteel ribs propping the seam open, and dug in his heels. He found himself taking a breath, as he would have done moments before plunging beneath the surface of the aquatic drill chamber on board the White Maw.

The rising tide of screaming, dirty flesh and rags struck. Even braced, the sheer mass of bodies made the Space Marines buckle, and physically pushed them back into the dirt of the walls. There were hideous crunching noises audible over the thunder as prisoners were driven against the unyielding armour of the Carcharodons, crushed there by the mindless force of those behind. More thrust past,
channelled relentlessly on down the seam and out towards the sub shaft beyond. Hands and limbs grasped and battered vainly at Kordi’s breastplate and pauldrons before being snatched away. He caught a few faces, snapshots amidst the rushing press, contorted with terror and desperation. There was nothing that could be done now, either to help or hinder them. All the Carcharodons could do was hold on and ride out the flood.

Something intruded on Kordi’s consciousness, an anomaly, distinct from the mass of bodies. One of the prisoners had a crude leather gas hood on, different from the respiration masks worn by the others. The figure seemed to sense Kordi’s sudden attention as he drew near and turned to meet his gaze. The eyes behind the filmy, bug-like lenses of the hood were bloodshot and burning with hatred. Kordi lunged towards the threat, blink-clicking the inter-squad vox-channel.

‘Contact,’ he shouted. ‘Contact in the–’

He was too late. Whatever device was flung down the tunnel by the cultist infiltrator, it detonated half a dozen yards away from where Kordi stood. The Carcharodons, pinned against the wall by the flood, could do nothing but die.

The explosion hit, and for a few brief seconds Kordi lost consciousness. His genenhanced physiology kicked him awake almost immediately, sending a potent cocktail of stimms thumping through his muscles. He realised he was lying on his back, staring up at the low seam ceiling. His armour’s warning systems were chiming – the integrity of his right shoulder plate was badly compromised, his right vambrace was buckled, and his breastplate had suffered three impact penetrations. Vitae signs showed low-level blood loss from wounds in his right arm and abdomen. The pain was almost nonexistent, already killed off by the stimms and his enhanced nervous system. There was something obscuring his visor’s right lens, something he suspected was blood.

He sat up, the servos in the damaged sections of his battleplate grating badly. His visor stripped away the fug of smoke, dirt and misted organics that clogged the dank air.

Unidentifiable viscera plastered almost every inch of the damaged tunnel. The plasteel beams buckled outwards, and dirt was cascading down from the ruptured ceiling. The explosion had broken the seam’s structural integrity. He had a few minutes at best before the roof caved in.

A few minutes that weren’t enough. Transhuman though he was, it still took Kordi a few seconds to register the figures moving swiftly through the swirling after-effects of the blast – he got an impression of gas hoods and robes. His instincts screamed at him to get up, get up and fight. The seam resounded with the unmistakable clack-clack of shotgun slides being wracked. A shape appeared before him, eyes glaring through the lenses of its hood mask. The barrel of an autorifle came up, gaping at him. The levelled firearm finally triggered a set of deeply ingrained muscle reflexes. He slapped the weapon aside even as it discharged, burying a spray of rounds into the dirt beside him. At the same time Kordi’s leg lashed out, striking the cultist’s shin. There was a snap and a scream as the man toppled.

Kordi was up in a second, forcing the damaged servos in his armour to obey. The cultist’s neck snapped easily under his gauntlets. He realised he was panting, body flooded with combat hormones and thrilling with the early onset of the Blindness. His bolter was gone, so he unclamped his chainsword. Its roar filled the bloody space.

His brothers were dead. Pahu and Rua lay either side of him. The former had taken the worst of the blast – his right side was a gory mess of shorn armour and exposed innards. A point-blank shotgun blast had burst Rua’s helmet, splattering the scarred walls of the tunnel with cranial matter.
The heretics rushed him. He gutted the first, revving his chainsword before kicking the butchered remains off the spinning blades. The urge to cry out, to roar his hatred and his fury, choked him. He resisted, obeying the Chapter’s hypno-indoctrination, decapitating a second cultist with icy silence.

He would avenge them. He would avenge all of them. The blood-wrath gripped him. His muscles burned with potency as he waded into the clutch of cultists assaulting him with blade and rifle butt, cutting them down with brutally efficient blows. He wanted to tear his gore-splattered helmet off and bury his teeth into the flesh of these degenerate cowards. The Blindness burned away his thoughts, demanded he sell himself dearly, telling him to kill and keep on killing. He used his own body as a weapon, slamming a pair of cultists up against a support beam when they tried to work their way round him, crushing them between ceramite and plasteel with a crack of splintering bones.

The traitors opened fire point-blank. He waded through the blizzard of shots, a red-streaked revenant in the swirling cloud of dirt and dust. Death came with every blow, splitting skulls and opening torsos with wet crunches, his chainsword howling out for more even as his own jaw remained bitterly locked.

Darkness surged up from the dust, flinging aside the last of the cultist execution squad. The new arrival’s eyes burned like red coals from the gloom, redolent with ancient malice. Its armour was the colour of night, shot through with stylised bolts of lightning. Vox-casters built into its maw grille moaned with fear.

The Night Lord came at Kordi with a strength and speed to match his own, a curving chainsabre cutting the air overhead. Kordi parried and dragged the blow to one side, the teeth of their weapons juddering and locked. He turned the deflection into a back-cut designed to open the traitor’s stomach, but the Chaos Space Marine darted away from the blow. The teeth of Kordi’s weapon scarred its breastplate silver.

‘Too slow, lapdog,’ taunted the traitor, its voice scraping from its winged helm’s vox maw. Kordi didn’t respond. He stabbed his chainsword, two-handed, towards the Chaos Space Marine’s abdomen, the confines of the tunnel restricting the range of his combat abilities. The traitor went back again, avoiding the lunge. Too late, Kordi realised it was drawing him on. Focused on the heretic’s every move, his feet snagged on a fallen plasteel support beam, disguised by the bloody remains that carpeted the tunnel floor.

The slight imbalance was all the traitor needed. It came at him again, as fast as the lightning painted onto its armour, slipping a blow through Kordi’s guard. The chainblade bit, sawing through the left side of his breastplate in a hail of sparks. Metal teeth found flesh.

Kordi grunted and thrust himself away from the blow, thumping into the right-hand wall. The seam shuddered, more earth collapsing from the roof. The traitor lashed out with a boot while Kordi was still recovering, kicking him down onto his knees. His armour, damaged by the earlier blast, was refusing to respond in time. The Night Lord brought his chainsabre back for the killing slash.

The woman smiled at him, the sand warm between his toes. He was going home.

Something banged Kordi’s head and thumped through the left eye socket of the winged skull embossed on the traitor’s breastplate. Dark blood spouted from the hole as the bolt-round detonated inside the Chaos Space Marine’s chest cavity. It staggered for a moment, chainsabre still revving. A second round smacked through its vox maw and blasted black matter out from the back of its shattered helmet. It collapsed in the dirt before Kordi.

The Carcharodon shuddered, his vision blinking. He’d clamped one hand over the wound in his side.
Even his advanced Larraman’s cells were struggling to staunch the blood flowing from the ripped flesh. He felt a hand beneath his arm, helping him up. The servos in his armour complained bitterly.

It was Ekara who had saved him. The strike leader had been reduced to using his bolt pistol – his right arm ended in a bloody stump just above the wrist. Brothers Haru and Tonga were behind him, both of them also wounded but alive.

‘They’re using the prisoners as a screen to infiltrate our lines,’ said Ekara, supporting Kordi with his remaining hand. ‘We have to regroup at the last junction and set up a proper defensive position.’

Kordi never got the chance to respond. There was a shriek of tortured metal as the last remaining plasteel ribs supporting the seam gave out. With a thunder that spoke of the pent-up wrath of Zartak’s scarred and defiled bedrock, tonnes of dirt came hammering down on the last survivors of Fourth Squad.
Day 91, Zartak local.
The prisoners have all gone. I’ve taken Worren and the combat servitors down into the cell vaults beneath the sub-precinct. The hatches have all been opened and the magnicles disarmed and unlocked. There is no sign of where the inmates have gone. The routes into the mine works are all breached too. I have decided to send a situation report package to Lord Rozenkranz, but I will not delay further exploration in order to wait for his response. I’ve sent servo-skull 2486 ahead into the works proper, and have linked its pict-feed to the viewscreens in the sub-precinct’s control room. The connection is not ideal, but Tech-Adept Julio is updating the captures as I write. I will return to this log when I know more.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Mem-bank entry log ends + + +

+ + + Thought for the Day: The means to enact the Emperor’s will never requires justification + + +
CHAPTER XI

The lead squads were reporting contacts.

From where he was waiting in the junction just beyond sifting chamber 9, Sharr had given the order not to fire on the oncoming prisoners. Even from beyond the grave he could feel Kahu’s judgement scolding him. If they massacred the convicts there would be no Tithe. The Chapter needed its meat living and preferably strong, not freshly butchered.

He’d ordered the two Devastator squads in reserve forwards to corral the sudden flood of mangy humans in the wider loco rail tunnel junctions behind the front line. Hundreds of prisoners had been packed into the space beneath the levelled guns of the Carcharodons blocking off the other tunnel routes. The frenzied momentum that had driven them on past the vanguard had finally dissipated enough for them to be halted and herded together. They now crouched and cringed beneath where Sharr had climbed up onto the back of an overturned loco carriage. It was the same in the junctions to the north and south – they had just inadvertently seized thousands of prisoners.

What Sharr hadn’t anticipated was the reason behind the mass exodus. Clearly the traitors had been massing them on the edge of Sink Shaft One and were now driving them as one back into the advancing Loyalists. They were using them as a screen.

Infiltration. The heretics had laced the prisoner masses with their own cultists. When the five Tactical squads leading the Carcharodons’ final strike towards Sink Shaft One had started allowing the prisoners to pass them by, they’d inadvertently lowered their guard. The heretics had not hesitated to strike. Judging by the vox reports trickling back, strike forces of heavily armed cultist infantry supported by a handful of Chaos Space Marines were assaulting the Tactical squads in the wake of bombing attacks, striking while the Loyalists were still bloodied and disorientated.

‘We hold the Tithe here,’ Sharr said to First Squad, gesturing at the junction crossroads spread out before them. He’d already ordered the Tactical squads to fall back on this position. The loco rail crossroads held by Sharr’s First Squad and the Devastators of Ninth Squad – junction 15-0 – was one of four that constituted the width of the subterranean front set up by Third Company. The Devourer squads – the Seventh and the Eighth – held the two lying approximately northwards, one on the upper and one on the mid level. The junction to the south, on the lower level, was being covered by the final Devastator squad, the Tenth. The ragged remains of the Tactical squads – Second through Sixth – were pulling back towards the two centremost junctions. There had been no word at all from Fourth Squad. Strike Leader Ekara was as experienced and effective a combat leader as any in the Third Company’s hard-bitten upper ranks, but Sharr suspected the worst. In the rush to follow up on their early successes, the Carcharodons had overextended and allowed themselves to be caught flat-footed. They needed time to regroup, time they did not have.
‘Our flanks are exposed,’ Te Kahurangi said from the foot of the overturned carriage. ‘The Seventh Squad to the north and the Tenth to the south are unsupported. The Night Lords will attack them first.’

‘You’ve seen it?’ Sharr asked tersely.

‘I have.’

‘Strike Leader Ari,’ he called across the junction to the Scout commander. With the bodies of the Red Brethren returned to the White Maw, Ari’s Scouts were helping to keep the prisoners herded together. Their exposed pale features and razor-toothed snarls were enough to cause the dirty humans to comply.

‘Company Master?’ Ari said, turning away from the work of his initiates.

‘Divide the remainder of the Scouts and deploy them to reinforce junctions four-one and eight-eight, immediately.’

‘Affirmative, Company Master.’

Te Kahurangi nodded. ‘That will be enough, for now.’

‘For now,’ Sharr echoed darkly. ‘We cannot keep all these prisoners here and still operate effectively. If we release them, they will flee to the surface and disperse among the jungles. We will not be able to take a Tithe of them before an Imperial response arrives in-system. And we both know we cannot still be here when that happens.’

‘So use the humans in the sub-precinct,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘Leave them behind to guard this flock.’

‘I have considered it. There are not enough of them left to be of any use to us.’

‘Not just the arbitrators. Use the convicts they still hold in the cells below the sub-precinct as well.’ Sharr shook his head.

‘We cannot possibly arm them. They may turn on us.’

‘The vast majority would, yes. But we do not require the service of the vast majority. A few hundred of the more trustworthy inmates will be enough. I would hope I could find that many able to serve loyally. I will seek out the thoughts of those who will do our bidding, either through fear or through proper devotion.’

There was truth in that, Sharr supposed. Te Kahurangi’s mental abilities were more than capable of measuring the mettle of a man’s thoughts. A few hundred armed and loyal convicts would be enough to keep the rest in line until the fighting was done, one way or another.

‘I will find the arbitrator in command and make it so,’ Sharr said. ‘In the meantime we must conceive of a means to turn the tide. If we cannot flush out the last of the Night Lords scum soon we will have to depart with what little we have taken here. My company has lost too many void brothers to do that.’

‘Our only hope for ending this engagement swiftly is to strike off the traitor’s head,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘We must seize the Precinct Fortress. That is where they are seeking to bind the boy with their daemonic master. I can feel his power intruding into the mortal plane. The shadows grow deeper, Sharr.’

‘We cannot teleport into the fortress as long as the void shield remains active,’ Sharr pointed out. ‘And to reach that we must fight our way through the last of the tunnels.’

‘It may be simpler than that,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘But the traitors must provide me with something specific first.’

‘They have halted their advance,’ Shadraith said to Cull. ‘They are fortifying the junctions west of us,
Cull had returned to the Precinct Fortress and its Centrum Dominus. He was pointedly ignoring Shadraith’s prisoner. The boy reminded Cull too much of how he’d come to be inducted into the VIII Legion. Shadraith had been force-feeding the captive triglyceride gel – a concoction of ultra-proteins, rapid-acting carbohydrates and fats – to give his pale, scrawny body some strength. If he died before the binding ritual was complete all the sorcerer’s work would be in vain. The thought made Cull smile.

‘We have stung them,’ the Prince of Thorns said, turning his back on Shadraith and the boy in order to scan the viewscreens still functioning in the darkness of the Centrum Dominus. First Kill stood around, idle, dire shapes in the deep shadows.

‘They must make their final play soon,’ Golgoth grumbled. The hulking raptor was flexing his bloody lightning claws impatiently, eying the prisoner.

‘They will,’ Xeron and Terron said in unison. Cull shot them a glance. The Dark Twins had started conversing with an increasingly disturbing level of precision. Membership of First Kill was only possible after a series of purity tests were passed, but corruption of the mind was more difficult to trace than mutation of the body. If something warp-spawned was taking root in the souls of the two Night Lords Cull would kill them himself.

‘I want their champion’s head,’ Narx the executioner said, offering Cull a brief bow. ‘For the glory of my prince, of course.’

‘You will have it,’ Cull said idly, still looking at Xeron and Terron. The twins shifted beneath his gaze, their skull helms averted.

‘The explosives broke them,’ Drac said. Alone among First Kill, the jaded demolitions master seemed at ease. He crouched in the darkness, apparently content to wait for his prince’s next orders.

‘You did your work well,’ Cull allowed. ‘The strikes conducted under the cover of the prisoner release have evened the odds. The Imperials grew overconfident, and we have punished them for it.’

‘And now they must choose,’ Drac added. ‘We have flooded their lines with fleeing prisoners. If they wish to hold them, they must cease their advance. If they wish to press on to us here, they cannot afford to bring them all. They won’t dare split their remaining forces.’

‘We have them outnumbered,’ Cull said. ‘The remains of the Black Hand cult squads will pin them in place while the Claws work their way round to the north and south. They cannot hope to cover all the levels. Once we have cut them off from their sub-precinct, we will slaughter them.’

‘It won’t be that simple,’ Shadraith said from behind Cull. The Prince of Thorns grimaced as the sorcerer continued.

‘The Pale Nomad still sees much. I can blind him as he sought to blind me, but he may yet anticipate our movements.’

‘He is too much for you, Flayed Father,’ Cull surmised, turning back towards Shadraith. He saw the Night Lord’s grip on his warp scythe tighten.

‘He is one of the oldest corpse servants I have ever encountered.’

‘You have encountered?’ Cull asked. ‘Or that Bar’ghul has encountered? Does your daemon guide you still?’

‘How I know of the corpse worshipper is not your concern,’ Shadraith snapped back. ‘He is nothing compared to one as blessed as I.’

‘If what your daemon says is true his age may match your own, Flayed Father,’ Cull said, giving the
moniker a mocking inflection. He knew exactly how much it infuriated Shadraith whenever he questioned the truth behind the sorcerer’s claims to have been fighting the Long War since the days of the Heresy.

‘I walked beside men who have since become gods,’ the sorcerer spat. ‘I remember our Legion’s degenerate home world, and the night we put it to the torch. I met the gene-sire you dare to claim descent from. I have his gift of foresight. You would do well to remember all that before you question my abilities. I will tear that Loyalist pretender limb from limb.’

‘How?’ Cull demanded, abandoning his barbed taunting. ‘He is in the midst of his grey brethren.’

