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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.
PART ONE - HARMONY
Within the roiling, too-bright tides of the hell-sea known as the Eye of Terror, a shoal of great beasts scattered in sudden alarm. Gossamer leviathans, made from tangles of warp stuff and forgotten dreams, thrashed away from the marauder that had appeared in their midst. Sleek and deadly, the Vesalius passed through the pall of their panic without hesitation, pursuing its own course through the empyrean.

The ancient, Gladius-class frigate cut through the chromatic depths of the sea of souls like a scalpel, safely shrouded in its flickering Geller field. Its silvery hull was scraped free of any exterior insignia or colour, beyond the strange, dark stains left by its passage through the crashing waves of the immaterium. Amethyst lightning played across the scarred hull, seeming to crouch and claw at the vessel’s turret array, and azure flames spread in its wake, briefly coalescing into impossibly vast, gibbering faces, before fading back into the audient nothing from which they had sprung.

The Vesalius was not alone in its flight. Dark shapes, sector-tall and system-wide, surged behind it, running across the ever-shifting starscape in pursuit. The wolves of the immaterium were lean and a-thirst and always on the prowl. They fed on unlucky ships and worlds alike, gobbling souls by the million within the incomprehensible hunting grounds of the Eye. Their shuddering howls, like the trans-sonic death-cries of distant stars, rang across the empyrean as they loped through gaseous nebulae and the crumbled remnants of a thousand worlds.

The frigate ignored these titan horrors. Once, the artificial spirit that animated its internal systems might have felt something akin to panic, at being pursued by impossible predators. But now, the fell intelligence that inhabited the Vesalius felt neither fear nor concern. It was as much a predator, in its own way, as its pursuers, and they posed no threat to it, so long as the Geller field functioned. It plunged on, unconcerned, unaffected.

A scalpel, slicing cosmic flesh.
Arrian Zorzi stood on the *Vesalius*’ command deck and watched reports flicker across the hololithic readouts. The lower decks and corridors echoed with weapons-fire and the cries of the injured. Alarm klaxons and proximity alerts wailed, adding to the omnipresent cacophony. Warning lights bathed entire decks in dull crimson tones as the crew went to war with itself. The croaking voices of the servitors wired into the majority of the stations merged into a monotonous susurrus. His teeth itched with annoyance as he parsed the droning updates. ‘Sealing bulkhead on B-deck. Arming internal defensive array. Alert...alert...alert...’

‘Damn them,’ the Apothecary murmured, without any particular rancour. ‘Their sense of timing is unfortunate.’ He glanced at his companion. ‘Wouldn’t you say, Saqqara?’

‘I’d say it is excellent,’ Saqqara Thresh said. ‘They seized their moment with impeccable haste. I would congratulate them, were circumstances different.’

Arrian chuckled mirthlessly. ‘What’s stopping you?’

Saqqara looked at him. Arrian laughed.

The two were a study in contrast, for all that they were both Space Marines. Arrian was the larger of the two. While his power armour might once have been the blue and white of the Twelfth Legion, the pitted plates of ceramite were now almost all a uniform, bare grey, where they were not stained a dull, reddish brown.

A sextet of cracked and yellowing skulls hung artfully arranged from his chest-plate, wreathed in chains, their cortical implants dangling like some barbaric tabard. More chains covered his torso and arms, as if he sought to keep something within himself securely contained. Beneath these chains, he bore the accoutrements of his rank – including an ancient narthecium, the runnels of its diamond-tipped drill caked in dried blood.
Saqqara, on the other hand, had never been an Apothecary, or anything close. There was not, so far as Arrian was aware, an official designation for what the Word Bearer was. What did you call one who wielded daemons the way another might use a blade? Other than unpleasant. Livid suture scars marked the Word Bearer’s exposed flesh, following the curve of his skull and the tight line of his jaw.

He was clad in battered crimson power armour. The plates were covered in line upon line of cramped, curling script where they were not adorned with blasphemous iconography or fluttering streamers of brittle parchment. The helmet magnetically clamped to his belt was similarly marked. Strange bottles of clay and glass hung from his armour, each one sealed with wax and marked with warding sigils. Within them, the indistinct shapes of captive Neverborn coiled and slithered, impatient for release. Saqqara idly stroked the bottles as he studied the readouts alongside Arrian.

‘Nervous, Saqqara?’ Arrian continued, not looking at the Word Bearer. ‘Afraid that today is the day you finally meet those gods you so cherish?’

‘No,’ Saqqara said flatly. ‘Death is the greatest gift the gods can bestow.’

‘Really? You’ve never seemed all that eager to accept it before now.’ Arrian turned. ‘Has something changed? Or have you simply grown a spine, at long last?’ The jibe was half-hearted. In truth, Saqqara was no more a coward than Arrian himself. Fanatical, egotistical, annoying – certainly. But a coward? No.

These days, the accusation did not even make him bridle, as it might once have done. Instead, Saqqara simply laughed. ‘Perhaps you are the one who is nervous, Arrian. His death – his final death – would confer a most horrid freedom upon you, would it not, war hound?’

Arrian frowned. ‘He is not dead.’

‘No? Then where is he?’ The Word Bearer looked at him. ‘What would you do, I wonder, with no master to trot behind? Would you at last embrace the destiny of all your misbegotten brotherhood, and sink into the red warmth of Khorne’s affections?’

Arrian studied him, palms resting on the pommels of the twin Falax blades sheathed at his waist. ‘There is no Khorne, hierophant. No Slaanesh. Only opposing natural forces, and the fools who ascribe them greater purpose than they deserve.’ The words sounded hollow, even to him. He lacked the Chief Apothecary’s certainty.

*And more than that, dog-brother. You have neither the wit nor wisdom of your master.*

‘Hush, brother,’ Arrian murmured, tapping Briaeus’ skull in warning. His dog-brother was the most vocal of the dead, as he had been in life. ‘You lost the right to chastise me for lack of wisdom the day you took your first step on the eightfold path.’ Arrian alone of his cohort had never made obeisance before the Skull Throne. Though the Butcher’s Nails sparked and snarled within his mind, a strict regimen of chemical calmatives kept the worst of the pain at bay. Occasionally, he allowed himself to overdose, just to see what it was like on the other side of madness. But never too often. A little pain was good. It kept his feet to his chosen path.
He needed that focus now, perhaps more so than ever before. Only a focused mind had hope of navigating the current situation.

The coup had not been unexpected. Sudden, yes. Fierce. But not unforeseen. Such was the nature of the Traitor Legions. Treachery was in their very name and nestled in every heart, whatever loyalties they might profess. They were the cast-off remnants of the greatest army to ever stalk the stars, and they had shed the ancient, instinctive discipline that once guided them, as eagerly as they had their oaths to the Emperor.

But just because something is foreseen does not mean that it can be countered easily. This particular uprising was akin to a recurrent inflammation, swelling slowly over the course of years and months, only to shrink and rise again.

They – the Chief Apothecary, rather – had collected the pitiful remnants of the 12th Millennial, Third Legion several centuries earlier, in the aftermath of the Lugganath raid. In the intervening decades, the hundred or so Emperor’s Children left to the cohort had made themselves useful. An army, even a small one, came in handy in Eyespace.

But their dissatisfaction had grown steadily, once their exultation at survival wore off. Occasionally, one or two might try something, mostly out of boredom, but little came of it. This, however, was not some display of hedonistic rebellion. This time, they wanted the ship and everything on it. If the Chief Apothecary had been here… but he wasn’t.

Arrian took a calming breath. By rights, he should have been in the ship’s apothecarium, overseeing the necessary procedures. Instead, he was forced to deal with a band of petulant sybarites, his only allies the crew and his fellow Apothecaries. And Saqqara, of course. The thought made him smile. A miniaturised fragmentation detonator, keyed to the Chief Apothecary’s brain activity, had been surgically implanted in the Word Bearer’s skull. So long as Fabius Bile’s mind was functional, so was Saqqara. It provided quite the incentive, and Saqqara was nothing if not a born survivor.

The crunch of heavy ceramite boots on the steps leading up to the command deck alerted him to the arrival of another survivor. One sadly less biddable than Saqqara.

‘Well – any word?’ the newcomer demanded.

Skalagrim Phar was bare-headed, his scarred features hidden beneath a wild tangle of grey-streaked hair and beard. Worn and faded Cthonian glyph-markings had been etched into his black battleplate. He had once served at Horus’ pleasure, and then, later, as the Master of the apothecarion on Maeleum, before Fabius Bile had made him a better offer. When the Third had destroyed the fortress of Monument and carted away the remains of the Warmaster, Skalagrim had accompanied them.

That Skalagrim had been so willing to throw over his brothers did not endear him to some among the Consortium. Arrian himself bore Skalagrim no particular ill will at the moment. But neither did he trust him. One who’d turned once might well do so again, if it suited him. The Sons of Horus legionary was a scrambler, always looking for the next advantage, the next opportunity. Anything to stay one step ahead of those who wanted him dead, and his hearts offered up to the restless ghost of the Warmaster.
‘Have they managed to sweep yet another deck clean of life?’ Skalagrim continued.
‘No. So far they’ve contained their tantrum to below the gunnery decks. Nothing down there but monsters and their prey.’

There were whole tribes – kingdoms, even – of mutants lurking in the deep places of the ship. They venerated the engines with a devotion equal to any Mechanicum acolyte, and waged bloody wars in service to the voices they heard within the omnipresent rumbling. Right now, he hoped that the engine-gods were telling them to repel the purple-clad intruders who stalked their kingdom of creaking gantries and rust.

‘You should let me go down there and kill them, war hound,’ Skalagrim said, scratching one tattooed cheek. ‘I will pry the valuable bits from their battleplate first, of course. Waste not, want not, as our absent chieftain so often reminds us.’ He patted the diamond-toothed chainaxe nestled in the crook of one black-plated arm. While he wore the accoutrements of an Apothecary, he preferred to perform surgery in the Cthonian fashion – bloodily and sloppily.

Arrian looked at the former reaver. ‘If I unleash you, they may well kill you,’ he said. ‘Perhaps not immediately, but soon enough. And then I will be one warrior short when I might need you most.’

‘And when will that be?’ Skalagrim looked around the command deck. ‘When will we strike back at them? Or are you content to allow them to pillage our ship at their leisure?’

‘Our ship?’

Skalagrim snorted. ‘Fine. His ship. But he is dead and we are alive, and I would like to keep it that way. And that means—’

‘Following my orders, brother. I am in command while the Chief Apothecary is indisposed.’

‘Dead,’ Skalagrim said.

‘Not dead enough,’ Saqqara interjected. He tapped the side of his skull. ‘If he were, I would be as well, remember?’ He smiled nastily. ‘Though, given who you’ve left in charge of the apothecarion, he might well be soon enough.’

A quiet cough wiped the smile from the Word Bearer’s face. Arrian turned, feeling something akin to relief. ‘Igori. You yet live. He will be pleased, when he awakens.’

‘All I do, I do in his name, Honoured Arrian,’ the old woman said, as she strode onto the command deck surrounded by her kin, lovers and children.

‘It’s a veritable family affair,’ Skalagrim barked, baring his teeth at the newcomers. A normal human would have cowered in fear. These returned the gesture. Though they looked human, they were not. Or, rather, they were the epitome of the human. The apex of the species, wrought from raw flesh by the hands of the one they called Benefactor. Gland-hounds. Angel-hunters.

Devils incarnate, by any other name.

The pale, malformed members of the *Vesalius*’ crew were scattered before them, like
vermin before hungry felids. And the hungriest of them all was their matriarch, Igori. She was old now, her hair the colour of ice, her skin tight over muscle and bone. All excess flesh carved away by time’s passage. She still wore the battered fatigues and battle-armour that had carried her through the corkscrew streets of Sublime and the wraithbone corridors of Lugganath, still wore her necklace of Adeptus Astartes teeth – heavier now, with new additions, click-clacking against her chest.

Her hand rested on the eldar shuriken pistol thrust through her belt, as she stopped before Arrian. She tossed off a lazy salute. ‘We have collected three more glands, cousin,’ she said, smiling. She spread her long, muscular arms. ‘Three more false warriors dead, to be reborn by his hand, in more pleasing shapes.’

Her pack set up an ululation at her words. A primal shriek of joy that set the beast within Arrian snarling. Not in pleasure, but in warning. He studied them through hooded eyes, noting the enhanced musculature, the chiselled, too-perfect features – like statues come to life. Though these statues were dressed in scavenged bits of battleplate and mismatched fatigues, rather than the finery of better days.

Skalagrim clapped. ‘You do him proud, curs. But shouldn’t you be in your kennel, growling over scraps? We are too busy to play with you at the moment.’

Igori fixed him with a bland glare. ‘We come to make our report to the Master of the apothecarion. That you are here as well is irrelevant.’

Skalagrim grinned. ‘I could make it so, if you like.’ He ran a thumb across the diamond teeth of his chainaxe.

‘She will kill you,’ Arrian said. ‘They would pull you down in an instant, and render you to your component parts. If that is how you wish to depart this life, do so elsewhere. I have a coup to put down.’ He looked at Igori. ‘Report.’

‘We have herded them into the flesh market, as you commanded. Most of them are there now. Safety in numbers. There are a few others scattered throughout the ship. My kin hunt these, as is our right. The others we have left for you, Honoured Arrian.’

Skalagrim chuckled at the honorific. Arrian ignored him. As the Chief Apothecary’s equerry, the Gland-hounds afforded him a certain amount of respect. He had hunted alongside them more than once, to satiate those urges that his chemical concoctions could not. Those occasions had taught him to respect the New Men, as even their creator did not. The Chief Apothecary saw them as children, or worse. But Arrian now knew that they were anything but.

In the dark and the quiet, a new race had come into the universe. The first generations of New Men had been made, augmentation by augmentation. Trial and error. But now they needed no fleshcrafter’s knife to grow their numbers. Igori was mother – aye, and grandmother – to her successors. Her sisters and brothers, those few who had survived as long as she, were the same. One pack had split into two, two into four, four into eight. Now an army prowled the silent spaces of the Vesalius, awaiting the moment the command came and they were unleashed to hunt their favoured prey.
‘Good,’ he said, after a moment’s consideration. In the silence, the dead voiced their opinion. *Good, he says... We are thirsty, brother... will you let us drink?*

‘Yes,’ he said, stroking the skulls of his brothers. ‘Yes.’ It was always best to have a consensus. He gestured. ‘Rouse the packs, Igori. The Twelfth Millennial has outstayed its welcome.’

He flexed his hands in anticipation, as his dead brothers whispered in satisfaction.

‘It is time to hunt.’

**Fabius Bile was dead.**

He had been dead before, and would be again. Such was the nature of the universe, and his place in it. Death was not the end. Instead, for him it was akin to an enforced rest. A period of quiet inactivity, during which his mind turned in on itself, like some ancient mollusc seeking the safety of its shell. In death, he could explore the great storehouses of knowledge within himself at his leisure. It was almost a relief.

Yet, beneath this relief was the sure and certain awareness that the universe would press on without him. That events would play out and spiral into unpredictable patterns, possibly endangering the work of ages. All for want of a steady hand and a firm mind. That too was the nature of the universe. The centre could not hold. And anarchy was ever one moment in the future. Inevitable and inexorable. Only by his will could it be held at bay. Or so he told himself, in quiet moments of indulgence.

In truth, he knew that he could no more hold back the tide of entropy than a king might hold back the sea. Everything fell apart. Change was the only constant in an inconstant universe. It was a fire that would devour all things, leaving naught but ashes in its wake. But after every fire, there came growth. What had once been, could be again. Stronger. Hardier. Better able to weather perennial cosmic conflagration.

These were among the certainties that comforted Fabius in the grey stretch between death and life. He – his mind, at least, the part of him that was still aware, despite the breakdown of his biological functions – wandered through corridors of stone and shadow. He could taste lightning, and the stink of wet dog. Old memories, these. Older than the man he was, squatting at the deepest depths of his psyche. He heard snatches of songs, and the drip of voices, their words worn smooth and unintelligible by time.

As he wandered, he wondered. How had he died this time? Not through violence, he thought. Those deaths left a mark, a red haze over the grey. No, his body had simply given out. They did so with more regularity these days, consumed from within by a blight beyond even his capacity to eliminate. A mote on the heart of eternity, eating it inside out.

Once, the blight had been the aleph of his existence. It nestled within the gene-seed of the Emperor’s Children, flourishing unseen until the moment it began to devour its host. Only by his efforts had it been prevented from utterly obliterating the Third Legion, in the early days of the Great Crusade.
Even so, they’d been whittled down to scarce two hundred in number. Then had come Fulgrim, and the infusion of fresh, untainted gene-seed. Or so they’d thought. But the blight was as hardy as the warriors it afflicted. It had rallied, spreading through the new recruits like a scouring flame, despite his best efforts. He felt a sudden weariness, as if his thoughts were wrapped in heavy chains. His first failure – and his greatest. The echoes of which still haunted him.

As far as he knew, he was the last sufferer of that scourge. Perhaps it was because he was the last of his Legion as yet untainted by the touch of the warp. Cursed by his own purity. A cruel jest, but then the universe knew no other kind. He laughed bitterly, the sound of it echoing strangely in this place of dreams and nightmares.

The echoes of that laugh stretched, joining present and past. He followed the sound, tracing his way through his memories. Ghosts swept past him, their faces blurred. He’d known them once, but with every passing century, every death and rebirth, he lost a bit more of who he had been. A mind was not an infinite storehouse, whatever some claimed. Soon, he might not even remember where this place had been – or what.

He stopped and reached up to touch his head. It had begun to ache, a sure sign that his time here was coming to an end. Even here, pain brought clarity. As he rubbed his skull, he caught sight of a familiar face among the wandering ghosts. One that was not blurred. It was as sharp and as vivid as the day they’d met. An old face. The face of a man who had never been young.

He could not recall the old man’s name. Perhaps he hadn’t had one. That was always a possibility with the lower gene-castes. They consoled themselves with nonsensical designations, assorted numbers and letters that meant little outside the meat-crèches of their creation. The old man had served his family as a retainer – a horse-leech, Fabius thought, though he did not recall his family owning any horses.

He had been stooped and thin, but powerful. Like a tree, hardening even as it withered, with a face like a knothole, and lank, greying hair that tumbled down about his hunched shoulders like smoke. What stuck most in the memory were his hands – artificial. Archaic. Ancient, clicking spidery things. Skeletal and unnerving in their eerie grace. A triumph of biomechanics.

He had made such curious toys with those hands, that old man. Silvery spheres that hummed gently as they carved strange patterns on the air. The tiny homunculi, made from clockwork and wood, that waged mock-war at a single twitch from one cybernetic finger. But most wondrous of all were his chimeras. Scaly cats with stinger-tipped tails, and bipedal dogs clad in specially tailored finery were among the most common, but there were others. Each more monstrous than the last. More beautiful.

The old man had taught him much, about the arts of meat and blade. How to stretch muscle and reshape bone, for the sheer joy of creation. How to dull pain, and increase pleasure, so that his creations did not writhe unnecessarily beneath the knife. The memories flowed strongly now. Vivid and sharp. Just like the old man’s knives.
Using these lessons, Fabius had trained a selection of white mice to dance and to duel, for the amusement of his parents. Dressed in minuscule finery, they mimicked the blood-feuds of the great houses of Europa. Tiny blades clicked in a skilful rhythm as he practised his latest routine. One mouse drew blood on another, and the wounded rodent squealed and launched itself at its attacker, teeth bared. Even then, he felt the flash of frustration and anguish as his creations tore each other apart in a bestial frenzy. No matter how much he screamed, or activated the tiny control nodes he’d implanted in them, they would not heed him.

And so, they’d died. Again and again. Though he’d shed few tears, and only in private, he had been inconsolable. Only the old man had thought to even attempt it. Then, what else could one expect of such a lowborn creature?

‘Do you know why you failed, boy?’ A grating voice, that. Like the scrape of a spade through dry soil. One finger reached out to prod a tiny corpse clad in silks and ruffles. ‘The beast flesh. The stubborn beast flesh, boy. It creeps back. It always comes back. No matter how much flesh you strip away or alter, you cannot change the soul of a thing.’ The man’s cybernetic hand clenched, sparks dripping from the clicking joints. A metal digit dug painfully into his chest. ‘And only the soul matters, in the end.’

The boy he had been nodded, knowing the wisdom of those words, even at such a tender age. A good lesson. And, as it turned out, the final one. A day later, he left home to join the rest of the flesh-tithe, bound for the Terran holdings of what would become the Third Legion. A children’s crusade, bound for a land – and a life – less than holy. A land where the old man’s lessons had served him well.

As they still did.

The old man, the room, himself, it all began to fade, then. The ache grew into a sharp pain. He touched his face, and fingers came away red. ‘At last,’ he murmured.

Fabius awoke from his dreams of the past to find a diseased gargoyle looking down at him. Not the most pleasant of sights, nor the one he’d expected. ‘I have asked you not to stand so close to me, Khorag. Especially when I have open wounds.’

‘My apologies, Chief Apothecary. Your physiognomy fascinates me.’ Khorag Sinj stepped back. The pallid, weathered plates of his ancient Cataphractii Tactical Dreadnought armour rustled like loose flesh. ‘Still, the sleeper awakens,’ he wheezed, clouds of miasmic incense billowing up from the cracked vents and ruptured hoses of his helmet. ‘Mind intact, then? All neurons firing correctly, are they?’ A slobbering sigh. ‘Good, good.’

Khorag was one of the few remaining Apothecaries of the 14th Legion. Nurgle’s chosen rarely needed medical treatment of any description, and the former Grave Warden had abandoned his brothers, and the services of Calas Typhon, to travel down darker avenues of research as a member of Fabius’ Consortium.

‘You performed the operation,’ Fabius said, somewhat shakily. ‘You?’ The thought of
those diseased fingers prying about inside his skull sent a chill through him. There was no telling what sort of effluvia was even now floating within him.

‘At a safe distance, Chief Apothecary, I assure you. I operated through the gentle hands of your hounds.’ A thick paw gestured to several attentive Gland-hounds. They stood nearby, watchfully. ‘Quite deft, these children of yours.’

‘Say grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, rather.’ Fabius peered at one – a callow youth, but already heavy with altered muscle and covered in scars. They started early, down in the kennels. ‘One of Igori’s?’ he asked as he sat up.

‘Yes, Benefactor,’ the youth murmured. He glanced down and quickly stepped aside as several stunted, hooded shapes squirmed between the Gland-hounds. The little creatures, in their heavy robes and hissing rebreathers, clustered about the examination table Fabius lay strapped to. With simian swiftness, they scrambled across the table, loosening the straps and unhooking the biometric sensors. They gurgled and chirped as they worked, and he stroked the sloped skull of one with affection.

The vatborn looked alike, sounded alike, and even smelled alike. The tiny mutants might as well have been stamped from a mould, despite being several hundred generations removed from the nutrient vats he’d grown their ancestors in. They bred like vermin, in out-of-the-way places. He was perversely proud of them – they were hardy, loyal little beasts. ‘Hello, my friends,’ he murmured. He looked at the Gland-hound, studying the barcode tattooed on his cheek. ‘You are… Nialos, yes? Bring me my panoply, Nialos.’

As the Gland-hounds hastened to obey, Fabius swung his legs off the examination table. He looked around, re-familiarising himself with his apothecarium, his laboratorium. His sanctum. The chamber was a circular knot of alternating antechambers and open space. Magnetised trays of surgical tools, not all of them designed by human hands, occupied the walls in seemingly haphazard fashion.

Nestled among these gleaming racks were diverse charts, documenting the progress of ongoing experiments, as well as his observations on such. Enhanced pict-captures of unique nerve clusters framed scraps of poetry, collected from a thousand worlds. Beneath this detritus lay the progenoid bio-vaults, which paid for his safe passage through the more conflicted regions of Eyespace, and a variety of material storage cylinders. A chill mist emerged from the refrigeration units built into the deck, curling across the floor, the cold causing the various hololithic projectors mounted about the central chamber to flicker with static. Vatborn scurried back and forth through the mist, taking diagnostic readings and recalibrating the various machines.

‘All is just as you left it,’ Khorag assured him.

‘Why you? Where is Arrian? Where are the others?’

‘Ah, well. It seems, in your absence, that there has been a bit of a… breakdown in discipline. They are attempting to restore order.’

Fabius rubbed his face. It was younger than he was used to. Firmer. His hair was thick,
long and pale. It would be gone soon enough. It was inevitably the first thing to go. He caught sight of his distorted reflection, in the edge of the examination table. There was much of Fulgrim in that face—a tad sharper, perhaps. Less perfect. The aquiline beauty giving way to an almost vulpine savagery. The beast flesh, creeping back.

He pushed away from the table and dropped to the deck. He stretched, feeling the strength in his new muscles. It was good to be strong again, if only for a little while. Somewhere, alarm klaxons were sounding. The ship. He was on his ship. The recent past returned to him in fits and starts, flickering pict-captures that spun and stretched across his mind’s eye. He had collapsed, not from combat, but simple overexertion. A straw death.

He chuckled. No death was a good death. Death simply was. Behind him, something hissed. ‘It has missed you, I think,’ Khorag said. He sounded uneasy. ‘If such a thing can be said to feel separation anxiety, I suspect it is that damnable machine.’

The spider-scorpion shape of the chirurgeon twitched eagerly in its rack. The arachnid-like assembly of blades, saws and syringes writhed, its spinal contact-nodes dripping with an oily solution. He had designed the complex medicae harness himself, in the first years of his apprenticeship in the apothecarion. But now, almost a millennium removed from those more innocent days, the chirurgeon had developed a proto-will of its own.

It was not truly sentient, he thought. But it was aware, in some way. As if it had… evolved somehow. Its machine-spirit was as complex as its multifarious functions. It was programmed to learn, though he had begun to think that it kept most of what it learned to itself. ‘Then, we all must have our secrets, eh?’

He went to the rack and turned. ‘Come, my friend. We have been apart too long.’ He grunted in momentary discomfort as the harness latched onto him with preternatural strength. The dermal nodes hissed as they sealed themselves tight, and thin, articulated hoses and neurofibre bundles slid home in sub-dermal contact-ports. Bone clamps pierced his flesh and carapace to latch onto the vertebral column. Fibrous filaments emerged from the clamps and insinuated themselves through specially installed apertures in his spinal canal, to sink into the nervous tissue of the spinal cord.

The chirurgeon purred in pleasure, as its dim awareness brushed against his own. It was as pleased to be reunited as he was. After so long, he felt… incomplete without the harness. He wondered, briefly, if it felt the same.

He looked at Khorag. ‘You mentioned a breakdown?’ he asked finally.

‘A coup, Chief Apothecary.’ Khorag chuckled wetly. ‘It seems they want the ship and your head. Not necessarily in that order.’
CHAPTER TWO

FREEDOM’S CHAIN

The ship’s corridors were bathed in crimson, as the sound of klaxons echoed and re-echoed through the hollow places. Fabius, once more clad in his scarred battleplate, strode down the corridor, trying to get used to the weight. It was always the same. Every new body took time to adjust. Unfortunately, time was a finite resource at the moment.

‘We are still on schedule then?’ he asked, flexing his gauntlet, listening to the whine of the ancient servos. His armour had maintained its integrity for the entirety of its existence, a rare event in the Eye of Terror. He had never been forced to scavenge for spare parts, like so many other veterans of the Long War. The vatborn were as clever as any maintenance-servitor or Legion slave, and more than capable of keeping his warpanoply functioning to standard. Like the chirurgeon clinging to his back, the armour he wore had a dim artificial awareness, though it only rarely made itself known, and usually only to express a desire for repairs. Dim-witted and sated was how he preferred to keep it.

‘So far as I am aware. We are thirty-six hours out from our destination. Arrian took command, naturally. A loyal dog, that one.’ Khorag gurgled a laugh. ‘Then, why else would you keep him around, eh?’

‘Arrian is a tool with a multiplicity of applications, Khorag – unlike others I could name. How long was I… indisposed?’

‘A few days.’

‘Days?’ Fabius snapped. ‘It should have been the work of a few hours to complete the cerebral transference, even for you.’

‘Well, we did have other concerns. They made their move as soon as word got out. I daresay that they’ve been waiting for just such an opportunity. It has been how many years since the last time?’
Fabius grimaced. ‘Paramar.’
‘Yes. And they were too busy fighting our mutual enemies then to take advantage. But
now – well. What else can you expect from such degenerates?’
‘A bit of common courtesy would be more than satisfactory,’ Fabius said. Behind him,
something gurgled, as if in agreement. He glanced back, scowling. ‘Must you bring that
great lolloping brute with you everywhere? It corrodes the decks wherever it crawls.’
Fabius glared at the daemonic creature gurgling and gasping happily in their wake. It
was a rotund, slug-like thing. Ripples of scaly, teratoma-covered flab undulated, sliding
it forward as it scrambled with clawed flippers at the deck, hauling itself along.
Nauseating gases spewed from its porous flesh with every lurch.
‘He was a gift, Fabius. One cannot refuse the gifts of the gods forever.’ Khorag slowed
his pace, so that the beast could catch up with him. He stroked its glistening flesh.
‘Besides, I kept him out of the apothecarium for you. Didn’t I, Paz’uz?’
Paz’uz made a vile burbling sound that might have been a bark. Fabius grimaced in
disgust. ‘There are no gods,’ he snapped. ‘Only monsters. And one should not accept
gifts from monsters.’
‘Says the one who accepted practically an entire army.’ Khorag gave a rattling sigh.
‘Then again, it is in the process of trying to kill you, so perhaps there is something to
what you say. A philosophical knot, to be sure.’
‘The Twelfth Millennial is not a gift. It is a burden, and one I have tolerated for too
long, despite my better judgement.’ Fabius blinked and looked at Khorag, as the latter
part of the Apothecary’s statement sank in. ‘A philosophical what?’
‘Or perhaps it is simply a matter of etiquette,’ Khorag said, as if Fabius hadn’t spoken.
‘Does one accept a gift, if one knows that it will turn in their hand? Is that perhaps the
test at the heart of all gift-giving ceremonies?’ He shrugged, expelling deleterious gases
from the loose cabling that clumped beneath his arms. ‘A thorny knot, this. Luckily, we
have eternity to pick it loose, eh?’
‘Spare me your regurgitated philosophy, Khorag. At the moment, I find that I lack the
patience for idle speculation into the great mysteries. Have all of our guests turned coat,
or just some of them?’ There was a sizeable contingent of Noise Marines aboard. If the
Kakophoni had turned on him as well, the Vesalius might well be destroyed in the
ensuing confrontation. He could still recall the destructive forces they’d unleashed
aboard the eldar craftworld of Lugganath, nearly crippling the vast world-ship with their
shattersong.
‘Ramos and his choir have not stirred from their garden,’ Khorag said. ‘And it has
been some time since you first welcomed them aboard Vesalius. They are hardly
guests.’
‘Yes.’ Fabius shook his head. ‘Time passes so quickly. It has not seemed so long.’ He
wondered idly what year it was, outside of Eyespace. The next time they surfaced in
real space, he would have to find out. To allow himself to be lulled by eternity might
prove a fatal error. One he did not intend to make.

‘Maybe it wasn’t. Time moves strangely in the Eye. Decades pass in a moment, or else
days gather and eddy in the shoals of perception, until time seems to stand still.’ Khorag
laughed. ‘Then, the gods would have little fun, if all of their favourite toys died of
advanced age, eh?’

Fabius shook his head. For all his talk of gods, Khorag was right. Eyespace distorted
reality as well as the perception of such. It was a place of all-consuming entropy, where
all things broke down, including the most inviolate of natural laws. The closer you
sailed to the byssos – the pinhole in reality where the raw stuff of the Eye merged with
real space – the worse things became. Time slowed, and stars became scars of light,
stretched across the firmament for impossible distances. ‘Whatever the reason, it works
in our favour. Only here do I have the time to do what must be done.’