‘I will give him reason not to be,’ Shadraith said. ‘There are many secret tunnels beneath this fortress, some known, others less so. My shadows have sought them out. I will plant the knowledge of one of the tunnel’s existence in the mind of the human spared on board the prison ship, and she will take word of it to her masters. They have to be seeking to end this fight soon. They think of themselves as predators, but a predator can always be trapped. I will lace the water with blood, and when they come for us we will welcome them to Bar’ghul’s birthing ceremony. The essence of the Pale Nomad will be my final offering.’

Rannik woke. Her autopistol was up and aimed in an instant, braced in both hands. Her body was trembling and slick with sweat. The sudden motion tripped the sleeping cell’s auto lumen. The darkness vanished. The room was empty. Outside, beyond the tiny vision slit, it was still night. The chrono display built into the far wall told her it was early. Or late.

She lowered the pistol and took a long, slow breath. She was still shaking. Memories of what had woken her intruded on her mind, like razors sliding into flesh – screaming skulls, nightmares of sharpened steel dropping from above, burning red eyes. Pale skin and scarred grey battle armour. Not just those, she now recalled. Something more. A narrow, dark corridor, more a natural fissure than a man-made burrow, pressing in against her.

Suddenly the memories came back, thrust as though by some violent hand into the forefront of her thoughts. Under-route 1, the so-called Sally Port. How had she forgotten about its existence until now? It could be vital. They could bypass the last of the works around Sink Shaft One and strike directly up into the Precinct Fortress’ vaults.

She swung her feet out of the bunk and onto the cold, bare rockcrete floor, fighting off her exhaustion. She’d slept for too long anyway. Since the Space Marines had arrived and left their heavy armour to help fortify the sub-precinct she’d felt abandoned in a strange sort of limbo. It wasn’t her fight any more; the towering god-warriors had made that much clear. Since they had set foot on Zartak, Rannik had been relegated to her former role – a subordinate caretaker of the planet’s prison population, not the commander of the last armed forces resisting a powerful Archenemy invasion.

A part of her was relieved by that, and that relief had manifested in the sleep from which the nightmares had arisen, unbidden. Another part of her was disgusted by her own weakness. She had been spared by the Adeptus Astartes, just as she’d been spared by their nightmarish reflection on the bridge of the Imperial Truth. Shame and fear twisted in her gut and made her face burn. Why had that monster not killed her, like it had killed Macran and the others? Had it done something to her in between knocking her unconscious and jettisoning her in the salvation pod? Was she carrying some sort of taint or corruption? Surely the Space Marines would have sensed it when they’d arrived? The
thought made her shudder.

Her vox-torq, lying on the kitbag beside the commandeered cot, clicked. Rannik dragged it around her neck and activated it.

‘Go ahead,’ she said.

‘Sir,’ crackled Jaken’s voice. ‘The Space Marines are back. They wish to see you immediately.’ The words sent a fresh pulse of fear through the sub-warden, but when she spoke her voice sounded curiously calm and detached.

‘I’m already up,’ she said, pulling her bodyglove from the kit bag. ‘Tell them I will be in the command room presently.’

She dressed quickly, clipping on her battered carapace. She tried not to think about the blood crusting over the black plates. She’d not had time to wash it. She’d been too busy attending the deployment of the Space Marines and the dispositions of her own men. The Angels of Death had pointedly ignored her. Once she’d delegated command of the sub-precinct to Jaken for the night she’d wolfed down a plastek tray’s worth of nutrient paste and a fibre bar, and then simply passed out on Klenn’s old cot.

Until the terrors had woken her. And the memories. Under-route 1, the key to the Precinct Fortress.

She forced herself to hurry down to Sub-Precinct Eight’s command room. It was too late now for hesitation. That was the thought that had been carrying her through the madness of the previous few long Zartakian days and nights, and she wasn’t going to give up on it now. Just keep going. She punched the code into the command room’s door panel and stepped inside.

The first two gods to have arrived on Zartak were waiting. The one in blue armour, inscribed with swirling white patterns and clutching a stone-tipped bone staff, nodded to her as she hastily made the sign of the aquila. The second, taller, with a vicious fin crest sweeping up from the top of his helm, did not react at all. Both their armour, and the huge two-handed chainaxe carried lightly by the second warrior, were visibly splattered with dried blood. Parts of their battleplate gleamed silver where they had taken the blows of blades and bolt-rounds. Despite the obvious hardships they had endured while Rannik had slept, the upright posture of both warriors betrayed no signs of weariness or injury.

Neither of the giants spoke. Rannik cleared her throat.

‘Lords,’ she said, ‘you honour me once more with your presence. I was about to contact you.’

‘Contact us?’ the grey-clad one asked, the voice inflected just enough to turn the statement into a question.

‘I have intelligence I believe may be of use to the Imperial cause,’ Rannik said. ‘If you wish to mount an assault against the heretics in the fastness of the Precinct Fortress, there is a tunnel I know of which will allow you to pass beneath the nearer mine workings and emerge into the vaults.’

The two god-warriors exchanged a lingering look, their expressions unreadable behind their grim helms. Eventually the grey one spoke again.

‘Why do you only just speak of this now, arbitrator?’

Rannik found herself lost for words. Her stomach was in knots of acidic terror, and she couldn’t stop a trembling tick in her left thigh. The blue-clad Space Marine glanced once more at his brother and, almost imperceptibly, shook his head.

‘We are here to make a requisition,’ the giant said, ignoring his own unanswered question. ‘From your facilities.’

‘What manner of requisition, lord?’ Rannik asked, giving silent thanks to Him on Earth that they had
not pressed her as to why she hadn’t told them of the Sally Port tunnel sooner. She had no good explanation as to why something so potentially vital had slipped from her thoughts until now.

‘Flesh,’ the grey warrior said, the word lingering darkly in the close air of the control room. ‘We require your prisoners.’

It took a moment to process the words. What amazed her even more than the request was the fact that she found herself denying it.

‘Impossible, lord,’ she said, her voice still serenely controlled. ‘It is my sacred task as an arbitrator and as the commander of this facility to ensure my charges remain fully incarcerated at all times. Any change to the status of a prisoner or group of prisoners can only be made under warden review, during set bimonthly cycles.’

The words had rolled automatically off her tongue, straight from her progenium training slates. Even as she finished speaking she felt a fresh upsurge of fear. Had she really dared deny these titans?

For a moment, neither of the Space Marines reacted. Then the grey one spoke again. His voice had taken on an even harder edge.

‘We do not require them all, only those very few who would be of any use to us in combating the murderers, traitors and heretics which you have allowed to seize this world.’

‘The number is irrelevant,’ Rannik said, sticking to the passages she had spent most of her life learning. ‘Due process is still required, even for a single prisoner. I do not have the authority to grant your request. I can only file it under recommendation.’

The blue-armoured Space Marine moved towards her. It was neither sudden nor violent, so Rannik’s first instinct was not to flinch away. Instead she simply stood and stared, like prey caught in the merciless death-glare of a hulking predator. The Space Marine reached out with one hand, and, slowly, placed two digits against Rannik’s forehead.

Nothing happened. The giant removed his fingers. Rannik couldn’t recall why they’d been there, but she supposed it wasn’t important.

‘The prisoners,’ the grey one demanded. Rannik nodded.

‘Yes, lord. They are at your disposal. I will initiate the release protocols immediately.’

Jaken, who’d been watching the whole exchange, looked from the Adeptus Astartes to Rannik, and back again, but said nothing. The grey giant nodded.

‘Be swift about it. We will need your directives if we are to find this tunnel you speak of.’

‘Of course, my lord.’

‘How many?’ Sharr asked.

‘Maybe a hundred we can trust enough to arm,’ Te Kahurangi said, eyes sweeping from one end of the corridor to the other. They had descended once more into the prison blocks beneath Sub-Precinct Eight. The cells around were silent, as though the prisoners were collectively holding their breaths.

‘For the most part, those with the strength and willpower to overcome their terror are also the ones least likely to submit to our authority,’ Te Kahurangi continued. ‘And we cannot risk giving weapons to any who might turn on us or throw in their lot with the other prisoners and attempt some sort of escape.’

‘You can guarantee the loyalty of the ones you choose?’ Sharr asked.

‘The vast majority, yes. A hundred or so prisoners will be enough to render us some assistance without too great a danger of them turning on us.’
Te Kahurangi had spent the last hour probing the minds of the prisoners held beneath Sub-Precinct Eight, teasing out their thoughts and weaving them together into something he was able to study. Unsurprisingly, the strongest emotions reverberating through the immaterium from the cells around the Carcharodons were fear, unease and mental exhaustion. Even confined to the prison, the inmates could not have missed the psychic blanket of despair that had heralded the arrival of the Night Lords. The sight of the Carcharodons only served to heighten their terror.

Beneath the more obvious pall of distress was a deep, chill undercurrent of fatigue and hatred. Te Kahurangi swam among this stinging morass of feelings, assessing the contributions of individuals to the wider flow. He sought out those whose thoughts could lend themselves to the Carcharodons’ objectives, those whose minds betrayed hints of stoic determination, courage or, rarest of all, hope. Those were the ones he would choose.

‘There’s more,’ Te Kahurangi said.

‘More?’ Sharr echoed.

‘I did not merely place the suggestion of releasing the prisoners in the arbitrator’s mind when I touched her,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘I was also seeking the presence of the Dead Skin. He was there, nestled deep within her thoughts. The human’s mind is weak and malleable.’

‘So it is as you predicted?’ Sharr said. ‘The sorcerer is trying to lure us into a trap. We should proceed as you have suggested?’

‘Of course,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘We are all here on Zartak for the same thing. Fresh meat for the Chapter, and the psychic potential of the boy.’

‘I have assigned you a volunteer from every squad for your strike force. I have not told them the full nature of what is to come, but they know how it will end.’

‘Their sacrifices will be honoured.’

‘Company Master Akia would not have approved of this strategy,’ Sharr said slowly. Te Kahurangi nodded.

‘You are right. In his later years, Akia would have simply resumed the frontal assault and tried to take the Precinct Fortress by force.’

‘You are fortunate, then, that I am not Akia,’ Sharr said. ‘I will order the arbitrator to open her armoury to the conscripts you’ve selected, then I will have her lead you into the tunnels she has been shown by the sorcerer. May the Void Father be with you, Te Kahurangi.’

‘And with you, Bail Sharr.’

Ninety-eight former prisoners left Sub-Precinct Eight under the watchful eyes of Second Squad. They had been taken from their cells by Rannik’s heavy-handed arbitrator garrison, and assembled before Te Kahurangi. If the terrifying sight of the huge transhuman psyker wasn’t enough to ensure their loyalty, the Chief Librarian had left them in no doubt as to the seriousness of their situation. He thrust images of the butchery committed by the invaders into their minds, and then opened them to the radiant hope that came with the Carcharodons’ offer of victory and salvation. Lastly he made it clear what fate would befall any prisoners who tried to escape, dredging up horrors from their deepest nightmares – phantoms of claws and the fangs of the beasts that prowled Zartak’s death jungles. Any who escaped would be hunted, and their deaths would not be clean.

Equipped with weapons from Sub-Precinct Eight’s emptied armoury, the convicts were led to the loco rail junctions by Second Squad and the arbitrators. Te Kahurangi, meanwhile, prepared his team.
Eight void brothers, one from every squad in the Third Company besides First and the missing Fourth, had volunteered to accompany him. They were the Tactical Marines Amonga, Imau, Koro and Tupai, the Assault brothers Unik and Unok, and two Devastators, Rull and Kea. Alongside them were Ari’s two youngest initiates, Zeta-one-nine and Zeta-one-ten. Lastly came Sub-Warden Rannik. She seemed to be in a dazed state, as though walking in the footsteps of a lingering dream.

Rannik had left Jaken in command of the remaining arbitrators, who were deploying from the sub-precinct’s walls and bastions down into the mines in support of the Space Marines and those prisoners they had armed. It had been made clear to them all that this was the final stage of the battle for Zartak. The shadows that had come up out of the night to claw and consume them were circling now for the kill. The last light, glimmering around the stretch of mine works held by the Space Marines, was on the verge of going out. The lawmen of the Adeptus Arbites stood alongside the god-warriors and the armed men who had once been their prisoners, watching the crouched masses herded into the junctions, and the darkness encroaching upon them from the surrounding tunnels.

While Te Kahurangi, Rannik and the strike team descended deeper into Zartak’s heart, Sharr left it all behind. He took First Squad in the Thunderhawk Razortooth back into high orbit, returning to the White Maw. Among the gloom of the ancient strike cruiser’s bridge he received a situation report from Shipmaster Teko.

‘We’re picking up phantom traces from the asteroid belt,’ he said. ‘Our augurs haven’t been able to complete enough scans to make any identifications yet, but I suspect that is where the traitor fleet has been concealed while we have been on-station here.’

‘They’re moving?’ Sharr asked.

‘Yes. Again, we have no definite patterns right now, but I suspect they’re about to break from cover and attack. I have put all vessels on high alert. Shields up and guns run out.’

‘We were correct to assume this is the end, then,’ Sharr said.

He welcomed it. Either the Carcharodon Astra would be victorious and take what remained of the Red Tithe, or they would die to the last void brother. Either way, the time for doubt had long since passed. He felt a sense of inner quiet, like the soothing loneliness of the void, which all Carcharodons meditated upon during their cryo-sleep, lost in the darkness between the stars. The angry spirit of Akia was gone, consigned now to honoured memory. He had bloodied himself at the head of the company. Regardless of the outcome of the final battle, he had bonded with his void brothers in his new role as their commander.

His First Squad were with him – Strike Veteran Dorthor, Company Champion Tane, Signifier Niko, Brother Soha. Only Apothecary Tama had remained on Zartak, still ministering to the wounded brethren in the medicae bay of the sub-precinct. His skills with auto-saw and scalpel, chirurgeon plasts and synth flesh would be in even greater demand soon enough.

Chaplain Nikora was with them too. Sharr had privately sought his advice on Te Kahurangi’s plan. The venerable Chaplain had approved it, on the condition that he was with Sharr for the final attack. He would not abandon the Chief Librarian, his oldest battle-brother.

Sharr led them all down into the shadow-haunted bowels of the White Maw. There, in the darkness and the silence, far above Zartak’s surface, they waited.
Day 91, Zartak local.
The pict's from servo-skull 2486 have turned up little of any value. There appears to be a great deal of feedback distortion corrupting the data. Adept Julio suspects some sort of artificial scrambling. There is evidence of military engagements, and a number of unidentified corpses deeper inside the mine works. The report sent via astropathic relay to Lord Rozenkranz has been psy-logged as delivered, but there has been no reply as of yet. I have recalled 2486 and am preparing the more physically able members of the retinue to accompany me down into the mines personally. The Saint Angelica is still scanning the wrecks in orbit for more evidence as to their possible origins or identity.

Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

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Thought for the Day: Mankind stands on the shoulders of the Martyred

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‘They are coming,’ Shadraith said. Eerie blue witch light played around the lenses of his helm and the wicked blade of his scythe. The air of the Centrum Dominus was alive with warp energy, little bursts of ethereal fire that flared randomly in the darkness.

First Kill were tense. Golgoth was practically growling, and Narx had unsheathed his power blade. Cull was pacing before the viewscreens, sickly light emanating from the Nostramo sigils of his runesword. The boy bound in the middle of the room was wide-eyed with terror, moaning at every crack of lightning that split the darkness overhead. Only Shadraith seemed to be revelling in the moment. Bar’ghul was drawing nearer with each passing second, scenting the suitability of its new host.

‘The time is nigh, brethren,’ Cull said over the vox, no longer trying to hide his excitement. ‘We will make these grey phantoms scream. All Claws, location report.’ Situation checks and readiness confirmations clicked back to the Prince of Thorns. They were slipping like a noose around the Loyalist-held junctions, ready to be tightened at the executioner’s command. Only the Warp Talons in their bloody nest and Vorfex, consigned to the Precinct Fortress’ maximum security cell, had not been deployed for the last assault. That, and the cult squads of the Black Hand requisitioned by Shadraith for his trap. The sorcerer walked around Skell like a hunter appraising his kill. He had cut three bloody marks with his silver blade into the boy’s flesh – markings favoured by the God of Change, and Bar’ghul in particular. He could feel the daemon’s insubstantial presence like talons on his shoulders, like stinking breath on the nape of his neck. The warp thing’s approval made Shadraith strong. Its servants were drawing nearer too, filling the darkest corners of the tainted Centrum Dominus with leathery wings and low, cackling laughter.

Shadraith cut the leather bonds and let Skell down. The boy would have collapsed, but the towering sorcerer held him upright. He tugged away the strip of cloth that had been used to gag him.

‘Do you understand what is happening?’ Skell merely shook.

‘You have been chosen,’ Shadraith told him. ‘You are the reason we are here.’

‘The reason you are here,’ Cull corrected him from the viewscreens. Shadraith ignored him.

‘A great power is awakening inside you,’ he continued. ‘You have been blessed with abilities that leave mere mortals in dread. Soon, you will experience the presence of a deity of the warp itself.’

The chittering from the shadow-things taking form around the chamber grew louder. More ethereal lightning crackled in the dark. Skell managed to find his voice.

‘Why me?’

‘Do not trouble yourself with such questions,’ Shadraith soothed. ‘Save your strength. You will need
The boy tried to move. He snatched himself away from Shadraith’s grasp and made for the command centre’s doors. He only covered a few feet before he collapsed. His body smeared the bloody sigils daubed across the floor. Shadraith gestured at one of Shenzar’s Terminators.

‘He still has some defiance left,’ the sorcerer said. ‘The knife-point between despair and hope. Tie him and gag him again.’ The Terminator hesitated before hauling the boy off the floor, one-handed. Shadraith bent to reconsecrate the blasphemous patterns disturbed by his weak attempt at flight.

There was still some fight in him. That was good. He would struggle when Bar’ghul seized control of his flesh. And Shadraith had been clashing with the daemon for long enough to know just how much Bar’ghul liked it when a mortal tried to fight back.

Unnoticed by the sorcerer, Cull and Shenzar exchanged a lingering glance. The Prince of Thorns nodded.

Rannik was with the Scouts in the forefront of the advance into Zartak’s core. They descended to under-route 1 via a secondary sub-tunnel just before the final junctions where the Space Marines and the prisoners were concentrated.

The entrance to the narrow space was boarded over. Yellow block letters, lit up by Rannik’s stab lumen, warned of a mine collapse and the potential danger of neurotoxic gases from an unstable seam. The Scouts broke down the boards and exposed the darkness within.

Rannik led the way. Her footing was sure, even in the rugged, bare stone tunnel they found themselves travelling down. She didn’t really understand how she was so certain of where they were or where they were going. She felt light-headed, slightly ill, as though she was experiencing the first touch of some terminal fever. Vague considerations of duty, and the lurking fear of the god-warriors pressing close behind her, carried her on into the depths.

It became infernally hot. Rannik was soon drenched in sweat. The Space Marines showed no sign of discomfort, the pale, predatory faces of the initiates in the vanguard remaining stoic. Their dark eyes made her shudder.

Under-route 1 led them on, dragging her ever deeper, the rock either side hot to the touch. For a terrifying moment she wondered if she was in fact dead, whether this was all some nightmarish afterlife, a descent into the hell that Cardinal Mollin had warned them about every week in the Schola Excubitos basilica.

If it was, the Space Marines were making the journey with her. That thought gave her something to grasp on to, easing the panic brought on by the suffocating darkness. There was no way such warriors could possibly die. Her memory strayed back to the lightning-clad monsters on the bridge of Imperial Truth. They were not the same. They couldn’t be. Despite the heat, she shivered again.

‘Contacts on the auspex,’ one of the Scouts muttered. ‘Hold.’

Rannik allowed the initiate to pass her by. The tunnel had finally stopped its descent and levelled out, though its curvature meant seeing anything beyond two dozen paces was impossible. At a curt gesture from the Scout behind her she turned off her stab lumen. Darkness swallowed them.

The advance resumed. After a few seconds there came a shriek, and the thump of blades through meat. The sounds didn’t last for long.

Zeta-one-nine darted from the shadows, his infra-lens lighting up the vitals of the figures crouched between the tunnel’s tight rock walls. If they had any means of illumination down in Zartak’s
sweating depths, the two men had switched it off to conserve its power, and the low murmur of conversation had concealed the initiate’s final approach.

The serrated edge of one-nine’s monomolecular combat knife took the first man in the throat before he realised anything was wrong. The grey-clad Scout pushed past the slumping body as arterial blood splattered hot rock, snatching the second by the throat as he turned. As the man scrambled with his sidearm, one-nine slammed his gas-hooded skull against the tunnel wall.

The cultist let out a strangled cry. Sudden fury seized one-nine, accentuated by the claustrophobic confines and the infernal heat. He broke the traitor’s head against the unyielding, jagged stone. The enthralling scent of fresh blood filled his flared nostrils. He didn’t realise the man was dead until Te Kahurangi thrust a calming imperative into his thoughts, breaking through the wall of bloodlust that had surged so suddenly from the deeps of the young Scout’s consciousness.

‘Calm yourself, Zeta-one-nine,’ the Chief Librarian ordered. ‘*The Carcharodon Astra do not lose control at the first hint of blood. Slaughter must always serve a purpose.*’

One-nine bowed his head in the dark, struggling for breath.

‘Who are they?’ Te Kahurangi demanded. The Scout switched his infra-lens for a handheld stab lumen, lighting up his bloody work.

‘Cultists,’ he said. ‘The ones with the black hands. Set to guard the tunnel, I assume.’

‘Do not assume. Find out.’

‘Chief Librarian?’

‘You have been implanted with your omophagea, have you not?’ Te Kahurangi demanded.

‘Yes, Chief Librarian.’

‘Then make use of it. Perhaps it will help quell your dishonourable bloodlust as well.’

One-nine knelt beside the two bodies and dragged the gas hood away from the throat of the nearest.

Rannik switched her stab lumen back on. It lit up the back of one of the two Scouts. He was crouching over the bodies he’d just taken down in the dark, head bowed. Rannik heard a wet tearing sound. She took a step towards the hunched Space Marine.

‘Go no closer,’ Te Kahurangi ordered from behind her, but Rannik found herself unable to look away. The scent of blood filled her nostrils. A part of her was aware of what she was witnessing, but still she didn’t believe it. Then the Scout turned to look up at her, and her last hope vanished.

The initiate’s pale face was a crimson mask, glistening with blood. He’d literally torn the throat from one of the men who’d been guarding the tunnel, the heretic’s blood still pulsing weakly from the ruined cartilage and bare bone that had been his neck.

The Scout exposed his pointed teeth, the filed gaps clogged with strings of gore. His black eyes gleamed in the stab light. Rannik stumbled back from the monster, but felt her backplate grate against the armour of one of its brethren. She was trapped.

‘We are following the right tunnel,’ the blood-drenched Scout said, rising and wiping viscera from his face. ‘The ascent towards the Precinct Fortress begins here. And…’ he trailed off, as though thinking, and then nodded.

‘These are the only guards. Just cultists.’

‘How can you know that?’ Rannik stammered. She was going to be sick. These things were no better than the monsters they claimed to fight.

‘Our abilities are far beyond your understanding, Rannik,’ the low voice of Te Kahurangi said. ‘By
consuming an enemy’s flesh we gain insight into their thoughts and memories. It is an important skill to master.’

The bloody Scout simply glared at Rannik. The Space Marine’s black eyes made it an utterly soulless expression. The arbitrator felt a hand on her shoulder, thrusting her forwards past the nightmarish warrior and over the corpses of his two victims.

“We have no time to lose,” Te Kahurangi said. ‘We all do the Emperor’s will here. Lead on.’

Trying not to shake, Rannik carried on down the tunnel.

*He was deep beneath the surface. The waters were warm and clear. Shoals of moonfins darted around him, their silvery scales glittering. He drove up towards the light, young arms burning with exertion, thoughts thrilling at the freedom the water gave him. He–*

…should be dead. He should be dead, but he was not. That thought was the only one that occupied Kordi’s mind as he dug. It was agonising work, both mentally and physically. The earth shifted only fractionally despite his efforts, the servos in his armour screaming and burning as they worked to enhance his transhuman strength. A void brother could have thrown a sixtrack flatbed onto its side, yet he was barely able to shift his injured body a few feet. Regardless, he fought on, in the dark, the dirt shifting around him like slow-flowing tar, his limbs burning and his lungs tight, squeezed by his armour’s internal air circulation.

*The memories came back, trying to overwhelm him, trying to drag him back down. They were not him, not any more. That life was gone.*

The chrono in his visor display was malfunctioning, continuously cycling through its digits and refusing to cancel or pause when he double blink-clicked it. He didn’t know how long he’d been digging. Beneath the earth, time felt insubstantial. The only weight on him was the weight pressing him down, making his scarred battleplate groan with strain as he fought up, ever up. Reaching for a surface that he knew could be many miles away, for a salvation that was far beyond his grasp.

Finally, his fist clenched something that wasn’t more dirt. He took a deep breath and heaved upwards, driving his body through the cloying filth. A bellow of exertion escaped his lips as he pushed. He felt the last of the soil give way, and he burst into open air. Dirt cascaded from the joints and plates of his armour.

His first sight was of a levelled bolt pistol.

His lower half was still trapped, but it didn’t matter. The pistol belonged to Strike Leader Ekara. The squad commander lowered and locked the sidearm before offering Kordi his remaining hand. The Carcharodon took it gratefully, and was dragged up out of Zartak’s crushing embrace.

‘My thanks, strike leader,’ he said as he regained his feet. He scraped the grime befouling the white Chapter crest on his shoulder guard away. Ekara simply grunted. The earth underfoot was shifting and unstable – Kordi felt himself sinking almost to his knees, and had to drag his boots free.

When the tunnel had collapsed, it had brought down the soil and bedrock separating it from the latticework of ratholes that ran above it – barely a dozen yards of earth. Ekara and the other two survivors from Fourth Squad, Haru and Tonga, had managed to fight their way back up into the new chamber formed by the cave-in. Like Kordi, they now resembled monstrous earth spirits from primeval legend – grey titans caked in black muck, their eyes gleaming and dark amidst the grime they had hauled themselves up from.

‘The auspex is lost,’ Ekara said as he surveyed their new surroundings. The roof above had once
been the top of what had probably been a rathole, except it was now a good fifteen feet above them.
The path back was blocked, while the way ahead was now at the summit of a ramp of collapsed dirt.
‘It’s still going in the direction of the sink shaft,’ Kordi said, nodding at the darkness of the freshly
unearthed tunnel. ‘And we can’t go back.’
‘Vox is down,’ Tonga said. Kordi realised he was right. They were no longer getting any signal. They
were completely cut off, and still almost half-buried.
‘We go on,’ Ekara said. ‘Either we break through to the sink shaft and re-engage the enemy, or reach
the surface and re-establish contact with the rest of the company.’
‘Assuming the tunnel leads up, and not further down,’ Kordi said.
‘Assume nothing,’ said the strike leader. ‘Trust in the Void Father and the Shade Lord.’
They began to climb.

Skell woke up, and tried to scream. He couldn’t.

There was a shrieking in his head, bouncing around endlessly inside his skull. It was the creature in
the dark, the thing that had been stalking him for months. It was inside him now, inside the wounds cut
in his back by the giant clad in fresh, flayed skin. They burned with agony. He choked on his gag.
‘Relax,’ hissed a voice. It was thick with corruption and decay, like a fat, white rockworm writhing
through Zartak’s cloying dirt. For a moment, Skell wasn’t sure if it was actually behind him, or in his
head. The screaming ceased suddenly, replaced by a low, drawn-out moan.
‘Patience,’ soothed the voice. The flayed giant paced around Skell until it was facing him. It bent
down, so that its great, horned helm was level with the boy. It pulled Skell’s head back by his greasy,
close-cropped hair, so that he was forced to stare into the burning eye-lenses.
‘Are you going to try to run away again?’ it asked in its hideous voice. Skell managed to shake his
head. It tugged the gag from Skell’s mouth and removed his bonds. This time he managed to stay
upright unsupported.
‘Are you afraid?’ the monster asked. Skell looked down at his bare feet, jaw clamped shut as he
tried to still the shivers running through his exhausted body.
‘Answer me.’
‘Yes,’ Skell croaked.
‘Do not be. You are blessed. More blessed than any mortal I have met in my ten thousand years of
struggle. Few in this galaxy are as privileged as you.’
‘Why?’
The monster gripped him, making him flinch.
‘The power of the warp courses through your veins. It has since you were born. You have been
touched by the glory of Chaos. I have amplified it with my words and my markings, but it was always
there to begin with. A million men would bargain their souls gladly for a sliver of the power you
possess.’
‘I’m just lucky,’ Skell stammered, tears streaking the dirt on his cheeks. ‘The others, they didn’t
understand. That’s all it is.’
‘Do not deceive yourself. You are only aware of a fraction of your potential. Much of it has been
buried by your subconscious, to protect you. It is well that it was, otherwise I would not have been
the first to reach you. I will unlock you in ways the False Emperor’s puppets never could. I will show
you just what you are capable of. Then you will truly become a worthy vessel for Bar’ghul. You can
The darkness in Skell’s head cackled, and the boy cried out in fear. The giant placed a gauntlet on his thin shoulder, the spikes that perforated it nicking his skin.

‘The Pale Nomad is on his way to take you from us. His blood is all I need to anoint you with. I will have it soon enough.’
Day 91, Zartak local.
We have progressed down into the mines proper. The first abnormality was what looks like a cave-in cutting off the sub-precinct from the mine works, listed on the carto-holos as Sink Shaft One. This collapse had been tunnelled through and crudely propped open. We encountered the first serious signs of fighting at the underground rail junction just beyond. There are eleven corpses, all of them Excommunicate Traitoris. My own knowledge of the Traitor Legions is blessedly insufficient for me to be able to identify them, but I will communicate the details to Lord Rozenkranz as soon as I return to the surface.
My own analysis, and those of Chirurgeon McRane, have identified many of the injuries as indicative of bolter rounds, although vicious wounds dealt in close combat by various forms of chainblades are also apparent. I would assume that the vanquishers of these vile heretics were also Adeptus Astartes, although they have been careful to remove any evidence of their presence. All we have been able to recover are a number of spent bolter shells, which I am sending back to Adept Julio at the sub-precinct for analysis.
The presence of Traitor Space Marines clearly escalates the seriousness of events here on Zartak. It is difficult to resist the urge to order the immediate incineration of these heretical corpses, but Lord Rozenkranz may yet wish to observe them himself. I will do my duty and leave them be, regardless of how foul they are. Even in death they are terrifying creatures. If any are yet lurking down here I would fear for our chances of survival. We shall press on. Judging by the tracks, whoever won this engagement must have advanced further into the mines. So must we.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Mem-bank entry log ends + + +
+ + + Thought for the Day: His judgement is unavoidable + + +
CHAPTER XIII

The tunnels were rising again, and the strike force was finally leaving the sweltering heat of Zartak’s heart behind. Rannik was still at the fore, her steps certain even while her mind was not. Her flesh crawled with fear, and the nape of her neck, just below the rim of her helmet, itched incessantly. In her mind’s eye all she could see was the pale countenance of the thing she’d once thought of as a Space Marine, glaring at her, streaked crimson by another man’s blood.

Her fear came and went, doused just when it started to become overwhelming. Rannik found she could breathe again, and would focus once more on the task at hand. All that mattered was guiding Te Kahurangi, her old friend, straight and true. Who was Te Kahurangi, another part of her consciousness demanded. How did she know the name of the blue-clad giant leading the strike force? The questions never fully registered. They didn’t matter. What mattered was what lay ahead.

Under-route 1 had changed as it progressed steadily upwards. No more was it a narrow, natural fissure of jagged stone. Now there was evidence of las cutters, and plasteel beams adding structural support overhead. The strike force came to a small junction where the tunnel branched off into three, the intersection lit by an old, flickering lumen orb. Rannik took the right-hand path without thinking. She’d taken this route so many times.

*When have you ever taken this route before?*

She thrust the urgent thought aside. There was no time for such insignificant questions. They didn’t have long.

A noise reached her, carried down the tunnel’s winding confines. It was a susurration, rising in volume with every step. After a moment Rannik realised it was the sound of running water. Seconds later the stench hit her. She knew what was up ahead.

‘Sink Shaft One’s sewer systems,’ she voxed. ‘Directly ahead.’

‘They allow us access to the Precinct Fortress?’ Te Kahurangi asked.

‘The lower levels, yes. From there we can reach the Centrum Dominus.’

The flumes and run-offs twisted away from the fortress’ cell blocks and the arbitrator barracks rooms, carried down to the very base of the sink shaft itself, where they formed a lake of congealing effluvium in the cavernous cracks broken into Zartak’s bedrock. The winding tunnel led out to a barred service hatch in the curved wall of one such runoff pipe. The grate covering the hatch was unlocked but rusting, gummed with centuries of slime. Rannik kicked at it until it gave way.

Her stomach churned at the sight of the knee-high filth swilling past, but she found herself compelled into it. The sludge tugged at her lower legs, cloying and cold. She shuddered with revulsion, one hand out to steady herself while the other covered her mouth to ward off the stench.

+Which way?+ Te Kahurangi prompted. It didn’t occur to Rannik that the voice hadn’t spoken out.
loud, but had come from inside her head. She gestured up the sewage tunnel, not daring to speak for
fear of inhaling the putrid air.

She took them further towards the surface, the strike force’s stab lumens disturbing great packs of
deformed, mangy vermin. Their chittering and the squirming motion of their wiry bodies as they
writhed past Rannik almost brought her to a standstill, but still the presence in her mind, the knife-
edged shadow swimming just below the surface, goaded her on. The light of her lumen reflected back
off the dark surface of the sludge below, dancing along the weed-choked, curved ceiling of the tunnel.

Eventually she found what she was looking for – a ladder set into a straight shaft in the wall.
Although rusting and grimy, it was heavy enough to take the bulky servitors that occasionally cleansed
the sewer systems of blockages, vermin and escaped prisoners. Rannik signalled to the Space
Marines to wait as she began to climb. Above she found an access hatch, covered by a grate that
could only be disengaged via a scan block. The Sally Port.

Rannik slipped her gene-key from a pouch in her bodyglove’s thigh, acutely aware of the Space
Marines circling directly below her. The key was her stamp of authority and means of identification.
It gave her access to most of the Precinct Fortress. Most, but not all. One hand still on the ladder’s
rungs, she reached up and swiped the strip of coded plastek across the grimy scan interface.