Khorag snorted. ‘Yes. Your New Men. Tell me, Fabius, what happens after you finish
spreading your brood of mutants to every corner of the galaxy?’ He hiked a thumb at
Nialos and the others, padding silent behind their master. ‘Will you retire to a life of
monastic solitude? More so than you already have, I mean.’

Fabius ignored him. ‘Is Diomat still secure in his tomb, or have they freed him as
well?’ he asked. The ancient Contemptor Dreadnought was the only one of his kind, out
of the dozens employed as an assault force, to have survived the 12th Millennial’s
attack on Lugganath. He was also quite mad. Fabius had often considered ending
Diomat’s misery, but pragmatism had always stayed his hand. A functioning
Contemptor was a rare prize indeed, and Diomat had proven his worth on many
occasions since.

‘Even they are not that foolish,’ Khorag said. ‘He has less reason to love them than he
does you. No, he is still safely in the cage you made for him.’

‘Not for long.’

Khorag started. ‘You can’t be serious.’

‘I intend to end this little coup as swiftly as possible. I have more important matters to
attend to than a half-hearted rebellion. Diomat will help me do that.’

‘He might also kill you.’

‘Then I trust you will be quicker with the cerebral transference the second time
around.’ A transit-elevator waited at the end of the corridor. Two members of the crew
stood on guard, their bestial features tense with worry.

Both of the creatures were capric in nature, with wide, horned skulls and goatish
features. Their hairy bodies were stuffed into the ragged, ill-fitting remains of what had
once been naval uniforms, now brown and stiff with centuries of accumulated grime.
Their uniforms, like the scalloped, rust-splotched armour they wore over them, and the
heavily modified autoguns in their crooked paws, had been passed down from one
generation to the next, even as those generations were irrevocably altered. The creatures
brayed in surprise as they caught sight of Fabius and the others, and fell to their knees in
primitive abasement.

To the atavistic clans of mutants which acted as the frigate’s crew, Fabius was their god and father in one. For it had been his experiments which had first set their ancestors on the long, crooked road of change. His intention had been to make them hardier and self-sufficient, unlike the slave-crews favoured by so many others. A crew that could not defend itself was of no use to him or the Vesalius.

‘You two, come with me,’ Fabius said as the transit elevator’s cage slid open automatically, in recognition of his battleplate’s broadcast codes. The transit elevators – those that still functioned, at least – were the connective arteries of the ship, and the lift platform was large enough to carry hundreds of pallets of ammunition and their servitor loaders to the gunnery decks.

It descended down the lumen-lit shaft at great speed, the convoluted maze of access tunnels whipping past. The shrieking of the klaxons became a banshee howl, spiralling higher and higher the faster they went. Fabius did his best to ignore the irritating wail, and concentrated on preparing himself for what came next. He’d put down such revolts before, but never so long after the fact. It was best to catch them quickly and end them with a well-placed bolt-round. Once the instigators, whether Adeptus Astartes or mutant, were disposed of, their followers tended to find better things to do with their time.

But this was different. Days had passed. If the majority of the 12th Millennial was involved, more than one or two deaths might be required. This might well be the moment he would have to erase what was left of the company from the Legion rolls. The thought brought him little pleasure, for all the annoyance they’d caused him of late.

The Third Legion was dead, both as a military force and as a unified body. Attrition and excess had reduced it to splintered fragments of a once-mighty whole, and good riddance. Whatever sense of affection he might have possessed for the rest of his Legion had long ago been reduced to the merest cinders. But even so, cinders could occasionally flicker to life. The only constant was change, even for one such as him.

The 12th Millennial was not a welcome reminder of old times, but it was a reminder nonetheless. A reminder of simpler times, when the way forward was clear for all to see. A reminder of when his great purpose had not yet consumed him. His grip tightened around the skull-topped sceptre he held, and the malign will within it growled in warning. He glanced down at the gilded skull, its curve etched with ruinous sigils. He thumped the ferrule of the sceptre against the platform, silencing its snarls.

‘You should treat your tools with more kindness, Fabius,’ Khorag said.

‘Perhaps. But I am in no mood to be growled at by something that ought to know its place by now.’ He lifted the sceptre and stared into the sockets of the skull. Its name, if such things could be said to have a name, was Torment. Like the Vesalius, he had renamed the hell-forged artefact to suit himself, when he had taken it from its former owner. The sceptre acted in some as yet unknown fashion as an amplifier – the slightest
touch could elicit raging torrents of agony or pleasure, or anything in between, in anyone it touched.

It was a blunt thing, with limited use. But within that narrow scope, it performed its tasks admirably. He could feel the power flowing through it, a power it shared with him, if unwillingly. Like the chirurgeon clinging to his back, there was a measure of symbiosis between himself and Torment. It required a wielder, and at times, sadly, he required the strength that it could give him. But not at the moment. ‘Do you hear? Do not pit your will against mine. Not today. Or I will leave you in your case of brass and bone for the duration.’

Torment subsided with a sulky pulse, and Fabius lowered it. ‘A singular problem with the universe, I find, is that things so rarely know their place.’

‘Including yourself, then?’ Khorag said.

Fabius glanced at him. ‘I know my place. It is simply that others refuse to acknowledge it. That in doing so they only strive against the tide, seems to make little difference.’

‘To some, you are the one striving in vain.’

Fabius paused. There was a dark truth in that. His enemies were without number, and had only grown since Ezekyle Abaddon had cast his spear into the heart of Harmony and destroyed Canticle City. He could still recall the sight of the dying cruiser, Tlaloc, as it had plunged from orbit and pierced the last, great fortress of the Emperor’s Children, ending them as a Legion. He could still hear it – that impossibly shrill screech of abused metal and tearing atmosphere, that sound the air had made as fire spread across the horizon.

All he had worked for ended in a single moment. The work of a lifetime, erased by the single swing of a hypocrite’s sword.

He shook his head, banishing the memories. ‘That only proves the limits of their perception. That they cannot see what is obvious even to these crippled brutes is a sure sign of their blindness.’ He dropped a heavy hand on the head of one of the beastmen, eliciting a whimper of mingled pain and excitement. He paused and laughed. ‘Forgive me, Khorag. A new body always makes me prone to boasting.’

‘So I have observed. In any event, I agree with you, Fabius.’ Khorag chuckled thickly. ‘What is a plague, but the cleansing flame in another form? Only the strong survive its passing. Only those fit to claim a kingdom from the ashes. Typhus the Traveller wrote those words, more than two centuries ago.’

‘Yes, well, I suppose even a blind rodent finds a morsel on occasion.’

Khorag chuckled. ‘An apt description. Calas has ever been a scrambler in the dark.’

The transit elevator juddered to a tooth-rattling halt. The cage creaked open, revealing a trio of beastmen, weapons aimed at the doors. Like their kin on the deck above, they abased themselves instantly upon sighting Fabius, snarling and bleating in welcome. Fabius gestured sharply. ‘Up, lackwits. I have better use for you than guarding transit-
shafts.’

Even as the beasts rose, he heard the tramp of ceramite on the deck plates. A familiar smell, like iron and damp, greeted him. ‘Saqqara,’ Fabius said. The Word Bearer had a particular odour all of his own, even after all this time among butchers.

A moment later, a coterie of familiar figures rounded the bend in the corridor. Arrian paced smoothly in the lead, hands resting on the pommels of his blades. Saqqara followed him, trailed by a pack of mutants, attempting something like military bearing. Arrian stopped. ‘Chief Apothecary,’ he said with a nod. ‘I was coming to check on Khorag’s progress.’

‘You could simply have voxed,’ Khorag grumbled.

‘I could, were I not certain that our disloyal guests would have intercepted it. I didn’t want to give them any ideas about raiding the apothecarium.’

Fabius frowned. An unpleasant thought. ‘I’m surprised that wasn’t first on their agenda,’ he said, somewhat annoyed. It was as if they didn’t consider him a threat. He forced the rising anger down – the instinctive urge to violence was another disadvantage of a younger, healthier frame. ‘Then, I’m sure it would’ve occurred to them sooner or later.’

‘Undoubtedly,’ Arrian said. ‘The packs have them herded into the flesh market. They seem to have little stomach for being hunted in the dark.’

‘Igori–?’ Fabius said.

‘She is leading the hunts. Skalagrim is watching over the command deck.’

Fabius nodded, satisfied. Igori would keep her packmates in line. It wouldn’t do to eradicate the 12th Millennial out of hand. He might still be able to salvage something out of it, once the gangrenous matter had been cut away. ‘Good. I am going to the Cage. Then I will descend to the flesh market and see an end to this inconvenience. You will accompany me.’

‘The–?’ Arrian hesitated. ‘They haven’t attempted to release him.’

‘Which is why I am going to,’ Fabius said, striding past Arrian. The mutants scrambled ahead of him and in his wake, yelping and bleating. They filled the corridor with a riotous clamour, and Fabius smiled indulgently. Though the mutants would, inevitably, be the lowest caste of the world to come, they had their uses. They were more dependable, in their way, than men. And hardier, as well. But the warp had its claws in them too deep for them to be of any real use, save as chattel. Much like his former brothers.

The Cage was an isolated chamber, just beneath the ship’s bridge. During the Vesalius’ previous life, it had been a temple-shrine to the Corpse-Emperor. A vast, cathedral space, lit only by the lumens set into the frames of the immense stained-glass observation ports that lined either side of the chamber.

The images that adorned the ports had long since been rendered indiscernible by
centuries of accumulated grime and damage. There was a thin whistle, as of a hull breach, though the stale atmosphere was otherwise uncompromised. Decorative columns had fallen and been hacked into chunks, and many of the statues of Imperial saints had crumbled due to neglect. Others glared at the macabre procession that passed beneath their sightless eyes.

Fabius led the others down what had once been the central nave, but was now a gauntlet of automated weapons systems and several specially altered combat-servitors. The latter had been wired into hollowed-out columns and to either side of the antechamber, their legs replaced by gyroscopic plinths. Their weapons cycled ominously and dead eyes tracked the group, even as Fabius’ armour broadcast an ident-pulse.

In the past, the Cage had been a quarantine area for less viable experiments which nonetheless had some military application. Lobotomised war-brutes and horrors with no real shape, or cunning transhumans, lacking even the barest iota of Adeptus Astartes discipline. Now, however, it played host to only one resident.

Ancient Diomat. Hero of Walpurgis. Diomat the Mad. Last of the 12th Millennial’s dozen Dreadnoughts. The rest likely still lay shattered and silent in the ruins of Craftworld Lugganath, if they had not been shot into the void by the eldar in the aftermath. Only Diomat had survived, much to his own chagrin.

The Hero of Walpurgis had been seeking death in one way or another since the fateful day a Gheist-blade had spilled his life’s blood, and condemned him to an eternity in an amniotic sarcophagus. The Dreadnought had been confined to the Cage after his latest rampage, during which an entire pack of Gland-hounds had been torn apart, and two of Fabius’ prized war-mutants had been rendered worthless, save as raw materials.

On occasion, Fabius regretted restoring Diomat’s bio-functions. The Dreadnought had been on the cusp of oblivion, his hull breached, his sarcophagus compromised. But something – some spark of pity, perhaps – had guided his hand, and the hands of his more technologically adept servants, to prolong Diomat’s vital signs until he could be restored. Since then, he had employed Diomat’s unbridled wrath for his benefit. The ancient warrior was a potent weapon, and more durable than most.

At the end of the nave, where the altar had once stood, there was now only a web of chains, each connected to one of half a dozen specially designed servitors. They could extend and retract the immense lengths of chain from the cybernetic pulley systems built into their augmented torsos. Each had a pair of heavy meltaguns rather than arms, and their legs had been replaced by reinforced boarding clamps, which dug into the marble floor. Their withered skulls rested in thickets of cortical cabling and bundled wires, their dull eyes fixed on the massive form at the centre of their web.

Diomat paced, in his wheel of chains. The ancient Contemptor-pattern Dreadnought was roughly humanoid in shape, and ragged with the harsh touch of war. The Imperial purple of his plating had faded to the colour of a bruise, where it had not been scorched.
off or chipped away. The deck-rattling tread stopped as Fabius stepped into the hold. The spherical head rotated in its ceramite shell, watching him as he approached.

‘Chief Apothecary.’ The amplified voice was loud in the stultifying silence of the Cage. It echoed from every broken column and shook the crumbled facade from the walls. ‘You have returned.’

‘Yes,’ Fabius said, waving Arrian and the others back as he advanced. ‘It has been too long since we last spoke.’

‘Not long enough.’ Diomat studied him, the crimson light of his optic sensors playing across Fabius’ face and armour. ‘Do you come to mock me, Fabius?’

‘Have I ever mocked you, brother?’

‘You mock me by denying me that which I desire.’

‘And what do you desire?’

‘Freedom.’ The word shook the air. Chains clattered. Diomat flexed crude claws. He had been stripped of his heavy armament and left with only a pair of close combat weapons. Even without his guns, the ancient Dreadnought was incredibly lethal.

‘I have offered you the run of my ship, brother. Of my holdings. I have offered to take you anywhere you wish, if my company proves burdensome.’

‘That is not what I mean.’

‘I know what you mean,’ Fabius said. ‘And I will not do it. I will not waste you, brother. I will not cast you aside as if you were rotting meat. You have use yet, brother.’

‘To you.’

‘To me. It could be worse.’ Fabius extended his arms. ‘Do your old oaths mean so little, brother? I am lieutenant commander of the Third. Once, that might have earned your loyalty, if not your trust.’

‘Trust is for the living. Free me, brother. Cast me into dreamless slumber, so that I might escape this nightmare we have made.’

‘If you wish, I will. I will put an iron bolt through what remains of your skull and add what is left to my organ banks. I will end your story as ignominiously as you seem to desire. Is there nothing left of you, brother? Of the Hero of Walpurgis?’

The Dreadnought stared down at him in silence. Fabius pressed on. ‘Or, you can do as you – as we – were created to do. Help me, Diomat. Help me to save this wretched universe from itself. Help me to save mankind, to drag it from the dark and back into the light. Help me, my friend.’

Silence. Then, a sound. A harsh clanging. Fabius realised that Diomat was laughing.

‘We were never friends, that I recall.’

‘No?’

‘No.’

Fabius smiled crookedly. ‘An oversight I would rectify.’

‘A friend, you say? Then but grant me the boon I ask, and we shall be as brothers.’

‘I will not kill you.’
‘Pity. Then you will at least grant me the solace of choosing my own death, brother. When and where I please. Grant me that, and I will stand at your side.’

Fabius grunted. A fair request. ‘Once this affair is ended, you have my word. Your death shall be your burden, and yours alone.’

Another stretch of silence. For a moment, Fabius feared that Diomat had fallen into the dreamless slumber that many such ancients inevitably succumbed to. Then, slowly, the great head nodded.

‘Very well. Take these chains off of me. And then tell me who I am to kill.’
CHAPTER THREE

FLESH MARKET

Fabius’ army grew as it descended. Mutant packs slithered out of hiding or from behind makeshift barricades, chanting joyfully as they flooded through the corridors in his wake. *Ave Pater Mutatis... Ave Pater Mutatis...* The savage hymn leapt ahead of them, drawing others from hiding. It rang out across the vox-system, echoing down through every deck and bay, alerting the crew that their lord and master was back among them.

When Fabius and the others reached their destination, their numbers had swelled greatly. As shows of power went, it was adequate. While Fabius doubted the rebels would be impressed, it would at least make them hesitate before they did something foolish. And if it didn’t, Diomat would. He glanced back at the Dreadnought, marching ponderously among the mutated dregs that loped and snarled about him.

He wondered what the ancient thought of these times he found himself in. What did he think of all that had befallen his Legion, in the millennia since they’d gutted themselves at Horus’ behest? Had it truly driven him mad, as it had so many of his kind? Or was he resigned to it, to forever being the tool of ever more degenerate masters?

Despite Diomat’s reticence, he felt a certain kinship with the ancient warrior. Both were hobbled by the mistakes of others, and neither had any love for the Legion that had abandoned them. And yet… some spark of loyalty remained. Some ember of the old dream, waiting to be fanned into new life.

‘Your creations love you,’ Saqqara said, intruding on his reverie. ‘They worship you.’

The Word Bearer glared about him, his hand resting on his holstered bolt pistol. The singing visibly irritated him.

‘And so?’

‘They see you as a god.’ Saqqara spoke flatly, his anger evident.

‘Their lives are hard enough. I see little reason to remove what joy they might get from
my presence.’ Fabius smiled. ‘Besides, at least I exist. At least I walk among them.’
‘The gods are with us, whether we perceive them or not.’
‘Very pious.’ Fabius glanced at the Word Bearer. ‘Which ones stalk among us at the
moment? And whose side are they on?’ Saqqara looked away and Fabius snorted. ‘I
thought not.’ He looked up. ‘Ah.’
A thick forest of gantries and iron-runged steps spread out ahead of them, bathed by
the light of alarm klaxons and sputtering lumens. And at its heart – the flesh market.
The flesh market was a common causeway between decks, where the crew had erected
a makeshift bazaar to trade rations and sell trinkets. On the rare occasions that the
Vesalius docked, the masters of the market sent their subordinates scurrying forth, to
acquire anything and everything that might be of some value. Fabius was content to
leave them to their diversions, so long as they performed their duties to his satisfaction.
It had grown over the centuries, spreading out along the cramped confines of the
causeway, becoming a shanty town, taller than it was wide. Rickety walkways and
creaking gantries stretched like metallic webs over the accumulation of crude tents.
Normally, the market was a noxious stew of stink and sound. Now, it was a ravaged
ruin. The rebels had fallen upon it like locusts, and stripped it of everything that could
be consumed, inhaled or otherwise indulged in. Bodies dangled from above, strung up
like demented marionettes. Others had been impaled on improvised stakes, and a thicket
of corpse-trees clustered thick about the end of the causeway.
Fabius looked up at the twitching remains and sighed. ‘Such waste.’ He started
forward, ignoring the soft, incessant patter of the blood that drizzled down from the
highest bodies. ‘Who will fly the ship if they kill everyone?’
‘I suspect they aren’t thinking that far ahead,’ Arrian said. ‘Most of the crew have
barricaded themselves into their berths or on the gunnery decks, in any event. Those
who haven’t are proving elusive. Igori’s pack is giving them quite a bit of trouble any
time they try to push into the upper decks.’
‘Good. How many has she disposed of?’
‘Twelve, so far.’
‘Progenoids?’
‘Only two viable ones.’ Arrian tapped one of his skulls. ‘I have stored them safely.’
‘I expected no less. Who is actually in command of these ingrates? Merix?’
A figure stepped into the dim light ahead of them. ‘No, lieutenant commander. Though
I did offer my services.’ The newcomer’s voice was a wheezing rasp, slithering through
the corroded, fang-like grille of a respirator. Striations of infection climbed across his
preternaturally wizened features, and he stank of rot and death.
Merix had been dying for as long as Fabius had known him. Likely, he had been dying
since the remnants of the Third had fled Terra, their ships loaded down with slaves and
plunder. Impact craters marked the flat panes of his Mark III power armour, and the
servos whined and sputtered as he approached. He flexed his prosthetic hand as he
moved, as if to relieve a persistent ache.

Fabius stopped. Arrian reached for one of his blades, but a look from his master stilled him. Fabius smiled as Merix stopped, just out of easy reach. ‘I take it that you are reconsidering your loyalties. Wise, under the circumstances.’

Merix glanced at Diomat, looming behind them, and shrugged. ‘I have never been accused of stupidity.’ ‘Your common sense does you credit.’ Fabius indicated the distant conglomeration of tents and barricades. ‘Who is in charge?’ ‘It depends on who you ask.’ Fabius nodded, unsurprised. Discipline was the only taboo left to the Third. ‘Well, I suppose we’ll find out directly, won’t we?’ He glanced at Merix. ‘Feel free to sidle back into your hole until this is over, if you wish.’

Merix gave a rattling, rasping laugh. ‘And miss all the fun? I think not.’ He fell into step with Arrian and the others. ‘Besides, I want to see the looks on their faces when they realise you aren’t dead.’ ‘I was. It is no difficult state of affairs.’

‘Even after Paramar – after all this time – I am not used to that.’ Merix shook his head. He flexed his hand again. ‘Sometimes, I wish I could depart this husk, as easily as you do your own. Like a serpent shedding a skin it has outgrown.’

‘That could be arranged,’ Fabius murmured. ‘Crafting a healthy, undamaged clone would cost me little in the way of effort.’ ‘But what would it cost me?’ Fabius shrugged. ‘Not more than you could bear, I’m sure.’ He looked at the other Space Marine. ‘Then, given the state of your current \textit{corpus}, there is no guarantee that a cloned body would resemble your old one in any way. Indeed, I find myself curious as to what might come of it…’ The chirurgeon’s limbs twitched, as if eager to take a sample. Merix shuffled away, bloodshot eyes narrowed. ‘I think I am content in myself, for the moment.’

Fabius gestured dismissively. ‘Would that more of our brothers were of a similar mind. It might have saved us a lot of trouble early on.’ ‘Including you?’ Fabius didn’t reply. He looked ahead. There was something rising out of the murk. He squinted. ‘What is that?’ ‘They’ve made a bulwark from the corpses,’ Arrian said. ‘They still have some sense of efficiency, at least,’ Khorag said. ‘They remember what a bulwark is, if not the proper materials with which to construct one.’ ‘Bodies serve as bricks well enough. They did on Terra.’ Fabius shook his head. More crew that would need replacing. Luckily, mutants bred like rats. And they had enshrined their function as tradition, enabling the ship’s operations to continue without incident. The \textit{Vesalius} was a self-regulating system, in many ways. At times, he fancied that he
and the others were nothing more than parasites, living in the belly of an ever-evolving beast.

Strange sounds rose from the bulwark, eating away at the silence. Heavy forms moved swiftly across the gantries above, shadowing his procession. He had left his helmet mag-clamped to his hip, so he couldn’t hear the vox-chatter, but he could imagine the whispered conversations, the idolatrous prayers, the hissed threats. The air throbbed with their spite. He drank it in, head lifted high, and smoothed the folds of his coat of flayed and tanned flesh. They hated him and feared him, his brothers.

Good. Let them. They had cause, as did he. Better curses in the open than a knife in the dark. This confrontation had been building for centuries, and he almost looked forward to it. Part of it was biological – a new body was prone to such anticipations. Space Marines were nothing more or less than biological weapons. They were built for war, and longed for it on a genetic level. Normally, he dampened those urges in himself. But he hadn’t had time to synthesise the correct dosages for this husk.

Then, perhaps it was a good thing. For too long, of late, he’d indulged in a hermit’s existence, shrinking into himself, seeing only the next problem. Seeing only another strand in a web of ever-increasing complexity. But this – this was a simple problem. With a simple solution. A smile split his features.

Fabius waved Arrian and the others back as the miasma cleared and the bulwark – as well as what lurked behind it – was revealed. ‘Well.’ He studied the line of guns and the hostile shapes behind them.

Their battleplate was a confusing muddle of colours and modifications. The dark purple of their original heraldry was visible in some places, beneath spills of silk or excess gilding. Tall crests of turquoise and white rose from helmets scooped to shallow points, and tusk-like extrusions erupted from rebreathers and grilles. Golden chains jangled from shoulder-plates and cuirasses, and censers fumed softly, filling the air with a malign sweetness.

Many had etched oaths of indulgence into their companions’ armour with ritual blades, or traded battle-pacts scrawled on ragged coils of parchment – reaffirmations of brotherhood. Once, such things would have been mere tradition. Now they were a harsh necessity – a Legion of hedonists could not trust itself, and so the wary and the pragmatic swore by the six hundred names of Slaanesh, and pledged themselves to the defence of their brothers. To break such a vow was to court the wrath of the Dark Prince.

Some of the warriors before him were singing softly – a panting hymn, or perhaps a prayer for indulgence. A sure sign of their unease. He shook his head. Every time he saw them like this, arrayed for battle in all their garish glory, he could not help but compare them to the warriors they might once have been. When their drive for perfection had pushed them to the heights of discipline, rather than the depths of excess.

‘Well,’ he said again. ‘What is this, I see before me?’
Silence. A wall of hostility.

Then, someone called out, ‘Why are you here, fleshcrafter? Shouldn’t you be rotting on a slab?’ Muted laughter followed this witticism. Fabius smiled and spread his hands. ‘Where there is discord, I seek to bring harmony. Where there is despair, I bring hope. That is what I offer you. Harmony and hope.’

‘Is that why you come here with an army?’

‘That is why I come here at all. I could simply have drowned you in an ocean of altered flesh. I have stores of chattel as yet unmolested by you. War-mutants and beast-packs in their hundreds, all aching for a taste of Adeptus Astartes blood.’ He struck the deck with Torment’s ferrule. ‘Then, you are already well aware of that, I think. How many of you have gone missing in the dark places? How many screams have echoed across the vox, only to be cut short? You have been aboard this vessel for too long not to realise that there are far worse things than any of you lurking in the lower decks.’

He laughed, loud and long. A strong laugh, not the wheezing chuckle they’d become used to. The sound unsettled them more than his apparent strength. ‘I refuse to bargain with faceless rabble. Send out your leaders to negotiate. Or I will come in there and find them myself.’ He lifted his hand and activated the hololithic chronometer built into his vambrace. Numbers flickered to life, counting down. ‘You have until the countdown ends.’

A bit histrionic, but then, his brothers had always appreciated a bit of melodrama to enliven the tedium of their existence. He did not turn away from them as the numbers ticked over. The chirurgeon sent a pulse of stimulants into him, in preparation for the confrontation to come. Finally, two figures stepped through a gap in the bulwark, jostling each other slightly as they moved to meet him. He ended the countdown and lowered his arm.

‘Thalopsis – and Savona, of course. I should have realised.’ Fabius leaned on Torment, studying them. Thalopsis was a figure of barbaric splendour. His battleplate was daubed in garish hues, and he wore a tabard of crudely stitched flesh. A twisted spur of metallic bone erupted from one shoulder-plate, and his helm had congealed into a leonine death-mask, frozen in an eternal snarl. A shaggy flood of crimson hair spilled from the open back of his helmet and across his shoulders. His hands rested on the pommel of the curved xenos blade sheathed on his hip.

Savona, in contrast, was taller than the Space Marines around her, for all that she had been mortal once. Her lithe form was clad in pale amethyst power armour, altered to fit her proportions. The armour was no longer metal. Instead, it resembled the carapace of some great insect, sharply edged and unpleasantly contoured. She balanced on long, jointed legs that ended in thick, black hooves. White hair, bound in whip-like braids, hung like a lion’s mane from her narrow skull. The lumen-light glinted from the golden rings which pierced one nostril.

Both had been high in the esteem of the 12th Millennial’s former commander,
Kasperos Telmar. Savona, like Merix, had been one of his Joybound – his most trusted subordinates. Thalopsis had commanded his huntsmen – bikers, mostly, with a love of speed that bordered on the monomaniacal. In the centuries since Telmar’s death on Lugganath, Thalopsis had become the voice of the disaffected in what remained of the company. But it was Savona, though she had not been a member of the company at its inception, who was the true power in their ranks. She had left the bodies of her rivals littering a thousand worlds, as she slowly consolidated her control of the remains of a once-mighty warband.

Fabius had indulged her in this. Savona was a mystery as yet unravelled, her origins unknown. There were mortal champions aplenty in Eyespace, but few rose to any prominence in the warbands of the Legions. That she had done so was proof of her determination, if not her skill. She stared at him sourly. Her eyes drifted towards his followers and widened.

‘You freed Diomat?’ she hissed incredulously. ‘I’m surprised he didn’t twist your head off, you sneering serpent.’

‘I’m sure he considered it.’ Fabius smiled. ‘As I’m sure you are reconsidering your current position.’

‘We are in control of this ship,’ Thalopsis said. ‘Whatever you think.’

‘My crew begs to differ,’ Fabius said, indicating his followers. ‘And there are more where they came from. Now, let us dispense with this pretence that you are anything other than a momentary inconvenience, and talk. What do you want?’

‘This ship,’ Thalopsis said. ‘And all aboard it. It is ours by right.’

Fabius raised an eyebrow at that. He glanced at Savona, who looked away. That was good. She was distancing herself from Thalopsis already. He wondered whose idea this foolishness had been, and who had merely seen fit to take advantage of it. Was this another of her games, to rid herself of an inconvenient rival? If so, he had to applaud her. ‘And what right might that be? Certainly not salvage.’

‘You forced us to abandon the Quarzhazat – our flagship,’ Thalopsis snarled. ‘Our fleet was left to the mercies of the eldar, and our brothers as well.’

‘I don’t recall you offering to stay and extricate them, Thalopsis. And that cursed ship was dying, even as it fled.’ Fabius recalled the sounds of the flagship’s death-agonies, as the splinter-thin vessels of the eldar harried it across the stars. ‘Nor was it the inviolate citadel you seem to imagine that it was. Or had you forgotten the Harlequins?’

Somehow, in some way he still had not fathomed, the capricious, colourful xenos clowns had boarded the Quarzhazat and run amok, even as the ship hurtled away from the wounded craftworld. What crew remained had died. Fabius and his followers had been forced to defend themselves time and again, until at last they’d rendezvoused with the Vesalius, and been able to abandon the dying flagship.

The last he’d seen of the Quarzhazat, it had been in the process of succumbing to long-delayed annihilation, as its plasma engines overloaded and consumed it in
iridescent fire. Sadly, that fire had not claimed the Harlequins as well.

He’d caught sight of the strange xenos once or twice over the course of the intervening centuries. They drifted at the edges of his awareness, shadowing his movements down the long path of years. Their attentions were akin to an itch he couldn’t scratch – a constant, unceasing annoyance. But one he’d learned to live with. They had joined the ranks of his enemies and were worth no more consideration than the Dark Council of Sicarus, or the Lernaean Brotherhood. Or even the fool standing before him now.

‘The Harlequins were there for you, not us,’ Thalopsis said. ‘If we had handed you over then—’

‘You would have died then, as opposed to now. Surely you can muster some gratitude for that, at least. A few extra centuries of life is no small gift, Thalopsis.’

‘What gift? We are slaves.’

‘You are honoured guests.’

‘Whom you force to fight your battles.’

‘It is a host’s duty to provide entertainment.’ Fabius clasped his hands behind his back, Torment dangling loosely in his grip. ‘And I have, down the years.’ He lifted the sceptre and the two warriors drew back slightly. Both had felt its touch, more than once, and it was too much for even their excess-addled senses. ‘Indeed, in a few paltry hours, I shall provide more of it.’

‘Yes, another dead hulk, full of ghosts and dust.’ Thalopsis laughed bitterly. ‘Another broken path. The dead are boring, fleshcrafter – I demand live prey!’ He threw up a hand and his sycophants among those gathered behind the bulwark bellowed in support.

‘Hardly a hulk. A craftworld, rather. So ancient that it has no name. Think of the plunder, Thalopsis. Think of the spirit stones…’

Thalopsis hesitated. Fabius could almost smell the greed radiating from him. Eldar spirit stones were a currency of sorts, among the warriors of the Emperor’s Children. Each glimmering stone held what was, for all intents and purposes, the soul of its wearer. And there was nothing the followers of Slaanesh enjoyed more than the ephemeral taste of a panicked soul. He had been assured more than once that it was a sensation both exquisite and unique, with no two spirit stones being the same. Some warriors would butcher a planet just to claim one, addicts that they were.

Thalopsis, unfortunately, had a clearer head than most. ‘No. We’ve heard those promises before, fleshcrafter. You are generous with words, but a miser when it comes to action. You will keep the greatest bounty for yourself, as ever.’