There was a thud, but the grate didn’t shift. She hit it with the palm of her lock glove, once, twice,
and the rusty auto-hinges finally engaged, levering the porthole back. Above was darkness, shot
through with bars of light.

Rannik climbed up through the hole, letting out the breath she’d been holding. She found herself in a
wide crawlspace, large enough for the maintenance servitors to traverse. It was ribbed with moss-
encrusted coolant pipes, pressure valves and electrode cabling bundles. Fat, sightless insects writhed
and squirmed in the patch of illumination thrown by her stab lumen.

The bars of light overhead were filtering down through a secondary grate. There was another scan
block, coded for ranking arbitrators and the servitors who cleansed the Precinct Fortress’ guts.
Rannik swiped it, praying silently that she had sufficient clearance. The scan block blinked red and
gave off an angry bleep. Rannik muttered a curse and swiped again, slower this time. The block
chimed green. The Sally Port’s secondary grate disengaged.

‘We’re in,’ Rannik hissed back down at the strike team. She had to fight the uncomfortable feeling
that one of the pale-faced Scouts was going to snap up at her exposed legs. The memory of the bloody
feast in the under-route made her insides squirm.

She pulled herself up into the light. She was in a secondary corridor, number 3-6, leading off from
the main refectorium. It was just as she’d remembered it. How had she forgotten about the Sally
Port’s existence? Why had it come back to her so abruptly, in the dead of night?

She pushed such uncomfortable thoughts away and climbed out into the corridor, unlocking her Vox
Legi from her back when she’d gained her feet. The corridor was empty, but she couldn’t help but feel
watched by the pict-recorders mounted on the walls. The bright lumen strips and the active security
systems emitted a low, disquieting buzz.

The Scouts came after her, spreading out, pistols raised, hugging the wall panels. The full void
brothers followed them up, ceramite scraping as they pulled themselves through the grate holes. The
blue-armoured giant came last of all.

‘Which way to the Centrum Dominus?’ he demanded. Rannik pointed down the corridor.

‘That way. There’s a refectorium and beyond it a stairwell that leads directly to the control centre.’
‘Venerable Librarian,’ interrupted one of the Scouts. ‘Something is scrambling the auspex again. We’re going in blind.’

‘We have no choice,’ the blue-armoured warrior said. ‘I will take the vanguard point from here.’

The strike force changed formation, the Chief Librarian taking the lead. They moved off down the corridor towards the refectorium’s aquila-stamped door hatch, passing it in silence.

The sight of the deserted refectorium beyond made Rannik hesitate. As in the corridor, the lumens still buzzed brightly. Plastek trays, filled with congealed hardtack and nutrient paste, lined the long, bare metal tables the arbitrators ate at. A rubric describing ‘The Thought for the Day’ was still scrolling across the rota viewscreen above the main vitals hatch, and the announcements vox was still on, hissing softly with static. Litany seals and yellowing law-oaths were pinned to the devotional columns that lined the walls, and a copy of the great Lex Imperialis still sat open on the ceremonial justice lectern that dominated the far end of the hall. The place had been abandoned when the warden primary had first issued the stand to. Nobody had been back since.

The strike team spread out through the room, angling for the door hatch at the opposite end. Rannik followed in the wake of the Scouts, feeling as though she was making more noise than even the giants in their softly whirring battleplate. They crossed the room’s central aisle. She could hear the click-click of inter-squad vox-messages being sent and received via the Space Marines’ helmets, passing on terse communications she was not privy to.

‘Wait,’ the Librarian said abruptly, apparently for Rannik’s benefit. The strike team froze, going automatically into crouches that Rannik clumsily mimicked.

‘Something’s wrong,’ the Librarian said. The green shard of his bone staff had started to glow, brighter than the unforgiving refectorium lumens.

‘They’re coming.’

The words had no sooner left his mouth than the air above them ignited in a blaze of blue flames. The Warp Talons had returned.

Cull watched the mutated Raptors launch their ambush. He turned to the remaining monitors still showing the tunnels around the loco junctions to the west. What was left of the warband was in position, the Stalk completed, grim shadows waiting in the black-and-white shade of the blinking screen captures. The Prince of Thorns opened the vox.

‘All Claws, attack.’

For a while it had seemed as though they were going down, not up. Tonga had taken the vanguard, leading them through the labyrinthine narrowness of the freshly exposed rathole shaft. It had dipped, and the temperature had risen. Kordi found himself beginning to wonder whether they would be damned to wander Zartak’s underworld forever, like lost, doomed spirits, cursed to spend an eternity in fiery darkness. It was a far cry from the void beyond the stars, the calming nothingness that the Carcharodon Astra replicated within the soothing, numbing waters of their cryo-tanks.

The shame of dying in Zartak’s hot, earthy embrace was even more real when Kordi considered the fact that if they weren’t able to make contact with the rest of the company before they departed, they would have no choice other than to remain in the deep darkness, burying themselves on the forgotten planetoid forever. It wouldn’t be long before the Imperium arrived to investigate events on the penal colony, and when they did they couldn’t be allowed to discover any of the Carcharodons, either dead or alive.
Kordi took the vanguard from Tonga. He still had his bolt pistol and chainsword, his armour still functioned sufficiently, and they were still moving. His twin hearts were still beating, and while that held true he would do the Void Father’s will. The injury in his side, dealt by the saw-teeth of the Night Lord’s blade before the tunnel had collapsed, was starting to scab over. His determination seemed to be rewarded when the winding passage finally ceased to dip, and instead became a slender incline. Eventually they started to note improvements in the tunnel’s structure – lumen orbs returned, as did support braces. Caches of reserve mining equipment and even an overturned ore chute began to populate the otherwise featureless rock walls.

‘Do you hear that?’ Haru asked. Moments later Kordi caught the sound.

‘Water?’ Ekara wondered out loud. They kept going. Kordi’s auto-senses started to analyse the scents hanging heavy in the close, still air. Judging from the results, he was glad he had sealed his armour during the cave-in.

‘Sewer works,’ he reported. Ahead he could see an opening in the tunnel. Foul muck rushed past beyond it, through a circular flume layered with a thick rind of scum.

‘We must be getting closer to the surface,’ Tonga said. ‘These have to be the outlets from the sink hole.’

The sewage pipe was just higher than the rock tunnel, meaning the Space Marines were no longer forced to stoop. Their pauldrons still grated against the circular walls, however, trailing filth. Swarms of vermin, unnoticed by the grey giants, crunched underfoot.

‘The upper levels,’ Haru said, using a blink-icon on the shared visor display to highlight a rusting, scum-streaked metal sign bolted to the wall on their left. Carrying on up the flume would allow them to keep moving upwards.

‘More noises from ahead,’ Haru reported as they set off through the flow. Kordi set his aural receptor implants to work in tandem with his Larraman’s ear to wipe the rushing of the sewage works from his hearing, leaving only the distant echoes drifting down from the facilities above them. After a few seconds he caught what Haru, trudging up through the waste ahead, had already heard. The far-off, yet unmistakable sounds of bolter fire.

Something moved in the darkness further down the tunnel. Second Squad were on Overwatch at the edge of the junction, guarding the main route heading eastwards towards Sink Shaft One. When he caught sight of activity in the tunnel in front of his position, Sergeant Nuritona didn’t hesitate.

‘Contacts. Second Squad, open fire.’

The sudden hammering of bolters across the junction was eclipsed by the panicked wailing of the hundreds of prisoners packed into the middle of the open space where the loco rails crossed over, crouching beneath the guns of their former prison mates. That in turn was almost drowned out by the vox-screaming as the traitors attacked.

Nuritona sent controlled bursts of fire down the tunnel, trying to target-lock the spiked shadows flitting towards them. Return fire stabbed at the Carcharodons’ entrenched position, battering at the ceramite arbitrator suppression shields that had been planted on the far side of a barricade of gravel-filled sandbags. One bolt struck a vicious glancing blow off Nuritona’s right pauldron, scarring the white Chapter crest, while another detonated prematurely in the air barely a foot above his head, scraping the grey of his helmet and the top of his backpack silver with a burst of razor debris.

Even in such a confined space, the traitors used the darkness masterfully, slipping right up to the
edge of the Carcharodons’ position under cover of the shadows they seemed to drag around themselves. Within seconds of the assault beginning they’d hit close range, a fact brought home by the sight of a fragmentation grenade arcing up out of the shadows to thump off the front of the requisitioned arbitrator shields.

‘Grenade!’ Nuritona barked. There was a solid crump and the suppression shields shuddered, the barricade buckling. Nuritona was unmoved, but the position was untenable. He slammed home a fresh magazine.

‘Fall back to secondary positions,’ he ordered, unsnapping a frag grenade as he did so. He set the fuse, yanked out the pin, released the spoon and tossed it underarm over the rank of shields. The air around him vibrated with the weight of close-range bolter fire being directed from the other side of the barricade, and he caught the impression of snarling skull-faced visors and bloody red wings. His grenade detonated, filling the air with more shrapnel. Second Squad gave ground as the thunderclap echoed back around the junction, dropping into cover behind secondary barricades erected overlooking the blocked tunnel entrance.

The traitors were wise enough not to carry their assault on into the fresh killing ground. Second Squad had their backs to the meagre force of arbitrators and loyalist convicts watching over the corralled prisoners at the junction’s centre. From further back Nuritona could hear the sound of what was left of Third Squad also engaging from the tunnel entrance that led back to the sub-precinct. They were the last line of defence, and they were cut off. Only the rail tunnels of the left and right-hand junctions – leading to the other crossroads still held by Nuritona’s void brothers – gave any hope of reinforcement.

‘Hold your fire,’ Nuritona ordered as he reloaded, auto-senses scanning the tunnel barricade for evidence of a renewed assault. ‘And trust in the Wandering Ancestors, brethren. We hold here, or we die.’

The signifier rune for Shipmaster Teko lit up Sharr’s visor display.

‘Company Master, I can confirm that we have six enemy vessels breaking from the asteroid belt and moving into attack position. We are still assessing their capabilities.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Sharr replied. ‘You must hold at all costs. Do not break formation to engage.’

‘Understood, Company Master. They shall not move us.’

The vox went dead. Sharr shifted slightly in his battleplate. He could sense that the rest of the command squad around him were similarly eager, instinct warring with the realities of combat. Reports were filtering in of a full sub-surface engagement. All four junctions held by the Third Company were being attacked. There was still no word from Te Kahurangi. For all Sharr knew the strike force had already been trapped and butchered, deep inside Zartak’s heated core.

Such thoughts did not trouble the Company Master. The plan they had decided upon was to his liking – direct and decisive. They would cut the head from this traitor warband with a single, vicious blow. The Chapter’s doctrines approved it.

‘The Void Sword thirsts,’ said Red Tane, disturbing the quiet of the chamber.

‘It cannot thirst,’ said Dorthor, tone slick with a veteran’s disdain. ‘It’s a sword. You are the one who thirsts, young Champion.’

‘The blood of traitors is not worthy of such a relic,’ Tane said, hand on his ancient weapon’s skull pommel.
‘At least you will find it in abundance down there,’ Niko pointed out. ‘We will wreak a red vengeance for Kahu, and all the other fallen.’ The signifier had returned the company’s battle standard to the ship’s fore armoury. It would only be an encumbrance where they were going. Instead he wielded his adamantium koa spear, another of the Chapter’s venerable weapons. It had been carried by the Wandering Ancestors during the earliest Days of Exile. Niko’s abilities with the seemingly archaic weapon had earned him renown across the Nomad Predation Fleet.

‘They think themselves superior to us, these traitors,’ Soha said, running his gauntlet over the ribbed coils of his ancient thermal ray gun, as he was wont to do when waiting. ‘The arrogance of their attacks shows the contempt they have for us.’

‘It is ever so with such renegades,’ Dorthor said dismissively. ‘It is their arrogance that drives them to treachery in the first place. We are here to judge them for that.’

Sharr said nothing, but glanced sidelong at Chaplain Nikora. The ancient, black-armoured warrior seemed unaffected by the restlessness that gripped the other veteran Carcharodons – he stood tall and firm in his pitch battleplate, quietly reciting the Third Litany of Readiness over the inter-squad vox. The flowing High Gothic words brought back the memory of Sharr’s visit to the mine chapel outside the sifting chamber, and the words Te Kahurangi had spoken to him there.

_The darkness arrayed against us would break you while you struggle to uphold your new burden. Will you let it?_

No, he would not. He would banish it, the way he had banished Akia’s lingering, bloody spectre. He began to join in Nikora’s litany, quiet yet firm, breathing the words of loyalty and dedication – words the Carcharodons had brought with them and spoken into the void, alone, for ten millennia. One by one, the rest of First Squad abandoned their conversation and joined in. One by one, their restless postures became calm.

They were the judges, they were reapers. From the Outer Dark they came, and when the Red Tithe was over, darkness there and nothing more.
Day 91, Zartak local.
We have penetrated deep into the mine workings now. The signs of slaughter are everywhere. As well as uncovering the dread corpses of more Traitor Space Marines we have catalogued hundreds of unaugmented human remains. Most appear to be former inmates of the Zartak prison mines, but there are some who bear clear markings of heretical cult worship and a few arbitrators. There is still no evidence of who is responsible for the killings, or what has become of the majority of the prison population – while the dead are numerous, there must still be many inmates unaccounted for.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Mem-bank entry log ends + + +

+ + + Thought for the Day: Blessed is the mind too small for doubt + + +
CHAPTER XIV

The Night Lords finally broke through at junction 27-0. It was Eighth Claw, under Jarq, that led the assault. The Claw champion commanded from the front, disdaining the bolt pistol fire of the Loyalist Assault squad trying to hold the tunnel perimeter around the loco crossrail.

Eighth was the warband’s Lesser Claw. Composed of the dregs and survivors from the others, it was held in endless derision by the more established squads. The other champions mocked Jarq incessantly, calling his warriors fodder for the guns of the corpse worshippers. The seven Night Lords that made up the Eighth fought with even greater bitterness and savagery because of it.

It was that bitterness that carried Jarq through the fire of the Loyalists holding 27-0. His visor was screaming warnings at him, speaking of target locks and incoming rounds, of entry wounds in his left thigh, left forearm and the right side of his breastplate. He dismissed them without even thinking, servos whirring as he pounded down the tunnel and directly into the barrage. His Claw followed on his heels, infected by their leader’s determination, their vox-screams ramped up to maximum. This was their opportunity to prove themselves. They would grasp it, or they would die trying.

Corvax took a bolt-round through the visor, the shot detonating inside his skull and blowing his head apart. A trio of well-aimed, closely spaced rounds punched through the breastplate of Jaggen. He stumbled on for a few more steps before collapsing, his insides turned to mulch by the triple detonations.

Jarq’s icy determination drove him through the barrage and the pain of his wounds. He slammed into the barricades the Loyalists had erected at the end of the tunnel. The grey-armoured Space Marines on the other side triggered their chainswords, preparing to face the might of the VIII Legion blade for blade. But Jarq had no intention of doing that.

He opened up with his bolter on full auto, at point-blank range. His power armour clenched and locked as it absorbed the recoil of the violent stream of shells, the hammer of discharges momentarily overpowering the wailing issuing from his brass vox-horns.

The three Assault Marines on the other side of the suppression shield barricades went down beneath the hail, armour plates ruptured and blown apart. Jarq stepped over their steaming corpses, slamming a fresh magazine home. Eighth Claw followed him into the light of the junction, their own howls overlaying the screaming of their victims.

More Loyalists rushed them. Most were Scouts, pallid youths wielding combat knives or barbaric saw-like mauls. Eighth Claw didn’t let up. Their firepower simply tore the junction’s defenders to pieces, cutting down the scattering of arbitrators and armed prisoners who tried to focus their fire on them. Only one more member of the Claw fell – Zarrio, his breastplate and chest torn open by the power fist of the Assault squad leader, who’d somehow waded through the storm of Eighth’s fire.
Jarq killed him with a bolt to the head when the Loyalist drew his crackling fist back to strike.
The four survivors of Eighth Claw turned their guns on the hundreds of prisoners crowding the junction’s centre. By then, other sections of the warband had broken through as well. Black Hand cult squads swarmed in through the northern and western tunnel entrances, adding their firepower to that of their masters.

If Jarq and his bloody, victorious renegades had ignored the prisoners and gone south, towards the second junction in the defensive line held by the Loyalists, they could have turned the tide of the entire fight. They could have punched through the lightly defended north tunnel right into the heart of the next junction and wreaked havoc.

But Jarq and his brothers were too inexperienced. They were gripped by the murderlust, ecstatic at their success, overwhelmed by the sight of hundreds of dirty, ragged and wholly defenceless figures kneeling before their guns. This wasn’t the Stalk, this wasn’t the Terror. This was the Kill. At long last, the yearned-for, glorious Kill. So instead of pressing the assault south they turned junction 27-0 into a slaughter pit. Even as they sought to prove they were worthy of the respect of older Claws, they did the opposite, and put their brutal desires ahead of the warband’s victory.

Only when every living thing in 27-0 had been reduced to twitching red meat did they finally move on.

The screams of the daemon warriors as they ripped their way back into reality left Rannik paralysed. The heretics, their spiked forms wreathed with blue fire, dropped on top of the strike force without warning. Their claws sliced through metal and flesh as though it wasn’t there at all. Rannik was unable to move, pinned by primal fear. The Space Marines showed no such hesitation – they opened fire.

‘Down,’ snarled one of the Scouts. His hand snatched Rannik by the shoulder and flung her bodily behind an upturned bench.

‘Warp Talons,’ the Scout snarled. ‘Half daemons.’ The pale warrior had barely spoken before the air was full of charged ceramite and snapping flames, and a hideous screaming brought the arbitrator’s ears close to bursting. One of the Warp Talons rocketed overhead, an indistinct blur of spikes and claws. The air itself seemed to shudder and split around it, as though trying to get away from something so utterly unnatural.

The Scout slumped in its wake. Something had opened his torso from his left shoulder to his stomach, the savage wounds jetting blood. The Space Marine managed to stay upright for a second, staring down at his torn body with wide, black eyes. Then he collapsed.

Rannik moaned with terror, pressing herself against the unyielding metal surface of the bench. The monsters were slaughtering each other. Across the aisle she could see the blue-armoured leader of the strike force standing unmoved. His bone staff was held high, his other arm outstretched, gauntlet making a clenching motion. One of the airborne attackers, scything through the Loyalists near the refectorium stove plates, faltered. Arcane words spilled from the helm of the blue warrior, and the green stone set into the jaw of his staff flared with light. As Rannik stared she saw the spine-crested helm of the taloned creature crumple and burst, as though the pressure of some fathomless depths had suddenly been applied to its cranium. Grey matter oozed from the split ceramite, and it crumpled, its cutting assault-shrieks silenced.

‘Press on, brothers!’ roared the blue-armoured giant. What was his name? Rannik couldn’t
remember. Had she ever known? The thoughts that had been inside her head, the thoughts that hadn’t been hers at all, were gone. How had she come to be here, in this hell of blood and razor-edged steel? Who were these armoured monstrosities, butchering one another like feral beasts?

She ran. A set of base instincts that had been repressed by other minds for too long finally triggered, and she found her feet and made for the door. Her duty, her rank, her role as an arbitrator, the importance of upholding the *Lex Imperialis*, it all faltered before what she was witnessing. She didn’t look back.

They’d lost the arbitrator. The ambush had taken Te Kahurangi by surprise, and in the seconds he’d been forced to redirect his consciousness the human’s mind had slipped free.

It didn’t matter. She had taken them far enough. Te Kahurangi parried a traitor’s talons as it came at him. The ensorcelled claws clashed and rebounded from the psy-reactive bone of his force staff. The Warp Talon shrieked with fury.

Te Kahurangi spun the staff deftly into a thrust that cracked against the Night Lord’s breastplate, splitting the baroque metal. The Warp Talon responded by raking him with its fire-wreathed claws, first below and then above Te Kahurangi’s guard. The blows kept coming, lightning-fast, forcing him back.

He lashed out with his mind, trying to grasp the Warp Talon in the crushing embrace of the void, as he had done with its kin moments earlier. The thing was coming at him too fast for the Librarian to be able to focus. The force staff flared with energy every time the bone haft met the monster’s claws.

It was Epson-five-nine-Rull who finished the furious duel. The Devastator Marine flung himself into the side of the traitor, his multi-melta abandoned. The attack threw the Warp Talon off balance, its wicked claws scrabbling for purchase for purchase across the refectorium’s bloody floor.

Te Kahurangi used the distraction. He flung his anger into a bolt of energy sent crackling up the haft of his staff and, as the Warp Talon lunged at him, he slammed the stone tip into its oncoming skull. The Night Lord’s helm crumpled as the back-blast of psychic energy pounded through its body, pulping its innards and blasting half of its hardened skeleton out its back. The remains crunched into the floor as though a concentrated tidal blow had rushed from the ether to pulverise it.

The Chief Librarian took a second to gather himself, breathing heavily. Wordlessly, Rull snatched up a fallen chainsword. Las-bolts darted past, their distinctive whip-crack snatching Te Kahurangi’s attention to the doors the strike team had entered through. Dark-robed cult troops in bug-eyed gas hoods were forcing their way into the refectorium, firing wildly into the melee. The trap was closing.

‘I can help hold them, Pale Nomad,’ Rull said. Two Warp Talons were still tearing apart the remains of the strike force, their claws a welter of blood. Te Kahurangi saw Brother Unok fall, his chainsword bisected, its metal teeth scattering viciously across the refectorium. Brother Koro was grappling with the other traitor, the claws of one of its hands already lodged in his guts while he tried to dig his razortooth-studded leiomano through the creature’s gorget. The other remaining Carcharodons were firing on the cultists piling in through the adjoining entrances, bolts blasting apart flesh and flakplate. Still the heretics came, blazing indiscriminately into the wrecked refectorium.

Te Kahurangi grasped Rull by the shoulder guard and dragged him towards the only hatch not swarming with enemies, the ones opposite those they’d entered through. The Pale Nomad barged past, force staff held before him, its green light blazing. It lit the corridor ahead, and the grav lift and stairwell at the end of it.
‘The stairs,’ he said, releasing Rull. Behind them the sounds of battle faded, the Carcharodons killing and dying in the eerie silence their Chapter’s long-obeyed doctrines demanded. They had all known this would be their fate. Te Kahurangi had been honoured by their sacrifice, and they had been honoured to fall in the struggle that would end the fighting on Zartak. This final blow would allow the thing most vital to the Chapter’s future – the Red Tithe – to begin. They were committed to it now. Without it, all the losses on the prison world would be meaningless. The Tithe had to go ahead.

Assuming they could reach the Centrum Dominus. Te Kahurangi could sense a presence ahead. The lumen strips in the stairwell flickered and died.

The light of the ancient Carcharodon’s force staff led the way. The shadows seemed to flit and dart over and round them, like living, breathing beings. Te Kahurangi knew that wasn’t far from the truth. The rest of the strike force had stopped transmitting, and their vital signs had all turned red and static. After a second, even those auto-sense displays flickered out. Te Kahurangi and Rull were left in darkness.

‘Pale Nomad,’ hissed a voice. The end of the last flight of stairs was ahead, the lumens in the corridor beyond it turning the figure filling the doorway into a silhouette of dire spikes. Two eyes burned from the horned darkness, redolent with ten thousand years of hatred.

‘Kiri mate,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘Dead Skin.’ He climbed the last few stairs, his force staff vibrating with power. The great scythe grasped in the shadowed giant’s hand flared with its own unnatural light, tendrils of blue flame coiling around its wicked edge.

‘You should not have come here, dear brother,’ the shadow told Te Kahurangi. ‘For one so old, you are a fool.’

‘For one so weak, you are overconfident,’ the Chief Librarian replied. He lashed out, releasing the power he’d been drawing into the force staff. An invisible bow wave struck the shadow at the top of the stairs, the unstoppable, natural force of a tidal surge. The darkness was hurled back down the corridor, crashing into the floor at the far end with a crack of splitting rockcrete. Te Kahurangi pushed up out of the stairwell, leaning heavily on his staff. He could feel blood dripping from his nose, running down the inside of his helmet.

The moment the green light of his staff left the stairwell, he heard a screech. He spun in time to see the shadows falling upon Rull. The Carcharodon’s chainsword roared, and black daemonic ichor splattered the walls.

‘Go on, Pale Nomad!’ the Carcharodon shouted, driving his weapon through the mass of dark, fluttering wings and snapping maws. Te Kahurangi turned back down the corridor without hesitation. Rull was doing his duty to the Chapter and the Void Father, as the rest of the strike force had before him. Te Kahurangi would do the same.

The shadow figure regained its feet. In the lumen light the Carcharodon saw him clearly for the first time – a Chaos Space Marine sorcerer, the flayed flesh draping his armour dark with newly crusted blood.

‘Your skins are fresh, traitor,’ Te Kahurangi said as he advanced, forcing himself to stop leaning on his staff and raise it. ‘What rituals were they a part of? What did you have to give your daemon master in order to escape the void I left you in? Your soul?’

‘I gave far less than I will take from you, Pale Nomad,’ the Chaos sorcerer snarled. He advanced to meet the Chief Librarian, and the corridor shuddered as the haft of the great warp scythe crashed against Te Kahurangi’s staff. For a second the two psykers strained, mentally and physically locked,
limbs trembling and servos grating. The lumen strips overhead started to pop, and the rockcrete underfoot began to buckle and give way.

Eventually both relented. A crash like thunder reverberated down the corridor, and they were hurled apart.

The sorcerer regained his feet first, coming for Te Kahurangi with his burning scythe swinging. He chanted, the dark words snagging and dragging the shadows after him, coiling around his ghoulish frame.

Te Kahurangi struggled onto one knee, gripping his force staff in both hands. His body was shaking, and his skull felt as though it had been shattered into a thousand shards. He tried to drag the broken pieces together and hurl them at the Dead Skin, his psychic hood vibrating as he delved deeper into his reserves of strength. With a litany of binding he sent another invisible tide of psychic energy crashing towards the Chaos sorcerer. This time the Night Lord simply laughed, a gesture of the scythe parting the wave. The shadows coiling about him had grown monstrously, transforming him into a looming, cackling revenant that towered over the Pale Nomad.

Te Kahurangi glanced at his visor display. Rull was dead. The sorcerer made a contemptuous gesture and the last of the lumen strips in the corridor burst. Only the green glow of the stone on Te Kahurangi’s force staff offered any illumination. Even as the Pale Nomad tried to marshal his strength for one last blow, it flickered and went out.

The shadows fell, and he knew no more.

‘We are too late,’ said Tonga. Kordi could not bring himself to agree, though the truth of his void brother’s words were evident.

The room had been a refectorium. Now all it served was butchered meat. Corpses of Carcharodons and heretics lay strewn where they had fallen, armour and flesh pulverised and ripped apart by indiscriminate, close-range gunfire or by the tearing edge of chainblades.

‘A strike force,’ Ekara surmised, surveying the carnage. ‘Perhaps they used the same tunnels as us to gain entry.’ The survivors of Fourth Squad had followed the winding sewer channels and flumes up through Sink Shaft One, until they’d found an entry hatch into the Precinct Fortress’ vaults. Tonga had blown them open with melta charges, triggering the lower level alarms. There had only been a handful of cultist guards to respond. Now they realised why there had been so few.

‘Arm yourselves,’ Ekara ordered. Kordi bent and retrieved the nearest bolter, pulling it from beneath the headless corpse of its former owner. From the exile markings and bionic left leg, Kordi recognised Brother Imau of Fifth Squad. He murmured a Void Vow of Quietening for the restless spirit of his brother, promising to return for him and the rest of his wargear once the mission was over.

Haru and Tongo were also rearming. The latter had discovered Brother Rull’s multi-melta amidst the slain, notched with the Devastator’s distinctive burning maw crest. With no sign of Rull himself, Tongo hefted the dual-nozzle weapon and its heavy pack, disengaging his own. The pyrum fuel in the melta’s backpack throbbed with barely contained potency.

‘Which way?’ asked Haru as he locked a trio of fresh magazines to his mag-belt. Three hatchways led off from the decimated hall.

‘Right,’ said Ekara. ‘And look for a schematics terminal. That, or pray our auto-senses come back online and we can access the retinal display again.’

‘Do you think there were any survivors?’ Kordi asked, looking over the bodies of his brethren,
almost buried by the filthy corpses of the heretics.

‘If so, there’s no evidence of which way they went,’ Ekara said. ‘Our objective remains the same. We find the leader of this heretical warband, and we kill him.’

‘From the Outer Dark we come,’ Haru intoned.

‘Darkness there and nothing more,’ the other Carcharodons finished.

The right-hand door gave way to a long barracks corridor. Hatches led off to sleeping blocks, all of them still pristine from morning inspections. There was no sign of any Carcharodons having passed this way already – if any had survived the battle in the refectorium, Kordi feared they’d taken another route. Then, at the third door on the right, Haru paused.

‘Movement,’ he said, voice clicking over the inter-squad vox. ‘Open hatch, breach.’

The four Space Marines stacked to the right before sweeping inside. Kordi tracked the undisturbed rows of bunk beds, the metal frames and starched sheets bright in the buzzing lumen light. They split off and advanced down the separate aisles, armour whirring softly.

It was Tonga who flushed out the figure skulking behind the bunks. It tried to make a dash past the Carcharodon, towards the open hatch and the empty corridor beyond. A reflexive blow sent it sprawling across the nearest bed. As it struggled to rise, stunned, it found itself staring down the barrels of the multi-melta, the deadly weapon vibrating with power.

‘Please, no,’ the woman sobbed. She was clad in bloody and battered arbitrator plate, but barely looked old enough to be out of schola, her short hair spiky with dried sweat and her pale face etched with wide-eyed terror.

‘Identify yourself,’ Tonga blared over his external vox.

‘I-I’m a servant of the God-Emperor!’

‘Name and rank, now!’

‘Sub-Warden Jade Rannik, arbitrator designate zero-two-oh-six-five, Zartak Penal Mine Colony Detachment, Sub-Precinct Twelve jurisdiction.’

‘You’ve been cowering in here since the Precinct Fortress fell?’ Ekara demanded.

‘N-No lord. I came here with… more warriors like you. I brought them up through the sewers.’

‘The warriors in the refectorium at the end of the corridor?’

‘Yes, lord.’

‘Why did you not see fit to die with them? Were they not worthy of you?’

The human was shaking violently, eyes darting from one Carcharodon to the next.

‘Do you believe her?’ Haru asked over the inter-squad vox.

‘Her armour is heavily damaged, and she is showing signs of distress common in unaugmented humans who have been exposed to recent high-intensity combat situations,’ Ekara said. ‘I believe she is telling the truth. Even if she has been found wanting at the final test, she led our brethren this far. And she can still lead us.’

‘You are familiar with the layout of this facility?’ the strike leader asked out loud. Rannik continued to look from one expressionless grey visor to the next, her features thrown into darkness by the giants that surrounded her.

‘I am, lords.’

‘Then rejoice, for an opportunity to absolve your recent failings has presented itself. You will lead us immediately to this site’s Centrum Dominus, or die with us in the attempt to reach it. As the Void
Father wills. Is that clear?’
‘Yes, lords.’
Day 92, Zartak local.
We are still uncovering more bodies. We are taking a direct route to Sink Shaft One – it appears to be the epicentre of the fighting. I have noted well over a thousand corpses in prison overalls now, displaying a wide variety of fatal injuries – las, bolt, shotgun blasts and severe close quarter trauma wounds are all evident. I can only assume such scenes of carnage are mirrored in the surrounding tunnels. They appear to have turned upon one another after gaining their freedom, and in turn been cut down by the Space Marines, though whether their killers were the slain traitors we have already uncovered or those who put them to the sword, it is impossible to know. Nor do we yet know how they escaped their cells to roam the mine works seemingly at random.
Lexmechanic Forren has sent 2486 back down into the mine with news that the astropath aboard the Saint Angelica has received a reply from Lord Rozenkranz. I have halted our progress through the mines at a junction while the data is transferred into a readable format and brought down after us.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Gene scan complete + + +
+ + + Access granted + + +
+ + + Beginning mem-bank entry log + + +
+ + + Date check, 3679875.M41 + + +

Thought for the Day: Seek faith before seeking wisdom + + +
CHAPTER XV

Skell sat in the midst of patterns of blood and chalk, his head in his hands, and wept. The thing in his skull was enjoying it. The daemon’s cackles rose above his own thoughts, drowning them out, causing his sobs to grow louder and more uncontrolled. He could taste the salty bitterness of the tears on his lips, and the vile dirt they’d tracked through. He could taste blood too. The daemon was taunting him.

*My name is Bar’ghul. We shall be getting to know one another very well indeed, Mika Doren Skell.*

‘If you don’t say anything back, it’ll enjoy it less,’ said a different voice. Skell’s head shot up. Through his blurred vision he saw a leering skull poised mere feet from his face, eyes glaring red from its sockets. He sprang back with a cry, almost disturbing the fresh markings the sorcerer had daubed on the floor around him.

‘Your fear is amusing First Kill, child,’ the nightmarish giant said. Beside it two of its brothers were wheeling in a gleaming surgical rack from the medicae bay, leaving it at the edge of the pentagram. The one that had spoken to him was kneeling, so that its gaze was level with Skell’s. As the boy stared in terror at the visage that had haunted his nightmares it reached up with its spiked gauntlets. There was a thud of locks, and the helmet came off in its grasp. Skell found himself looking into black eyes, framed by alabaster skin and a shock of jet hair. The face was the last thing Skell had expected. It was young.

It smiled, revealing metal teeth etched to wicked points. The boy shuddered.

‘I was like you, once,’ it said. ‘Not so very long ago. Torn by guilt and fear. But the galaxy has a strange way of righting wrongs. The parents who adopted me spent their lives living off the same class of people they plucked me from. When I was your age, I lowered the shield protecting their home and let my future brothers slaughter them. The galaxy rewarded the way I had righted that wrong. It elevated me.’

_Do not listen to him,* snarled the voice in Skell’s head. _It was by my will that he was raised up, no other’s.* Skell moaned. The kneeling giant went on.

‘You see these things…’ He gestured up at the darkest corners of the Centrum Dominus. They were filled with rustling, clicking shapes. Skell caught an impression of bat-like wings, slavering maws and eyes that burned with pale blue warpfire. He flinched away, looking back down at the bloody inscriptions around his feet.

‘These things are not worthy of your veneration,’ the giant told him.