‘And why shouldn’t I? What does one say, when faced with such ingratitude?’ He shook his head. ‘I have allowed you the freedom of my holdings and the right to plunder my stores to your greedy hearts’ content. I have healed your wounds, repaired your battleplate and put shells in your bolters and meat in your bellies. All I ask in return is the occasional favour. And for this, I am condemned?’ He stabbed the deck with Torment’s ferrule, metal clanging on metal.
‘Favours, he calls them,’ Savona said loudly. She extended her power maul in an accusatory gesture, playing to the crowd. ‘You spend our lives like bolter shells, old man, and deny us all but the simplest of comforts. Where are our slaves – our joytoys and fleshpots?’

‘A waste of precious resources,’ Fabius said offhandedly. ‘Besides, do I not provide entertainment enough even for your jaded appetites? I have created whole species to live, fight and die at your pleasure. I have devised new and ever more potent stimulants by the vat. I have unleashed you on archaeomarkets and exodite worlds to plunder at your whim, and still, you complain.’

‘We did not seek a nursemaid, but a leader,’ Thalopsis snarled. ‘We have no desire for the one, and if you will not the play the part of the other, then we shall take what we wish. And afterwards, we will feed your rancid carcass to the beasts that howl endlessly in the depths of this ship.’

Fabius studied the leonine masked warrior. The threat was not idle. He’d known this day would come, and had prepared accordingly. A third of the would-be rebels were addicted to substances only he could provide. Perhaps Savona or, more likely, Thalopsis, had promised them an endless supply of narcotics, hidden in his apothecarium. But some of those he could see were already showing signs of withdrawal. Their ravaged systems would begin to shut down. They would be little threat then.

But he had no time for such waiting games. They were drawing nearer to their destination with every passing hour, and he would need his full concentration for the task ahead. That meant ending this farce here and now.

‘Diomat.’

The Contemptor Dreadnought moved swiftly through the crowd. His footsteps echoed resoundingly through the flesh market, like the drumbeat of doom. Mutants scattered from his path with fearful yelps. Diomat paid them little mind. His claws flexed as he drew near. ‘Thalopsis – betrayer. False friend. Long have I awaited this.’ His voice boomed out of the vox-broadcasters built into his chassis. ‘Long have I dreamed of crushing your skull in my claws, and casting your soul into whatever hell awaits you.’

Savona ducked aside as the Dreadnought charged towards them. Fabius was confident that she would not interfere. Nor would the warriors watching from the bulwark. Some of them might consider it, but for all intents and purposes, this was an honour duel. And though they might have cast all other traditions into the dust, the concept of the duel was still sacrosanct among the sons of Fulgrim.

Thalopsis’ hand flew to his blade, but not quickly enough. Diomat put on a sudden burst of speed. One long arm launched out, and his claws snapped shut on Thalopsis’ head, even as the latter swept his sword out, carving a scar across the Dreadnought’s chassis. There was a wet, crunching sound, and the renegade’s headless body collapsed in a heap.
‘I am Diomat.’ Diomat hurled the crushed remnants of Thalopsis’ head at the bulwark, and advanced towards it, claws working. ‘I stood at Walpurgis.’ One massive, mechanical foot lashed out, slamming into the wall of corpses. It toppled over with a soft sound as warriors scattered. ‘You know me.’ Not a shot was fired, nor protest made. They knew better.

‘Come,’ Diomat demanded. ‘Where is your courage now, brothers? Has it departed, along with my chains? To think that I was ever proud to stand among you puling curs.’ His curses echoed from gantry to gantry. But none answered them. Eventually, the Dreadnought fell silent, save for the rhythmic click of his claws.

‘Merix,’ Fabius called after a time, holding Savona’s gaze as he did so. She sneered at the other warrior as he approached, and Merix’s glare could’ve cut ice. ‘You will oversee the decimation. One in ten to be handed over to me, for summary judgement.’

‘A light sentence,’ Merix said. ‘Still, there are fewer than a hundred warriors left to the company. Are you sure it is wise?’

‘The ones you choose will accompany me on my expedition. Any who survive will be forgiven their trespasses and allowed to re-join the Twelfth Millennial.’ Fabius looked at Savona. ‘And you will lead them, my dear. Consider it penance, for encouraging Thalopsis in this foolishness.’

Savona smiled, baring thin fangs. ‘I did nothing.’

‘I noticed. It is the only reason you are alive.’ He looked over the remains of the bulwark. ‘You wanted my attention. Well, now you have it.’ He looked at her. ‘The question is, what are you going to do with it?’

‘A good question,’ Merix murmured, as he and Savona watched the Chief Apothecary stride away. Already, the tensions of the rebellion were fading, drawn away even as the rest of the bulwark came down. ‘Why did you engineer this farce?’

Savona chuckled. ‘I was growing tired of Thalopsis’ bluster.’

‘And without him, there is one less challenger to your authority. How many of my brothers have you killed, now? A dozen?’ Merix looked around. Mutants scrambled everywhere, cleaning up after their murderers. Arrian and the other Apothecaries moved among the dead like carrion birds, taking samples. The bodies of the dead would become provender for the crew, or would be added to the great flesh-vats that bubbled away eternally somewhere below them.

‘Not enough.’ She looked at him. ‘You’re in charge now.’

Merix shrugged. ‘Only for the moment. Someone will rise to the occasion soon enough, of that I have no doubt. Perhaps even you.’

‘Legion will only follow Legion,’ she said with a frown. ‘They would follow you, if you gave a damn. Once, I think you did. You scrambled for power as much as any of us. What has become of you?’

Merix said nothing for several moments. Then, ‘Oleander.’
Savona laughed. ‘Oleander is dead. Or wishes he was, wherever he is.’

‘Oleander thought – as I once thought – that there was something yet to be salvaged in us. Some spark of who we once were, waiting to be nurtured back into a roaring flame. We are a dying phoenix, building our nest and waiting for the moment of pain that will see us reborn. But I think that moment has been and gone, and we missed it. All we are now – is this.’ He gestured to the corpses dangling from the gantries, or hanging from their stakes. ‘And soon, it will be as if we have never been anything else.’

Savona sighed and tugged on a braid. ‘You are blinded by nostalgia, Merix. You do not see the future, only the past.’

‘And you do?’

‘I see many futures. Most of which do not involve you.’ She tapped his chest with her maul. The gesture was almost playful. ‘You were not with the Manflayer when he pierced the grove of crystal seers on Lugganath. I was. I saw... Well.’ She shrugged. ‘There is power yet in him. Not like the power that drove the Radiant King in his Joyful Repose. But power all the same. And I would know what it is.’

‘Destiny,’ Merix said, making the word sound like a curse.

‘Perhaps.’

‘Oleander thought so as well. And look where it got him.’

‘Oleander was a fool. Like you, he dreamed of the past. All of you do. You are trapped by it, even as you seek to escape it.’ She spat a glob of something acidic on the deck. ‘You think old thoughts, weighed down by old fears. You dream of fire, but give no thought to what comes after.’

‘Nothing,’ Merix said. He flexed his prosthetic hand. ‘Nothing comes after.’

Savona shook her head and set her maul over her shoulder. ‘That you think that, is why it will consume you, in the end.’ She turned away. ‘Let me know when you’ve chosen those who are to accompany me into peril and death. I would speak with them beforehand.’

Merix watched her pick her way gracefully across the field of corpses, but said nothing. She was right, in her way. But also wrong. There was nothing left for the Legions. They had condemned themselves to hell, and made themselves kings of its sulphurous expanse, all at the cost of their future. What they were was all that they would be – a dwindling, bitter remnant, increasingly irrelevant and ever more debased.

He clenched his false hand, feeling it pull against his ravaged flesh. It vented sparks, as worn gears scraped against one another among the feathery strands of alien tissue growing between the cables and pistons. It ached all the time now, and the ache was spreading. Crawling through him like an invading force. The Chief Apothecary had done what he could, but the rot went too deep. It hurt, but the pain was good. Pain helped him focus. It helped keep him alert, against the false dreams that sought to wind their way through him. The whispers of half-seen shapes, seeking to beguile him down crooked roads.
For a moment, faces pressed against the outer edges of his perception. Androgynous faces, murmuring, giggling, leering – poking and prodding at his determination. He blinked them away in irritation. The gods were impatient. They wanted a man to run when he would prefer to walk. ‘But you will have to wait for my soul. Until I am ready.’

A Space Marine approached, his armour inscribed with line upon line of obscene Chemosian gutter-poetry. His name was Bellephus, formerly of the 214th Millennial. One of Savona’s followers, Merix recalled. Or he had been. Loyalties were more fluid these days. ‘Are we spared, then?’ he asked, tapping tunelessly against the hilt of his sword.

Merix laughed bitterly. ‘You ought to know better than that, brother.’ He shook his head and started towards the crumbling bulwark. He had a decimation to conduct. ‘There is no such thing as mercy, among these evil stars.’
Fabius stalked through the dimly lit corridor, followed by a gaggle of vatborn. The huddled creatures snuffled and murmured quietly in their own tongue. That they had a language was a matter of some concern. He had not designed them to speak. He had not designed them to communicate at all. Nonetheless, they did. And had for centuries.

‘Life finds a way,’ he murmured to himself. A rule: life will persist, whatever the intentions of a hostile universe. His vatborn had defied his expectations, becoming something more than he’d intended. Something greater. That alone would have been enough to convince him of the rightness of his path. Whatever happened, his creations would survive. The thought brought him a certain comfort.

One of the vatborn gurgled a warning, and he nodded with a smile. ‘Yes, I know. They have been trailing us since the last bulkhead. Wary and watchful, your cousins. As we all must be to survive in this galaxy.’

He could feel the eyes of his creations on him. The corridor had once been used for the transportation of heavy cargo to the upper holds. It was larger than most, with a thick canopy of conduits, pipes and bundled wires. The hull plates bulged like the uneven walls of a canyon, casting deep spills of shadow across the deck. He noted a number of lumens that had the look of having been tampered with.

The conduits above him creaked and rustled. Quiet laughter, as if that of children, drifted down. Fabius stopped and looked up. He spied small shapes clambering through the canopy, watching him with eyes that caught the light and reflected it. ‘Tell her I am here, children,’ he said. The shapes vanished, as if startled.

He chuckled. Like the vatborn, the first generations of his New Men had been unable to propagate themselves, save by his art. But things had changed. Things were still changing. Evolution in action. Life finding its way. Holds and chambers that had been
empty for centuries now echoed with the murmur of voices and the cries of infants.

Over the centuries, Fabius had populated frontier worlds with his New Men. Safely spinward from the core of the Imperium, hidden from the eyes of those who might do them harm. Since Paramar, he had learned a greater caution. His creations could not rule openly, as they had there. Not without risking everything he had worked to build.

Not yet, at any rate.

He came to a heavy bulkhead. It had been reinforced at some point in the recent past, likely during the recent coup. A servitor’s skull was wired into a nook set above. Optic sensors clicked and whirred within the withered features. A lumen-scanner occupied what remained of the mouth. Threads of sickly green light flared out, cascading over him, scanning the ident-markers of his battleplate. The bulkhead groaned open a few moments later, once his identity had been safely determined.

Noise washed over him as he entered the repurposed bay beyond. It had once housed gunships and fighter-craft, he thought. All gone, now. Instead, it had become a communal gathering place for his New Men. A place of assembly for the disparate packs, where they could come without fear of the rivalries and feuds that characterised so much of their day-to-day interaction. And watching over them all, the eldest of the pack-leaders.

‘Igori,’ Fabius said, as the hatch cycled closed behind him.

‘You live, Benefactor. That is good. When you are dead, it is troublesome.’ Igori crouched atop the rail of the observation deck, lined features knit in concentration. She glanced at him, one hand idly toying with her necklace of teeth. ‘Is all well?’

‘As well as ever,’ Fabius said. ‘I am given to understand that you and your packs collected a fine quota of glands. Most acceptable, my dear.’

He came to join her at the rail, and looked down. The deck below had become the lair of his New Men – or at least one pack of such. They brawled with each other, or sat huddled in quiet conversation. Some sat taking care of their gear, stripping weapons or sharpening blades. One or two matched themselves against specially modified combat-servitors, or saw to the skinning and dressing of something they’d caught on the lower decks. While it might once have been human, it was no more than meat now.

‘They grow more skilled with every hunt,’ Igori said. ‘Soon, they will not need me at all.’ She sounded sad, somehow. Not afraid, as might be expected. Just… sad. ‘One of them will challenge me soon. And they will win.’ She looked at him. ‘Will you mourn me when I am gone, Benefactor?’

Fabius hesitated. The question was unexpected. Unprecedented. He found himself nodding. ‘I will. But you will live on, in your children, and your children’s children. They carry your ferocity, your strength, in them. As you carry the strength I gifted to you, in years past.’

She nodded. ‘She said you would say that.’

‘Who?’
‘I do not know her name. Only her voice and her face. She is ever-changing and unchanging, horned and hoofed like a Neverborn, but… not.’

Fabius felt a chill. ‘You have… met this creature?’
‘I dream of her, sometimes. She calls you father.’

Fabius frowned. ‘And what else does she say?’

Igori tilted her head. The gesture was inhuman. Alien. ‘Nothing at all. We merely… walk together. She shows me things. Herself, I think. As a child. You are there. You are teaching her, Benefactor. As you have taught me.’

‘Yes.’ Then, more quietly. ‘Yes, I taught her. But I have not seen her in many centuries, save out of the corner of my eye, or in dreams.’

Melusine. His first true creation. A being born of his flesh, and the bio-wombs of his design. Created even before his failed attempts to clone the primarchs, before the False Horus. Melusine, whose very presence had so terrified Fulgrim that he had snatched her away, into the undiverse. Another crime among the many that his gene-father had committed against him, since they’d cast down the Loyalists’ standards at Isstvan.

Whatever Melusine had been, she was not that now. She had spent too long in the forest of the night, and changed into something he hardly recognised. The last time she had seen him, she had come bearing a warning. True to form, it had either been too late or too early. He bore her no malice for it regardless. With Melusine, there was only ever regret.

Igori looked at him. ‘Perhaps we dream the same dreams, Benefactor.’

Fabius studied her for a moment. ‘Yes. Perhaps so.’ He pushed all thoughts of his former creation aside and looked down at the Gland-hounds. ‘I will need the Twins. They have the most experience with the sort of undertaking I have in mind, save yourself.’

‘Then I will go.’

‘No.’ Fabius shook his head.

She frowned. ‘Why?’

‘Because I have commanded you thus. What other reason is needed?’ He looked at her, noting the set of her jaw and the heat in her eyes. The lioness, unfettered. ‘The Twins,’ he said again, holding her gaze. Eventually, she looked away with a terse nod. Fabius watched her for a moment longer and then turned away himself. A vague sense of unease permeated him, washing away the last vestiges of satisfaction. As he left the observation deck, he found Skalagrim awaiting him.

‘Arrian sent me to find you. We are nearing the gateway.’ The renegade glanced past Fabius, a frown on his scarred features. ‘Visiting your pets, then? How is the old girl?’

Fabius looked at him. ‘Why not ask her yourself?’

Skalagrim grimaced. ‘No, I think not. They bear me little love, those beasts.’

‘And why should they?’

‘They ape their betters. You ought to have taught them their place.’
Fabius laughed. ‘I rather thought I had.’
‘You know what I mean.’ Skalagrim shook his head. ‘You know Abaddon has ordered that they be killed on sight. It has caused some consternation among those who value their… talents.’
‘What Ezekyle Abaddon orders is of little concern to me.’
‘Make it your concern,’ Skalagrim said. ‘Whatever is whispering into his ear has set itself against you – against us all. Soon enough, it might decide that he should seek us out and put an end to us, once and for all.’
‘And how do you know this, Skalagrim? I was under the impression you were no longer in contact with your former brothers.’
‘I keep my ears open, and you are not the only one owed favours by the great and the powerful. You are not the only fleshcrafter in the Eye, Fabius…’
Fabius turned and thrust Torment’s head beneath Skalagrim’s chin. The sceptre throbbed in his grip, eager to unleash its energies on the Apothecary. Skalagrim froze. Fabius leaned close. ‘Chief Apothecary,’ he said.
‘Chief Apothecary,’ Skalagrim corrected.
Fabius lowered Torment and turned away. ‘We are on expedition, Skalagrim. Discipline must be maintained. But do continue – you were saying?’
‘You have painted a target on us by your creation of those… things.’
‘You should be used to it. Come. If we are nearing the gateway, we must have Key.’
Skalagrim grunted. ‘Another monster.’
‘Another tool. And one a good deal more useful than yourself.’

The outer observation bay was one of a hundred such blisters lining the hull of the Vesalius. It was a rounded chamber, the voidward side of which was taken up by an immense series of viewports, resembling the stained-glass windows of a cathedral. Unlike Diomat’s prison, the bay had not been badly neglected. Instead, it still somewhat resembled the officer’s lounge it must have once been.

That was not to say that there had not been changes, over the centuries. As Fabius and Skalagrim entered the bay, the nascent wraithbone that sheathed the walls and floor trembled, as if in fear. The pearly yellow substance covered every available surface, and stretched from wall to wall, in thin latticework of deceptively fragile-looking strands. Strange undulations and curving shapes spilled wild from the walls, or erupted from the floor, winding like roots among the half-buried conduits. Grown from samples taken from Lugganath, it had taken Fabius centuries to coax the xenos matter to flourish, even in this somewhat limited space.

Further, what growth there was had only been accomplished with the aid of a special cadre of gardeners. Several of these individuals moved to greet the newcomers, as word of their arrival shivered through the psychoplastic jungle. They came accompanied, as always, by sound – a raw, heaving cloud of feedback, which scratched along the vox-
link like rats scurrying through hollow walls. The wraithbone twisted into new and more unpleasant shapes about them as they came into view, its semi-solid substance running like melted wax. Their battleplate was equally warped and unnatural, more resembling a lunatic’s idea of insect carapace than the functional armour it had once been.

Every facet of their armour was daubed in garish colours – some of which were actively painful to Fabius’ enhanced vision. Only the most extravagant patterns and hues registered with the Kakophoni’s warped senses, and their armour had been modified accordingly. Rugose carvings decorated the surfaces of shoulder-plates, and strange flowering growths spilled down from the burst confines of gorgets and chest-plates. Power cables, pneumatic pumps and serpentine hoses hung from them like tabards. Vox-relays decorated the malformed helmets of some like techno-organic crowns.

One stepped forward. Heavy pipes and sonic emitters hung from armour that was a patchwork of marks and styles. The battleplate had been crudely reinforced, extra plates attached by means of some glistening, cancerous growth, which pulsed in time to the slightest sound. His helmet was covered in barnacle clusters of broadcast amplifiers, and the grille resembled the jaws of a wild beast. Bloodshot eyes met Fabius’ own, through the shattered lenses of a mangled visor.

‘Lieutenant commander, you live… again,’ the Kakophoni pulsed.
‘Hello, Ramos. You and your brothers did not join the coup.’
‘Why would we? What does it matter to us who rules this ship?’ Ramos, Bull of the Eighth Millennial, spread heavy arms, and the air churned with a roiling growl.
‘Though, it must be said, on the whole, we prefer you to Thalopsis. He had no ear for music, that one.’

Fabius was struck by Ramos’ erudition. When they’d met aboard Kasperos Telmar’s flagship, Ramos had been barely able to communicate. Now, it seemed he had relearned the art of conversation. The Noise Marine stroked the flat skull of one of the simian servants that he and his fellows had brought aboard. Void-adapted descendants of slaves taken during the Legion Wars, the ape-like creatures were singularly resistant to the auditory miasma their masters gave off.

Hundreds of them inhabited the wraithbone grove that the Noise Marines now tended on Fabius’ behalf. They scampered and chattered among the pale solid foliage, shaping its pliable substance with quick gestures. Fabius watched them for a moment. ‘The wraithbone is still flourishing, I see.’

‘Our song aids its growth,’ Ramos said. ‘It listens and learns, spreading wherever we cast our voices.’ Fabius nodded, pleased. The wraithbone was essentially solidified warp energy, and through trial and error he had discovered that it could be manipulated by proper application of psychic force, such as the raging clamour that bled from the Kakophoni. Already, it was beginning to permeate the Vesalius’ structure, winding
through the frigate like creeper vines and spreading across the hull.

The vessel didn’t seem to mind the intrusion, thankfully. To the contrary, it seemed to welcome it. Somehow, in some way as yet unidentified by the few machine-priests still aboard, the wraithbone was improving the frigate’s functions, one by one. Then, hybrids were often stronger. Only time would tell what the *Vesalius* might become in a few centuries. Fabius was already considering the possibilities of a ceramite-wraithbone blend – a lighter, more reactive armour, capable of repairing itself.

He pushed the thought aside before he could become lost in the possibilities. ‘Has it been quiet?’ he asked. Ramos nodded.

‘As the grave. It is at the grove’s heart, as ever. We leave it be, and it ignores us.’

‘And the wraithbone?’

Ramos hesitated. ‘The wraithbone… talks to it, I think.’ The Noise Marine sounded almost uneasy, if such a thing were possible. ‘We leave it to its gardening, as you asked.’

‘Good. We near our destination. I will require your services when we arrive.’ Fabius stepped past Ramos and made his way deeper into the tangled mass of wraithbone. Skalagrim, Ramos and the others did not follow him. Even the void-born kept their distance. The air at the grove’s heart was clear of much of the sonic distortion that characterised the rest of the bay. Instead, it was filled with the soft rustle of growing wraithbone.

Here were the circular grow-units where he had overseen the implantation of the wraithbone shards, from which it had spread across the bay. And among the humming units a thin, alien figure sat cross-legged, in a writhing field of wraithbone fronds.

Fabius extended his hand towards it, in a courtly, if mocking, gesture. ‘Come, Key. It is time to once again fulfil your purpose.’ The lithe shape took the hand, and Fabius helped it to stand. It had been an eldar, once. A Corsair of the Sunblitz Brotherhood, taken for the information it held in its narrow skull, information that had allowed Fabius to plunder the hoarded knowledge of an undeserving species. But now, the creature he’d named Key served a different purpose. One that had occupied them both for the better part of several centuries.

Wraithbone grew within it, permeating the porcelain flesh, encouraged by his careful attentions. Pale thorns studded its arms and cheeks, and a single, rough, curling horn-like extrusion sprouted from its skull and curved back over its head. Its eye sockets were occupied by thick tangles of psychoplastic, carved to resemble eyes. Old blood stained its limbs and the wasted frame beneath the loose robes it wore, congealing about the innumerable sensor filaments that erupted from its body. As it moved, the wraithbone moved with it, thickening beneath its feet, or rose up to touch its dangling hands, though it paid no heed.

Key had no mind, now. Or at least, not in the traditional sense. Its cerebrum, like the rest of its body, had been utterly infested by wraithbone. It was a living psychic
resonator – a skeleton key, for opening a certain type of lock. It followed him meekly as he escorted it out of the garden. Ramos and the other Kakophoni stepped aside, heads bowed, their noise levels dipping slightly as Key moved through their ranks.

Skalagrim kept his distance as they made their way to the command deck. ‘They were frightened of it,’ he growled.

‘Respect, not fear. Unlike you, Ramos knows art when he sees it.’ Fabius glanced at Key’s blank features, free of all the hatred and pain that had once adorned them. Year by year, decade by decade, as the wraithbone spread through it, all that Key had been was stripped away. The xenos had, like many of those who served him, been repurposed into something more useful.

The command deck was awash in noise when they arrived. A ship in motion was rarely silent. Bulkheads groaned and hull plates flexed in their framework. The Gladius-class vessel was old and had a bellyful of complaints, which it manifested in a clangour of humming consoles and whining cogitators. Beneath the observation dais, the servitor-crew sat hunched in their control cradles.

The bulk of the Vesalius’ functions were handled by the fleshy vat-grown automatons. Fabius preferred the precision of slaved minds, where possible. Those functions that could not be performed by the servitors were dealt with by members of the pale, wasted clan of mutants that were currently in control of the upper decks. Wars were fought between the subhuman clans for the right to serve on the command deck, and the pale worm-folk had been in ascendancy for centuries. They were descendants of the original bridge crew, appropriately enough, and wore the faded, frayed remnants of their ancestors’ uniforms with no small amount of pride.

Both servitors and mutants were under the command of those few original officers whom Fabius had found worthy of augmentation. Officers such as the strategium overseer, Wolver, who greeted Fabius and Skalagrim as they stepped onto the observation deck. ‘The Vesalius is content,’ it said in a crackling monotone.

Fabius took in the creature at a glance. Wolver was nothing less than an alembic twisted into a roughly human shape. A being of hard metal and thick glass, clad in a pristine naval uniform. A still-living brain glistened visibly within the skull, and human eyes peered out through the sockets of a brass death-mask. The vox-grille set between the lips of the mask pulsed again. ‘The Vesalius is content.’

‘Good.’ The symbiosis between overseer and vessel was impressive. If Wolver had any thoughts which were not shared by the Vesalius, and vice-versa, Fabius had seen little evidence of it. ‘Has our presence been detected?’

‘Negative,’ Wolver crackled. It turned on its heel and marched back to the command throne that occupied the heart of the observation deck. Fabius followed, still leading Key. Arrian, Saqqara and the others, including Savona, were already there.

‘Excellent.’ Fabius looked up at the profusion of display screens which flickered along
the far curve of the command deck. The largest of them, a cracked and sputtering oculus viewscreen the size of a fortress wall, showed a full forward outlook of their destination. The webway gate floated amid the broken fragments of a slain world. The latter was one of many planetary carcasses littering the Eye of Terror, the remnants of a fallen empire. So too was the immense edifice now silently tumbling through the empyrean. The gateway was wider across than the Vesalius, and taller as well. It resembled an antiquated doorway, surrounded by an ornate frame that was at once decoration and defensive emplacement. It spun slowly in place, propelled by the cosmic wind.

Once a nexus-point of a pan-galactic empire, it was now a home to Neverborn. Daemons of all sizes, shapes and descriptions crawled across it. Countless thousands of obscene shapes, writhing, digging, squabbling among the alien perfection. He frowned, repulsed by the sight. But also pleased. Thus far, the daemonic horde did not appear to have noticed the vessel sliding towards them. ‘Your hexagrammatic wards are working as promised, Saqqara.’

‘For now,’ the Word Bearer said sourly. Key jerked its hand loose of Fabius’, and swayed towards Saqqara, carved eyes fixed on the crimson-armoured renegade. Saqqara met Key’s blank gaze without flinching. The former corsair’s pale fingers traced the Colchisian runes that marked his battleplate, its mouth moving silently. The Word Bearer endured its attentions stoically. For whatever reason, the creature seemed fascinated by him. It was as if he were a book it could not wait to begin reading anew.

Fabius left Key to its studies and turned his attentions to his own. Over the course of the intervening centuries, he had begun a careful exploration of certain spurs of the webway, with Key’s obliging aid. The labyrinthine dimension was littered with the detritus of a fallen culture. Most of it was altogether useless for his purposes. But some of it had value, and was worth acquiring.

For the past several decades, that had been his driving focus, or distraction, perhaps – gathering what he could, to pore over and study. Like a carrion bird, picking at the bones of a forgotten empire. The thought was not displeasing. After all, there was much that could be learned from bones, if one was observant.

He watched the gateway draw closer and his gaze slid over the multifarious, intricate carvings that covered every speck of its surface. Even this – a simple interdimensional hub – was nothing less than a work of art. Next to it, even the greatest cathedrals of Terra were nothing more than rude hovels, their stones grubbed from the earth and stacked with haphazard care. Though he doubted any cathedral had ever suffered as great a daemonic infestation as this edifice did.

It was always the same. Wherever there was a closed gate, you would find the Neverborn, lurking on the threshold. As mindless and as predictable as insects. And like insects, they came in a variety of forms, each with its own purpose. Once, he’d made a study of such creatures, taking several apart at the base level. They were frustratingly unique, even those with similar physiognomies.
‘I will never understand your fascination with these creatures,’ Saqqara said, stepping past Key. ‘Eldar are nothing more than rootless vermin. Fit only as sacrifices.’

‘Aeldari,’ Fabius corrected absently, still watching the daemons.

‘What?’

‘Aeldari – it’s what they called themselves before their empire imploded. Or as close as the human mouth can come to shaping that particular term. A fascinating language. At the height of their culture, even the most banal conversation between equals was akin to a performance.’

‘A useless affectation for a useless race,’ Saqqara said.

‘Oh, I’d say they have some small use,’ Savona said, playing with the necklace of spirit stones she wore. The colourful stones were mostly cracked and dull, though one or two still flickered with an inner light. She smiled, as if listening to something only she could hear, and tapped one of the stones against her lips.

Saqqara shook his head in disgust. ‘Sybarite,’ he said loftily.

‘Yes, and quite good at it.’ Her forked tongue slid from between her lips and curled lewdly. The Word Bearer looked away, his scarred features set and still.

Skalagrim laughed at the exchange. ‘Why are you even here, Saqqara? Come to pray for our souls?’

Saqqara snorted. ‘Prayer is for the faithful. Which you are not.’ A cruel smile spread across his face. ‘Doubly damned, is what you are. Tell me something, turncoat, how did it feel, helping the Clonelord kill your own kin? Was the reward worth it?’

‘Truthfully, I would have done it for free.’ Skalagrim’s grin was a sharp slash of yellow. ‘Do you have any idea what it’s like, living in a tomb among those who are all but ghosts? Walking and breathing, but ghosts all the same. My brothers were naught but broken automatons by then – trapped in dreams of the past, and held fast in those dreams by the blind gaze of a dead demigod.’ He took a step towards Saqqara. ‘They made pilgrimages, you know. To sit and stare at that ravaged husk, as if they might dredge some meaning from its ruined features. Every day, more and more of them.’

‘Horus was the chosen of the gods, the uncrowned king,’ Saqqara snapped, face flushed with religious fervour. ‘In him was the will of the Primordial Annihilator made manifest for all to see and glory in.’

‘Yes. Glorious, right up until the point his father snuffed him from existence, as easily as you or I might crush a serf’s skull. The gods stripped his divinity from him quickly enough after that.’ Skalagrim bared his teeth in something that was more like a grimace than a smile. ‘And us, with him. All that we had fought for, all that we bled for – gone.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Just like that.’

‘Hardly as quick as that,’ Fabius said. ‘Victory slipped through our fingers the moment Horus chose to reach into the dark and something reached back. We sacrificed our ambitions on the altar of his hubris, and when he fell, he dragged us all down inexorably with him. And not just Horus – Fulgrim as well. And Angron. Magnus. Lorgar.’ He
looked at Saqqara. ‘The gods you worship are nothing save lies, hidden behind masks of folklore and superstition. Interdimensional cancers, their mindless hunger confused for sentience by the lost and the damned.’ Saqqara flinched.

‘Speaking of which, the last time I saw that many Neverborn was aboard the *Terminus* bloody *Est,*’ Khorag grumbled, gesturing to the screens. ‘Can’t stand the blasted things, myself.’ He patted Paz’uz, mussing the nest of writhing, frond-like tendrils atop its head.

Saqqara looked down at the panting beast, and then up at its master. ‘So I see.’ He stepped back as the creature’s drool began to eat through the deck. ‘They haven’t noticed us yet, but they will soon enough.’ He shot Fabius a wary glance. ‘You’re not planning on dropping the Geller field again, are you?’

Fabius snorted. ‘Have no fear, Saqqara. We will be doing this the old-fashioned way.’

Wolver nodded. ‘The *Vesalius* is happy.’

Fabius smiled. ‘I knew it would be.’

A few moments later, the frigate’s weapons turrets spat destructive lances of incandescent light. The light struck the vast edifice like lightning, scouring daemons from their perches by the hundreds. Defensive batteries opened up a moment later, as thousands of darting, inhuman shapes flung themselves into the void as a billowing cloud. It wasn’t a battle so much as pest control, and it was over almost as quickly as it had begun.

Fabius turned to Key. ‘Now, quickly, before they reform. Open the gate.’

Key raised its hands and began to sing. There were no words to the song, nor even anything resembling a recognisable sound. Nonetheless, the wraithbone within the *Vesalius* resonated with the non-sound, and that resonance echoed outwards, into the void. Like the tolling of some ancient bell, buried deep beneath the black earth. The reverberation washed over the webway gate, and the primeval sensory apparatus within the construction awoke for the first time in millennia.