_He lies,* the voice in his head spat.

‘These things are nothing more substantial than your thoughts and whims. The Eighth Legion has never served them, and it never will.’
All will serve the true glory of Chaos, Skell. I will show you that soon enough.

‘Remember this night, child. My name is Amon Cull, Prince of Thorns. Your prince. You are a part of the Eighth Legion. We are beholden to no one, mortal or immortal. The galaxy is a sea of victims, and we are the predators.’

‘Get away from him.’ The order rang out from the figure striding back into the Centrum Dominus. It was the sorcerer. Behind him a great flock of black-skinned, hideous daemonic creatures were dragging something which their fluttering wings and scrawny limbs half obscured. The sorcerer pointed his scythe at Cull, who stood to face him. The warriors around the edges of the room shifted, and the daemons roosting in its shadows shrieked and gibbered.

‘Flayed Father,’ Cull said. ‘I see you’ve finally won your prize.’

‘More successfully than you,’ the sorcerer replied, stopping barely a foot from Cull. His daemonkin clustered behind him, chittering, their claws scraping at the rockcrete.

‘This is supposed to be a harvest,’ he went on, his words harsh as a bared blade. ‘Not some excuse for butchery. I thought letting you loose in the Nemisar and Talith systems before we arrived here would quench your youthful murderlust and allow you to focus on the task at hand. I can see I overestimated your abilities.’

‘You speak as though you are my master,’ Cull snapped. Skell saw his claws tighten around the flesh-bound grip of the long, curving runeblade locked to his hip.

‘I do not have time for your petulance,’ the sorcerer said, snapping a finger at the daemons cowering in his shadow. They dragged the thing they’d been carrying past Skell, placing it with difficulty on top of the surgical rack. It was another of the giants, except this one had been stripped of its upper armour. While its torso gleamed with a strange, hard-looking black carapace, its bared arms and head were deathly pale and blotched with patches of strange grey scabs. It seemed unconscious, and had been bound with the explosive magnicles usually reserved for Zartak’s convicts. Two of the daemons not hauling the figure into place were grappling with a long, carved bone staff, a shard of green stone clamped in its maw-like tip.

‘We must hurry,’ said the sorcerer, standing over the pale prisoner. He’d drawn his ritual dagger, its silver edge still crusted with blood from the runes it had cut into Skell’s back. He bent to touch the wicked blade to the prisoner’s bared throat. The giant snapped awake just before the long knife reached his flesh. His head turned, black eyes locking with Skell’s, as though he had been aware of his presence even while unconscious.

Do not hesitate, said a thought in his head. The thought Skell hadn’t heard since he’d driven it from his mind in the air exhaust backtunnel. Now, looking into the fathomless black eyes of the pale giant, he realised just whose thought it was.

Do not hesitate when the time comes, Skell.

He could feel the daemon in his head squirming with anger at the intrusion, even as he sensed Cull move behind the sorcerer. The flesh-clad giant was bending low over the prisoner, the voice dripping from his vox-grille slick with scorn.

‘So, you have rejoined us, Pale Nomad. You have woken just in time to die.’

‘But he’ll watch you die first, Flayed Father,’ Cull said from behind the sorcerer, and plunged his long, rune-etched blade through the Chaos Space Marine’s back. The unnatural steel punched, quivering, out through the sorcerer’s breastplate.

The daemon in Skell’s head tried to shriek a warning, tried to fling his weak, bloody body at Cull,
but Skell bit back. He clamped his teeth down so hard that blood ran from his split lip, refusing to let the daemon move him like its puppet. He could feel the gaze of the pale prisoner still on him, lending him the strength to resist, to hold himself rooted to the spot even while his psychically charged hands itched to close around the throat of the Prince of Thorns.

Slowly, the sorcerer looked down at the tip of the blade that protruded from his body. Cull gripped the sorcerer’s shoulder, and dragged the warp-cursed steel free. The sorcerer turned to face him, scythe still in his grasp. Then, with a crash of ceramite, he collapsed onto his knees.

‘I hoped you wouldn’t lose yourself to the daemon’s will,’ Cull said. ‘I’d hoped you were still a true member of the Eighth. But you have expended your last chance. You had none of the primarch’s foresight – you only saw what Bar’ghul allowed you to see. In your greed you became its slave. You wanted to become a god, so you made yourself a monster. You served others when the Eighth Legion should only ever serve itself. And I will not allow a daemon to rule this warband through an old puppet like you.’

‘Young fool,’ the sorcerer managed to choke. Dark blood was running from his helmet’s vox-grille, pattering onto the rockcrete beneath. ‘You… understand nothing…’

‘If you had completed the ritual with his blood, you would have made your daemon master too powerful,’ Cull went on. ‘The Long War is over for you, Flayed Father. This is for my real father. Not the false one you skinned in his palace. Not the murdering one whose genes you implanted into me. This is for the savlar dreg in the hive city you virus bombed.’

The Prince of Thorns swung his blade, and the sorcerer’s horned helmet tumbled from his shoulders. With a shriek, the daemons attacked.
Day 92, Zartak local.
Word from Lord Rozenkranz has reached me. His findings are truly disturbing. Since receiving my initial report he has been investigating the disappearance of the original mining colonists, prior to the transformation of Zartak into a penal colony. Like me, he came across a great deal of redacted material, but it would seem that our worst fears are in fact true.
Sometime a little over two centuries ago contact was entirely lost with the Zartak system. When it was re-established by an Imperial Navy rapid response sub-fleet, the planetoid was found to be entirely deserted. All four hundred and eleven thousand, seven hundred and thirty-two colonists, as recorded in the last census, had vanished. The ore ships anchored in high orbit were also entirely devoid of life. The fragmentary reports from the Navy sub-fleet that have not been purged do not mention any particular signs of violence. In all other senses though, the current circumstances on this accursed world seem eerily similar.
Lord Rozenkranz has sent a directive saying he is making his way here with all possible haste. I pray I find something positive to report to him when he arrives. Tomorrow we will continue on through Sink Shaft One towards the Precinct Fortress.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Mem-bank entry log ends + + +

+ + + Thought for the Day: Faith without sacrifice is meaningless + + +
Unnatural howling and the thunder of bolter fire echoed down the corridor. Kordi paused for a second, assessing the situation.

Fourth Squad, the human named Rannik in toe, had progressed through the corridors, barrack blocks and vox-substations of the Precinct Fortress without opposition. Whenever they reached an intersection Rannik would point them in the right direction. It was only when they came to the final flight of stairs before the control centre that they encountered any sign of the enemy.

Rannik had initially refused to climb the stairwell. The lumen strips had gone out, and the human seemed petrified of the dark. Ekara physically dragged her up, ignoring her screams. On the final flight they found Rull’s body, his armour split and savaged by countless claw marks. Beyond the next corridor was the Centrum Dominus.

Its open blast doors led to a scene of chaos. The control room had become a place of writhing blackness shot through with stabs of gunfire, the echoing reports of point-blank, full-auto discharges vying with the screams and shrieks that shuddered up through the abandoned fortress.

The Carcharodons halted at the doors, those auto-senses that still functioned piercing the dark as they attempted to make sense of what was happening.

‘They’ve turned on one another,’ said Ekara. The Night Lords were firing and hacking indiscriminately at winged, shadowy daemons across the length of the embattled control centre. The creatures were swarming towards the cogitator pit at the heart of the room, their dark flocks obscuring its centre.

‘Let them slaughter each other,’ Haru muttered.

‘We cannot,’ Kordi replied, pointing towards the middle of the Centrum. ‘They have the Pale Nomad.’

Bound to a surgical rack at the bottom of the pit was Te Kahurangi. The armour had been stripped from his upper body, revealing his black carapace and the neural ports that studded his white, scabbed flesh. Two daemons were struggling over his force staff, clutching the ancient relic’s haft.

‘Iron Tide-pattern,’ Ekara said, picking an assault wedge. ‘I’ll lead. We get to Te Kahurangi, and we release him.’ He turned to Rannik. ‘Can you open his magnicles?’

Rannik was staring into the maelstrom of shadows. Ekara snatched her roughly by the shoulder and spun her so she was forced to look up at the towering Adeptus Astartes.

‘I asked you a question. Can you release him?’ Rannik managed to nod.

‘Then do so,’ Ekara finished, and let go of her. The Carcharodon turned to Kordi.

‘Keep the human alive. We’ll do our best to hold off the rest until you two reach the Pale Nomad. Hopefully amidst all this confusion—’
Ekara never finished. As though to underline his words there was a splitting crack, followed by a howl of primordial, ancient fury. The sound tore through the souls – mortal and immortal – of every being on Zartak.

He had awoken.

Skell hugged the ground as the daemons struck. Bar’ghul tried to force him back onto his feet, tried to make him assist the Furies as they punished the petulant, traitorous mortals who were foiling the daemon’s plans. Skell resisted. He was stronger now.

The Pale Nomad was with him. His power, as eternal and unrelenting as the crashing ocean,infused him with raw energy. Bar’ghul snarled and snapped at him, rendered impotent. Skell could feel the Pale One’s eyes still fixed on him from atop the rack, even as the Centrum Dominus descended into a living hell of screams, shouts and ear-aching gunfire.

The two daemons that had been wrestling over the Pale One’s bone staff were still struggling, stubby wings beating the air furiously as they simultaneously tried to snatch the prize free whilst gouging one another. Neither had noticed the green stone at the tip of the staff starting to glow again.

One of the armoured giants attacking the daemons dragged a spray of hard rounds across the cogitator pit, the air above Skell alive with bolt detonations. The two warring Furies were struck, and came apart like a nightmare lost amidst waking reality.

The staff fell.

Time seemed to slow. Everything became agonisingly sluggish. Skell watched with morbid fascination as the staff tumbled end over end, down into the pit.

Now, said the thought in his head.

No, shrieked Bar’ghul.

Skell lunged. He felt his aching, fatigued muscles stretch agonisingly, felt fresh blood break from the ritual wounds carved into his back. He saw everything. Bolt shells arcing away, slow as departing constellations, their propellants flaring like the final bursts of starlight in the depths of voidspace. The stab-illumination of muzzle flashes reflected back from bared claws and fangs, grinning skulls and hateful, red eye-lenses. Four more grey-clad giants and one terrified arbitrator poised at the blast doors, on the cusp of flinging themselves into the melee. Skell saw it all, and cared for none of it. All that mattered was the beautiful, beaten, ancient staff plunging down towards him, its green headstone blazing with light.

Skell stretched out, his feet smearing the bloody markings on the floor, the ones that were supposed to bind and trap an immortal predator inside him. Half a second before the staff fell into his outstretched hand, reality reasserted itself. Time sped back up. Daemons shrieked and gibbered and burst into nothingness, disintegrating into wisps of black smoke as they were blown apart by bolter fire. Their dark, transhuman vanquishers cackled and cursed, reloaded and fired. The staff thumped into Skell’s hand…

…and he screamed.

Reality buckled. The air ignited with energy as bolts of lightning crashed from the staff to rip and tear across the room, leaping between combatants and arcing up to the ceiling. The few cogitators that hadn’t yet been smashed all came online at once, jolting as their screens lit up green and white with data-overloads. An echoing thunderclap shuddered through the Precinct Fortress, shaking Sink Shaft One all the way down to its flooded, cavernous depths.
Skell collapsed, unconscious, the staff clattering to the floor beside him. Lightning still sparked and danced from the bone haft and around the boy’s prone body. The Centrum Dominus shook. And, for just a second, the void shield above flickered and failed.

On board the *White Maw*, in orbit above Zartak, Techmarine Beta-one-three-Uthulu swung his ignition hammer. The blessed instrument struck the initiation panel with a great, echoing clang. The adepts ranged around the Techmarine’s raised lectern inserted the final data-slates into the activation panels, prayers of machine-glory and servo-encouragement blaring from their hooded vox-grilles.

Te Kahurangi’s gamble had paid off. He’d reached the boy, and the warp discharge of his full psychic awakening had been enough to short out the void shield protecting the Precinct Fortress for a few seconds.

Those seconds would be enough. With a crack the chained lightning arcing between three teleportation orbs lashed downwards, earthing into the transitional sigils etched on the deck. In an eye blink, Sharr and First Squad were gone from the *White Maw*’s teleportation bay.
Day 93, Zartak local.
We have penetrated the Precinct Fortress. Like the surrounding cell blocks, it seems entirely deserted. There are signs of combat, especially in a lower level refectorium. In all my time serving the Inquisition I have never seen bloodshed so savage, so mindless. The bodies we came across had literally been torn limb from limb. I praise the God-Emperor that such a fate has been reserved for heretics and not loyal subjects of the Imperium, though there is still no sign of what has become of whoever meted out this furious justice.
We shall continue upwards towards the fortress’ Centrum Dominus.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ + + Mem-bank entry log ends + + +
+ + + Thought for the Day: By your works shall you be known + + +
CHAPTER XVII

In a halo of white light and a blaze of energy, Sharr, Chaplain Nikora and First Squad materialised in the midst of the Centrum Dominus. They moved without hesitation and in deadly silence, launching themselves into the nearest Night Lords. From the doorway, Kordi and the rest of Fourth Squad charged into the chamber.

Nikora, his heavy crozius arcanum blazing with holy light, smashed through the battleplate of one of the Night Lords Raptors, knocking him to his knees. The traitor’s ignited lightning claws raked the Chaplain’s pauldron as he went down, leaving glowing, smoking rents in the ceramite. A second blow from Nikora’s skull-tipped mace staved in the Night Lord’s head, leaving him crumpled and bloody on the floor.

On the vox-gantry ringing the upper walls, Red Tane had engaged a power sword-wielding traitor. The two warriors were a blur of vicious motion, the cut and thrust so swift and relentless it seemed to have been choreographed. The Void Sword struck and sparked from the Night Lord’s power blade, each blow delivered with a speed and strength only transhuman champions could possibly possess. More sparks danced from the scarred and damaged equipment around them, throwing the ferocious duel into oscillating moments of light and dark as they drove each other back and forth across the gantry.

Below them a huge Raptor smashed his lightning claws through Soha’s guard. The crackling blades pounded straight through the Carcharodon’s raised chainsword with such force that Soha’s grey breastplate buckled, and he was sent slamming back into the nearest bank of overloaded cogitators.

Strike Veteran Dorthor’s chainaxe turned aside another heretic’s chainblade, the Night Lord left momentarily exposed by the Carcharodon’s deft parry. The traitor flung himself back in time, Dorthor’s backward sweep striking only sparks from his skull-plated breastplate. The two warriors drew apart and circled one another in the Centrum’s main data pit, like wary, caged animals.

Signifier Niko lashed out with his adamantium-haft koa spear, its reinforced shark teeth bound with feathers and wreathed with a snapping disruptor shield. He plunged the weapon into the guts of another Raptor, savaging the wound with an expert twist of the haft. The Night Lord’s chainsword struck sparks from the weapon as he tried to shear through it, but Niko ripped it free and spun it in a low crouch, the teeth biting deep into his left greave. The Night Lord went down on one knee.

Sharr swung Reaper in a savage arc, forcing the Night Lord he was facing to back up against an augur array. The Company Master sensed a presence looming towards his right and turned just in time to avoid the air-splitting crack of a power mace. One of the Night Lords Terminators advanced towards him, armour crackling with the energy of its active refractor field. The intervention gave the first traitor the opportunity he needed to regain his footing. Together, the two Chaos Space Marines
moved towards the Company Master.

Kordi emptied his newly acquired bolter into a Chaos Terminator grinding round to face him, a black Fury still struggling hopelessly in its grip. The hulking monster absorbed Kordi’s barrage without flinching, activating its chainfist with a roar. Kordi’s own chainsword answered it.

Ekara tried to avoid the lunge of the Terminator attacking him, but the disruptor energies wreathing the giant’s clenched power fist snapped, buckling the side of his armour plating. The Carcharodon grunted as the surge of energy thrust him back into the wall. He ducked the next swing, the rockcrete above him shuddering as the spiked gauntlet hammered deep into the plasteel-reinforced side of the control centre. He turned the motion into an upward thrust, driving his chainsword into the Terminator’s guts. If he’d been able to deliver the blow two-handed, it might have done damage – as it was, it simply struck sparks from the thick layers of ceramite and plasteel protecting the giant. Before Ekara could recover from the lunge, the Terminator brought its fist down, grinding through the rockcrete and slamming into the strike leader’s back. There was a hideous crunch as the destructive weapon pounded through the Carcharodon, the release of its violent disruptor flare tearing apart the Space Marine and splattering his remains against the partly demolished wall.

Tonga’s new multi-melta vibrated in his grasp, the pyrum molecules in the weapon’s fuel canister breaking down before being unleashed with a crack of vaporised air. The Terminator turning towards him from the melee was struck in the thigh. Its refractor field flared and shorted in a burst of sparks, and the roar of atomised flesh and armour molecules filled the chamber as the Chaos Space Marine’s left leg disappeared. It went over like a felled rustbark, bellowing in anger and pain. A second shot from the recharged melta liquefied its tusked helm.

Rannik darted through the carnage. Her every instinct screamed at her not to enter the command centre after the Carcharodons. The place had become a battlefield for gods, a space of sensory overload filled with transhuman roars, terrible screams, the howling of chainblades and the hammering of point-blank discharges. The air itself crackled and danced with the power unleashed by ancient weaponry and psychic overload, and throbbed with the passage of blade, bolt and armoured bodies. The cogitator rows, augur array and vox-banks were smashed beyond all use, battered into sparking scrap as the huge, ceramite-plated warriors grappled and flung themselves at one another. A single careless blow or random shot could have cut Rannik down, and no one would have even noticed. No one except the figure strapped to the dissection rack near the room’s centre.

It was Te Kahurangi, the one who once again called Rannik on, into the maelstrom of unyielding metal and blood. Te Kahurangi, who had been seized and bound by the traitors, yet still resisted, his mind sharper than any of their razors. Te Kahurangi who, restrained as he was, fought on with his mind alone.

The sight of the pale monster, stripped down almost entirely to his scaled, grey flesh, held no terror for Rannik. This was what she was here to do. It was as necessary to her now as breathing, as the rapid beating of her own adrenaline-charged heart. It was not something she could fight or stop. She darted beneath the roaring blades of a chainaxe, dodged a stumbling grey-clad warrior bleeding from a savage head wound, ducked as a combi-bolter hammered out on full auto next to her. She slammed to a halt against the side of the rack.

‘Your gene-key,’ Te Kahurangi said, looking at her with his bottomless, black eyes. Rannik fumbled for the slip of plastek without saying anything. She had to free him. The Chief Librarian could bring
the God-Emperor’s wrath surging up from the depths. If Rannik only did one more thing before she died, it had to be this.

She swiped the gene-key against the charged magnicles binding the Space Marine’s wrists. They unlocked and disarmed with a thud. Te Kahurangi rolled off the bare metal with a litheness that belied his age. He knocked Rannik aside as he lunged towards his bone staff, still lying where it had fallen from the numb fingers of the unconscious prison boy. As his hand closed around its haft and his psychic powers once more earthed themselves into its reactive stone tip, the scrap of consciousness that had been impelling Rannik was torn from the arbitrator’s mind. The sub-warden cried out in pain and fear as her panicked thoughts reawakened to the chaotic reality surrounding her. The Carcharodons Librarian needed her no longer.

In the few, frenzied seconds in which the Loyalists first materialised in the Centrum Dominus, Cull felt only one emotion – joy. This was what he had been waiting for, the chance to stamp his dominance before the rest of the warband by finally trapping and slaying these arrogant grey predators. The needs of the harvest had paled next to the challenge presented by the Loyalists. And Cull loved nothing more than overcoming challenges.

The Prince of Thorns spun on his heel, Shadraith’s blood still running off his blade. A Loyalist charged him from the door, bolter flaring. The rounds cracked and ricocheted from Cull’s armour, shearing off ceramite thorns. Cull snarled and swept his runesword up to meet the Carcharodon as the Loyalist triggered his bolter’s chainblade combat attachment.

Shenzar loomed over the black-armoured Chaplin who had just slain Skorra. The Terminator had mag-locked his combi-bolter in favour of two spiked power maces, the blunt weapons snapping with enough energy to rival that of the Chaplain’s crozius. While the Loyalist maintained his silence, Shenzar attacked with a vox roar that eclipsed even the scream-audios being broadcast by his brethren. The Terminator’s style of fighting was dictated by his brute bulk and strength – he committed to great swinging blows that smashed cogitators and data lecterns, confident that his armour could absorb any counter-strike.

The Chaplain gave ground, his attention fixed on keeping out of the crackling arcs of the two maces as they split the air before him. Shenzar advanced like an implacable colossus of midnight metal, his every step shuddering the floor underfoot. A warrior with less experience might have been tempted to try to lunge in through the Terminator’s open guard, but the Chaplain knew such a move would have only one outcome – him lying, crumpled and broken, beneath the Chaos Terminator.

Cull turned aside the chainblade lunging for his stomach with a dismissive flick of his runesword, stepping inside the Loyalist’s guard to slam his clenched gauntlet into the Space Marine’s helm. The warrior recoiled, one black lens cracked and the ceramite dented by thorns. Cull followed up with a wicked slash that opened the Loyalist’s cuirass, spilling out a stream of blood and intestines. The Space Marine still tried to fight back, the fatal wound not yet registering with the rest of his genenhanced body. He tore his bolter’s chainblade attachment across Cull’s left pauldron, seeking to slice into the side of his helm, but the thorns trapped and locked it. Cull snarled and ploughed his runesword two-handed through the Space Marine’s breastplate, punching it out through his back. He twisted the curved hilt so the flesh didn’t grip the metal, and ripped his sword free. Impaled and gutted, the Loyalist slumped onto his knees and collapsed against Cull’s legs. The Night Lords prince placed one spiked gauntlet over the dying warrior’s head, as though in some sort of mocking
benediction, before twisting and letting the limp corpse thump to the floor.

Sharr felt the pull of the slaughter around him. The air was thick with the acrid stench of weapon discharges, active disruptor fields and, most maddeningly of all, the metallic tang of blood. It infested the Company Master’s nostrils, passing even his helm’s sealed exterior. Whether it was the actual stink, or his imagination of it, honed by a thousand past encounters, Sharr could not tell. All he knew was that it lent strength and vitality to his limbs, along with a shaking, jaw-clenching need to lash out.

He was done with restraint. He was done with leadership. He was done with being tested. He was not Bail Sharr, Master of the Third Battle Company, any longer. He was Aleph-sixteen-nine the initiate, undertaking his first blooding, his pale features streaked bright red, panting as he quenched the manic frenzy that was his genetic inheritance.

It was the Chaos Terminator that took the brunt of Sharr’s awakened fury. The Raptor he’d engaged had wisely dropped back, slinking like a scavenger beast around the two larger predators as they squared up to each other. He was too slow to intervene when Sharr sprung suddenly into a wild attack, swinging Reaper as though the unwieldy weapon was a perfect example of poise and balance.

The Terminator tried to parry with its mace, but its heavy armour rendered it too slow, and the refractor field that would normally have protected it could do little to stop the whirring, revving death that Sharr unleashed. Reaper thundered down through the Terminator’s helm and didn’t stop until it had carved halfway through its rib plate, the reinforced shark teeth spraying out a stream of gore and scraps of twisted armour. Sharr revved the weapon free and the Terminator went down, painting the quaking floor red.

Sharr advanced over the corpse towards the Raptor, and the Night Lord fell back, in no mood to face the silent, dripping revenant.

On the vox-gallery, Narx and the Loyalist Champion both found the fatal blow. The warrior with the black sword left his guard open for a split second after turning aside a controlled stab by the Night Lord’s executioner. So focused was the young heretic on the killing blow that he lunged again before he realised it was a trap. The power sword plunged into the Loyalist’s stomach. He grunted as the disruptor field bit through armour and then flesh, even as his backward cut took off Narx’s sword arm. For a second the Night Lord simply stared at the sheared limb, his sword still buried in the Loyalist. Then the grey-clad warrior plunged the wicked black edge of his relic sword into Narx’s faceplate, ploughing it through his jaw. The Night Lord fell. The Loyalist released the clamps binding the ancient shield to his other arm and placed his hand on the hilt of the power sword half buried in his lower torso. Teeth gritted as he fought to stay silent, he deactivated the weapon and dragged it free. Then he collapsed onto his knees beside Narx, his blood spilling down onto the fallen Night Lord.

Kordi thrust himself away from the Terminator as it came at him with its chainfist screaming. Assaulting the brute warrior didn’t seem like such a wise decision, but the Carcharodon refused to disengage. He could smell blood. He hungered for it now, needed to see it spilled by his own hand, red on the floor and on his gauntlets. He reached for a fresh magazine as he put a battered cogitator between himself and the traitor. The Night Lord roared, and slammed straight through it, smashing it to sparking metal with a few rending blows. Its shadow loomed over Kordi as he reloaded, charged with murderous intent.
His mother’s arms embraced him, hugging him close. She would never abandon him.

‘Down, brother,’ said Tonga’s voice over the vox. Kordi, his reflexes honed by decades of combat alongside his Fourth Squad brethren, did so without thinking. He heard the shrieking blast of vaporised air, and his armour systems pinged a warning as they detected a heat spike that left the outer ceramite blistering. When he looked up, through a mist of atomised organic matter, the upper half of the Terminator had been reduced to a bubbling mess of flesh and metal.

Kordi rose, scanning for fresh prey, forcing the memories of a life long lost back down.

Te Kahurangi felt power coursing through him. He’d allowed the traitors to believe they were leading him into a trap, and the psychic awakening of Skell had lowered the void shield protecting the Precinct Fortress for long enough for the teleportation assault. Now, he just had to keep Skell alive. He stood over the unconscious boy and swung his force staff in a blurring green-tipped arc, driving back the Furies flocking towards them. Those that remained were all focusing on the room’s cogitator pit, desperate to get at the boy and the last fragment of their master before it slipped away. Te Kahurangi could hear Bar’ghul’s enraged shrieking in his head, but he drove it out, grunting as he slammed his staff into one daemon that swooped too low. More vanished in dark, swirling clouds as the energies binding them to the material plane dissipated. Without the Dead Skin’s rituals or the attention of the Night Lords, their grip on reality was slipping.

Across the control room, Shenzar caught the Chaplain. One of the few Furies not yet banished from the chamber launched itself at the Loyalist from behind. The daemon snatched and scrabbled wildly, clamping its claws around his waist. He spun and swung his crozius in a tight, vicious arc, the holy weapon blasting the daemon back into oblivion. His guard was back up in an instant, but the brief distraction had been more than enough for Shenzar.

The Chaos Terminator champion smashed his mace into the Chaplain’s left pauldron. There was a hideous crunch and the Loyalist went down onto his knees. A swing of Shenzar’s second mace was met by the crozius. There was a blast of power as the conflicting energy fields collided. Servos locked as they kept the two warriors from being thrown apart by the discharge. Shenzar braced his second mace against the crozius while bringing the first back down into the Loyalist’s side. Wordlessly, the Chaplain crumpled. Shenzar slammed one heavy boot down into his back, keeping him pinned while he assessed the melee tearing the control centre apart.

‘You!’ shouted Cull. He gestured with his runesword at the tall Loyalist with the two-handed chainaxe stalking towards Xeron. The sight of his brother’s blood running off the tainted weapon seemed to make the Loyalist pause.

‘Face me, Silent One,’ said Cull, striding through the wreckage. He grinned as he went, still without his helmet, steel fangs gleaming. He had hungered for a challenge such as this. With Shadraith dead there were no more limits. Killing the grey-clad warrior would cement his place within the warband’s shifting hierarchy. The Loyalist turned towards the Prince of Thorns, Xeron using the opportunity to make for the blast doors.

‘I have enjoyed our little games,’ Cull said, casually kicking aside a broken data lectern. ‘I thought the harvest here would prove to be unfulfilling. How wrong I was.’

The Loyalist said nothing, bringing his great chainaxe up into a defensive combat stance, feet squarely planted, the haft of the weapon guarding his breastplate.
‘Why do you and your brothers not speak?’ the young Night Lord asked Sharr. ‘Are you ashamed to be doing your Corpse-God’s work? Did He make you take some sort of ridiculous oath? That’s why I could never fight for Him. Even the pathetic creatures that put all their faith in these weakling daemons are infinitely more free than you’ll ever be.’

Sharr attacked. In an instant the Carcharodon had gone from static, prepared defence to whirring, slashing assault. The shock of such a violent change would have left most prey helpless, but the Night Lord was not so easily caught. He let the first buzzing swing of the chainaxe pass him by, then darted in while Sharr recovered from the miss, swift as a striking viper.

Sharr, too, had been expecting just such a counter. The Company Master pulled his blow in time to use Reaper’s haft to parry Cull’s strike. The Chaos runesword rang off the adamantium shaft of the chainaxe, jarring the arms of both warriors.

Sharr used his greater strength to thrust the Chaos Space Marine back, giving himself room to swing again. Reaper cracked off one of the traitor’s pauldrons, shearing away its thorns but failing to bite deep. The Night Lord responded with a rapier-like thrust that jarred off Sharr’s side, cutting the grey plate right down to his black carapace. Sharr responded the way any Carcharodon would – by attacking even more violently. Reaper struck one, two, three times, in quick succession, the servos in Akia’s old armour grating as they gave Sharr the speed and strength necessary to wield the great weapon with such apparent ease. The Night Lord gave ground, no longer with the lazy, mocking grace of a duellist, but with the haste of someone desperately trying to buy time.

Sharr purposefully drove himself into the traitor, abandoning the last vestiges of defensive poise as he went for the jugular. He turned the Night Lord’s blade aside with Reaper’s haft and snatched him by the gorget with his other hand, dragging him in close. The traitor, still without his helmet, met the black glare of the Carcharodon with a metal-fanged grin.

‘A poor decision, Silent One,’ he said. He triggered his armour’s ancient power coils. Arco-lightning ignited with a crack, a blaze of light shooting out from the nodes in the Night Lord’s spike-studded battleplate. Sharr was flung back by the sudden discharge, his jaw locking as his body went into spasms, Reaper tumbling from his grasp. The ancient weapon gave a throaty growl as its rotor began to decelerate. It skidded across the control room’s floor. Sharr hit the ground a dozen strides from the Night Lord, cracking the rockcrete, his left pauldron and its bonding studs buckling as they took the full force of the impact. He lay there for precious seconds, paralysed, muscles clenched and unresponsive following the shock of the arco-lightning. The traitor laughed and began to pace towards him, his armour crackling.

‘Too confident, Silent One. Too unrestrained. Now, let us see if I can make you scream.’

‘Even if he did, you probably wouldn’t hear it over your own incessant chatter,’ Te Kahurangi snarled. The Chief Librarian had risen from the cogitator pit, Skell cradled unconscious in one arm, staff in the other. The light blazing from its tip had banished the last of the Furies and torn Bar’ghul from reality.

‘I should have let Shadraith kill you before I cut him down,’ the Night Lord sneered, coming to a halt. ‘No matter. You won’t stop me, old man.’

Te Kahurangi didn’t reply. He was muttering under his breath, breathing words unuttered for the better part of a millennium. The light emanating from his staff throbbed in time with the litany, warp lightning flaring and sparking down its haft. The desperate, savage frenzy of the surrounding melee seemed to fade into nothingness as the Chief Librarian centred the energies coruscating around the
Cull realised what was happening. He lunged at the psyker, fangs bared in a snarl. He was too late. With a crash the rockcrete floor beneath him surged upwards, impelled by the Librarian’s will. Stone and metal shattered and reshaped itself around the Night Lord, forming into a vast, jagged maw. It snapped shut around the Prince of Thorns with a crash, hammering him from both sides with the broken fabric of the Precinct Fortress. Then the debris fell, plummeting through the hole torn by its displacement, into an auxiliary armoury room below. Amon Cull was dragged down, the cascade of rubble pounding him into the floor below, shattering his armour and breaking his body. His arco-lightning flared and shorted out, seconds before his bloody remains were buried by collapsing debris.

Shenzar had seen Cull’s fatal fall. Even as the great jaw of broken rockcrete cracked shut around him, the Terminator had abandoned the fallen Chaplain’s prone form and headed for the blast doors. As the bloody slaughter in the Centrum Dominus reached its climax, he stomped down towards the precinct’s inner holding blocks and scanned the gene-key taken from the captured warden primary against the precinct’s maximum-security cell access block. Locking bars and hinges grated as the internal mechanisms swung the reinforced hatch open.

Vorfex crouched within the cell, its darkness stripped away by Shenzar’s preysight. The Raptor champion looked up as the Terminator filled the hatchway. Wordlessly, Shenzar unlocked Vorfex’s helm from his mag-belt and tossed it down.

‘I was right then,’ Vorfex said, looking at his crested helmet.

‘They’re both dead,’ Shenzar rumbled.

‘What of the main offensive, against the junctions?’

‘A stalemate. One has fallen. The remaining three still resist, with casualties mounting on both sides.’

‘And the fleet?’
‘Engaging the Loyalists in high orbit. They can break contact any time we desire.’

‘Then our work here is done, brother,’ Vorfex said, scooping his cracked helmet off the cell’s floor. He locked it down over his gorget and gave it a moment for its auto-senses to awaken. Once they were online he activated the warband-wide vox-frequency.

‘This is Vorfex to all Claw champions. The Flayed Father and the Prince of Thorns are dead. One betrayed the Legion with his base bargains, the other was an arrogant youth who should never have been allowed to rise as far as he did. I am assuming command. Shenzar is with me. If any wish to challenge us then they may do so at an opportune moment, but for now all Claws withdraw to the shuttle bays and prepare for a return to orbit. Let us waste no more time on these grey monsters.’

After a while, acknowledgements began to trickle back from the Claw leaders. They knew better than to attempt to upset the situation – one wrong move could see the remnants of the warband tear itself apart even as it attempted to disengage. Vorfex expected at least two of them – probably Artar and Fexrath – to mount challenges as soon as they returned to the Last Breath. He welcomed them. Try all they might, the warband was his now.

The last of First Kill were fighting to the death in the Centrum Dominus. While they inadvertently covered the retreat, Vorfex and Shenzar left the cell and headed for the shuttle bays. The harvest was over.
Nuritona ripped his chainsword free, arterial blood gouting from the savage wound and splattering across his greaves. The twitching cultist died beneath the boot of Second Squad’s strike leader, whilst his fellow traitors fell beneath the bolter fire of Nuritona’s remaining Tactical Marines.