Slowly, the flat sheen of the gateway began to crack. Veins of shimmering light speared through its expanse. Then, with a roar that Fabius felt in his bones, the gateway opened. ‘All ahead full,’’ he snapped.

The *Vesalius* surged forward, defensive batteries still firing as the daemons began to regroup. The frigate plunged through the antediluvian gateway like a scalpel into flesh. Colourless bands of lightning played across the surface of the gate as its own defensive systems struggled to awareness. Fabius turned to the hololithic projection of the gateway, studying the scans they’d made of it. Experience guided his eye to a singular point – the control node for the hyperspatial nexus.

He rattled off a string of coordinates, and Wolver, following procedure, directed a lance strike at the control node. With the node destroyed, the gateway would remain open, until he decided it was time to destroy it. He paid little heed to the daemontide.
that flooded into the webway in the frigate’s wake, already intent on calibrating the necessary sensor sweeps. His quarry would be close. It was just a matter of getting to it before any other scavengers. Key fell silent as the ship entered the webway, the echoes of its song drifting to the far corners of the command deck.

The *Vesalius* slid easily through the darkness of the compromised pathway. Such was rarely the case – most of the hyperspatial network had collapsed, or been destroyed, during the aeldari’s fall from grace. What was left was often too small to traverse, save on foot. Luckily, such was not the case here.

On the display screens, the pan-galactic expanse of navigable tunnels spread out around the ship, in all possible directions. A labyrinth of scalloped coils, curving away at impossible angles, at once a thing of the materium and the warp. A sideways place, existing between what was and what should not be, spanning entire dimensions. The glowing tunnels reminded Fabius of nothing so much as an exceedingly complex network of capillaries and arteries, running through some vast, unknowable corpus.

‘Beautiful,’ Fabius murmured. ‘Look well, and long. Know sorrow, and weep. For we shall never see such grandeur again.’ It was an old quote, but apt.

‘Until the next time we break into the webway,’ Skalagrim said. ‘And the next, and the next, until you find some new obsession.’

The *Vesalius* drifted on, engines at half power. There was no need for speed, here. The sensor-feeds from the hull flashed across the screens as the ship’s cogitators calculated and recorded every aspect of its surroundings over the course of the next hour. As the numbers scrolled across the real-time hololithic projection, Fabius added them to a digital map. While there was little chance of ever discovering the full extent of the webway, he could at least make some attempt to chart those areas they had explored. Periodically, a thin lance of plasma fire carved a mark in the crumbling stratum above the ship.

‘Chalk marks on a labyrinth wall,’ Arrian said, as the afterglow of one such burst faded. ‘You foresee us returning here, at some point?’

‘No.’ Fabius looked up from the cogitator feed. ‘But what is the point of exploration, without some mark of our passage?’ An alert flashed on his feed and he stiffened. ‘Ah.’

A moment later, Wolver, echoing the servitors below, said, ‘Destination sighted.’

Fabius turned from the hololith as the craftworld crept into view. It was a leviathan of a ship, like a continent ripped free of some world’s crust and twisted into an arrowhead. Its design was almost organic – as if it had been grown, rather than made. Given what he knew about wraithbone, that seemed entirely possible.

As the *Vesalius* drew closer, docking towers became visible, surmounting the dorsal frame of the craftworld. There were hundreds of the thin, needle-like protrusions, rising from the vessel’s back like quills. Scattered among them were blister-like defence turrets and launch bays. All dark, all silent. The craftworld had been dead for centuries. According to the records Fabius had plundered in his travels, many craftworlds had
launched themselves unfinished into the webway, desperately seeking to save
themselves from the expanding warp rift that would become the Eye of Terror. Some
had survived, despite all odds.

Others, like this one, had not. He turned back to the hololith. The *Vesalius’* sensors
had begun feeding information about the silent hulk into the system. Every craftworld
was different, though they all shared some similarities.

‘What was it called?’ Arrian asked, studying the hololith.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Fabius said dismissively. ‘What is in a name? It is no less a
treasure trove for being unidentified.’ He spun the image, increasing its size. ‘Smaller
than most, but in better condition than expected. Yes, a treasure trove indeed.’

‘It’s just another dead world, in a dead universe,’ Skalagrim said. ‘How many have
you plundered now, Fabius? Fifty? A hundred?’

‘Hardly so many as that,’ Fabius said. ‘In any event, a thousand would not be enough.
I am rebuilding a base of knowledge that has not existed for aeons. Knowledge far
beyond anything we are familiar with. The knowledge that enabled the ancient aeldari to
carve tunnels through sub-space, or cage suns.’

‘Or live forever, eh?’ Skalagrim laughed. ‘I know you, you old fiend. I know what
drives you. You’re nothing more than a *Wahmpuryi*, scuttling from century to century.’

‘And, pray tell, what is that?’

‘A blood-drinking daemon, from Cthonian folklore. There were similar legends on
Barbarus and Terra as well.’ Khorag chuckled. ‘Superstitious, are we, Skalagrim?’

‘Merely making a point, you wheezing canker.’ Skalagrim gestured with his axe. ‘A
blind man could see it. Oh, he boasts of his New Men – his apex beasts – and how they
will replace us and the mortals both, but for all his talk of dying with dignity, he has no
intention of doing so. You’re a hypocrite, Fabius. And I grow tired of humouring you.’

‘You are free to leave at any time, renegade,’ Fabius said. ‘As I have told you the last
three times you’ve made this complaint. There are gunships in the bays. Take one. Set
your own course, Skalagrim. The universe is vast, and a wise man can find his own
destiny.’

Skalagrim fell silent. Fabius smiled. ‘But you won’t, will you?’ He twitched a finger
chidingly. ‘You never have. Because you are Skalagrim the Judas. The Twice-Damned.
He who betrayed his lord, not once, but twice, to save himself. Where would you go,
Skalagrim? What warband would have anything to do with a treacherous butcher like
yourself?’

‘Abaddon wishes his company, at least,’ Saqqara said idly. ‘He has offered quite the
reward for the pelt of the False Son. Perhaps we should turn him over ourselves…’

‘Try it, god-botherer,’ Skalagrim snapped. ‘I’ll split your gullet and feed you to the
beasts that howl beneath the engines.’

‘Hide your fangs, Skalagrim. You are safe here, as I promised all those years ago.
Whatever else, I keep my promises.’ Fabius turned away from the seething Apothecary
and back to the hololith, his hands clasped behind his back. ‘Besides, I may well have need of you, before this is done.’ He smiled. ‘Waste not, want not, remember?’

The dead craftworld drew close. No lights lit its sullen frame, no flicker of power tripped the Vesalius’ sensors. Then, Fabius had not expected any of its systems to still be active, not after so long. He could not say with any certainty how long it had floated here, but it was a prize unlike any other. Most such husks were badly damaged, or crawling with Neverborn, or worse. This one was seemingly intact. Perhaps a plague had claimed its inhabitants, or some form of mass, ritual suicide, leaving the vessel itself unharmed.

Fabius rotated the hololith again, studying the sensor feeds of the craftworld. He identified one of the tertiary docking spires as the easiest point of access. ‘We’ll take one of the assault landers in – not Butcher-Bird. Not after last time.’

The gunship had strafed their prize, possibly out of spite, but more likely out of boredom. Like the Vesalius, it was a patchwork thing, and the infernal spirit that inhabited it was far too destructive for an operation like this. Instead, they would take one of the several reclaimed assault landers that now occupied the lower bays. While no more pleasant than the gunship, they were at least more sedate, controlled as they were by dull-witted servitors.

‘That place is cursed,’ Saqqara said, bluntly. ‘I can hear the death screams of the vermin which inhabited it from here. They died even as they closed that gate behind them.’ He spat and the deck sizzled. ‘Useless creatures. The galaxy is better without them.’

‘I am inclined to agree,’ Skalagrim said. ‘Never trust the knife-ears. They are lies made flesh. Worse than Neverborn.’

‘Perhaps. But they were wise, in their wickedness. And I would know what they knew. The survival of the species may depend on it.’

‘And yours as well, Chief Apothecary,’ Arrian said softly. Fabius did not reply.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE GHOST HALLS

The craftworld had been smothered in darkness for time out of mind. Its empty galleries and crumbling, untended habitation domes had seen no light in countless centuries. Now, it was filled with the echoes of an army. A small army, but noisy nonetheless. A tangle of stab-lights swept out around more than a dozen armoured forms, illuminating the gentle curve of fluted columns and the fragile-seeming walkways of the dead world they traversed without fear or respect.

The Emperor’s Children moved in loose formation, with all the casual arrogance of veterans of the longest war. Savona prowled at their head. A golden death-mask of a helmet, which had once belonged to an eldar autarch, encased her narrow skull.

Beside her, as always, strode her amanuensis, Bellephus. The gutter-poet seemed to be her loyal dog, for reasons known only to them. The hulking renegade wore battleplate inscribed with line upon line of obscene verse, and his helmet bristled with unnatural fleshy growths. Despite the state of his armour, the bolter he carried was well cared for, as was the sword sheathed at his side. Fabius knew him for a steady hand, as far as such things went.

Savona gestured silently and the Space Marines closest to her spread out, always staying in sight of one another, and their commander.

Fabius watched approvingly, as he and the other Apothecaries followed the armoured figures. Savona was competent, despite her proclivities. Though she was not of the Legion, she had adapted well to their ways. Her warriors trusted her as they would any Legion officer. Which was to say, not much. But that was enough. Savona glanced back at him, her gaze unreadable behind the sculpted visor of her helm.

She did not want him dead, he thought. Not anymore, at least. Savona could not lead a Legion warband, save at the whim of another. There were limits to the loyalty of his
brothers. But she had come to understand that he had little interest in the games of command. Once she’d realised that he did not intend to usurp her authority, she’d sheathed her knives and fallen mostly into line. Her support of Thalopsis had been nothing more than a whim, or perhaps a subtle way of disposing of a rival. Fabius approved of such subtlety, so long as it did not inconvenience him in any way.

A short, sharp yelp caught his attention. Gland-hounds ghosted through the shadows, keeping pace with the Space Marines. The augmented mortals moved silently, staying in contact with each other by brief blurs of sound. Their enhanced hearing allowed them to triangulate the calls of their fellows, where scent and sight were not optimal. Identi-runes flashed as his augurs scanned the codes tattooed on his servants.

The Twins padded silently ahead of their fellows. Fabius was one of the few, besides their gene-kin, who could tell Maysha and Mayshana apart without looking at codes tattooed on their cheeks. Both had the enhanced musculature common to his creations, but in them it was a result of breeding, rather than augmentation. The first of a new race, the progenitors of the New Man. There were others, who had come after. But the twin Gland-hounds were special, for they had been the first of their kind, and had exceeded all expectations.

They were taller than normal humans, but not quite so tall as a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes. Broad shouldered and narrow at the waist, they wore faded fatigues found on some industrial world, now long since an ash-blown ruin, and piecemeal armour, culled from the still-warm bodies of fallen foes. Bandoliers of ammunition crossed their chests, and scattered scraps of wargear hung from their combat harnesses, most of which still worked. Scattered among it all were the trophies – necklaces of teeth and finger bones, empty shell casings and heat-warped Imperial aquilas were all in evidence.

Both Twins wore industrial rebreathers and heavy goggles like the rest of their pack. The Gland-hounds’ thickened dermis was resistant to the chill and they could survive limited exposure to the vacuum, if necessary. In addition, the Twins carried battered, heavily modified autoguns, and a somewhat startling variety of blades, only a few of which were visible. Lights attached to the ends of their autoguns played across the crumbling wraithbone, illuminating the damage and dust in equal measure. Neither Twin displayed any sign that they understood or cared what they were looking at. Their faces were smooth. Unperturbed.

‘Like automatons,’ Skalagrim growled over the vox, watching them. ‘Flense the meat, only metal beneath. Worse than Igori, even.’

‘Only bone,’ Fabius murmured. ‘Strong bone, but bone. They are not machines. They are merely composed.’ He glanced at the other Apothecary, in his black war-plate and bestial helmet, and smiled thinly. ‘You might well learn a thing or two from them.’

Skalagrim laughed hoarsely. Fabius stared at him, until the other Apothecary’s laughter faded into quiet chuckles. When he’d fallen silent, Fabius turned away. ‘One would think that a renegade – twice-over, no less – would think again before laughing
in the face of his benefactor. Then, you have always been somewhat short-sighted. A creature of brute impulse, unable to take full advantage of an admittedly keen intellect.’

Skalagrim snarled. Fabius laughed. ‘The cur growls. Will this be the time he bites?’

Arrian stopped Skalagrim’s forward lunge with a hastily interposed hand. ‘Peace, brother. The Chief Apothecary is correct.’ The former World Eater swiftly drew one of his Falax blades and pressed the edge to Skalagrim’s throat. ‘But if you’ve reconsidered your membership in our brotherhood, I am happy to add your skull to my collection.’

Skalagrim snorted and reached up to prod the blade away from his throat. ‘Any time you’d like to try, war hound, you’ll find me ready and willing. But not now. I acquiesce.’ He bowed his head in mocking apology. Fabius gestured dismissively.

‘If you two are finished, may we continue?’ He didn’t wait for a reply. He expanded his augurs, conducting a sensor sweep of the gallery and beyond. His battleplate’s internal systems were far in advance of their outer shell, and capable of scanning and analysing vast distances in a fraction of the time it would otherwise take. Echolocation pings swept through the darkness ahead, mapping his surroundings.

The craftworld was empty of all save the most basic forms of life. Unfinished war machines hung limp in assembly cradles, weapons sat untouched upon racks. Whatever had happened here had done so swiftly, leaving little sign of the havoc it had undoubtedly wreaked. With nothing here to attract the attention of daemons, the Neverborn had left the silent vessel untouched. It was a tomb, floating quietly in the webway. But even tombs had their treasures.

‘What are we looking for this time? Just those dusty parchments you seemed so excited about?’ Skalagrim chopped through a tall sculpture of delicate crystal. Fabius frowned at the other Apothecary’s casual destruction of the xenos artefact. Skalagrim had left a trail of defaced and desecrated decorations in his wake since they’d arrived.

‘Yes, among other things.’ Fabius expanded the sweep of his sensors. ‘The aeldari knowledge base in regards to gene-weaving is far in advance of anything available to us. I intend to make use of every scrap that they’ve left behind.’ He gestured to the dozen snuffling mutants who followed in their wake.

The malformed creatures carried previously acquired specimens in special preservation cylinders, great rolls of curious, impossibly thin parchment confiscated from the craftworld’s libraries, or hauled grav-sleds loaded down with wraithbone samples, studded with darkened spirit stones. The inhabitants of the craftworld either hadn’t had time to activate their vessel’s infinity circuit or had been prevented from doing so. Regardless, their loss would be Fabius’ gain.

From up ahead, he heard a quiet whistle. The Twins had found something. ‘Spider-sign, Benefactor,’ Mayshana said, as Fabius strode towards them. She lifted the barrel of her weapon, revealing the glistening strands stuck to it. Fabius turned, letting the stab-lights mounted on his battleplate play across the wide gallery. The harsh light was caught and reflected by something.
‘There,’ Maysha said. He pointed. An immense, crystalline web stretched among the shadowed archways and shattered porticos around them. The strands of the web glimmered softly as the tiny, aggressive spiders that had woven it scuttled along their lengths, hunting for prey. Maysha made to draw his knife. ‘Should I…?’

‘No. Arrian.’

‘Yes, Chief Apothecary,’ Arrian said, unsheathing one of his Falax blades. Fabius studied the web as Arrian drew close to it. His helmet magnified and isolated one of the spiders. The creatures normally populated the infinity circuit of a craftworld, helping to maintain its function in a sort of symbiosis. With the craftworld’s dormancy, they had spread throughout its empty spaces, filling the silence with the soft click of their thin, hard limbs. The clicking increased as they became aware of Arrian’s presence.

The World Eater deftly extracted a strand of the crystalline web, ignoring the spiders as they swarmed over his armour. He dripped arachnids as he trudged back towards the group, brushing the last few off as he re-joined them. Scattered bones and broken things crunched beneath his heavy tread.

Saqqara had been right. The ship was a tomb. And a haunted one, at that. Faint snatches of long-ago transmissions still floated through the ship’s communication circuits. Occasionally, a babble of distorted voices would overpower the frequency lock and impose themselves on the vox. The ghosts of the past, their screams of denial echoing into the future forever. Appropriate, in its way. Like the ghost-signals, the eldar were a warning that no one would ever heed. A squall of feedback caused him to wince.

‘They are here…’

Arrian tensed, blade in hand. Fabius motioned for him to put it away. ‘Just an echo, Arrian. We are the first living things to walk these halls in millennia.’

‘It’s not the living who worry him,’ Skalagrim said from nearby. The renegade crouched beside a grime-shrouded skeleton. He pried the fragile skull loose and made a show of examining it, even as it crumbled in his grip. ‘Tell me, war hound, what do the ghosts that haunt these halls tell you? Are you wishing you’d stayed aboard the Vesalius with Saqqara?’

Before Arrian could answer, there was a sound like distant thunder. A dull boom. Fabius turned, seeking the source of the sound. The echoes spread out across the gallery and thinned into silence. Gland-hound and Space Marine alike stood stiff and alert, senses straining to pinpoint the sound’s origin.

The sound repeated itself again and again, but more quietly each time, as if whatever were making it were drawing away from them. Its reverberations quivered through the wraithbone, startling strange shapes into view. Long-limbed, dog-like beasts that loped across open galleries, uttering high-pitched yelps, or avian forms that circled high above, beneath the jagged edges of shattered domes, shrieking in dismay.

As the last of the echoes faded, a bloom of Medusae drifted into view, passing through the stab-lights mounted on Fabius’ battleplate. The strange creatures resembled nothing
so much as a conglomeration of free-floating brain matter and ganglia. They glowed with a soft phosphorescence that set odd shadows to dancing across the darkened galleries of the craftworld. A rare find, this, and fortuitously jolted into the open by the noise. Fabius gestured. ‘Khorag, if you would?’

Khorag chuckled. ‘Paz’uz,’ he rumbled. The bloated beast galumphed excitedly towards the bloom, trailing acidic strands of slime in its wake. Fabius grimaced, but said nothing. Khorag wouldn’t have unleashed the beast, if there was any danger of it doing permanent danger to the specimen.

The daemon-thing flung itself on the slowest member of the bloom, dragging the creature from the air. The Medusae made no sound, but its gelid ganglia pulsed in alarm as it thrashed in Paz’uz’s grip. A mouldy paw pinned the xenos to the floor until Khorag could make his way to it, his armour wheezing and groaning with every step. He snatched up the squirming thing, ignoring its lashing tendrils. ‘A bit small, Fabius—perhaps we should throw it back, eh?’

‘Size is of little importance, so long as it is a healthy specimen,’ Fabius said. The static on the vox distorted his voice, creating a feedback echo. He saw Khorag tap the side of his helmet, and knew that his words hadn’t reached the former Grave Warden.

‘Closer and closer they come...’

He twitched his head, instinctively trying to clear the feed. There was something familiar about that echo, as if it were a voice he’d heard before. He tensed as a sudden thought occurred to him. He had heard it before. He turned slowly, his armour’s sensors cycling through scanning frequencies.

That they might be here, now, seemed improbable. But it was not impossible. As he turned, the dull boom sounded again, somehow closer this time. Was the internal structure of the craftworld succumbing to neglect at last? But the sound was too regular, too rhythmic. Like a series of controlled explosions.

The vox-link crackled. Saqqara’s voice sounded in his ear, garbled and incomprehensible. The Word Bearer sounded agitated. Not unusual, but the timing could not be ignored. A single gesture put Savona and her warriors on high alert. Ambushes were not uncommon in the webway. The twisted kin of the eldar regarded sub-space as their personal fiefdom, and reacted aggressively when confronted by those they deemed intruders. But this did not feel like them. They did their taunting face-to-face, not at a distance.

The vox squealed, stinging his ears. A bolter roared, chewing chunks from a curving wall as something half-glimpsed darted away, laughing. Fabius’ hand dropped to his needler.

‘Something is here with us, Manflayer,’ Skalagrim said, tracking something with his bolt pistol. ‘I can see them, just barely.’

Impossibly thin shadows stretched and squirmed within the glare of the stab-lights. Pale faces peered out through jagged cracks in the walls, or from within forgotten
doorways, as the sound of soft singing pattered down like rain. A scream sounded down the vox-link and Fabius saw one of Savona’s warriors stagger, his armoured form shrouded in a web of monofilament wires. The renegade struggled away from a shadowed archway, fighting the taut wires, even as they sliced through ceramite and into the meat beneath.

The Space Marine toppled forward in a cloud of blood, and was swiftly yanked backwards, into the dark. His howls of anger degenerated into yelps of pain as he was dragged out of sight. A fusillade of bolter fire lit up the darkness as several of his fellows fired into the shadows.

‘The King of Feathers bows before the Emperor of Ashes, and bares his neck, oh, he bares his neck for the blade...’

‘Not likely,’ Fabius snarled, raising Torment. Even the barest touch from the artefact would send shockwaves of pain shooting through his opponent. But he had to hit them, first. He twisted, searching.

A mutant shrieked as something dragged it up the side of a broken wall and quickly out of sight. Another stumbled, coughing blood, and toppled with a wet whine as it clutched at the wound that had suddenly appeared in its throat. Two more died in the seconds that followed, torn apart by giggling shadow-shapes.

‘Close ranks,’ Fabius shouted. His words were lost as one of the Emperor’s Children howled in agony. The warrior staggered as a slim shape dodged back, clutching one of the renegade’s hearts in its grip. A second shape leapt onto the wounded Space Marine’s shoulders and plunged a flickering hand through his helmet as if it were not there, and jabbed stiffened fingers into his skull. The warrior sank to his knees, babbling and singing as the shape swiftly plucked a mass of cerebral tissue from his head.

Arrian lunged for the shape, his blades hissing out. But it flipped away, still clutching its prize. Threat-runes flashed, spinning across Fabius’ display. Five became ten, ten became twenty, the enemy numbers doubling and redoubling. Savona shrieked a command and her warriors began to fire in all directions, pouring death into every aperture. He heard the harsh cry of his Gland-hounds as they caught sight of their foe.

‘Chief Apothecary, we must retreat,’ Arrian said. He scraped his blades together in agitation. Something about the Harlequins made the Nails bite worse, Fabius knew.

‘Funny words, coming from you,’ Skalagrim said. He revved his chainaxe.

Before Arrian could reply, a typhoon of multicoloured shapes suddenly whirled towards them from all directions. The Harlequins dropped down from above, slithered up through cracks in the gallery floor and walls, or vaulted over the edge of the walkway, moving like leaves caught in an infernal wind. They came laughing and singing, filling the vox with noise, drowning out any orders Fabius might have given.

The chirurgeon, sensing his agitation, began cycling stimulants into his system. Time slowed as his perceptions sharpened. The Harlequins moved languidly now, rather than lightning-quick. Like dancers following a choreography.
He watched them flood the gallery, attacking Savona’s warriors with graceful abandon. Arrian traded blows with a tall xenos that had a vibrant red crest rising above its grinning mask, and a shimmering coat that distorted the air about it. Skalagrim bellowed and took the fight to the enemy, interrupting their movements and driving them in all directions – a sour note in an otherwise immaculate performance.

‘Fall back – protect the plunder,’ Fabius shouted to the pack bearers, boosting his vox-unit in order to be heard over the din. ‘Better your lives than those samples.’ He caught sight of Khorag throttling a Harlequin with one hand, spraying a noxious, alchemical liquid from the weapon he held in the other. The acidic soup splattered across gaudy forms, eliciting screams of agony amid the persistent laughter.

Fabius swung Torment out, driving a whirling form away from the mutants carrying his prizes. The creatures clutched archaic weapons, none of which would do them much good against foes like these. Nonetheless, they fought, chanting his name. Rusted chainblades growled and antique autopistols spat as they made to defend their burdens. And one by one, they were struck down. Cursing, Fabius watched as the last fell, choking on its own blood. ‘worthless,’ he spat, starting towards them.

A lilting laugh caught his attention. He turned to see a gangly clown bounding towards him, blade hissing out. He jerked aside and drove Torment into the side of his attacker’s cowl. He felt bone crunch as the porcelain mask crumpled. But even as the body tumbled away, more blades darted for him, coming from all sides.

The vibrantly hued forms spun about him in a kaleidoscopic wheel, attacking and darting away. Torment shrieked in frustration, light pulsing from within the sockets of the skull, every time he lashed out and failed to connect. As fast as he was, they were faster. Even with the combat stimulants flooding his newly grown system, his speed was but a fraction of theirs. They needed a distraction – to pull back and regroup.

Thinking swiftly, he turned, seeking the closest support column. Vox still inoperative, he shouted, ‘Smash the columns – collapse this gallery and fall back to the previous. We must retreat.’ Roars of assent reached him, as he shouldered aside one xenos and slapped a second from his path. Bolters gouged wounds in the columns around him as he reached his target.

Torment squirmed in his grip, sensing his intentions. Strength flooded his limbs, as the artefact stirred itself to full wakefulness. Harlequins swarmed towards him as he took a two-handed grip on the sceptre and swung it towards the thinnest part of the column. Torment gave a shuddering, sub-sonic cry as it struck the wraithbone, smashing great chunks out of it. He heard a krak grenade go off nearby, and suddenly the air was full of dust and splinters. A groan reverberated through the gallery, trembling up through the stabilisers in his boots. Ignoring it, he wound back and struck the column again, shattering it completely.

Across the gallery, other columns followed the example of the first, bursting or tearing loose from the gallery. The angle of the floor beneath Fabius’ feet dipped, and another
groan echoed up as the gallery, free of the columns connecting it to the upper levels, began to twist on its lower supports. Dust billowed from the ruptured wraithbone walls, as everything began to shake and shudder.

Fabius and the others retreated back the way they’d come, pausing only to grab as many of the prizes they’d collected as possible. Concentrated bolter fire drove the Harlequins back into the dust as the renegades made their departure from the wounded gallery. Savona spat curses as she reloaded her bolt pistol. ‘I can’t contact the *Vesalius*, or the scouting parties we sent out to check the upper and lower galleries.’

‘That you think they might have survived shows more optimism than I gave you credit for,’ Fabius said. The vox frequency was striated with nonsense noise – childish singing and hurried monologues stripped from ancient aeldari sagas. The Harlequins were all about them, unseen and weaving fatal stories, and blocking any attempt they might make to escape in one piece. ‘Come – we must keep moving.’

The Emperor’s Children fell back through the dust-choked gallery, back towards the wide, scalloped stairwell that led to the docking tower where they’d made their entrance. They were accompanied in their flight by trilling songs, some mocking, others more in the nature of dirges. Any time they sought to make a stand, the Harlequins would harry them back into motion. The colourful xenos attacked from all directions before twisting away out of sight, like smoke caught by a high wind.

Worse, Fabius’ sensors had detected the low, distorted hum of grav-engines creeping through the still air of the craftworld. The Harlequins had brought more than acrobats and mimes to this celebration. ‘They are moving to cut us off from our escape route. Hurry!’ He began to jog, the servos of his battleplate whining in protest at the irregular strain. The Twins ranged ahead, followed by the remains of their pack. Savona and her warriors took up the rear, retreating more slowly as the old disciplines reasserted themselves.

‘*Khaine comes, awash in madness, and Vaul, exhausted from his labours, must run-run-run, or be struck down,*’ a Harlequin sang over the vox. ‘*He cannot face Khaine, shrunk and brittle, he can only flee…*’

‘Khaine…’ Khorag wheezed. ‘That’s the name of their murder-god, I think.’ The former Grave Warden lumbered in the rear, slowed down by his bulk. Paz’uz loped beside him, whining in agitation.

‘Ignore them,’ Fabius snapped. ‘Their words are just another trap. Do not listen to them, do not look at them unless it is to kill them.’

‘Easier said than done,’ Skalagrim said. He looked at Fabius. ‘They’re herding us. You know that, don’t you? Confining us to the battlefield of their choice.’

‘And what would you have us do?’ Fabius said.

‘We could make a stand…’

‘Where? Here? There? Pick a spot, Skalagrim. I guarantee that they’ll have thought of it first. No, our only hope is to escape.’ Fabius spotted an immense set of intricately
carved doors – the portcullis that led to the entry hall. Beyond that was the docking tower, and dubious freedom.

‘No escape, no escape, not from fate,’ a voice crooned in his ear. ‘You have led us a merry dance, O king, but this chapter draws to a close.’ The words sent a thrill of unease through him. Even now, they did not seem intent on his death. That was what worried him the most about these encounters. Death held no fear for him, but they did not want to kill him – no, they wanted him in chains. But why? What purpose did they foresee for him? Whatever it was, he had no intention of giving in to it. Let them chase him from one end of the galaxy to the other if they would.

They retreated into the gallery and flung closed the great doors. Alien locking mechanisms shuddered into place, sealing the deceptively fragile-seeming bulkhead with a disgruntled hiss. It wouldn’t hold for long, if the Harlequins were determined to get in.

As if to vindicate this thought, the vast doors shuddered. Light flashed between the cracks, and his armour’s sensors registered a spike in temperature. The Harlequins would be through in a moment. Fabius cursed. ‘Fall back – all of you, fall back to the docking tower. Staggered ascent. Maysha, Mayshana – lead the way.’ He gestured to the curving, crystalline steps in the centre of the gallery, rising upwards like the coil of a spring.

‘Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide,’ the unseen Harlequins sang over the vox. Fabius tried to ignore the gloating echo of those words. The Gland-hounds pelted past him, swiftly climbing the steps. Khorag and Skalagrim went next, followed by Arrian and Fabius.

As Fabius climbed the steps, the doors buckled inwards with a groan. Wraithbone burst and splintered. The Emperor’s Children not already following him up the steps laid down a heavy sweep of fire, driving back the colourful shapes that sought to enter. The Harlequins weren’t alone – eldar in orange-and-yellow armour accompanied them. The Sunblitz Brotherhood. Perhaps they had come to reclaim their lost associate. Perhaps they had simply come for revenge. He had no intention of waiting to find out which.

The renegade Space Marines fell back, following Savona’s shouted commands. The eldar were swift, faster even than an Adeptus Astartes. The only way to compensate in close quarters, to avoid being separated from your brothers, was a tight formation and alternating fields of fire. Luckily, the Emperor’s Children had made fighting eldar into an art.

Slowly, steadily, they retreated up the recursive stairwell. Shuriken fire tore at the structure, casting splinters of wraithbone across the armour of the renegades. Over it all, Fabius could hear that familiar, mocking laughter. He scanned the chamber, noting the lead elements of the Corsairs making for the landing leading to the steps. ‘Savona – destroy the lower section of the stairwell,’ he said.
‘Some of my warriors are still below,’ she said, glaring up at him. Fabius saw that she was correct. A small knot of Emperor’s Children still fought on the landing of the steps, unable to ascend for the weight of enemy fire.

‘Good, they will provide an excellent distraction. Arrian, Skalagrim – krak grenades.’ Fabius reached into his coat and plucked loose a curved canister grenade from his combat harness. He primed the detonator and sent it bouncing down the steps. Arrian and Skalagrim followed his example. The trio of grenades bounced past Savona and her remaining warriors as they hastily climbed higher, trying to get out of range of the ensuing blast.

The wraithbone structure shuddered as the krak grenades tore through it, shattering the frame. The lower section tore itself loose with a groan and toppled down with a deafening crash. Below, the trapped Emperor’s Children howled curses at this turn of events. Several even turned their weapons on their fellow Space Marines, firing wildly at them as they continued to ascend. But before too long, they were forced to turn their attentions back to the advancing eldar.

Unfortunately, the Harlequins were not so easily distracted. They sprang through the air as the echoes of the collapse faded, weightless and swift. The gaudily clad xenos scuttled up the sides of the curving stairwell like spiders, their shapes blurring and flickering.

‘Pluck them off,’ Fabius snarled. Savona and the others leaned over the edge of the stairwell, firing. Harlequins danced along the railing, tumbling ever upwards. The air filled with noise and colour as the xenos sprang from one side of the stairwell to the other.

Fabius swiped at one and the Harlequin flipped backwards, landing lightly, impossibly, atop Torment. The clown sprang away laughing as Fabius tried to shake it off. The others followed it, retreating as quickly as they had come. As if this were nothing more than a game. ‘They’re playing with us,’ Skalagrim growled, bracing his boot against the rail in order to pry his chainaxe loose. ‘Trying to tie us up here until the Corsairs get into position.’

‘Thank you for that succinct encapsulation of our situation.’ Fabius scanned the stretch of stairs above. Only a few metres to go before they reached the outer hatch of the docking tower’s connecting transit tube. He and the others moved swiftly, shadowed by the slim, darting shapes of the Harlequins. The clowns stayed at a safe distance, attacking the slowest of the group’s number, but only briefly.

When they at last reached the transit tube, they sealed the outer hatch behind them. The sound of racing feet and inhuman singing accompanied them as they hurried upwards, along the sloping passage towards the docking platform. The gunship they’d used to effect entry would be waiting there for them.

The docking platform shuddered as they entered, and Fabius could hear the thud of distant explosions. Something was going on, beyond the ambush. Had the eldar come in
force, then? If they were attacking the *Vesalius* as well…

The thought was interrupted by a sudden blow. He heard the Twins scrambling around, Maysha cursing, as he staggered forward. The other Gland-hounds reacted with similar hostility, swinging their weapons around to face his attacker. Fabius turned. ‘Hold!’ He pinned the Twins in place with his eyes. ‘Hold,’ he said again.

‘You left them to die,’ Savona snarled, stalking towards him. Fabius rubbed the back of his head. The chirurgeon clicked in agitation, analysing his vital readings. Were he further along in his decrepitude, such a blow might have done serious damage. But for the moment, he was made of sterner stuff. He waved Arrian back before the World Eater could launch himself at her. Bellephus, ever faithful, had his weapon pointed in the World Eater’s direction.

‘Yes. Call it restitution, for their earlier foolishness, if you like.’ Fabius could taste blood. His helmet feed still juddered from the force of her blow. ‘We shall discuss your own restitution, once we are safely aboard the *Vesalius*.’

‘And how are we going to get there?’ Skalagrim asked.

Annoyed by what he took to be the renegade’s attempt at humour, Fabius snapped, ‘What are you blathering about, fool?’

Skalagrim pointed. Fabius turned.

The assault lander that should have been waiting for them was gone.
CHAPTER SIX

FLAVIUS ALKENEX

Saqqara Ur-Damak Thresh, Diabolist of the Seventh Choir, stared at the thing called Key as it sat in quiet contemplation. Of what, he could not say. Nor did he wish to know. The eldar had assumed a cross-legged position, just after the attack had begun, and seemed unconcerned by anything going on around it.

On every viewscreen, the image was the same – orange, blade-shaped eldar fighter craft swarming about the Vesalius, like cull-wasps stinging a bovid. Every so often, the frigate shuddered as a fighter got past the defensive turrets. By themselves, they were little threat to the Vesalius, but the Word Bearer knew that this was nothing more than a distraction. He laughed hollowly. ‘A trap, of course.’

It had happened before. His enslaver was nothing if not single-minded, and that made him predictable in some ways, if not others. His obsessions had been diverted down crooked paths after that long-ago raid on Lugganath. Bile had been drawn deeper and deeper into the mysteries of eldar, seeking the answers he sought in the unnatural writings of the filthy xenos. ‘Was that their plan all along, I wonder?’ he mused, as alarm klaxons sounded, alerting the crew to another strafing run.

The eldar had surged out of a side corridor of the webway, like dead leaves blown through an open shaft. One moment, the webway had been empty. The next, it was full of death. And not just Corsairs – the ship’s sensors had isolated and identified strange, multicoloured craft, smaller and faster than the others. They spun about Vesalius with impossible grace, darting in and retreating, doing little damage but drawing fire from the startled gunnery crews.

‘One trap after the next. Cunning are the xenos, and they make all truths falsehoods.’ The words came naturally to his lips. The twenty-third canticle from the Codex Lorgarius – trust not the xenos, lest ye be mired in treachery. The attack was a feint.
They were occupying the *Vesalius*, jamming its vox frequencies and keeping anyone aboard from sending aid to those aboard the craftworld. If he tried to launch gunships, the eldar would swarm through the open bays. ‘If we stay, I die. And if we leave, I die.’ He smiled crookedly. ‘A double-edged blade.’

Saqqara sank to one knee before the former Corsair and tipped up its chin with a finger. ‘Is that why they let him keep you, all these centuries? So that you would lead him here, into their trap?’ He smiled. ‘Do they think so far ahead, these creatures?’

The eldar played with prophecy the way a child might shape mud. They twisted certain futures all out of joint, and changed the course of time’s river. Full of arrogance, they invaded the playground of the gods for their own pathetic ends. Saqqara grinned into Key’s face. ‘If so, they will find him trickier prey than they might expect. I know from experience that he is no simpleton, whatever his other faults.’

Key’s false eyes twitched in their ravaged sockets. It reached up a pale hand and stroked Saqqara’s cheek. Slivers of wraithbone, protruding from its flesh-like thorns, sliced through his skin. He jerked back with a hiss, but did not strike the creature. ‘A wasted effort, whatever I might wish – you would not feel it, would you?’

Key said nothing. It merely stared at him, expression blank. Saqqara blinked and looked away. The creature was unnatural. An abomination, even among abominations. A thing that should not exist. More proof that Fabius Bile needed a guiding hand.

‘Enemy fighters breaking off,’ Wolver intoned. Saqqara started and rose to his feet. He turned towards the strategium overseer.

‘What?’

‘Enemy fighters—’

‘I heard you. Show me.’ The sensor feeds flickered, cycling from one node to the next. It was as Wolver had said. The eldar were breaking off, retreating. But why? Then, he caught sight of the bulky shape of a Stormbird assault lander, plunging down through the haze of battle. And then a second, a third, a dozen. Storm Eagle gunships accompanied the larger craft, duelling with any eldar vessel foolish enough to draw near. ‘Identify the newcomers – now!’

Information began its slow crawl across the displays as ident-signals were recognised and expanded. Saqqara grimaced. They all belonged to the Third Legion. Or did so now, at least. ‘But what are they doing here?’ he muttered. Once again, he tried to contact the others, but the vox frequency was still scrambled.

‘Third Legion transports *Blood of Terra* and *Firehawk* requesting docking permission,’ Wolver intoned.

‘They move quickly,’ Saqqara grunted. He paused, considering. Unlike the eldar, the Emperor’s Children had likely come through the same gate that the *Vesalius* had traversed. While the Stormbirds were long-range craft, the supporting gunships were anything but. That implied the presence of larger craft in close proximity.

‘Third Legion transports *Ollakius* and *Yammering Tongue* requesting docking
permission.’ Wolver’s monotone crackled with something that might have been displeasure. ‘Third Legion transports Fulgrim’s Whisper and Eidolon’s Folly requesting–’

‘Yes, yes,’ Saqqara growled. ‘Less a timely intervention than a boarding action, it seems. Contact Merix. I want the Twelfth Millennial ready to meet our saviours in the docking bays. And find some way of breaking through that jamming signal. The Clonelord might wish to know that his former brothers have come calling…’

Fabius stared at the empty space where the assault lander had been. Scorch marks scarred the open docking platform, and the wraithbone looked as if it had been chewed by high-velocity weapons fire. The bodies of the two Gland-hounds he’d left to guard the vessel lay scattered like crimson spillage across the platform, their augmented forms torn apart by the same weapons that had wounded the wraithbone walls and deck.

He stalked towards the open bulkhead, his armour’s augurs pinpointing and analysing the angle and depth of the holes marking the wraithbone. Arrian and the others spread out, several of the Emperor’s Children moving to force the inner bulkhead closed. ‘Where’s the blasted lander?’ Skalagrim said.

‘It’s been destroyed,’ Fabius said flatly. He suspected that was what Saqqara had been trying to tell him earlier. This trap had been well and truly sprung. But this did not feel like a Harlequin ploy. The ambush, yes – but this? He stepped to the edge of the outer bulkhead, the astral winds whipping at his coat. He could see the expanse of the craftworld stretching out around and below him. Rising from among the broken spars and shattered domes were thin plumes of smoke. One of them undoubtedly marked the remains of the assault lander.

The vox was still jammed, emitting only a faint murmur as of many voices, speaking all at once. But the heights above were full of sound and fury. Disparate craft – not all of them eldar – duelled across the crooked horizons of the craftworld, raining fire down on the dead world. Spars of the webway splintered as they were caught in the crossfire, and fell like pale comets. The craftworld shuddered as these missiles struck home, eradicating domes and structures that had remained sacrosanct for untold centuries.

‘Those are Third Legion gunships up there,’ Savona said from nearby. ‘But I don’t recognise them. Are they ours?’ She crouched at the edge of the berth, staring upwards.

‘I think not,’ Fabius said. They’d missed something, preoccupied as they were by the Harlequins. ‘This section of the webway is more crowded than I’d hoped.’

He could see the vast bulk of the Vesalius holding position nearby, its defensive turrets casting thunder and lightning at the swarm of comparatively minuscule xenos vessels that afflicted it. The eldar had come prepared for war. He smiled bitterly, wondering whether he ought to be flattered by such attentions.

Something screeched and flung itself at him through the empty air. It was a snarling ball of wings, jaws and malice, reeking of the empyrean. He drove Torment forward
like a spear, punching through one of several champing mouths. Broken fangs spattered his arm as he whipped the stunned creature around and slammed it against the side of the berth, pulping it into a harmless mass. He freed Torment from its writhing shape and kicked it off the platform. ‘Damnation,’ he muttered.

It seemed that the conflict had drawn the attentions of the Neverborn. Daemons raced through the savaged air, corkscrewing towards unlucky vessels. An eldar fighter bucked like a wounded animal as daemons tore at its fuselage and canopy, trying to get at the pilots within. It slammed into a nearby docking tower. The flare of destruction drove Fabius and Savona back from the opening. He cursed and turned back to the others. ‘We will not be able to hold this position for long. If the eldar don’t overwhelm us, the daemons will.’

‘What do you suggest?’ Skalagrim said. ‘Shall we climb down and lose ourselves in the maze below? Or perhaps you’d like to parley with the xenos?’ He pointed his axe at Fabius. ‘Deliver unto us your words of wisdom, Chief Apothecary.’

Before Fabius could reply, something heavy struck the docking tower. He staggered, his battleplate’s internal stabilisers keeping him on his feet. The wraithbone arches buckled and the tower’s long-dormant systems burst in a spray of sparks and eerie blue flame. Smoke boiled out of the damaged control nodes, washing through the chamber before being drawn out through the open berth.

His armour’s proximity sensors screamed as slim shapes darted through the fug. Where the Harlequins had come from, he couldn’t say. That they were here now was the important thing. And there was nowhere else to go.

‘He has run – oh, he has run – but he can run no further...’

Fabius turned. The smoke seemed to congeal about him, thickening and becoming almost opaque. The vox faltered and went dead, sealing him inside his armour. He could hear nothing save his own breath rasping in his lungs, and the thump of his pulse. Even the chirurgeon was silent, though he could feel it twitching and pulling against his spine. In the haze, vague shapes capered and spun about him, drawing closer with every gyration. Suddenly, the audio sensors of his helmet squealed, nearly deafening him.

‘The story never ends,’ a hatefully familiar voice said. ‘It only circles back around, from end to beginning, and starts again.’ A thin shape danced towards him, spinning a long staff as if to disperse the smoke. Fabius stiffened.

‘Veilwalker.’

‘Whether you wish it or not, the performance continues, O King of Feathers,’ Sylandri Veilwalker half-sang. ‘The story permutes and shifts about you, but you will never break free of it. Like the glistening coils of Shehem-shahai, they pull you deeper into destiny’s embrace, the harder you struggle. That is the story of you.’

The Shadowseer twirled towards him, moving with a curious, rolling gait. As the xenos twitched, mirror images sprang from it, like reflections in shattered glass. The images switched positions, as if the creature were dancing with itself. Beyond the
images, he could see Arrian and the others fighting the Harlequins. Khorag smashed a clown from its feet with a sweep of his arm, and Paz’uz leapt on it, eliciting a scream from the gaudy xenos. Arrian staggered as a Harlequin plunged a hand through his chest-plate, its phase-field allowing it to bypass ceramite as if it were thin air. The World Eater’s desperate slash sent the Harlequin tumbling back, out of reach, its fingers dripping red. The others were similarly engaged and unable to come to his aid. The Harlequins had isolated him with deft skill.

‘It has been over a century, Veilwalker. Find a new tale to tell. Or better yet… don’t.’ Fabius snatched his needler from its holster and fired, sending a dart towards each of the images. One by one, they flickered out of sight. Fabius grunted in annoyance as something hard crunched against one of his stab-lights, shattering it. He spun, firing again, but Veilwalker flipped away, laughing shrilly.

The smoke seemed to drag at his limbs. It was as if the Harlequins had suborned it somehow. His armour’s targeting system couldn’t get a lock on the slim figure capering about him. He was forced to rely on his own instincts. Unfortunately, those instincts were somewhat dull from disuse. It had been too long since he had taken the field in anything more than a detached capacity. The front line was foreign ground to him. He needed distance. A distraction. He bulled through the smoke, seeking allies.

As he burst through the roiling cloud, he spotted several of his Gland-hounds fighting back-to-back against the darting shapes. ‘Nialos, Hargan – form up,’ he snarled, as he lurched towards them. Two Gland-hounds broke away from the pack and hurried towards him, firing at the whirling shapes around them as they came.

A scrape of silk on wraithbone brought him around as Veilwalker darted towards him. Swiftly, he stepped behind one of the Gland-hounds. The staff spun in Veilwalker’s hands, and the weighted ferrule slammed down on Nialos’ skull. Reinforced bone buckled as if it were paper, and he toppled forward with a disgruntled sigh.

The Shadowseer was over the body a moment later, spinning towards Fabius in a blur of colour. Fabius interposed Torment, catching the xenos’ staff before it connected, but only just. The alien was incredibly fast – faster even than his enhanced reflexes could compensate for. Hargan roared and lunged, nearly tackling the eldar. Veilwalker leapt straight up and drove the end of its staff down like a spear.

Hargan gave a strangled groan as the staff punched through his armour and crushed his spine. He flopped to the ground, his screams cut short as Veilwalker landed on his head. The Shadowseer vaulted off the dying Gland-hound and sprang towards Fabius. ‘Bow to fate, mon-keigh, lest its weight crush you where you stand.’

He backed away from the slim shape. The distorted vox crackled suddenly, erupting with the ecstatic death-cries of the Emperor’s Children and the shrieking moans of his Gland-hounds. A tactic that might have unnerved a lesser mind. ‘Better to be crushed by fate than to live in chains,’ he said, spitting the words at the alien. ‘You had my answer on Lugganath, witch. What makes you think this time would be any different?’
Warning runes flashed in his display, alerting him to his danger an instant before the enemy struck. Veilwalker had manoeuvred him into a trap. Fabius twisted aside, and a monomolecular blade pierced the flap of his coat, tearing away a silently screaming face. He brought Torment down. The colourful shape flipped out of reach, laughing. They were all laughing. Or worse, singing.

The vox rattled with shouted calls for aid, or warnings. The Harlequins had sliced the Emperor’s Children’s battle formation apart, like water sluicing through parched soil. Everywhere he looked, warriors fought alone or in small groups.

He caught a glimpse of Savona and Bellephus chopping themselves a path towards Skalagrim, who was wrestling with a spindly clown, its too-long fingers crackling with blinding energies. He heard Arrian calling out, but could not spot the World Eater’s ident-rune in the confusion.

His armour scanned and isolated the capering figures that now surrounded him, and began the slow trawl through his archive of aeldari mythology. Harlequins did not wage war so much as they performed it. Battle flowed according to a choreographed rhythm. If he could identify the story they were acting out, he stood a chance of escaping the otherwise lethal pull of the narrative – or of upending it entirely.

‘Patience,’ he murmured. Veilwalker phased in and out of sight, dancing through the shadows, drawing closer with impossible speed. The other Harlequins orbited around the Shadowseer, playing their assigned roles. He ignored the off-kilter singing, the playful lunges, and tried to concentrate on the big movements, and identify the main characters. Veilwalker was the instigator, but there would be others.

They whirled about him in a murderous cyclone, their blades marking his armour, his coat, drawing sparks and scraps alike. The chirurgeon responded to his need, and a flush of stimulants filled his bloodstream. He matched his opponents, move for move. There were dozens of Harlequins, but most of them seemed more inclined to prance and sing than attack. The world, his surroundings, narrowed to the performance.

‘The chorus, then – playing to the audience,’ he said to himself. The implications of that infuriated him. He was no play actor, strutting and fretting on a crumbling stage for the enjoyment of others. He readied his needler and targeting runes spun, trying to lock on to one of the slender shapes pirouetting about him.

Even as he fought, however, a portion of mind was analysing his enemies. They reminded him, in some ways, of his brothers. Or his brothers as they had been. Their movements had the same air of practised repetition – as if every fight had been fought a thousand times, and every move accounted for. The search for perfection had driven his brothers into the arms of anarchy. But these creatures had surrendered their will to a far crueler philosophy – that of narrative causality. Their stories, once begun, could not help but take their inevitable shape, again and again.

The question here was, was this a story where they won – or where they lost? He staggered as a burst of needle-fire drew oily sparks from his shield-plate. He twisted,
pulling the trigger, replying in kind. He swung the needler, finger still on the trigger. He could see the weak points now, the centre of each part of the narrative – the god figures. Hurt them, disrupt the performance.

Choosing one at random, he lunged, Torment sweeping back for a clubbing blow. All of a sudden, the narrative contracted in an unforeseen fashion, and the Harlequins scattered in all directions. He felt something vibrate through the platform, and turned.

A gunship hovered before the open docking bay, assault cannons whirring, driving Veilwalker and the other Harlequins back. The vox crackled as a new voice intruded over the clamour of alien voices. ‘—o you live, Lieutenant Commander Fabius?’

He recognised that voice. Fabius turned towards the gunship as it docked in the berth. Though its heraldry was faded and warped, it was still recognisably that of the Third Legion. The disembarkation ramp thudded home as the entry ports cycled open with a hiss of escaping pressure. The ramp trembled beneath the tread of booted feet. Warriors in twisted battleplate thudded down into the chamber, weapons blazing, bellowing the battle-cry of their Legion – ‘Children of the Emperor! Death to his foes!’

The phalanx of amethyst battleplate spread out, pushing the Harlequins back through sheer momentum. The alien clowns leapt and danced among the firestorm, nimbly avoiding whistling bolter rounds with impossible grace. But no matter how adroit their movements, they could not pierce the curtain of explosive rounds, and were forced back.

Fabius saw Veilwalker race up the side of a wall, twisting in the air, staff sweeping out like a scythe to knock a Space Marine staggering. A moment later, the Shadowseer was gone, retreating with the rest of its troupe back through the chamber entrance. The alien voices that had been ricocheting across the vox faded, giving way before the voices of the newcomers.

Fabius turned, weapons still in hand. He found himself staring down the barrels of several bolters. ‘Is this a rescue, or an assassination?’

‘As distrustful as ever, Spider.’

A warrior pushed his way through the newcomers’ ranks. He was clad in magnificent Mark IV battleplate, decorated with complex heraldry and ornamentation. Every facet of the purple armour had been made over into a work of art – painted faces warred for space with deceptively delicate looking crystalline growths and carefully sculpted extrusions of ceramite. The helmet bore a crest of stiff white hair, and the golden visor was scooped to a sharp, baroque curve. Ancient oaths of moment, all either happily unfulfilled or proudly broken, fluttered about his armour.

Fabius straightened. ‘Flavius Alkenex.’ Flavius Alkenex, whom he’d fought beside at Byzas and Walpurgis. Prefect of the Phoenix Guard in the waning days of the Heresy. One of Fulgrim’s lackeys in the centuries after the flight from Terra. There was no telling who he served now, though it was certain that he was serving someone. Flavius had never been one to lead, when he could instead follow. Fabius lifted his needler,
ignoring the bolters aimed in his direction. ‘My question stands.’
‘If it were the one, rather than the other, why not simply leave you to your fate?’
Alkenex shrugged. ‘Then, you always were sorely lacking in common sense.’ He tapped
the pommel of the blade sheathed at his side. ‘And my rank is prefect, as I’m sure you
recall.’

Fabius laughed. ‘And mine is lieutenant commander. But that was when there was a
Legion, with a command structure. Now, we are just Fabius and Flavius. And if you do
not answer my question, there will soon only be Fabius.’ The needler didn’t waver.

Alkenex laughed. ‘You are as stubborn as I recall, Spider.’
‘Do not call me that,’ Fabius snapped.
‘I’ll call you what I like, given that you are now my prisoner.’ Alkenex made a show
of drawing his blade and laid it over his shoulder.
‘On whose authority?’
‘Does it matter? I outnumber you. That alone gives me all the authority I need.’

Fabius looked around. Only a few of the warriors who’d accompanied Savona were
still standing, Bellephus among them. And as Alkenex had pointed out, they were badly
outnumbered by the newcomers. Arrian and the other members of his Consortium were
isolated, facing down a firing line. The only ones not being covered were the Twins and
his surviving Gland-hounds, likely because Alkenex thought them to be nothing more
than mortal chattel.

He caught Mayshana’s eye, and she dipped her chin. The Gland-hounds eyed
Alkenex’s warriors hungrily and Fabius knew that if he gave the order, they would
attack. And most likely die in the doing so. Ordinarily, he wouldn’t have hesitated, but
they had taken too many casualties on this expedition. Too much viable stock now lay
ruined on wraithbone decks. Even so, he was loath to allow Alkenex to hold the upper
hand. He stepped forward, needler still raised. Alkenex tilted his head, watching him as
he advanced.
‘Ordinarily, in these situations, the prisoner lowers his weapon,’ he said.
‘I have never been ordinary.’ Fabius ignored the anticipatory twitches of the
Emperor’s Children surrounding him. ‘Nor have I ever surrendered, especially to a
jumped-up equerry such as yourself, Flavius.’
‘The alternative is death.’

Fabius laughed. ‘I have died before.’ He let the barrel of the needler drift, his targeting
array locking onto the space between Alkenex’s chest-plate and helmet. ‘These needles
can pierce all but the thickest ceramite. And the concoction within them would break
down your body, cell by cell, until there is nothing left of you but a bad smell. I do not
fear death, Flavius. Do you?’

Alkenex tapped his shoulder-plate with his sword. ‘No. But neither am I in any hurry
to die. I could just have them shoot you…’
‘You said it yourself – if you were here to kill me, you would have left me to the
Harlequins. Which means you need me alive.’
‘True. But alive doesn’t mean in one piece.’ Alkenex stabbed his sword into the wraithbone with an emphatic thunk. ‘Perhaps we should retreat, eh? Leave you to escape on your own. I suspect that you’ll manage it, in time.’ He pointed upwards. ‘If the Harlequins let you, that is.’

Fabius glanced up and saw the pale ovals of Harlequin masks peering at him from the shadows of the chamber’s upper reaches. A whisper of sound slithered across the vox, something between a laugh and an eager whine. Abruptly, he lowered his needler. ‘Fine. I… surrender.’

‘Louder, Spider. So that the audience can hear.’ Alkenex lifted his sword and tapped it against Fabius’ shoulder. ‘I want there to be no mistake.’

Fabius brushed the sword away. ‘I surrender,’ he said, holstering his weapon. ‘Though, I would ask to whom I am surrendering – who sent you here, Flavius? On whose behalf are you here, spouting threats?’

‘Why, the only authority that matters – the Lord Commander Primus himself.’ Alkenex sheathed his sword with a flourish, and turned away.

‘Lord Commander–?’ Fabius began.

‘Yes. Lord Commander Eidolon wishes the pleasure of your company, Fabius.’
CHAPTER SEVEN

OLD SONGS

The *Vesalius* slid through Eyespace, accompanied by another ship – the battle-barge, *Wage of Sin*. The stocky vessel was larger than the *Vesalius*, and more than capable of obliterating the frigate, should it come to it. Which it wouldn’t. Alkenex had brought more than enough warriors aboard the *Vesalius* to ensure that everything went smoothly.

The eldar had retreated into the webway at almost the same instant as Alkenex’s gunship had entered the *Vesalius*’ fighter bay. Even so, Fabius had ordered that the ship’s weapons batteries be turned on the craftworld, just in case the Harlequins had not yet abandoned it. Regrettably, Alkenex had chosen that moment to assert his authority. They had left the craftworld where it floated, and departed the webway with all due haste. They had, at least, destroyed the dimensional gate, at Fabius’ insistence.

Now, warriors of the Third prowled every deck of the *Vesalius*. Fabius had identified members of at least four different Millennials, as well as renegades of a more recent vintage. With the disastrous end of the Legion Wars, the Emperor’s Children had been forced to replenish their depleted ranks with whatever warm bodies were to hand. The lilting accents of Chemos mingled with the rough, gutter-twang of Nostromo and even a few Terran dialects he had not heard since before Fulgrim had picked up the Laer Blade.

Fabius paced along the corridor leading to his laboratorium, resisting the urge to grind his teeth in frustration. There were intruders stationed at every bulkhead and transit elevator. His own followers were confined to the lower decks, save for a few exceptions. He himself had been barred from the command deck, for no reason more complicated than spite.

Then, Alkenex had always been a spiteful fool. Even as an aspirant, he had shown little but disdain for the Apothecary overseeing his elevation to something greater than
human. The arrogance of Old Europa ran strong in Alkenex. It was no surprise that Eidolon had sent him, in retrospect. Alkenex was no decadent fool, easily distracted by hedonistic pursuits. He could be relied on to do as he’d been ordered.

The question was – why send him at all? What was the purpose of this assault on his sovereignty? Fabius shook his head as theories sprouted like weeds in the cracks of his certainty. He’d never counted Eidolon among his enemies – the self-proclaimed Lord Commander Primus had kept his distance since well before the destruction of Canticle City. He’d always assumed some vague remnant of gratitude would protect him from Eidolon’s attentions. He now saw how foolish that assumption had been. ‘The better angels of our nature are long since drowned,’ he muttered.

Another possibility existed. One he had not considered in some time. It had never seemed important, until now. One more mistake to add to the list, perhaps. Then, who could have predicted that the Phoenix Conclave was anything other than a grandiose delusion on the part of Kaspers Telmar?

Supposedly – according to Telmar, at least – the Phoenix Conclave was a gathering of the minds, led by Eidolon. Composed of those who ruled the splintered fragments of the Third, it sought to rebuild the Legion, and restore it to its former glory.

Not an uncommon story, in these fraught times. Every Legion had its own variation on the theme. Abaddon had made good use of that persistent need to belong that afflicted so many of their brothers, manipulating it and them in order to build his new Legion, out of the ashes of the old ones. Perhaps Eidolon had learned something from the Warmaster.

‘One would think that if brotherhood had meant so much to us, we would not have discarded it so blithely, all those years ago,’ he said out loud, as he entered his laboratorium. His armour’s vox recorders clicked as they inhumed the statement, saving it for posterity. ‘What we once so eagerly cast aside, we now sacrifice all to reclaim. We have become beggars of virtue.’

‘Benefactor?’ Igori asked, startled by his sudden arrival. She stood near the entrance, hand resting on the butt of her shuriken pistol. Several more of her pack were visible, their tension palpable. There had already been a number of incidents. It had taken some time for word of the newcomers’ status to filter down, and several of Alkenex’s less observant warriors had wandered into inhospitable territory. Most of them had survived. The absence of those who hadn’t, had yet to be noticed.

‘Nothing, my dear. Merely making notes. Do not concern yourself with it.’ Fabius paused. ‘You have brought them, as I requested?’

She nodded. At the gesture, two of her pack urged forward a trio of mutants. They were brawny lower caste workers, from the dark forests of the engine decks, where warplight seeped out through cracked and impotent sigils. The mutant clans that inhabited those decks were stronger than most – sturdier, better able to survive harsh conditions. It was dangerous ground, so close to the hell-light of the warp engines.
Strange creatures prowled those corridors, hunting for blood and souls. The mutant clans hunted them in return, in order to feast on their theoretical flesh.

These three had been chosen, by whatever savage rites their clans deemed fit, to receive the blessings of the Pater Mutatis. Igori and her kin had escorted them safely through the byways. Even if the *Vesalius* was helmed by a new captain, that did not mean that the ancient ways had changed. The niceties must be observed.

‘Were you seen?’ The question was unnecessary, but a matter of ritual.

‘No, Benefactor. We brought them through the Cur-roads.’ The Gland-hounds had their own paths through the *Vesalius*. The ship had accommodated them with an almost human equanimity, allowing them to reshape access tunnels and fire-conduits for their purposes. The packs could come and go as they pleased, with no one the wiser. Certainly not the Space Marines now guarding every hatchway and bulkhead.

‘Good. Appointments must be kept, lest all fall to anarchy.’ He turned to the bank of techno-crèches that occupied one wall of the apothecarium. The artificial wombs were capable of mixing disparate genetic material into a stable form, and then artificially aging it. And not just age, but evolution, as the material was combined and broken down, the way a swordsman might heat and fold a blade. Millions of years of carefully guided development, accomplished in a matter of months.

Each one contained a slumbering experiment, and there were a hundred more just like them scattered across the galaxy, in isolated caches and laboratoriums. In most cases, he used them to develop advanced neurovascular bundles and synaptic webs, which were then implanted in worthy recipients. Such devices had also been of great use in perfecting the lesser gene-seed he’d used in the creation of the first generations of New Men.

But in this case, he was after something a touch less subtle. He opened one of the techno-crèches and thrust his arm into the nutrient soup within. Something with too many limbs wrapped itself about his forearm. Diamond teeth scraped against ceramite, and a bone-stinger struck repeatedly, trying to find a weak point. He extracted the wriggling newborn and held it up to the light. He turned the creature, examining the venom sacs that throbbed inside the bone cage of its thorax.

‘Excellent,’ he murmured. The creature’s venom was more than just a poison. It contained a potent genetic cocktail of his own mixing. He’d crafted the gene-venom after many years of patient genetic sequencing, and eugenical cultivation. If the mutants were going to insist on breeding, he would ensure that they produced useful offspring. Hardy stock, capable of surviving the rigours of a life of servitude below decks. The gene-venom would seek out the flaws in their DNA, and correct – or, at the very least, moderate – them. He conducted similar inoculations on the warrior-clans that prowled the gunnery decks, streamlining them for combat of all types.

While the wretched creatures would never be the equal of his New Men, they would still have some purpose in the world to come. True, a caste system was not the most
efficient means of running a civilised society, but it would do as a starting point. If the creatures evolved into something worthwhile in the coming millennia, things might change. But for the moment, they had their place and their duties.

He gestured. ‘Come here.’ A mutant shuffled forward, snorting in apprehension. Fabius glanced at it. Its head was vaguely feline, beneath the tangle of horns rising from its skull-plate. Broad torso, with a thick cabling of muscle and powerful limbs. A steady heart rate, as well. None of the obvious physical deformities that cropped up every other generation or so, then. Good. ‘Hold him.’

The two other mutants stepped forward, eyes wide. Like the first, they were superior, if bestial, examples of their kind. They gripped their fellow roughly, pulling on its horns in order to expose its neck, as Fabius extended the squirming, scorpion-like thing. The chosen mutant began to whine. Fabius clucked his tongue. ‘Now, now – it’s for your own good.’ He held his arm out and stroked the insect-thing’s spinal ridge, eliciting a quiver. It tensed and struck, its barbed stinger sinking into the mutant’s neck. The mutant snarled as the venom entered its veins.