They had come from the north tunnel, supporting a wild rush of four Chaos Space Marines pounding out of the darkness. Clearly the Devourers of Eighth Squad and junction 27-0 had fallen. It was only the brave counter-attack of the surviving arbitrators that had checked the heretical forces long enough for Nuritona to switch from the eastern tunnel’s barricade to cover the breach. The last arbitrators were all dead, cut down in the savage melee close to where the prisoners were being held. The traitors, though, had been halted.

‘East barricade, report,’ Nuritona snapped into the vox, already moving back towards his original position. He was afraid that having left the entrance to the eastern loco rail defended by only three void brothers, the Chaos Space Marines would have renewed their attack there. It seemed, though, that for once the shadowy killers weren’t on hand to take advantage of the Carcharodons’ weakness.

‘They’ve withdrawn,’ came the reply over the vox. ‘No sign of movement and the sensors are functioning again.’

Nuritona realised the statement was true – his auto-senses were fully online once more. Whatever had been scrambling them was gone.

‘The auspex?’ he demanded.

‘Also functional. It’s not picking up any hostile returns.’

‘It must be a trap,’ Nuritona said. ‘Maintain overwatch.’ He switched channels.

‘Company Master,’ he said. ‘The heretics have retreated.’

Sharr stood perfectly still.

His body was recovering, coming down from its battle-ready state. Adrenaline and combat stimms still flooded his veins. His muscles burned with unused energy, his grip like a vice around the scarred haft of Reaper. He could still smell blood.

Around him the Centrum Dominus mirrored his stillness. Blood dripped slowly from every surface, spreading from the dismembered bodies that covered the broken floor. The cogitators, vox-banks, viewscreens and augur arrays were dead and smashed beyond repair. There was a clatter and crunch as a small part of the collapsed section of the floor fell into the room below, cracking off the pile of debris that was the Chaos champion’s tomb.

Soha was dead, his skull split open by a pair of lightning claws. Sharr had already recovered his precious volkite caliver. Red Tane was alive, but barely. His stomach had been torn and ruptured by a power sword during his duel along the upper vox-gantries. Niko was wounded in half a dozen places. Almost half of Chaplain Nikora’s bones were broken. Three of the four members of Fourth Squad who had come to their aid – Ekara, Haru and Tonga – were dead. Only Strike Veteran Dorthor and the last survivor of Fourth Squad, Kordi, were largely uninjured.

And the Pale Nomad. Te Kahurangi faced Sharr now, deliberately invading his line of sight. The Chief Librarian was still half stripped of his armour, his pale flesh streaked with blood. Little of it was his own. In one arm he held the boy he’d come to Zartak to retrieve, still unconscious and barely alive.

‘Reports from the junctions,’ Sharr said, his voice coming out flat and dead, betraying nothing of the ongoing urge to rend and tear that still shuddered through his body. He knew from experience that the
Blindness would leave only reluctantly. ‘All squads are reporting enemy withdrawals.’
‘I can sense their retreat,’ Te Kahurangi confirmed. ‘Including the ones that escaped from here. They
are headed for the shuttle bays, and we are not enough to stop them.’
‘I will order the fleet to pursue.’
‘They will likely outrun us. Besides, they are not what we are here for.’
‘So I have been told, many times,’ Sharr replied. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Slowly,
his secondary heart decelerated to a complete stop. His body shuddered slightly as the last of the
stimms flushed from his system. He felt a sudden tiredness, an ache that he thrust angrily aside.
‘Very well then,’ he said. ‘It is time.’ He opened the company-wide vox-channel, and patched
through to the *White Maw*, still engaging the smaller heretic fleet in orbit above.
‘This is *Reaper* to all callsigns. The sub-surface is secure. The heretics have been purged. Begin the
Red Tithe.’
Day 93, Zartak local.
God-Emperor preserve me. The butchery in the lower refectorium is as nothing compared to what has occurred within the Centrum Dominus. The place is a ruin, populated only by slaughtered, eviscerated remains. Words fail me. The auspex has just pinged for the first time since making planetfall. I am taking Sister Alesia and following its trail immediately. I pray that whatever still lives down here isn’t the same thing that unleashed this madness.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.
CHAPTER XVIII

Rannik lived. She stood near the middle of the Centrum Dominus, close to the very spot where, barely two days earlier, she’d begged Warden Primary Sholtz to include her in the operation to secure *Imperial Truth*. The place was almost unrecognisable now – bloody, broken and littered with wreckage. The surviving Adeptus Astartes stalked through the twisted, dripping carnage, retrieving their fallen brothers and delivering killing blows to those traitors still showing signs of life.

Rannik didn’t move. She barely had the strength to stand. Her body was numb, and her thoughts sluggish. Her skull throbbed painfully. It felt as though fingers had been probing around inside her head, clawing at her brain.

A shadow fell across her, obscuring the light filtering in through the open blast doors. A shiver ran through her exhausted body. The two Space Marines, the grey one with the crested helm and the psyker with the staff, stood before her.

‘We require all of the remaining prisoners,’ said the grey one. He was splattered in slowly congealing viscera, yet his voice remained as level and devoid of fatigue as when he’d first addressed Rannik. ‘We will begin to remove them via your Precinct Fortress’ shuttle bays within the hour. It may take up to two days, local time, to evacuate them all.’

‘You can’t,’ Rannik said, but her denial was without conviction.

‘By the edicts of the Forgotten One, we can. We have already Tithed this world once. And we shall do it again. It is the work of the Void Father. Do not attempt to impede us.’

The psyker, his pale flesh streaked red, reached out towards Rannik’s brow, but the arbitrator flinched back. The Space Marine dropped his hand.

‘We are the protectors of humanity,’ he said instead, fixing Rannik with his black stare. ‘And its judges. When the shadows strike, we strike back. From the Outer Dark we come, and into its depths we shall return. The black sea beyond the stars calls to us.’

‘Do you have no home?’ Rannik asked. ‘No world you call your own? Only emptiness?’

‘We did once,’ the psyker replied. ‘But it is far from here, and we have not been welcome for a very long time. I believe we never will be, though many of my brothers would disagree. We cannot go back, but nor can we go on without the materials necessary to fulfil our ancient vows. Weapons and armour, fuel and food, the Grey Tithe. And flesh, the Red. We need hands for our ships, and we need suitable aspirants who can compete for the honour of becoming void brothers. That is why we are here. We have come to exercise the right given to us on the first Day of Exile, and take a Red Tithe from Zartak.’

‘All of us?’ Rannik asked.

‘Few enough have survived as it is,’ the grey one said. ‘We came here for a Tithing, and instead
fought to the death. What remains of the prison population will have to be enough.’

‘Will you take me as well?’

‘You are a member of the Adeptus Terra, an active servant of the Void Father,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘The edicts granted to us do not permit such a thing. The scum in your cells, however, have forfeited their rights. Aboard our Nomad Predation Fleet they may at least earn redemption and final peace, beneath the lash.’

‘You may do as you wish,’ the grey giant went on. ‘You and your brother. The mortis-cry of your astropaths should draw a response soon, and assistance will arrive.’

‘My brother?’ Rannik said, not understanding. ‘There is one other survivor like you, an arbitrator. He is in the main chapel. He did not respond to us when we freed him. He seems damaged.’

‘You should go to him,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘We will not require your assistance any longer.’

Rannik opened her mouth, but realised she had nothing to say. After a moment both giants turned in unison and walked away. Their fallen brothers recovered, the Space Marines were leaving the chamber. Rannik saw one of them carrying a sedated prison boy. She looked away, a familiar sense of nausea curdling in her stomach.

She didn’t know how long she remained in the Centrum after the giants left. At some point she found that she’d ascended two levels to the empty Precinct Fortress’ primary chapel. The halls and corridors were quiet. The faint sound of sobbing echoed from within the chapel’s half-dome. Beyond the threshold all was dark. Rannik unlocked her stab lumen and stepped inside.

Even after all that she’d experienced, the stench still hit her hard. Her boots squelched through something wet and yielding. She didn’t look down, but kept the focused beam of light dancing across the far walls. The once-holy air of the chapel was now cold and full of death-stink. The sobbing grew louder.

Her light picked out the source of the noise. A figure was hunched before the broken remains of what had once been the chapel’s altar, at the far end of the semicircular room. Rannik approached, ignoring what she knew she was treading on, ignoring the tears running down her cheeks. The figure looked up as Rannik drew closer, squinting and grimacing in the beam of light.

It was the warden primary. His ageing, grizzled face was pale and lined with horror. He whimpered as Rannik stopped, and clasped his arms round the sub-warden’s legs, like a child.

‘Sir,’ Rannik croaked. ‘Sir… I have to report…’

Sholtz began to sob again, louder this time, hands gripping Rannik’s mag-belt.

‘The prisoners,’ Rannik began to say, then realised what the warden was doing. Wailing, he snatched Rannik’s autopistol from its lock.

‘No!’ shouted Rannik.

A single gunshot echoed back from the empty rafters of the chapel.
Day 93, Zartak local.
The auspex has tracked its reading to the Precinct Fortress’ main chapel. It’s definitely a life signal, albeit faint. If there is indeed a survivor he may possess vital knowledge. We must find whoever did this, track them, and deliver the God-Emperor’s judgement. This must never be allowed to happen again.
Signed,
Interrogator Augim Nzogwu.

+ ++ Gene scan complete + ++
+ ++ Access granted + ++
+ ++ Beginning mem-bank entry log + ++
+ ++ Date check, 3682875.M41 + ++

+ ++ Mem-bank entry log ends + ++

+ ++ Thought for the Day: Fear the judgement of the righteous + ++
EPILOGUE

The coral chamber was inimical to human life. The air was heavy with toxins and choke gas, and every surface, from the cold surgical slabs to the blades of the incisors and buzz saws, had been treated with ecologies of deadly bacteria. It was a place designed to kill, to test human endurance to its limits, and from it new life was born.

In the centre of the chamber, upon a slab illuminated by a heavy, wheeled multi-lumen and surrounded by dead-fleshed surgical servitors, Apothecary Tama worked. He did so in silence, observing the Void Vow he’d upheld for a century. The only noise came from the buzz of his blade, the crack of bones and the wet, precise slitting of flesh.

Te Kahurangi stood in the shadows near the door, his notched force staff in one hand, watching the Third Company’s Apothecary operate. Occasionally his black eyes would dart to the gently humming vitae-support systems the patient was hooked up to. The signs blipped slowly across the viewscreen, the subject hovering on the fine line between life and death. He was standing on the edge, staring into oblivion. And oblivion was beckoning.

Perhaps he was pushing the genhancement surgery too soon? But no, the Chief Librarian told himself. The subject had been almost dead. He had to undergo the first implantations, before he lost the tenuous grip he held on life. The other aspirants would have longer to go before they received the first of their ancient gene-seed – of the thousands of youths brought in by the Red Tithe, Te Kahurangi doubted three dozen would rise to become numbered Tenth Company initiates.

Another figure entered the chamber, deep in the armoured innards of the White Maw. It was Bail Sharr. The Company Master nodded a silent greeting to Te Kahurangi, and stopped alongside him to observe Tama. The Apothecary, his bared, tattooed forearms slick with blood, was seemingly oblivious to the two onlookers.

‘He still lives then,’ said Sharr.
‘For now. He is entering a critical phase.’

‘The Nomad Predation Fleet is hailing us,’ Sharr said, eyes not leaving the operation. ‘I will deliver my report in person to Lord Tyberos.’

‘I have assembled a separate data file for the Red Wake which I will provide you with before you leave,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘It details all the assistance you gave me.’

The two Carcharodons were both still fully armoured, and spoke over their helmet’s sealed vox-link, so as not to disturb Tama’s work.

‘Was it worth it?’ Sharr asked, gesturing towards the surgical slab. ‘Was he worth it?’
‘The Tithe was a success,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘The slaver shuttles have brought in over thirty thousand souls, enough to fill the holds of the Nomad Predation Fleet. Gunnery crew, enginarium
labourers, Chapter-serfs, new overseers and bondsmen. Enough for the moment, anyway.

‘It irks me that the traitorous filth escaped. We should have slaughtered them all.’

‘Kahu’s methods were flawed, but he had the right understanding – we were not there to fight. The Tithe was our objective, as was retrieving the boy. Both of those we achieved. The heretics will have left with few prisoners of their own, and their lords have been slain. Their daemon master is thwarted once more.’

‘At great cost,’ Sharr pointed out. ‘Only thirty-seven of my void brothers remain, and few of them uninjured.’

‘We all know about great cost,’ Te Kahurangi said, and for the briefest moment Sharr thought he caught a hint of sorrow in the ancient Librarian’s rasping voice.

‘That is true. I will report that cost to Lord Tyberos. And pray for his survival.’ He nodded at the surgical slab before turning to leave.

Te Kahurangi remained, watching Tama’s silent work. Watching as the Apothecary sewed and stitched and grafted in the first of the gene-seed implants that would eventually transform Mika Doren Skell into a void brother of the Carcharodon Astra.

She lived.
She could hear voices.
The voices were growing louder.
There was light.
She cringed and whimpered, and realised how dry her throat was.
She tried to move, but could not.
Hands grasped her, rolled her over, right over onto the rotting corpses she’d lain down amongst to die.

‘Hold her up, Sister,’ said a gruff voice. ‘She’s still alive.’

‘Barely,’ said a second voice, this one female.
‘Give me your lumen,’ said the first.
The light intensified. She moaned and blinked, her body limp. She was dimly aware of a face, its features lost in the blinding light.

‘My name is Interrogator Augim Nzogwu,’ said the gruff voice. ‘Adept of Lord Inquisitor Rozenkranz of the Ordo Hereticus, Segmentum Pacificus Divisio. Can you identify yourself, arbitrator?’

She dredged up memories, thoughts she felt as though she hadn’t needed for years, ideas that weren’t her own. A name. An identity. The thing she had been before all this. She found the words and forced them out past parched lips.

‘Rannik.’

‘What did she say?’ asked the female voice.

‘I don’t know,’ said the first. There was a scuffle of boots, a creak of leather. The light flicked off, and darkness embraced her once more.

‘Bring her.’
By the authority of the God-Emperor’s Most Holy Inquisition, note is hereby passed to the Imperial Commanders of the Ethika subsector that the Inquisitorial quarantine protocol which has been in effect across the Zartak system for the past year, Terran standard, is hereby lifted, effective immediately. Repopulation of the penal mines of Zartak is once again fully authorised.

Directive ends

Thought for the Day: Darkness is to be destroyed or embraced, never feared
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robbie MacNiven is a highland-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. He has written the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Legacy of Russ* as well as the short stories ‘Redblade’, ‘A Song for the Lost’ and ‘Blood and Iron’ for Black Library. His hobbies include re-enacting, football and obsessing over Warhammer 40,000.
An extract from *The Reaping Time*. 

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**CARCHARODONS**

**THE REAPING TIME**

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

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**EXTRACT**
The guildmasters were terrified. Their postures were stiff, their eyes darting, sweat slicking their pale, wrinkled flesh. One old man, stooped beneath the weight of his own sagging fat, was twitching uncontrollably. The motion juddered grotesquely through his heavy jowls, growing more pronounced the more he tried to hide it. Another balding, rheumy-eyed figure’s skeletal hands were clenching and unclenching on the grip of his silver pick-cane. A third was clutching her ermine ruff so hard her scrawny, velvet-draped limbs were shaking.

The entire assembly, packed onto the walkway of an observation gantry, cringed at the presence of the giants towering over them.

They were monsters, primordial terrors clad from head to foot in battleplate the colour of ash. They reeked of weapons unguents and a cloying, alien scent that turned the humans’ stomachs. None had moved since stepping onto the gantry. Their motionless state spoke of a razor-edged, predatory patience.

Eventually, one of the ashen giants spoke.

‘These are all of them? All the young?’

None of the guildmasters answered. For a moment, nothing happened. There was a click. Then, abruptly, one of the giants lunged.

For something so large, it moved with terrifying speed. Its bone staff shattered the skull of the fat, twitching guilder. Those around recoiled from the splattering of brains and blood. Without hesitation, the other giants lashed out.

The screaming started. It didn’t last long.

The figure at the heart of the coral chamber woke with a start. He bit back a cry, fists clenching and shaking around his force staff.

It had been no dream. His kind were incapable of something so human, so innocent. No, this was the third time he had seen the exact same scene – the exact same slaughter – play out since the ship had broken in-system. It was a warning. It could be nothing else.

The figure shifted his cross-legged stance fractionally, the incisor-charms hanging from the leather bands around his wrists rattling. Without his etched blue battleplate and psychic hood, the true horror of his ancient form was revealed. The simple black shift did little to hide the ivory whiteness of his flesh, or the ugly grey dентicle-scabs that blotched his elbow joints and neck. It was an affliction, the result of his unique and degraded genetic inheritance. Even more startling were the figure’s eyes. They were utterly black, without iris or sclera, as pitiless and unfathomable as the void that was his home.

The figure drew in a long, slow breath. Should he inform Company Master Akia? Not doing so
would be a dereliction of duty. But telling him ran complex risks. They could not afford the dangers of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with the Tithe.

After a while the vox bead in his ear clicked. The figure known to his brethren as Te Kahurangi – the Pale Nomad – listened for a moment, then uncrossed his legs and stood.

The time for contemplation was over. The reaping time had arrived.

Click here to buy *The Reaping Time*. 
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