It slumped, shivering. The others joined it, as each in their turn received the same dose from the insect’s stinger. He watched the three creatures for a moment, timing their convulsions. When he was satisfied that they would survive, he ordered the Glandhounds to take them back to their clans. There, they would be free to pass on their superior genetic legacy, should they survive. It would take a few generations before he saw the results of his tinkering, but he was patient. In the meantime, he would continue to tweak the effects of the gene-venom, further refining it.

As he deposited the insect back into its crèche, he turned to find that Igori had remained behind. She said nothing, merely watching him. He frowned. ‘The Twins did well,’ he said. ‘You should be proud.’

‘The xenos almost killed them. They almost killed you, Benefactor.’

‘But we are not dead.’ He sighed. ‘They are survivors, like you. They will lead your people well, when the time comes.’

She nodded, almost absently. ‘I dreamed of her again. The one called Melusine. I think she was trying to warn me about something. You are in danger, I think.’

‘When are we not?’ Fabius said. ‘It is a dangerous galaxy for such as we. You are children yet, and I must protect you until you can look after yourselves.’

‘Not us,’ Igori said. ‘You.’

Fabius hesitated. There was worry in her voice. True worry, not simply the unease of a predator facing something it could not comprehend. Something she should not have been capable of. Then, there rarely came a day his creations did not surprise him.

‘You look tired. Have you been sleeping?’

‘I am not tired,’ Igori said softly. ‘I am old.’

‘And I am not?’ Fabius said. ‘Age is but a state of mind, child.’ He studied her with an Apothecary’s eye. She had lost some mass, as the years chipped away all but the most
necessary of flesh and muscle. Her hair had turned the colour of ice, but her eyes were still vibrant. She flexed a hand subconsciously and he caught hold of it. ‘Does it hurt?’ ‘No,’ she said. ‘Stiff.’ Fabius grunted, examining the pliability of her fingers one by one. She watched him. ‘Will you put me to sleep, the way you did Faethor?’ Fabius paused. Faethor had been First of the pack, before Igori. There had been a flaw in him, a subtle swelling of the glands that had led to crippling pain and an eventual loss of mobility. The subsequent autopsy had enabled Fabius to correct that error in the others. ‘Faethor was blighted – sleep was a mercy.’ Igori nodded, as if he had answered her question. ‘My children and my grandchildren are strong,’ she said. ‘Mayssha and Mayshana – they serve you well.’ ‘They do.’ Fabius released her hand. ‘As do you.’ ‘I no longer hunt.’ ‘No. You train others to hunt. A more important task, in my opinion.’ He looked down at her, seeing, for a moment, the child she had been, so many centuries ago. Thin, malnourished, barely human. He had drawn out the best of her and made her worthy of his gifts. And she was. They all were. They were survivors. Pure and untarnished by the weaknesses of previous generations. Worthy inheritors of the galaxy to come, once the fires of the last great war had burned themselves out. ‘The day will come, my dear, when your children’s children stride the galactic rim as the kings and queens of all they survey. But first, you – we – must teach them how to survive, until that moment.’ He caught her chin gently and lifted her face up. ‘In your generation, there were five hundred. Of them all, I kept only you and your closest siblings. The rest are scattered across the galaxy, burrowed into the flesh of a dying empire, so that they might best guide it to its well-deserved and long overdue grave. They, and their children, carry my teachings into the dark.’ He smiled. ‘Generation upon generation, their strength breeding true. As mankind dies, so it nurtures its own replacement, all unknowing.’ He leaned close to her, so close that he could hear the thump of her heart. A strong heart. ‘But you are different. You and your kin are to be my hand on the throat of the future. For my brothers will not surrender to fate with dignity. Those who remain, after that final hour, will fight one another for the right to rule the ashes. And in that moment, you and yours shall assert yourselves, for the first time and the last.’ He tugged on her necklace of teeth, causing them to rattle. ‘You will hunt angels, in the days to come, and make a new kingdom from their bones.’ ‘And where will you be?’ she asked softly. Fabius stepped back. ‘I imagine I will be first among the foundations, my dear.’ He smiled thinly. ‘There will be no place for me in the paradise to come.’ He laughed. Behind them, the entrance to the laboratorium whined open, and someone entered. Fabius ignored the newcomer, even as Igori stiffened. ‘But until then, I persist. Until my work is done.’
‘Only, it will never be done, will it, Spider?’

Fabius grimaced and turned. Flavius Alkenex stood behind him, watching him with a mocking eye. Alkenex had removed his helm, exposing his face. He bore little in the way of obvious mutation. His face had been ritually scarred, and his pale hair braided into thin locks that hung serpent-like from his scalp. His teeth were unnaturally sharp and had been etched with tiny characters, as if each fang were a poem. ‘Flavius. Come to spy on me?’

‘Call it curiosity. I see you are still doting on lesser creatures. Is it because they make you feel superior? That is the only reason I can conceive of why one would stoop to speak to such things.’ Alkenex strode past, examining the objects of study that lined the walls. He stopped and pointed. ‘That is the skull of a hrud.’

‘Yes. Troglydium hrudii. Igori killed it, when we encountered one of their interminable migrations, some years ago.’

Alkenex glanced at her, eyes narrowed. ‘By herself?’

Fabius snorted. ‘Of course.’

‘Is that why she’s so withered?’ He leered at her. ‘Run afoul of one of those entropic fields of theirs, little dog? How foolish of you.’ Igori made a sound that might have been a growl, and took a step towards Alkenex. He grinned. ‘Call it off, Spider, or I’ll kill it.’

‘You’ll do nothing, Flavius.’ Fabius let his hand drop to his needler.

Alkenex’s grin faded. ‘Mind your tone, Spider. Or I’ll pluck off your limbs.’

‘No. You won’t.’ Fabius looked at him. ‘Otherwise Eidolon might be disappointed. And you know how he gets when he’s disappointed.’

Alkenex stepped back with an easy laugh. ‘There’s the Spider I remember. Quick to skitter away from any and all confrontation.’ He shook his head. ‘Send the cur away, Fabius. I would speak with you.’

Igori growled low in her throat, but subsided at a look from Fabius. ‘Go,’ he said flatly. She turned and departed, hands on her weapons. As he’d hoped, she did so by the main entrance. For the moment, the Cur-roads would remain a secret. When she’d gone, he turned back to Alkenex. ‘Satisfied?’

‘Very little about this situation satisfies me,’ Alkenex said.

‘You always were one for complaints.’

Alkenex picked up a scalpel from a tool tray and turned it so that it caught the light. ‘Why this hostility, Fabius? We have harmed none of your pets.’ He grinned. ‘Yet.’

Fabius snorted. ‘Make the attempt, by all means. My pets, as you call them, are more than capable of looking after themselves. And I am hostile because I have been made a prisoner in all but name on my own ship, by those who have little reason to love me.’

‘And whose fault is that?’

‘Yours. Yours and those like you.’ Fabius looked at him. ‘Unappreciative, treacherous dolts, one and all. And Eidolon the most doltish and unappreciative of the lot. Without
me, he’d be one more victim of our wayward father. One more name, consigned to the ash heap of history.’ He pointed at Alkenex. ‘All of you would be dust, without me. And what is my reward? Isolation. Persecution.’ He snorted. ‘Then, it has always been that way, hasn’t it? I rebuilt the Legion, helix by helix, when the blight threatened to consume it. I pulled it back from the precipice and in return, it shoved me over.’

‘Are you finished?’ Alkenex said after a moment.

‘I have only just begun,’ Fabius said, turning away. ‘How did you know where to find me, Flavius? I was not aware that my activities were being monitored by anyone, let alone my former brothers.’

‘Obviously, given how easily the xenos lured you into that trap.’ Alkenex set the scalpel down. ‘But, I only know what I’m told – Eidolon knew where you were, or rather, where you would be, and sent me to intercept you, several weeks ago.’ He looked around. ‘Unfortunately, this vessel of yours is much faster than I was led to believe.’

Fabius smiled. ‘So it is.’ He looked at Alkenex. ‘Why did you come for me, Flavius? I have no doubt that it is of the utmost importance.’ He dragged a tray of aeldari scrolls, salvaged from the craftworld by the Twins, towards him. Fabius studied the parchment for a moment before tearing a strip from it and popping it into his mouth.

Catching sight of Alkenex’s grimace, Fabius smiled around a mouthful of shredded parchment. Swallowing, he said, ‘Some among the aeldari inscribed their knowledge on a type of vat-grown dermal extrusion. It “remembers” the information, in much the same way as the human brain. After much trial and error, I managed to train my omophageac implant to synthesise and interpret the information grown on this sort of parchment.’

‘You actually… eat that filth?’

‘We’ve eaten worse, Flavius.’ Fabius crumpled up another strip and ate it. ‘Remember Gheist? How many of the Ulashi broodslaves did we devour, seeking the location of their war-queen?’

Alkenex grunted. ‘They tasted like excrement.’

‘Given the way their internal processes worked, that is perhaps not surprising.’

‘Why waste your time devouring parchment, when there are so many more pleasurable meals to indulge in?’ Alkenex shook his head. ‘You’ve always been an odd one, Spider.’

‘And you’ve always been a dullard, Flavius. I’d hoped the intervening centuries had cured you of it. Answer my question – why did you interrupt my expedition?’

‘It looked to me as if I was saving your miserable hide.’ Alkenex laughed. ‘The stories I’ve heard have nothing on the facts of it – the mighty Manflayer, harried by a pack of alien clowns. Why do they want your head so badly, Spider?’

Fabius turned back to his meal. ‘Revenge for my part in the raid on Lugganath, I suspect.’ He glanced at the white, grinning mask, sitting nearby. It was lightly spattered
with the blood of its former owner – another gift from the Twins. ‘Should I ever capture one alive, I shall surely ask them.’

Alkenex grunted again. ‘Perhaps you will get that chance. I’ve taken the liberty of ordering your bridge crew to set course for Harmony. Eidolon wishes to speak to you.’

‘Harmony?’ Fabius turned, eyes narrowed. ‘What does he want of me? And why there? Is this another of his obtuse attempts at humour?’ Eidolon had only gained a sense of humour after Fulgrim had removed his head. It was therefore perhaps unsurprising that it was as warped and erratic as it was. Eidolon’s jokes left whole planets lifeless.

‘Even if I knew that, I probably wouldn’t share it with you, Spider.’ Alkenex grinned. ‘But rest assured, it’s probably not to protect you from your xenos friends.’ He turned to leave. ‘Enjoy the rest of your meal.’

Fabius watched him go, images of Flavius spread out and sliced open on his examination slab dancing in his head. Then, he turned and picked up the Harlequin mask. He sat in silence for a time, studying the bloody xenos mask, while the vatborn scurried about him, checking his armour’s functions.

Alkenex had asked a pertinent question. Why were the Harlequins still pursuing him, even after so many centuries? What purpose did such harassment serve? Perhaps it was simple entertainment – did they consider him a target of opportunity? Had he offended them, by slipping their net on Lugganath? Or maybe it was something more sinister.

‘Is this why you haunt the dreams of my creations, child?’ he murmured. Melusine was still trying to deliver her warning, though he had no idea what she was trying to warn him of. Nor, it seemed, did she.

He thought of the varied futures he had been witness to, in Lugganath’s grove of crystal seers. And the portents and omens he had seen since. In some, he succeeded, in others, he failed, but always his survival predicated on turning from his path. It seemed that to raise up his New Men required that he die first. An outcome he was nominally comfortable with, but one that grew increasingly more questionable – his death now would leave them rudderless. They were still as children. Still imperfect. He needed more time.

He could not die until his work was done. But eventually, even a rational mind must bow to an excess of fact, no matter how fanciful it might seem. In the decades since he had become aware of the Harlequins’ interest in him, he had begun to question the nature of fate – his fate, and that of his creations.

‘Bow to fate. Bow to fate.’ The words came out like a curse. ‘What fate? Fate is the name the ignorant give to causality. It is a factor, not of cosmic rigour, but of simple action and reaction. One made a choice, and all that happened after sprang from that choice. Ripples in a pond. But those ripples were not preordained. They could not be.’

To believe in fate was to resign oneself to the limits of one’s existence. Something Fabius Bile had never been able to do. Fate said he should have succumbed to the blight
that ravaged his body. Fate said he should have sunk deep into the mire of depravity that had claimed his brothers. Fate said he should have been dead a thousand times over. ‘Yet here I stand, unbowed, if not unbent.’

He looked down at the mask, tracing its ever-changing contours gently. He smiled. ‘If I possessed a poet’s soul, I might say that that, then, is my true fate. To be the rock in the stream. Unchanging and unwavering.’ He looked down at the hooded shapes that tended him and his smile faded. ‘But for how much longer will that be the case? What will become of you then, my little ones? What will become of all that I have built, when I am gone?’

He wondered whether the Corpse-Emperor, on his Throne, had had similar thoughts, in those hours left to him before he had given the order to damn himself to an eternal half-life. ‘Did you wonder, in those final moments, whether your path was the correct one?’ he said aloud. ‘Did you spare any thought for what might come of hovering over your creations for an eternity, like some grim shadow that they will never escape?’

No. No, that did not sound like the Emperor of Mankind at all. He would have simply made the choice, certain that his was the only way. ‘As he was, so must I be. Certain and sure. Without certainty, there is doubt and in doubt, failure.’

His fingers tightened on the mask, crushing it to fragments. ‘I will persist until my work is done. And then, no longer. I will not stifle them, as you have. When they no longer need me, I will go, and gladly, knowing that I have left behind a legacy that shall endure forevermore. Let the galaxy burn, so that my children might rule that which rises from the ashes.’ He swept the fragments aside.

‘But not today. Not yet.’

The aft observation bay echoed with the sounds of perfection. A soaring clamour of voices, raised in song, ecstasy and pain. The sound of hunters on the trail of the most elusive quarry. And the 12th Millennial were dedicated hunters indeed. Their former commander, Kasperos Telmar, the Radiant King in His Joyful Repose, had set them on the trail, and they had continued to follow it even in the wake of his death.

Many of them now occupied the bay, hurrying along their own avenues of perfection. Then, there was nowhere else for them to go, at the moment. They had been confined to the bay by the *Vesalius’* new masters for the duration of the journey. Most were all too happy to submit to the confinement. It was little different to the normal state of affairs. Some were not, and occupied themselves plotting against those who’d imprisoned them.

Savona stalked along the upper berth, above the bay, seething in frustration, Bellephus trailing in her wake, as always. Her hands itched for lack of weapons. She wanted nothing more than to assert her superiority over these newcomers, but they had denied her every avenue of challenge. As if she were not worth their time. She ground her fangs at the thought. It was always thus, and had ever been, since the first moment she had set her hoof on the Legion road.
Once, she had admired them – to her, they had seemed the apex of the universe. Angels wrought in the shape of men. When they had come to her little agri world, seeking slaves and supplies, she had gone with them willingly, as a bride to her groom, draped in the blood and skin of her family. She had offered up the hearts of kin, and been made a serf for a Legion that had forgotten what such things were for. She had worn a golden torc about her throat, and endured pain and pleasure in such gross quantity that one had bled into the other, until it was impossible to tell which was which.

She had sacrificed a life of grey drudgery on the altar of sensation, and remade herself beneath the loving gaze of a god. Her old life had offered her but one path – Governor’s daughter to Governor’s wife to Governor’s mother, and finally, to Governor’s widow. A flat circle of placid moments. But now, her life was a web of possibility, with a million strands. That alone was worth all that she had endured, and would yet endure. A gift from the gods.

The battleplate she wore had been another gift from her master, as he lay gasping out his miserable life on a world of iridescent dust and singing winds. She treasured her memory of the look in his dimming eyes, as she crept towards him through the stinging dust, knife in hand. How he had moaned as she’d pried his armour off, one plate at a time, exposing the withered meat beneath. How it had hummed as she placed it on her own body. It had sunk its barbed contact nodes deep, and spread a rough, newborn carapace beneath her scarred flesh. It had found her to be sweet soil, and had drawn what it needed from her meat and marrow, making her over into something worthy of itself.

Now it was something like a second skin, filling her head with its satisfied purr, even as they grew ever more inextricably intertwined. She did not think she could remove it now, even if she wished. It was her, and she was it. And yet, despite this, and even though she wore their heraldry, she was not Legion.

Some of them stared at her as she passed among them. They moved aside, like predators giving way before another carnivore. There was respect, but no deference. She had no rank, no authority save that which she earned by virtue of her own savagery, over and over again. For a time, she had been content in that. The Radiant King in His Joyful Repose had been an indulgent master, and she had abused that indulgence mightily. But now, in his absence, the old pecking order was re-establishing itself. The minds of her warriors, never energetic at the best of times, sank into old mires of discipline and hierarchy too easily.

So, she had begun to kill those who eclipsed her. Never openly, for to do so would surely turn the 12th Millennial against her. If there was one taboo remaining to the renegade Space Marines, it was that – her hands were not worthy to take the life of a Legion brother. So, instead, she let them do it, with only a quiet word of encouragement in the right ear, or a meaningful glance. Duels and rebellions, accidents and angry
confrontations, whittling down the chain of command, one rusty link at a time. Soon, they would have only her to look to, for none of them would wish to take on the burden of leadership. And once at the top, it would be a simple matter to stay there. She was strong, but not so lost in her own strength as to forget her weaknesses. And then would begin the true work – breaking down the last of the old ways, and reforging them into a warband worthy of her. The 12th Millennial would die and be reborn as something stronger. But only if they all survived the next few days.

‘Eidolon,’ she said, glancing at Bellephus. His brothers called him the gutter-poet, though she’d never heard him recite any. He had served her since before she’d joined her fate to that of the 12th Millennial, a warrior in search of a master. Some of them were like that – ever eager to turn the reins of control over to another, whether mortal or Neverborn. His excesses were those of the devoted servant. Sometimes he seemed more an extension of herself than his own being.

‘You’ve heard the stories,’ Bellephus said. Despite the coarseness of his appearance, his voice was as smooth as silk and almost musical. ‘He died and came back, thanks to the Manflayer. Some say that he was slain a second time, during the Siege of Terra, by some forgotten champion of the Corpse-Emperor. Some think that the creature that now bears his name is an imposter. Others say that there were many Eidolons, each grown from a drop of his spilt blood by the will of the Dark Prince.’

‘Yes, very interesting. But what is the truth? Have you ever seen him?’

‘Once, in better days. Long ago, and under different stars. And what is truth, really, save the shadow of a lie?’

Savona snorted. ‘As helpful as ever, Bellephus.’

‘I but live to serve, my lady.’

Savona frowned. Whether this Eidolon was the original or not mattered little. The only thing that mattered was the battle-barge following stolidly in the Vesalius’ wake, the warriors that now occupied every deck of the frigate, and what that portended for her ambitions.

A lupine beast, clad in scavenged battleplate and crudely dyed robes, stepped into her path suddenly, drawing her from her reverie. It bared its teeth at her, in not-quite challenge. While they had been denied their slaves in Fabius Bile’s service, the warriors of the company had attracted a fair number of serfs from among the mutated crew of the Vesalius. Creatures seeking masters less remote, or perhaps more predictable, than the one they called Pater Mutatis. For their part, the Space Marines had accepted this subservience as their due.

More mutants scurried about the bay, on various errands – requisitioning ammunition or supplies, carrying messages between the company officers, and a handful delivering challenges on behalf of their masters. Others, like this one, warded their master’s privacy with a feral devotion. The creature growled softly, malformed paw toying with the hilt of the blade thrust through the filthy sash of silk that girded its waist. Savona
considered breaking its neck, or ordering Bellephus to do so, but then decided that it might be judged rude. ‘Merix, call off your cur.’

‘It is all right, Evangelos, she is expected.’

At its master’s voice, the creature bowed its too-wide skull and stepped aside, letting Savona past. Merix stood near the edge of the upper berth, a canvas stretched across a frame of metal and bone standing upright before him.

It was a sign of respect, that he was left to his isolation. Space was at a premium, but the warriors of the 12th still refused to impose on Merix. Like Savona, he had been one of the Joybound, but unlike her, he was of the Legion. Though he was not of the 12th, they had nonetheless adopted him as a sworn brother. And Merix returned their respect with grave consideration, when he bothered to acknowledge it at all.

As she approached, he dipped his finger into a bowl of char, and then drew it across the canvas. Both char and canvas had come from the same source. The mutant had been singularly ecstatic about sacrificing itself on the altar of Merix’s art. Now, he drew on its flayed flesh with the substance made from its bones, sketching the unsettling perfection of its asymmetrical features from memory. An ouroboros of interpretation. The char rested in the cracked dome of the mutant’s skull, which he was using as a pallet.

‘Still at it, then?’ she asked.

His armoured finger scraped across the canvas, pulling a black line behind it. ‘Memory is an imperfect thing, removing, as it does, all flaws. Or else exacerbating them beyond credulity. You cannot trust memory, Savona. It lies as often as any daemon. But memory can be tamed. Broken to the pallet. Made perfect. So I have broken this creature down, and now I shall recreate it, from its base components. In order to prove my memory is perfect.’ He glanced at her. ‘Yes, I am still at it, as you put it. I will be at it until I get it right.’

‘Why?’ Savona said.

‘Why not?’ Merix eyed her. ‘Perfection is the most elusive prey. One must chase it wherever it leads. In war, and in art. Else it is a hollow quest, and thus flawed.’ He dipped his finger in the char again. ‘Then, you’ve never really understood what drives us.’

Savona snorted. ‘I understand well enough.’

Merix shook his head. ‘You understand nothing. What were you, before you were this? We seek only to become the most perfect version of ourselves. I know this, and so do my brothers. Even Bellephus there, standing so silently at your shoulder. You, on the other hand, seek only to indulge your rampant desires.’

Bellephus chuckled and Savona glanced at him, eyes narrowed. He fell silent at her look and she turned back to Merix. ‘And are my desires worth less than yours?’

Merix nodded. ‘Yes. Because your desires are base – instinctual. You are an animal, gorging itself on easy prey. We are hunters of thought. We stalk the soul of the thing,
while you merely tear at its flesh.’ He pointed a char-stained finger at her. ‘And no matter how much gene-seed you devour, you will never be like us.’

Savona laughed. ‘You forget, I’ve seen you at your amusements, Merix. I have fought with the Legion for centuries – peddle your high-minded philosophies to someone who hasn’t watched your brothers burn entire worlds, simply to snort the ashes.’ She turned. ‘Did you hear – they have confined Diomat. Set a constant guard on his refuge.’

‘Wise,’ Merix said. ‘Diomat loose is a terrifying thing.’ He paused. ‘I never thought the lieutenant commander would free him. Then, he is mad.’

‘He isn’t mad. He’s vile – cantankerous – an utter bastard, but not mad. He merely follows his whims, the same as we do.’ She made a show of studying his work. ‘He seeks perfection, the same as you.’

‘A strange sort of perfection,’ Merix said, adding another line of black to the stretched skin. ‘Then, Fabius was always a bit odd. Even in simpler days.’ He paused. ‘I knew him, then, though I suspect that he does not remember. He oversaw the rites of my gene-implantation. As he oversaw those of many here, eh, Bellephus?’

‘Indeed,’ Bellephus said. ‘He cut me open and teased out the threads of my future with delicate care. An artist’s touch, our Chief Apothecary, even then.’

Merix nodded. ‘In those days, he always had the air of a man striving against the inevitable. He would stare at us for days, seeking some imperfection visible only to him. Later, we learned of the blight, and it all made some sense. But I think he never stopped seeing flaws where there were none.’

Savona snorted. ‘It does not take an Apothecary to see the flaws in you, Merix. You are nothing more than a collection of wounds held together by an overinflated ego.’

‘And who gave me many of those wounds, Savona?’

‘You’re welcome,’ she said prettily. She turned to watch the 12th at its amusements. ‘No one seems concerned.’

‘And why would we be?’

She glanced at him, considering. She had come to determine where Merix’s loyalties lay – with the Chief Apothecary, or with his Legion. One meant that he still had value. The other meant that his usefulness as a figurehead had come to its inevitable end. Merix was respected, even loved, by some among the company. In contrast, Thalopsis had been feared and few had wept to see him dispatched.

‘Our fate is tied to that of the Manflayer,’ she said finally.

‘For the moment.’

‘Yes, but the moment stretches, and we are still in it. We are prisoners on this ship.’

‘And we weren’t before?’ Merix looked at her. ‘We are his slaves, as surely as we were Kasperos Telmar’s. I have had centuries to come to terms with that, as have the others. Better a strong leader than no leader at all.’

‘Then why did so many revolt, when I – when Thalopsis began his coup?’

‘For the same reason you did, I assume – boredom. Spite. He ignored us, we forced
him to pay attention, and an amusing evening was had by all.’ Merix hesitated. ‘Except for Thalopsis.’ He sighed. ‘What are you truly worried about?’

‘They say we are going to Harmony.’

‘Yes. The graveyard of the Third, where the last true measure of our strength was spilled across the ashes of Fabius’ hubris.’

‘Very pretty. What is it like? What awaits us there?’ She had heard the stories, of course. The only thing that moved faster in the Eye than the Neverborn was gossip. Of the Singing World, and how its eternal hymn had been interrupted at the last by a dying ship, hurled by a sorcerer’s will. Of the echoes of a world’s death-scream, which had driven weaker planets from their orbit and shattered moons. Of how a Legion had defied the Warmaster – and how that Legion had died.

‘Us? Nothing, I suspect. We are blunt instruments, fit only for the purpose we were designed for. But for Fabius Bile…?’ Merix scraped a line of ash across his canvas, and sat back. ‘I suspect that what awaits him on Harmony is quite awful indeed.’
CHAPTER EIGHT

JUDGEMENT OF THE PHOENIX

Fabius slumped into his restraint throne aboard Alkenex’s personal gunship, *Phoenician’s Blade*, eyeing the real-time hololithic projection of their destination. The flickering image of the daemon world rotated slowly, blurts of nonsense information scrolling upwards to either side. It had been more than ten thousand years since he’d last been here. Time had not improved it. They had entered Harmony’s orbit twelve Terran-standard hours earlier, after being escorted through a crude network of orbital defence arrays by a flotilla of salvaged gunships and assault fighters.

The *Vesalius* waited amid the inner circumference of the network, its hull bathed in periodic sensor sweeps as the mindless drones that controlled the orbital arrays scanned it for any sign of treachery. He had been allowed to bring no one with him. No bodyguards, not even an assistant. For the moment, his ship still belonged to Alkenex – or Eidolon, rather. It seemed unlikely that was going to change in the near future.

He distracted himself with a vitals scan. Information slid across the inside of his visor. The chirurgeon gave an almost petulant hiss as it found nothing wrong with him. The degeneration had not yet started, but he could feel it, like the phantom ache of a missing limb. A kernel of rot, waiting for the right moment to flourish and consume this body as it had all of the others.

In a way, the anticipation of the inevitable pain was less bearable than the pain itself. Even hale and healthy, he second guessed every movement, every flutter of his heart or unfamiliar sensation that passed through him. He knew from long experience that if he pushed himself to the edge of his capabilities, the degeneration would flourish that much quicker. Moderation was his only ally – conserve, conserve, conserve. Hoard his strength like a miser, so that he might eke a few more centuries out of the corpus he wore.
It was a process of diminishing returns. The degeneration began earlier with every new body. Soon, this one would begin to break down, as all the others had. He would need stimms and opiate mixtures to maintain his equilibrium until it was time to seek new flesh. But not yet. A few decades, perhaps a century. He had some time. Time to complete his work. Time, perhaps, to find a cure.

He’d thought – hoped – the aeldari would have one. Though they had since degenerated, they’d once had a knowledge base far in excess of humanity’s own. He’d picked the bones of their extinguished empire, but to no avail. So far, nothing had worked. His experiments with wraithbone cultivation might yet reveal something of use, but he held out little hope. The best he could do was buy time – just a few more centuries, to perfect his New Men. To give them the best chance of survival.

And now, to add insult to injury, he had to deal with this interruption. He did not fear for his life, such as it was. But the time – he was losing time. He pushed the thought aside and turned his attentions back to the hololithic projection. The gunship shuddered slightly as it pierced the stratospheric veil and dropped into a sub-orbital trajectory.

Harmony was a broken world. It was but the ghost of the hellish paradise it had once been. The projection showed that parts of the crust had separated from the core, and the planet shuddered with massive, intermittent, tectonic upheaval like a wounded animal, bleeding fire into the void. Striated scar lines marked its circumference – the rad-blasted remains of once-mighty Mechanicum city-states. But it was the largest wound in the world’s hide that attracted Fabius’ eye. ‘Canticle City,’ he muttered.

‘Not so beautiful, now,’ Alkenex said. He sat across from Fabius, his sword across his knees. His warriors sat to either side of him, their eyes never leaving Fabius. He wondered what they thought he was going to do, trapped aboard their vessel as he was.

‘It was never beautiful. It was barely passable, at the best of times.’ Fabius watched the ruins of the city swell in the hololithic feed, as the gunship descended through the fiery atmosphere. Proximity alarms sounded every so often, and he heard the faint thud of autocannons. Sporadically, there came a sound like the rattling of claws across the hull. There was more than dust in the skies of Harmony.

Targeting runes flashed across the projection, alerting the gunship’s passengers to the fact that their descent was not unobserved. ‘Contact,’ echoed the voice of the servitor hardwired into the pilot’s compartment. ‘Transmitting verification codes.’ The hollow voice cascaded over the vox-link, accompanied by a brief blurt of binary gibberish.

‘Have we come all this way only to be blown out of the sky?’ Fabius’ grip tightened on Torment’s haft. His hearts sped up, straining slightly in their traces. He called up a bio-readout, studying his vitals as they scrolled along the interior of his helmet’s visor with a dispassionate eye. Still strong. No discernible fluctuations. There would be, soon enough. But for the moment, he was strong enough to walk away from a crash landing.

‘Your ending will not be so gentle, Spider, of that you can be sure,’ Alkenex said. ‘But no, Eidolon is simply cautious. We have enemies, after all. Thanks to you.’
Fabius snorted. ‘I had some help, in that regard.’

Alkenex sat back and said nothing. Even when they’d landed, he said nothing. He merely gestured for Fabius to stand. They trooped out of the gunship and down into the dust of a dead world. They’d landed in a cleared plaza, surrounded by barely functioning sentry-guns, which whirred and clicked, tracking every movement. Everything was red. Not like rust or blood, but the dull, sore red of inflammation. The atmosphere was in upheaval, and there was still dust in the air, several millennia after Abaddon’s assault.

Canticle City spread out around them, an uneven spillage of ruined structures, rippling outwards from the upright hulk of a warship. The Tlaloc’s shadow cascaded across the ruins, carried by the solar wind, which stripped the ruins of colour and strength. The Tlaloc had been a mighty vessel, forged in the fires of the Great Crusade. What was left of it rose an impossible distance above what was left of the city, tall enough to reach the heavens.

Up close, the warship did not resemble what it had once been. It was simply a wide, high tower of jagged metal and buckled hull plates, rising over the districts it had toppled with its arrival. Whole structures had been uprooted and hurled in all directions, or else obliterated in their entirety. Towers and defence emplacements lay scattered about like toppled gravestones. Clouds of dust and water vapour collected about the ship at odd points, obscuring whole sections. Flocks of things that were not quite birds roosted in the high places, and their discordant song drifted down to those below.

A shanty town had sprouted in the impact crater, and overflowed the walls of gouged crust and soil. Despite Abaddon’s best efforts, life yet persisted here, and in the remains of the once-proud Mechanicum city-states. The Mechanicum had abandoned Harmony not long after the Emperor’s Children, leaving it to the lost and the dead.

Like the spear that had killed it, the city had been magnificent – an ever-expanding work of art. Minarets of bronze and gold topping towers of black jasper and lapis lazuli, heavy with gilded vox-casters wrought in the shape of singing daemons, rising above slab-roofed cathedral-communes. He remembered the sound of pilgrims arriving at the great southern gates in their thousands, their voices raised in hymns of praise to malign gods. The omnipresent whine of Mechanicum flyers, flying precise routes between the cities of their masters and their masters’ masters.

Now, the only sound was… static. The harsh rustle of impact-scrambled frequencies against the electronic frame of the vox network. Abaddon’s spear had disrupted more than just the physical – it had ruptured the ether itself. Snatches of old signals and panicked messages from the day of the attack intruded on the vox-link, making internal communication all but impossible.

Despite this, Alkenex and his warriors moved in assured silence. They formed a phalanx about Fabius, trapping him in a cage of ceramite. They followed a straight avenue, into the heart of the ruin. At intervals, they were met by decaying combat-
servitors, which lurched from broken doorways to scan them with hazy, sputtering sensors, before retreating into the dark. These were not the only guards, though they were the only obvious ones. The enhanced auspex in Fabius’ battleplate detected a dozen power armour signatures, moving all about them, out of sight. He said nothing. Let them think him blind and deaf, if they wished. He might need the advantage, sooner or later.

The deeper they went into the ruins, the more abstruse it all became. Creeper-vines of pale, pink flesh clung tight to structures, and sullen, gawping faces were slathered across walls, eyes rolling blindly in drooping sockets. Half-formed Neverborn scratched and clawed at their surroundings, attempting to free themselves. Their efforts only grew more agitated as Fabius and the others drew close. A musky mist seeped between buildings, and indistinct shapes danced within it, entreating the Space Marines to join them.

‘Entropy,’ Fabius said, making the word sound like a curse.

‘Perfection,’ Alkenex replied. He reached out and tore a pink creeper from an archway. Something that might have been blood spurted from it and dripped down. ‘You planted the seeds of this garden, fleshcrafter. One would think you would appreciate it more.’ He tossed the wriggling creeper to Fabius, who caught it.

A brief scan revealed a familiar signature on its genetic pattern. ‘This came from one of my flesh-vats,’ he said. ‘How curious.’

‘The things you create do not die easily, Spider. There are plenty of them, still howling down there in the dark. Perhaps we will toss you to them, before the day is out.’

Fabius said nothing. The creeper clung tenaciously to life, squirming in his grip like a serpent. Tiny, circular mouths dotted its underside, and these flexed abominably. The chirurgeon took a sample, as it was programmed to do, and he tossed the writhing lump of meat aside. Now that he knew it was there, he saw more signs of his handiwork scattered about the ruin. Strange growths of fibrous meat, squeezing up through the cracked pavement; malformed creatures, simian-like and primitive, watching from the high places; and the biological sensory nodes, observing and recording all that passed beneath them, though the repository for those recordings had long since been destroyed.

His facilities on Harmony had been extensive – larger even than those on Urum. By the end, nearly two-thirds of the city’s substructure had been given over to his needs. In his absence, some of it had obviously done as he designed it to do – persist. He felt a curious sort of pride. He had made his mark and it endured, despite the best efforts of his enemies.

‘There,’ Alkenex said. Fabius looked up. The structure, or what remained of it, looked familiar, even at a distance of several centuries. It sat close to the impact crater, and had obviously been nearly destroyed by the Tlaloc’s arrival. That it had not collapsed in on itself spoke to the surety of its construction.

Fabius was escorted through a labyrinth of broken archways and semi-intact walls, all
open to the red skies. Mutants huddled in the shadows, warming themselves before burning oil drums, watching the newcomers with dull eyes. Fabius could hear the rumble of many augmented voices echoing through the crumbling stones.

‘I thought I was here to meet Eidolon,’ Fabius said as they navigated the maze.

‘Eidolon wishes to see you,’ Alkenex corrected.

‘And that’s different, is it?’

‘Much.’ Alkenex stopped. Turned. ‘Now hold your tongue, lieutenant commander. Be silent, until someone asks you to speak.’

Fabius made to reply, considered and gave a terse nod. Not so much due to the threat, but out of curiosity. This had all the elements of the opening to a performance. His armour’s sensors had detected several scrambled pict-feeds being fed back from the optic scanners of the servitors that had accosted them. Someone was watching every move they made, and had been since they’d arrived. He could almost smell the anticipation on the air.

The sounds slipping from the maze’s centre had grown in volume. A roar of voices, like hounds baying at the scent of blood. Alkenex’s pace quickened and Fabius was forced to hurry to keep up with him. Around him, Alkenex’s warriors did the same, moving swiftly, laughing, singing, one panting like a dog.

At last, they came to an archway higher than all of the others. The great steel doors were covered in lewd carvings, shaped by the hands of daemon-possessed artisans. The carvings seemed to flex and writhe as the two abhuman slave-beasts crouched beneath them moved to force the large doors open.

The doors swung inwards, ancient hinges screeching in protest. Beyond the doorway, there was only ruin and red sky. The heart of the structure, burst open and hollowed out like a gutted corpse. Alkenex stepped through, and a rumble of voices swept down and back through the doorway, as if in greeting. Fabius was herded through by Alkenex’s warriors, a condemned man on his walk to the gallows.

‘Behold, for I have brought thee a king with a head of gold,’ Alkenex roared. ‘Behold, the prodigal brother, returned to the embrace of kin and kind.’ He turned lightly, arms spread. Fabius squinted against the harsh glare of the sputtering lumens strung from the cracked heights of the makeshift amphitheatre.

A howl, almost solid in its force, went up. The sound buffeted him, threatening to drag him under. There were Kakophoni above, and worse things besides. Massive, twisted shapes that could only exist where the warp bled over into the hard corridors of reality. They stood above him, crouched on broken walls, or standing atop shattered columns. All wore robes of pristine white, threaded with gold, over their battleplate. Hoods covered their heads, and in some cases, they wore golden masks wrought in the image of leering, androgynous daemons. Others glared down at him, their faces unhidden. He did not recognise them.

All save one. A crude throne had been crafted atop the most stable section of ruin – a

Eidolon had not changed much in the centuries since Fabius had last seen him. His battleplate was a chemical-scarred riot of colour, its facets carved into suggestive shapes. His mangled scalp was shorn smooth, save for a single cascade of colourless, brittle hair that tumbled across the ornate vents and amplifiers wired into his armour. His face looked as if the flesh were too loose to hang properly on a skull that was no longer structurally sound, and his eyes were opaque orbs. Power cables studded his head and throat, feeding back into his armour, and these sparked and twitched like serpents. His thunder hammer rested across his lap as he sprawled back in the throne.

‘Hello, brother,’ he called down, his voice a harsh, reverb buzz. ‘Welcome home.’

‘I would say that it is good to be back, but we both know that’s a lie,’ Fabius said. As he spoke, the audience fell silent. He pushed past Alkenex and stepped fully into the light of the lumens. ‘What is this? Why am I here?’

Eidolon heaved himself to his feet. A movement that should have been awkward due to his bulk was anything but. There was an unnatural grace there that spoke of great changes within him. Fabius studied the Lord Commander Primus and wondered how much of the warrior he’d once conspired with was left in that husk.

‘You are here because I wished it. Because we wished it.’

‘And who is we?’ Fabius made a show of looking around at the masked and robed figures. Most were in power armour, though there were a few who were not. Some were more – and less – human than the Chaos Space Marines they stood among. Sensor baffles were mounted among the ruins, preventing him from identifying anyone by their armour-signatures.

‘Surely poor Kasperos mentioned us to you, before you so cruelly betrayed him to the eldar,’ Eidolon said. Given the state of his face, it was hard to tell if he was smiling or not, but Fabius suspected that he was. ‘Kasperos Telmar was a true and faithful brother, unlike you, Fabius. And he paid the price for trusting you – a price most of us have paid, at one time or another.’

‘Is that what this is, then? A gathering of those who feel wronged by me? If so, I’m surprised that there aren’t more of you. Our brothers were ever quick to take offence over the smallest of slights.’ A mutter swept their ranks, and he wondered how many of them had known he would be here. Hands fingered weapons. He knew only Eidolon’s authority prevented some among the masked congregants from attacking him.

Eidolon chuckled and the air hummed with static. ‘Our membership is more exclusive than that. We are the remnants of a once-proud Legion. The masters and commanders of an army like no other, broken on the reefs of your hubris. We are the Phoenix Conclave,
and we rose from the ashes of the fire you set, Lieutenant Commander Fabius.’

Another growl of voices, low and steady. Fabius frowned. Every eye was upon him. He could feel the heat of their disdain. ‘One more name, added to an already unsteady pile of titles and sobriquets. It means nothing to me.’

‘But it should,’ Eidolon said. ‘And it will. We rise, like the Phoenix, and spread our wings over the Eye and all that it contains. We see and understand our place in this galaxy with perfect clarity.’

‘Clarity? I see no clarity here. Only childish obfuscation and ritual.’ Fabius swept Torment out, indicating the masked figures all around him. ‘Illuminate me, Eidolon. Tell me why I am here. Not to join whatever revels you have planned, I think.’

Eidolon planted his hammer on the ground. ‘And you would think wrong. Our father Fulgrim sleeps, and in his sleep, he sent to me a messenger. A lovely creature, who danced so pleasingly and in her dancing, passed to me a message from our father.’

Fabius hesitated. ‘What was her name?’ he asked, thinking of what Igori had told him earlier, about her own dreams. Was this another of Melusine’s games – or something more sinister?

Eidolon smiled and sank into a crouch on the edge of the dais, leaning on the haft of his thunder hammer. ‘I do not know. But she told me to gather those who still have the courage of their convictions. Those who still burn with the old fire. Those who still know yearning, who still seek perfection.’

‘And this is all you could find? A few dozen old friends?’ Fabius laughed, but the sound was forced. Eidolon was lying. But why, and about what? He pushed the question aside. ‘No wonder you sent Flavius to strong-arm me, if this is the best you could do.’

‘Fulgrim once conquered a world with but six of us,’ Alkenex said. ‘What might we do with a hundred? Even if one of them is you.’

Fabius glanced at him. ‘It was seven, and I hesitate to consider it. But Eidolon is not Fulgrim and I have no interest in playing soldier.’ He looked around. ‘Perfection. You say that word as if it has any meaning for you beyond indulgence.’ He looked back at Eidolon. ‘What perfection do you seek?’

‘The only kind that matters. The natural state of the universe is entropy, and we are one with that entropy. We follow it to its ultimate end. With every act of excess, we further break down the bonds between what is and what could be, between the imperfect and the perfect. With every exquisite sensation, we add more heat to the phoenix’s nest. Birth, death and rebirth – that is nature of this universe.’ Eidolon looked around, a crooked smile rippling across his lumpen features. ‘We are the sparks of time’s cleansing flame, brother. We are the all-consuming fire. And only in that fire can perfection be found.’

A raucous cheer went up at these words. Even among decadents such as these, faith was the strongest vice. The need to be a part of something greater was an addiction as insidious as any other. And harder to shake than most.
Fabius watched his brothers cheer their own destruction, and spat on the ground. Silence fell at the gesture. Eidolon alone seemed amused. He studied Fabius for a moment, as if preserving him for posterity. Then, he laughed. ‘Always so quick to dampen the blaze of enthusiasm, eh, Fabius?’

‘What you call enthusiasm, I call stupidity.’ Fabius looked up at the hateful gazes glaring down at him. ‘Never have I seen cattle so enamoured of the slaughter. You shame Lorgar’s fanatics with your fervour for meaningless rhetoric.’

‘Better fervour than dead-eyed resignation,’ a voice called down. ‘Better to take joy in the last moment than to wallow in misery for eternity.’

‘Funny words coming from you, swordsman – aye, I recognise your voice from here, Eternal One. No, no, keep your mask on. I have no wish to see that patchwork countenance of yours.’ He looked around. ‘Eternity, he says. As if I am not the only one among you for whom death is an abiding concern. Your last moments stretch unbearably long, brothers. I have no doubt that I will perish – and gladly – long before the least of you.’

‘Only you would take pride in such imperfection, Clonelord,’ another voice echoed down. Inhuman and rasping, like something with alien vocal cords, attempting to approximate human speech. Nonetheless, another familiar voice, another old friend turned enemy. Then, that was what they all were, in some sense. ‘Only you would cast your weakness in our faces, as if it were a strength.’

‘And why not?’ Fabius turned. ‘My weakness is strength. I have true purpose, unlike you fools. Look at yourselves – were you truly so bedazzled by Fulgrim as all that? Are we like Angron’s murder-dogs now, ready to hurl ourselves on his pyre without hesitation? Are we Horus’ whelps, bereft without our father to hold our hands?’

‘Fulgrim is the Phoenician, and we are his sons,’ Eidolon said lazily.

‘And we made do quite well without him for a long time.’ Fabius looked up at the Lord Commander Primus. ‘Are you so eager to lose your head to one of his tantrums a second time, Eidolon?’

Eidolon touched his throat, the look of sly contemplation sliding from his face. Even now, the thought of his death held a power over him. Fabius smiled. ‘Yes, how long will you keep it this time, do you think? And without me there to sew it back on…’

‘I have kept it long enough. Fulgrim sleeps, but he will stir soon enough. And when he spreads his wings, the galaxy will burn. All that is imperfect will be reduced to ash and forgotten in the blazing world to come.’ Eidolon stood. ‘That may well include you and that carnival of monsters you travel with, Fabius. Unless your common sense reasserts itself soon.’

‘Is that it? Is that why I’m here, so that you can deliver some vague warning and an even vaguer threat? If I’d wanted that, I would have stayed with the Harlequins.’

‘Warnings and threats? No. Too late for those, I think.’ Eidolon pushed himself to his feet and swung his thunder hammer out so that it pointed towards Fabius. ‘No, Fabius –
this is to be your gauntlet.’

Fabius stared up at him. ‘You cannot be serious,’ he said contemptuously.

Eidolon smiled. ‘It is what is demanded, before you can re-join us. You must face a
test of worthiness, and a punishment for dereliction of duty. That is our way, Fabius. All
will be forgiven… if you survive.’

‘Forgiven? I need no forgiveness.’ Fabius found himself shouting. ‘And certainly not
from fools like you.’ He turned in a tight circle, hand dropping to his needler. He froze
as Alkenex signalled and his warriors raised their weapons. The amphitheatre erupted in
shouts and bellows. Fabius tensed, prepared to signal for a rush of stimulants. If he
could get past them and out into the city, he might be able to escape and signal the
\textit{Vesalius}.

‘Give me an excuse, Spider,’ Alkenex said, one hand on the hilt of his sword.

‘Peace, Prefect Flavius,’ Eidolon called down. He raised his hammer. ‘All of you, be
silent. A fiend does walk abroad, and it is to him that this onerous duty falls.’ Eidolon
swept out a welcoming hand. ‘Let us greet him with all due ceremony and joy.’

Fabius turned as someone – something – new entered the arena. A troop of mutants,
their eyelids and mouths sewn shut, and their bodies hidden by heavy robes, shuffled
into view, hauling something behind them. It drifted into the light amid a web of chains.
One by one, the mutants released the chains they held and retreated back into the dark
as their prisoner continued to float forward.

‘What is this?’ Fabius said, hand still resting on his needler.

‘Some say he is the last of the old lodges left. The last priest of Davin.’ Eidolon gave a
ghastly smile. ‘Or he was. What he is now is a matter of some debate, among those
given to such wearisome indulgences. For the moment, however, he is ours. You should
feel honoured, my brother. I went to no small effort to acquire a fitting judge for you…’

The withered, wizened thing in its cloak of chains had been a man, once. Or perhaps a
woman. After a certain point, it became hard to tell, short of an autopsy. It – he – looked
as if he had been stretched out of proportion, every limb and digit dragged to twice its
own length. A great cage, bent in the shape of a bull’s head – or a goat’s – rested on the
too-wide shoulders, imprisoning the stretched, flattened skull. It hung suspended from
nothing, the ends of its many chains hovering above it, like the heads of a hydra. The
chains did not rattle or clink. It was as if the thing drank in all sound, all light.

‘All hope,’ the newcomer said, through cracked and threadbare lips. His paper-thin
eyelids peeled back, revealing eyes empty of colour and vitality. ‘And why not?’ he
murmured. ‘What is there new to see, under all the suns? What was shall be again, and
what is shall inevitably end.’

With agonising slowness, he brought his skeletal hands together, in a parody of prayer.
The chains loosened and fell, link by link, to the ground, throwing up a cloud of dust.
‘Perhaps you will show me something new.’ He laughed, a dry rustling sound, like dead
leaves caught in a breeze.
Fabius looked up at Eidolon. ‘Is this… individual to be my executioner?’

Eidolon chuckled. ‘Only if the gods are not on your side.’ His smile threatened to split his lumpen features. ‘Then, you don’t believe in gods, do you?’

Fabius grimaced. The withered thing had drawn closer while he was distracted. Floating as if he weighed no more than a feather. ‘Keep your distance, or take your chances,’ Fabius said softly. ‘I’ll not die as meekly as that.’

‘Perfection, Fabius,’ the creature said, in a voice like sand rasping against stone. ‘That is your vice. A scalpel-bright yearning… Ah. It makes me ache to feel it. Eidolon promised me a banquet of perfection, and he has truly delivered.’

‘And who are you then? Name yourself.’

‘I am the whetstone of desire. I am the asker of questions. I am the Quaestor.’

‘I have never heard of you.’

‘Of course you have,’ the Quaestor said. ‘We have met many times. And will meet again, before the last sun sets and the galaxy goes dark forevermore. I was with you, in the temples of the Laer, and I sat at your elbow as you raised up the first children of your genius from the nutrient soup. That you could not see me is no matter – I was there, and I saw you.’

Fabius felt a flicker of unease as the pale gaze pierced him through. The chirurgeon twitched, as if it shared his uncertainty. The Quaestor’s smile was like a scalpel grating on bone, and he clapped again. The world seemed to shake. One by one, the sensor-feeds in Fabius’ armour went dark, and its confines became stifling. Quickly, he tore loose his helmet.

The air felt still and heavy. Not from the expected atmospheric pressure, but instead – what? It was as if the world had somehow stopped in its rotation, and everything else had clattered to a sudden, irresistible halt. Fabius looked around. The red of the world had faded to a rusty haze, and the members of the Phoenix Conclave were as statues. Even Eidolon stood frozen, in mid-gloat, and Alkenex, still poised to spring. Fabius turned, his breath straining in his lungs and billowing like fog from between chapped lips. Sweat beaded and turned to ice on his face. He felt overtaxed, as if he’d run for days.

‘What have you done?’ he demanded. His words fell flat, the echo stifled at conception. ‘Some trick of witchery?’

‘Nothing so crude. Merely a moment, stretched to its utmost.’ The Quaestor floated closer. ‘To my perceptions, all time is thus. A collection of eternal moments, one bleeding into the next with infinite slowness.’

‘Why?’

‘This is the moment of testing. The moment your hearts are weighed against the Phoenix’s feather. Are you not curious at the outcome?’

‘Not remotely. I know my worth, and I know my crimes. This court holds no jurisdiction over me.’ Fabius straightened, trying to slow his heart rate. His muscles
strained against unknown pressures. It was as if he stood at the bottom of a vast ocean, and the weight of thousands of fathoms pressed down on him.

‘Its jurisdiction extends far beyond your ability to conceive, alchemist. You have committed crimes of such monstrous elegance that even the gods themselves grow uneasy. Look – see – they sit in judgement of you.’ A too-long finger drifted upwards, and Fabius followed the gesture. He looked up, and something looked down.

It was not a face, for a face was a thing of limits and angles, and what he saw had neither. It stretched as far as his eyes could see, as if it were one with the whole of the sky and the firmament above. Things that might have been eyes, or distant moons or vast constellations of stars, looked down at him, and a gash in the atmosphere twisted like a lover’s smile. It studied him from an impossible distance, and he felt the sharp edge of its gaze cut through him, layer by layer. There was pain, in that gaze, and pleasure as well. Agony and ecstasy, inextricable and inseparable.

With great effort, he tore his gaze away. ‘There is nothing there,’ he snarled, his teeth cracking against each other. His hearts stuttered, suddenly losing their rhythm. He pounded at his chest, as internal defibrillators sent a charge of electricity shrieking through him. The chirurgeon flooded his system with tranquillisers, and he tapped shakily at his vambrace. A secondary solution of mild stimulants joined the tranquillisers, stabilising him. He ignored the urge to look up. There was nothing there. Nothing at all. ‘There is nothing there,’ he said again, tasting blood. ‘There are no gods. Only cold stars and the void.’

The pressure increased. Something whispered, deep within him. It scratched at the walls of his mind, trying to catch his attention. He ignored it. ‘No gods,’ he repeated. ‘Random confluence of celestial phenomena. Interdimensional disasters, echoing outwards through our perceptions. I think, therefore I am. They do not, so they are not.’

He met the Quaestor’s bland gaze unflinchingly. ‘Gods are for the weak. I am not weak.’

The Quaestor nodded expectantly. ‘No.’ Then, after a moment, he said, ‘But you are ill.’ The words quavered on the air, and floating particles of dust congealed about them, making strange shapes. The Quaestor floated through them, dispersing them before they had a chance to become more distinct.

‘I am dying,’ Fabius said simply, steadying himself on the solid ground of undeniable fact. ‘Fruit rotting on a soured vine. If that is the limit of your awareness, I fear this will be a short trial.’

The Quaestor’s loose features wrinkled unpleasantly. Fabius thought the entity was trying to smile. ‘Time is a construct of an organic mind.’

Fabius arched an eyebrow. He dabbed at the blood on his lips. ‘I suspect that was not an invitation to debate.’

‘Your illness is also a construct.’

‘Explain,’ Fabius said flatly.
‘You have given it a name. A method. A desire. It is a Neverborn without a mind, and you are its cocoon.’ The Quaestor gestured idly, drawing several stones from the ground and causing them to crumble and splinter without touching them. The entity waved long fingers, and the debris spun in a slow, fractal pattern. ‘Or, it will be, in time.’

Fabius watched the spinning stones, trying to ignore how much their shape reminded him of what watched him from above. ‘How much time?’

‘Eons. Moments. Time is a—’

‘Construct, yes, you said. You are lying. The blight is nothing more than a collection of cellular abnormalities.’

‘It is more than that.’

‘It is not. I have been studying it for the better part of ten thousand years.’

‘And you are no closer to divining its origins than you were at the beginning of your studies.’ The Quaestor was close enough now that Fabius could detect the eldritch stink radiating from his gaping pores – like the smell of a plasma-scorched hull plate, mingled with the odour of rancid milk.

‘It is complex – evolving—’

‘The sickness in you is deeper than bone. Deeper than blood and bile.’ The Quaestor circled him slowly, the tips of his feet tracing abominable sigils in the dust of the dead city, broken stones floating about him like an asteroid belt. ‘It bites at the roots of you. Gnaws at your heart’s last gleaming. It is the fire of your ending, and the light of your beginning.’

‘Pretty words, to describe an overly industrious cancer cell. To quote a long-dead scrivener – my life, a tragedy, and its hero, the conquering worm.’ Fabius followed the Quaestor with his eyes. It was better than looking up, though not by much. ‘There is nothing deeper than blood and bone. We are meat, and what comes after meat. Nothing more.’

‘And what is the motive force of meat?’ the Quaestor asked, stretched limbs twitching. ‘What drives the cogwheels of thought and desire? If meat dances, where then does the song originate from?’

‘I know the answer you want,’ Fabius said. His eyes rolled in their drooping sockets and his wide mouth rippled. It might have been an expression of humour. ‘It is the same answer your sort always wants. But it is a lie.’

‘What is a lie, but truth’s shadow?’

Fabius laughed, but the sound was weak in the unnatural silence. ‘More words. Meaningless ones at that. Then, I expected nothing more from a warp-addled creature like yourself.’ Even as he said it, the Quaestor was surging towards him with impossible swiftness. Long fingers caressed his features. Fabius tensed, Torment snarling in his grip, demanding to be put to use. But he restrained himself. Fought the urge to strike. Something told him it would do no good.

‘I was with you aboard Lugganath, as well,’ the Quaestor said softly. ‘I saw all that
you saw. Your destiny is a fractal of impossible complexity. The shadows of empires past, and those yet to be, seek to simplify that pattern, for their own ends. You, and those like you, are nothing more than weapons, aimed at the future.’ The Quaestor leaned close, eyes blazing like twin suns. ‘The only question is – which future? By whose hand will you be aimed?’

Fabius blinked. The Quaestor now floated some distance away, a faint smile on the sagging face. The world had resumed its normal course. Sound and light sped up, bruising his senses. He felt a weight on his hearts and clutched at his chest-plate. He risked a quick glance. The sky was red and empty, of all save clouds and dust. The Quaestor spoke.

‘How long will you persist, Fabius?’

‘Until my work is done.’ The answer came automatically. Instinctively.

The answer hung on the air for a moment, before fading. The Quaestor’s smile widened. It looked up, pallid gaze roaming across the assembled sons of Fulgrim. ‘I have asked. He has answered. I find no guilt in him. The trial is at an end.’

A great uproar followed these words. Shouts of disbelief and cries of anger. They had come to see him punished, and it seemed that desire was to be unfulfilled. Fabius felt no satisfaction. He yearned to smash the Quaestor’s smug face, to batter the daemon-thing into bloody tatters. Its words pulsed through him, reducing him. He wanted to silence it. Instead, he forced the anger down. There was a time and a place to give vent to such emotions. And here and now was not it.

‘The Quaestor has spoken,’ Eidolon said, his voice carrying across the ruin. ‘And his judgement is final. Lieutenant Commander Fabius is hereby absolved of his crimes against the Legion. Any who wish to challenge him must be of equal or superior rank. And that isn’t anyone here, save me.’ He grinned crookedly, empty gaze sweeping over his assembled chieftains and warlords. He crooked a finger towards Fabius and turned. ‘Come, brother. It has been too long since last we spoke, legionary to legionary.’

Fabius followed him out of the arena. He felt the eyes of the Quaestor on him the entire way.
CHAPTER NINE

THE LOST

In the training cages aboard the *Vesalius*, Arrian let the weight of the blade guide his hand. Falax blades often had a mind of their own. They went where they would, thirsty for blood. He turned, following the steps of an ancient dance – the oldest dance. The dance of eternity. Of death and rebirth. He had not learned it among his Legion. It was a mote of his past, of a forgotten childhood, lodged in his memory. A painful note in an old song.

The nails that bit into his mind and soul sparked as he moved, and the chemical dampeners went to work, muting the pain. The Red Path receded, its jagged contours softened, and the barbaric rush faded. For a time, he would be able to concentrate. To see, without the shadow of the axe clouding his vision.

Free of his leash, the war hound danced, and his brothers kept time. Their ghosts howled and stamped, urging him on to greater speed. Their chains clacked in arrhythmic accompaniment as he whirled and spun, blades slicing the air. The sound they made as they did so was like the sliding of some vast serpent’s scales across stone. His battleplate creaked and groaned with exertion. It was almost like a thing alive, and as lazy as any predator.

It felt good to move, to slash and spin. Working with the Chief Apothecary was akin to running a whetstone along the edge of one’s mind, ever sharpening your thoughts and observations. But such narrow focus led to a dulling of the body, and a dependence on chemical stimulants to prod old instincts into motion. A sharp mind required a sharp body, else the whole mechanism would grind to a halt, at the worst possible moment.

He had almost died aboard the craftworld. The Harlequins had surprised him – had surprised them all. Once, that would not have been the case. Perhaps the dampeners had dulled his wits overmuch. He had lost focus and it had nearly killed him. The wound
pulled against itself as he moved. The pain was good.

The Harlequin had been fast – so fast. He had fought eldar before, and knew their speed. But this had been something else again. A whirling dervish of flashing colour and silent smiles. He felt the echo of the impact, of the alien fingers sliding through the joins in his armour, biting into his flesh with surprising strength, clawing for his heart. He’d erased its smile a moment later, but too late.

*One more scar for the collection, brother,* the ghosts murmured. *One more debt paid.*

‘Quiet,’ Arrian said. The skulls clattered against his chest-plate, as if laughing at him. He turned away from the thought and towards other, more immediate worries. It had been several hours since the Chief Apothecary had been escorted to the planet’s surface. They had heard nothing since. Alkenex’s warriors held the command deck and patrolled the main corridors and causeways. For all intents and purposes, the ship was theirs.

That could change, and swiftly, but Arrian was loath to implement such a course without cause. To do so risked the *Vesalius* being destroyed out of hand by Harmony’s defence-grid. Not to mention the other vessels in close orbit. The battle- barge, *Wage of Sin,* was not alone out there in the void. A pack of vessels of various make and class prowled the debris belt around Harmony. More vessels sworn to the Third Legion. A fleet in the offing. They were outnumbered and outgunned. Patience was the best weapon they had.

He heard a sound behind him. A cat-quiet tread, light and swift. Arrian leapt, turned and dropped, blade extended. The tip came to a halt inches from Igori’s throat. He gave no sign of surprise at her sudden presence, though he had not heard her enter the chamber. She looked down at the blade and then up at him.

‘He has been down there too long.’

Arrian nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘We must go to him.’

‘No.’

Her nostrils flared. ‘They may kill him.’

‘Yes.’

She stared at him, like a raptor studying its prey. Her hands twitched, as if seeking to sink into warm flesh, and peel it back from bone. Arrian lowered his blade, spun it and sheathed it. ‘You do not think they will,’ she said after a moment.

‘No. If they wanted him dead, they would have left him to the eldar. This is something else.’ He rested his hands on the hilts of his swords, frowning. ‘I do not know what, but something.’

Igori nodded, her frown mirroring his. ‘I do not like this.’

‘Nor do I. But we must have faith. In him, if nothing else.’

She smiled. A feral thing, that smile. He returned it in kind. They understood each other, he thought. Two beasts, pulling against the same leash. Two hounds, loyal to the same master. ‘Faith is for the weak,’ she said.
‘Yes. But weakness can be strength, in the right circumstances.’

Eidolon led Fabius up a set of cracked and broken steps, and into the remains of an open chamber, far above the amphitheatre below. Fabius recognised the shape of it – one of his secondary observation chambers. Here, the results of his lesser experiments would have been left to their own devices, their habits and behaviour recorded by the techno-organic sensor-polyps that sprouted from every wall. Those polyps, and their subjects, were long gone now. The bones of the latter crunched underfoot as he followed Eidolon into the chamber.

‘I’m surprised you didn’t recognise this place from the outset.’

‘I have never had a head for architecture,’ Fabius said. ‘Is there a reason you’re using one of my old facilities as a meeting place for your lodge, or was it merely expedience?’

‘We are not a warrior lodge, Fabius. Their purpose was served long ago, and they ceased to be. We are something new under the sun.’ Eidolon sounded insulted.

‘Secret societies are hardly unique, brother. Mankind has had them for as long as they have had fire and the shadows it cast.’

‘We are not secret, either.’

‘No? Then why masks and robes for the laity?’

‘Ritual is the sinew of brotherhood,’ Eidolon said. ‘Then, you’ve never been much for brotherhood, in all the years I’ve known you.’

‘If that is your belief, why bother to invite me here?’ Fabius lifted Torment and pointed it at Eidolon. ‘And how did you find me in the first place? Have you been watching me, then? Spying on me?’

‘Of course.’ Eidolon shrugged. ‘But in this instance, we were told where you were.’

‘And who told you how to find me, Eidolon?’

Eidolon drew a vaguely human shape in the dusty air. ‘She did.’

‘She?’

‘You know who I mean, Fabius.’ Eidolon grinned. ‘She who is as much a part of you as that contraption you wear.’

Fabius froze. His heartbeats slipped and the chirurgeon uttered a concerned hiss as it analysed the sudden faltering. ‘Melusine,’ he said softly.

Eidolon nodded. ‘She danced out of the shadows, speaking nonsense riddles and drawing shapes on the walls with golden talons.’ He indicated the wall, where strange shapes had been etched into the ancient rockcrete. After a moment’s study, Fabius realised that they were all of one piece – a crude star map.

‘Why?’

‘Why did she show us? Presumably because she wanted us to find you.’ Eidolon shrugged. ‘Who can tell, with one like that. She’s a member of the Dark Prince’s court, now, whatever she might once have been.’

Fabius grimaced. ‘Yes.’ He looked away. The last time he’d seen Melusine, she’d
attempted to warn him about something. He’d been unable to make any sense of her
ramblings, beyond the barest essence of the message. Was this another warning – or
something else? ‘I’m surprised you trusted her. She is one of my creations, after all.’
‘Yes, but she belongs to another now. As everything you have made will belong to
him, in time.’ Eidolon tapped the distorted aquila on his chest-plate. ‘The Phoenix stirs
fitfully, and your horrid daughter-thing comforts him in his restlessness.’
Fabius’ grip on Torment tightened. ‘Be that as it may, you still have not told me why
you summoned me here.’
‘Do you know why we come here, Fabius?’
‘I would hesitate to guess.’
Eidolon chuckled. ‘Harmony was where the Legion died for a third time. Three times
we have succumbed to the fires, and three times we have been reborn. This place is
sacred – it is a place of pilgrimage and contemplation.’
‘It is a ruin filled with ghosts.’
‘Name me one cathedral of significance that isn’t.’ Eidolon gestured dismissively.
‘Harmony is where we were reborn, out of the fires of your madness. All of us – even
you. Or can you truly claim that you are the same as you were then, before Abaddon
cast his spear?’
Fabius hesitated. ‘No. Even my hubris has its limits.’
Eidolon nodded. ‘This place is as dear to us as lost Chemos, or the butcher-fields of
Terra. It is a monument to our sins, and our strength. Here, our enemies came against us
with enough force to crack a world, and still – we live. We endure. We grow. And we
have you to thank for it, Fabius. Without your madness, we might have sunk into
useless somnolence, as so many of our brothers have.’
‘And my reward was exile.’
‘Self-imposed exile.’
‘You tried to kill me.’
‘That wasn’t the first time,’ Eidolon said. ‘Assassins came for you on a daily basis
when you were trying to consolidate your control over the Legion. And how many tried
to kill our brother, Lucius? Or me? You should take it as a compliment.’
‘We have different ideas as to what constitutes a compliment.’
‘Possibly. We were angry with you, Fabius. We sought a scapegoat and you donned
the horns and hide all too willingly. You’ve always been a martyr to one cause or
another, and you’ve always given us reason to hate you. How many brothers did you
condemn to undignified death, in order to preserve our ranks from the ravages of the
blight?’
‘Too many.’
Eidolon nodded. ‘And some of those were closer than brothers, weren’t they? Do you
remember Lycaeon? Whatever became of him?’ Eidolon was smiling as he asked the
question. It was the smile of a man who already knew the answer to his own question.
Fabius swallowed, perturbed despite himself. He had long since cast off the shackles of guilt, but even so, he felt a twinge at his old friend’s name.

‘Lycaeon died. At Terra.’

‘Did he? It is hard to remember. So many of us have died. So many of us yet live.’ Eidolon knocked on the broken wall. Clumps of masonry shifted and fell. ‘How did he die?’

Fabius frowned. ‘I don’t recall.’

‘I find that hard to believe.’ Eidolon turned, empty eyes studying Fabius. ‘Then, as I said, you’ve never been one for brotherhood, have you?’

Fabius was silent. Eidolon nodded, as if he had spoken. ‘Flavius hates you. I am not entirely certain why. A common state of affairs where you are concerned, though.’

‘Small minds hate what they fear,’ Fabius said.

Eidolon chuckled. More masonry fell, cascading down from above. Fabius stepped back. ‘Flavius has a larger mind than most. He fully grasps the extent of the performance to come, Fabius. He is… precious to me. As are you.’

‘You have an amusing way of showing it.’

‘Surely you understand by now – that little show out there was for their benefit. To demonstrate that I have you in hand. Word travels like wildfire in this region, Fabius. Already, spies flock to their masters, carrying news of your capture. Soon will come the demands – for your head, for your services, for your secrets.’

Fabius laughed. ‘Do you think I fear them? I am the most hated and beloved individual in the Eye, Eidolon. When your numbers run low, when mutation reduces your combat effectiveness, then you all come crawling, begging for the touch of my knife. But when you are strong, you hunt me and hound me, as if by bringing me to heel you might expunge some stain on yourselves. Hypocrites – every one of you.’

‘Spare me your self-righteousness, Fabius. It is a shade that does not suit you. Whatever your troubles, you have brought them on yourself.’ Eidolon touched the twisted mass of scar tissue that ringed his neck. ‘I know this, because I am your greatest sin, given voice.’ He smiled, the flesh of his lips tearing like paper, revealing a razor maw beneath. Up close, Fabius could see that Eidolon’s skull no longer fit his flesh. It had transformed in some awful, subtle way. Was transforming still. As if that sagging grey meat was nothing more than a cocoon for some gestating horror.

‘I gave you more than that, I think,’ Fabius said finally.

Eidolon laughed. A low sonorous sound that reverberated painfully through Fabius’ bones. ‘Perhaps. And perhaps that is why I have become inclined to lenience where you are concerned, renegade. Our father wants you chained to his throne. An ornament for his pleasure gardens. But I am disinclined to give Fulgrim such a small gift, when there are greater ones by far that could be provided.’

‘Speak plainly.’

‘I haven’t done that in quite some time, thanks to you.’ Eidolon turned. ‘But very well.
I have found them, Fabius. After all these many thousands of years, I have found our missing brothers.’

Fabius frowned. ‘I was not aware we were missing anyone of particular importance.’
‘Weren’t you? I recall that you mourned them longer than most. You wept for the potential, never to be realised.’

Fabius’ eyes widened. ‘That is impossible. They were destroyed.’

‘That was only ever the most obvious explanation. But you should know by now that such things are rarely as they seem. The lost gene-tithe, Fabius. It is still intact. Still viable. And ready for the taking.’

The lost gene-tithe. The first blow their Legion had suffered, if not the most grievous. In the years following the Proximan Betrayal, a substantial portion of their gene-seed reserve had been dispatched to Luna, for safe-keeping. The tithe-ship had never reached its destination. Some reports claimed that Selenite rebels had hijacked a defence laser and destroyed the vessel, and all that it contained. Other reports insisted that the ship had suffered an unforeseen malfunction in its guidance systems, lost control and crashed, even as it attempted to dock. And some, fewer in number and heeded by no one, postulated that the ship and its precious cargo had simply… vanished.

Regardless, it was a mystery that had soon been forgotten, paling as it did next to the horrors to come. Fabius closed his eyes, fingers pressed to his temple. He could still recall the smell emanating from the gene-seed vaults on Terra. Of spoilage and sour meat. Only the vaults of the Third had been affected. A fast-acting viral blight, the biomagos claimed. Cause and origin unknown. Even now, so many thousands of years later, it was still unknown. Perhaps it was some viral abomination, brewed in the darkest days of Old Night. They had created horrors in those days that would send even Neverborn shrieking for the safety of oblivion.


‘But even twenty centuries of stony sleep cannot crush such potential,’ Eidolon said. Fabius looked up. Eidolon smiled, his face twisting into a ghastly expression. ‘You are not the only one who knows that antiquated verse, Fabius.’ The smile slumped into a leer. ‘That was always your problem. You thought you were better than the rest of us, when really, you were the worst of all.’ He laughed, and recited, ‘“The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”’

‘Enough mockery. How did you find it?’

‘The same way I found you. Someone told me.’

‘Where is it?’

Eidolon shrugged. ‘The Eastern Fringe. A world that is not a world.’

‘That is singularly unhelpful, Eidolon.’

‘I have the coordinates. That should be more than adequate, even for you.’
‘If you have the coordinates, why do you need me?’
‘So suspicious, Fabius. That, too, should be obvious. You are the Chief Apothecary – it is your responsibility. Your duty.’

Fabius gave a bark of laughter. ‘You’re a fine one to talk. I have no duty to this Legion of monsters, any more so than it has a duty to me. I am a Legion of one, and I have been since Abaddon drove his spear into the heart of this world.’

‘But it doesn’t have to be that way, Fabius. To forgive is divine.’
‘Another bit of doggerel you spout without understanding. Who is doing the forgiving here? Me? You? Fulgrim, perhaps? Has the Phoenician stirred at last from his throne of thorns to make himself heard once more by his prodigal sons?’

Eidolon frowned. ‘The Illuminator still sleeps, Fabius. He waits for us in a paradise of his own dreaming. In a shining city on a hill. I suspect you will never see it.’ A rumble was building in him, like the echo of distant thunder. Fabius paid it no mind.

‘And you, will you see it? Is that all you desire now, Lord Commander Primus? To grovel before your master’s coils?’ Fabius tensed. Eidolon’s jaw sagged. The sound that emerged from within that altered throat was akin to a physical blow. Even as he was knocked backwards, Fabius knew that Eidolon was using but a fraction of his strength. At its strongest, Eidolon’s howl could punch through the hull of a frigate.

He staggered, only just maintaining his feet. The chirurgeon was hissing in alarm, its articulated limbs clicking and whirring as it sought the threat. ‘Struck a nerve, I see,’ he croaked, awaiting the next strike. ‘If you cannot handle such petty insults with grace, I fear for the future of your arrangement with Abaddon.’

Eidolon paused, eyes narrowed. Fabius chuckled and probed his teeth with his tongue. A few were loose from the sonic blow. No matter. ‘Oh, yes, I know that you have been seeking to curry favour with that dull-witted brute. Joining him on his little expeditions. Has the Legion forgiven him his crimes, then? Or have you merely turned coat once again?’

‘Bile by name, bile by nature,’ Eidolon muttered.

Fabius nodded. ‘If you like. What would your loyal dogs, your so-called Phoenix Conclave, out there do, if they knew on whose behalf you shed Legion blood? Would they applaud your foresight and wisdom? Or would they tear you apart?’

‘It would depend on who told them, I think.’
‘Possibly. Then, you were never well liked, Eidolon.’
‘Neither were you, Fabius.’

Fabius dipped his head, in acknowledgement of the point. ‘Then, I ask again. Why go through all of this… farce, just to bring me here, and tell me this? What do you need from me, Eidolon? You have your own fleshcrafters, crude though they are. They would serve well enough, to make use of such a bounty. If it even exists.’

‘It exists. Of that you can be sure,’ Eidolon turned away. He was silent for a moment, as if considering his next words. ‘You say we died here. That our back was broken, our
hearts burst. That Abaddon killed us. And that is true. But the Phoenix must die, in
order to be reborn. We have died three times, and been reborn stronger each time. As
we are being reborn even now. Those dogs, as you call them, are but the first. Others
will come, old friends and new, until the Legion is unified once more.’

‘So this is an appeal to brotherhood. How quaint.’

Eidolon laughed. ‘No. Nor is it an appeal to your vanity. I know you too well for that.
No, this is an appeal to your pragmatism, Fabius. You claim you are hunted, harried
across the Eye? Who will hunt you, if you are safe once more behind the shields of your
brothers? Who will dare?’

‘Abaddon.’

Eidolon gestured dismissively. ‘Abaddon is no fool. He puts no stock in honour, save
that it benefits him. He knows well your uses, whether he admits it or not. Indeed, he
has often said as much to me.’

‘And how often were those kind words accompanied by the desire that you bring me to
him in chains?’

‘No more than once or twice, I assure you.’

Fabius snorted. He strode past Eidolon to the tower’s edge, and looked out over the
devastation. ‘What do you truly want of me, Eidolon? Am I to be your hunting hound,
seking out this prize on your behalf?’

‘If you like. With that ship, and its contents, brother, we might be able to build the
Legion anew. A Legion of gods, not monsters. Think of it as a canvas upon which you
will paint your masterpiece. And I am your obliging patron. Whatever you need,
whatever you wish, I shall endeavour to make happen. All for the price of a thing you
would do for free.’

Fabius smiled. The thought was a pleasing one. It had been so long since he’d had
access to that amount of raw material. And not just cloned scraps, either, but fresh. ‘And
what will Abaddon think, I wonder, when he gets word of this? Or the Dark Council of
Sicarius? The Legion Wars are not so long over that our estranged brothers will have
forgotten. They will not wish to see a resurgent Third.’

‘Nonetheless, see it they will. And once it is done, their… disapproval will mean less
than nothing to us. We shall resume our rightful place as the rulers of this hell. But only
if we have the numbers to do so.’

‘And that is why you need me,’ Fabius said. It was an intriguing offer. He had not
contemplated a project on such a scale in some time. But if it bought him the good
graces of his brothers, and the time to perfect his own creations then perhaps it was
worth considering. He glanced at Eidolon. ‘I am the only one who can guarantee the
necessary success rate.’ He hesitated. ‘I will choose the aspirants myself, yes? There
must be no taint in them, no weakness of soul or flesh.’ That would be the most
important part. They must be perfect at the outset, or the likelihood of rejection would
be increased beyond acceptable parameters.
‘Agreed. Though I suspect that will come in time.’ Eidolon’s leer was unpleasant. Fabius almost changed his mind there and then. But spite for its own sake served little purpose. ‘Find me my army, brother, and I will see to it that your name is once again whispered throughout the Eye.’

Fabius looked at him, pondering. An army. A restored Third Legion. Once, he might have leapt at the opportunity. Now, it was a matter that required careful consideration. Still, there were benefits to such an arrangement. And the terms of the agreement could always be altered, when it came to it. If necessary.

After a moment, he nodded, smiling thinly.

‘Very well. We have an accord… brother.’
Fabius stood in the remains of his first great laboratorium and looked on the ruins of centuries of work. Cracked containment cylinders bled coolant and nutrient waste across the floor and walls, as sickly strands of cloned flesh stretched like creeper vines through the canopy of rusted power conduits and fibre bundles.

He removed his helmet and sucked in a lungful of mouldering air. The faintest traces of old experiments were discernible, even now. The chemical stink had permeated the stone so thoroughly that not even the fires of destruction could fully scour them clean.

Eidolon had given him leave to plunder through his old haunts, seeking anything that might yet be of value. He’d hoped there would be something, given the wealth of knowledge and raw material he’d been forced to abandon, but precious little remained. Time and scavengers had picked the bones clean.

He’d descended into the depths of the great building alone. He had no doubt Eidolon had someone watching him, in some fashion, but the sensor baffles he’d installed in his power armour would take care of any prying, artificial eyes. While outwardly his battleplate was still the same ceramite he’d worn on the killing fields of Isstvan and Terra, inwardly it had seen much augmentation. Beyond the enhanced sensory array and the baffle filters, there were any number of odds and ends, including one that was the direct result of his recent studies into eldar technology.

Idly, he tapped the stud of circular metal set into his brow. While it resembled nothing more than an antiquated service stud, it was in actuality a neural buffer. Every few moments, it copied his neural patterns – all that made him, him – and remotely uploaded them to the databanks in his laboratorium. In such a way, his knowledge and personality were preserved, in the event of misfortune.

With a sigh, he pulled his helmet back on. He would need the sensor feed to identify
and locate anything of value that might yet remain. As the visual feed flickered to life, he turned, examining his surroundings in greater detail.

The reinforced super-structure of the facility had survived the impact of Abaddon’s spear, but only just. Massive cracks ran through every flat surface, and most of the machinery had shorted out instantly. That which hadn’t, had puttered on for a few decades before finally succumbing to neglect and power loss. Clone-tanks lined one wall, their contents slumped at the bottom of each. He wandered down the line, studying rotting husks huddled in their own liquid effluvia. The ident-scanner built into his vambrace whirred and pinged as it read the binaric code etched into the face-plate of every tank.

The clones had been grown from samples taken from a thousand key figures in the Imperial hierarchy – key figures at the time, at least. Iterators, senior Administratum staff, division heads of the Estate Imperium, and even a few senior officers of the Militarum Tempestus. The samples had been provided by agents of the Lernaean Proxies, accompanied by certain neural wetware to be implanted before the decanting process had begun. Mass-produced double-agents, to better serve Alpharius – or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

‘I am Alpharius,’ he murmured, and chuckled. It was a given that all of the sons of the Hydra were Alpharius. It was just a shame that Alpharius had proven himself to be so dull. ‘Whatever else, Fulgrim never committed the sin of vacuity. Never tried to stamp us in a mould of his own making.’

The destruction of the clones had precipitated the breakdown of his once-cordial relations with the representatives of the Alpha Legion. Another thing to thank Abaddon for, if they ever crossed paths again. And not just the Alpha Legion. He turned, spying canisters of long-rotted gene-seed, stolen from the recruiting worlds of the World Eaters in some forgotten raid. He could not recall what he had been planning to do with it. Something more practical than its original owners intended, no doubt.

He paused suddenly and turned back. Something was missing. Several somethings, in fact. Machinery far too cumbersome to be carted off by scavengers – not fully, at any rate. He cycled through sensor frequencies, as his gaze followed a series of conduits. They were still active. But where was the power going?

Curious, he followed the conduits as they devolved into crudely spliced cables, all leading further down. There were thousands of kilometres of access tunnels beneath the city, many of them once occupied by the machinery necessary to keep an urban centre of such mammoth proportions functioning. Recalling the loose flesh he’d seen bubbling up through the streets, he wondered what might have taken them over since the city’s destruction.

‘Only one way to find out, I suppose,’ he murmured.

The hatchways to the access tunnels were right where he’d left them. The last time he’d used them, the tunnels had been full of his creations, seeking vain refuge from the
coming enemy. He could still recall the stink of their fear, and the howling, as he and his bodyguards had fought their way to the underground teleportarium he’d had the foresight to design and maintain. Now it was empty, save for shadows and filth.

Broken bones littered the narrow corridors, and burst chem-dispensers and fried power cables dangled from the cracked ceiling high overhead. The locking mechanisms of the security bulkheads had been cooked in the electromagnetic death-knell of the shattered Tlaloc, leaving most of them open. Those that weren’t had been shattered, or simply torn loose from the walls. Bulkheads were only as impassable as the walls they occupied.

The stab-lights of his armour flickered to life, sweeping the darkness. A grid-map of the tunnel system surfaced from the data-core of his armour, overlaying the visual feed. His sensors locked on to the tangle of active supply cables and he followed them. As he traversed the tunnels, he saw that the junction-nodes and bleed-off points had all been cracked open and spliced into the central conduit, so that every last erg of energy was flowing to the same source. The deeper he went, the harder it was for his sensors to penetrate the surrounding walls. It was as if something were actively interfering with them.

When the first whisper slid across his vox, he was not surprised. He had been expecting it, in a way. It was possible that the Harlequins had tracked him to Harmony. There were few places the alien clowns couldn’t go, if they were of a mind. Even daemon worlds were no obstacle to them, mad as they were. And the narrative lure of his current undertaking was too strong for such creatures to resist. A man alone, in the dark of a forgotten ruin, seeking the answer to a mystery. Of course there would be monsters. He stopped at a fourfold junction and hefted Torment, waiting.

‘The King, oh, the King, he descended into the underworld, blade in hand…’

The junction was a baroque crossroads, littered with grotesque ornamentation. Leering faces crowded above vaulted arches, and long-silent vox-casters sat in the stone jaws of hideous gargoyle shapes. The stripped, silent carcasses of four servitors still occupied their alcoves, their darkened optical sensors fixed on something only the dead could see.

‘He descended, the King, to challenge the Crone, on her dark throne…’

He didn’t recognise the voice as it slipped and slid into and out of audibility. It did not sound like the Shadowseer, Veilwalker. The voice was less a giggle than a growl. Though that meant little, where such creatures were concerned. He had long suspected that Veilwalker was not individual but many – a title, rather than a name. A choice role, played by many actors. He turned, slowly, boosting his sensors, trying to pinpoint the source of the signal. ‘If you wish to talk, talk, but spare me your attempts at poetry.’

‘The King stumbled through the dark land of death, seeking that which no blade could defeat, no command could sway…’

‘I grow weary of this. Reveal yourselves or be silent.’ Fabius swung Torment out in a loose arc. The artefact snarled, filling the air with red light. A shape, undetected by his
sensors, twitched back, out of sight. Fabius tensed.

It had not been a Harlequin. Or, at least unlike any Harlequin he had ever seen. A moment later, he heard something laugh close at hand. He spun, Torment raised. Only the clop of hooves on stone awaited him. A Neverborn, perhaps. Harmony was rife with them. ‘Where did you hear that song?’ he asked.

‘From a friend…’

‘Who are you?’

Silence.

‘Melusine?’ he murmured, as a sudden suspicion flared. ‘Is that you?’

More laughter. Like that of a child, delighted at the trick it has played on its parent.

Fabius snarled in frustration. ‘I grew tired of these games a thousand years ago. Whatever you are, Neverborn or aeldari or something else entirely, know that you are trying my patience. Did you lure me down here merely to spit gibberish at me?’

‘Not gibberish, but a story, a story, a story… Tell me a story, Fabius…’

Fabius twitched his head in annoyance. ‘I do not know any stories.’

‘A lie, a lie! You are made of stories, King of Feathers, Father of Monsters, Clonelord and Primogenitor. Every name, a story. Every story, a name.’

‘Then perhaps I simply have no patience for indulging a mysterious voice. Speak plainly, or not at all.’ Fabius turned, casting his lights in every nook and crack. Nothing moved save particles of dust, disturbed by his passage.

‘Your story is one of damnation and salvation, forwards and backwards,’ the unseen presence sang, causing his vox to crackle painfully. ‘Who will you save, who will you kill?’

‘Only those I must,’ Fabius said. ‘That is all I have ever done. What I must, when I must. If I have a god, let it be necessity, for that is what guides my footsteps.’ Sensors swept the broken tunnels, delivering a recalibrated three-dimensional map to his display. Pulses of warmth drew near to his position. Something was coming.

The chirurgeon clattered in alarm as something touched his arm. He spun, Torment slashing out to pulverise a sagging pillar. There was nothing there. Only the fading echo of a laugh. He cycled through the sensor frequencies, trying to isolate the signal that intruded on his vox. ‘Why don’t you stop singing and come out with it? What do you want?’

No answer. His helmet feed sparked with static. Strange shadow-shapes seemed to bleed out of the walls and floor for a moment, before vanishing as swiftly as they’d come. The shapes had no substance, no solidity. But he tensed, regardless.

He flexed his hand, ready to draw his needler at an instant. Steam seeped from broken pipes and boiled up from melting patches of coolant, obscuring the path directly ahead of him. For a moment, he thought he saw something dancing within its folds, but as the steam cleared, the shape was revealed to be nothing more than a trick of the light, or perhaps his own overwrought senses.
Loose stones shifted. He turned more slowly this time, controlling the kill-instinct. He lifted Torment, and pointed the sceptre at the hunched shape that had sought to take him unawares. It shied back with a whine. A mutant, wrapped in concealing rags. It waved bandaged paws at him, as if begging for mercy. More of them crept out of the darkness, crawling towards him, eyes reflecting his lights.

Slowly, he removed his helmet. At the sight of his face, they abased themselves. The first one gabbled at him in a semi-coherent pidgin. He recognised the babble, and replied in kind. More than their babble was familiar – his scanners picked out certain markers among the cacophony of their genetic melange.

The mutants were the descendants of those he’d selected to serve as his assistants. The genetic markers were obvious, to his eyes. In the centuries since the destruction of Canticle City, they’d obviously fled into the depths and bred down in the dark. Inured as they were to pain and hardship, they might even have thrived, in a sense. But only for a time. He could smell the stink of septic wounds and the brittle tang of fear. Once Harmony’s old masters had returned, they would have become nothing more than prey without his protection. Wild mutants were hunted by the Legions, for sport and food.

They caught at his hands, attempting to lead him down a side corridor. He hesitated, but only for a moment. They meant him no harm. Indeed, it was beyond their capacity to even consider such a thing. He had implanted certain safeguards in their ancestors – safeguards they had passed down to their descendants.

He followed them deeper into the tunnels. More of them came out of hiding to greet him, or to simply stare in wonder. Twisted paws reached out to touch the fleshy folds of his coat. Malformed faces gazed at him in adulation. Some of them had begun to sing, in broken voices that echoed eerily in the cramped spaces. ‘Ave Pater Mutatis,’ they crooned, lifting squalling infant-things up to him, as if to receive benediction. And he gave it to them, brushing his hands over the squirming, fleshy shapes that squealed and wept. Even after all of this time, they worshipped him.

The walls of the tunnels were covered in crude paintings. He recognised himself, captured in blood and oil, rising over indistinct, huddled masses like some great, protective spider. He smiled thinly. The mutants led him down, through winding, hand-carved tunnels that branched off from the square access corridors like tumours. The air grew thick and rank, and lumen-light gave way to more primitive forms of illumination. Fires burned in out-of-the-way tunnels, and long shadows capered on the walls.

There were hundreds of nooks and crannies dug into the rugose walls – a necropolis of bones and bits of scavenged technology, none of it salvageable. The pirated lines of power cabling crawled across the walls and ceiling, spliced together with more enthusiasm than skill. Occasionally, sparks spattered down, cascading across his armour to dance across the uneven floor. He was led through a series of ragged curtains, made from body shrouds and rotting skins, and into a deep chamber.

The chamber was filled with banks of salvaged flesh-vats and cloning tanks, arranged
like statues in a primordial temple – he knew them all by sight. Somehow the mutants had managed to bring them down into the tunnels. Things writhed and thumped within some of the tanks, their forms hidden by soured nutrient gel. Jaws with too many teeth pressed against reinforced glass, like welcoming smiles. Fabius strode down the nave of monsters, his attentions drawn to the humming bio-unit which occupied the altar-point.

He recognised it for what it was immediately. He’d had twenty of them constructed, according to a very specific set of criteria. One for each of the Emperor’s sons. It had taken him centuries to acquire the necessary genetic material for such an endeavour. He had consigned entire systems to the cauldron of war, just for a splash of old blood on a ragged cloth, or a bit of scrimshawed bone.

‘And I would do it again,’ he said. His voice echoed in the cavernous chamber. The mutants sank down with a sigh, their faces pressed to the floor. ‘I would do it all again, and better.’ He stopped and turned, studying his skewed reflection in a clone-tank, delaying the inevitable. A mouldering skeleton drifted within, bound in a web of calcified nutrient hoses. ‘I could have saved us, if only they’d listened. Our fathers abandoned us, but I could have brought them back. Made them whole, sane, healthy. We could have stepped back from the brink, shed ourselves of the weight of our sins. The Great Crusade could have begun again, as if it had never been interrupted.’

Even as he said the words, he knew them for a lie. It had been nothing more than a dream. A last, desperate attempt to rectify all that had gone wrong. A necessary failure. It had shown him, once and for all, that there was no going back. The Great Crusade was over, and mankind was condemned to burn in a pyre of its own ignorance.

He pressed his hand to the glass, studying his face. Not hollow with fatigue and pain, not yet. That would come soon enough. ‘I am – I was – the last crusader, and this was my city on the hill. The pinnacle of renewal, cast down by barbarians. The banner of science, trod into the dust of ages by the boots of brute ignorance.’ He felt a stab of pain, not physical, but almost spiritual. An ache where his soul might’ve been, if he believed in such things.

His reflection seemed to smile at him. The vox in his helmet crackled. He glanced down at it. When he looked back, it was not his face reflected in the greasy glass, but something else. He turned, but whatever it was, was not there. He could hear someone – something – singing, distantly, dimly. Either far away, or close by and quietly.

Another trick. Another trap. A nearby generator groaned, as if on the point of cessation. He followed the sound to the final tank, occupying the end of the makeshift nave. The altar stone of this primitive temple. Had he been led here, just to find this?

It was one of the ones he’d been forced to leave behind. And still functioning, somehow, thanks to the stolen power. ‘It is the nature of this universe that the old must give way before the new,’ he said softly. ‘All that was will be washed away, as the sands are taken by the sea. But some old things yet remain, unchanging and unchangeable, stubborn as the rock itself.’ Wonderingly, he touched the condensation-
slick surface of the nutrient-vat. He rubbed the excess moisture away and jerked his hand back as the thing within shifted restlessly in its slumber, and turned too-perfect features towards him.

It – he – was pale. Not in an unhealthy way, but like unpainted marble. Tiny, sturdy limbs, tucked against a narrow chest. There was a hint of violet beneath shuttered eyelids, and the thin hair on his head was as white as snow. A perfect infant, several months old, healthy and strong.

Fabius hissed in recognition. ‘Fulgrim…’ he murmured. He wiped more condensation from the reinforced glass. That the infant primarch still persisted, after all this time, was all but impossible. He glanced down and saw that somehow the mutants had jury-rigged the power supply unit, hooking it directly to the mains. It was not getting much power, but just enough to keep the system running.

‘No wonder you haven’t matured,’ Fabius said softly. ‘It’s all they can do to keep you alive.’ He turned back to the mutants. The creatures were still kneeling in worship. Still murmuring their hymns to his benevolence. He felt a flicker of something that might have been pity. They had held faith with him, even after all this time. ‘But alive you are.

The power supply groaned again, sparks dancing along the salvaged cables. The tank flickered. It was dying. He thought he knew now why he had been led here – to witness the end of his creations’ futile efforts at preserving his legacy. He stepped back, uncertain. The nutrient-gel began to darken as oxygen seeped from it, and the filters that kept it sterile began to fail, one by one. The infant within began to twitch and thrash as it slowly suffocated. It would be dead in moments if power wasn’t restored.

Good. It had lived too long already.

He turned away, not wanting to see. It was the past. He could not go back. Not now. Even so, he did not wish to see the death of a dream. There was no satisfaction in this. Simply an ending, long overdue.

‘What is a kingdom, without a king?’ The voice hissed from the vox in his helmet, each word sinking into him like a blade. ‘What is an army, without a leader?’ Torment whined in his grip. ‘What are sons, without the father?’ The chirurgeon clicked as it detected a rise in his heart rate. ‘What is a dreamer, without the dream?’

Fabius snarled and spun. Torment lashed out with a shriek of parting air. Reinforced glass cracked and burst, as fouling solution spewed from it. The tank emptied swiftly, and Fabius braced himself amid the noisome torrent. The infant was carried towards him on a wave of effluvia. He caught the half-awaked child gently, cushioning its fragile form against his chest.

Fabius looked down at his burden. Dark, violet eyes gazed up at him, empty of all save innocent wonder. The baby was filthy, but still beautiful. That had been one of Fulgrim’s gifts – to look his best, even at his worst. Tiny hands clutched at him, seeking comfort. Fabius frowned and shook his head. ‘What now?’ he murmured.
Fulgrim’s only reply was a wordless murmur of contentment.
PART TWO - MAELSTROM
'I do not like this,' Arrian said softly. The command deck of the *Vesalius* was dimly lit, as the frigate prepared to depart Harmony’s orbit. The servitors hunched in their control cradles hummed to one another in muted binary, making minute changes to planned trajectories and tracking the Third Legion vessels that prowled nearby like watchful guardians. Eidolon was taking no chances. ‘Nor do I. But we have little choice in the matter.’ Fabius glanced at the other Apothecary. ‘Rest assured that I do not intend to accept fate passively, Arrian. Be watchful, and wary. And be ready.’ Docking reports echoed across the observation dais, as Third Legion gunships slid into hangar bays that had not seen use in centuries. For the first time in a long time, the *Vesalius* played host to a Legion battle-group. ‘For what?’ Arrian asked. ‘I don’t know yet.’ Fabius leaned forward, peering at the data feeds scrolling along the display. ‘Just be ready.’ He had decided against telling Arrian, or any of the others, about what he’d found in his old facilities. Secrets were more easily kept by one, than two, and he could not afford to allow Eidolon or any other member of his Legion learn of the nascent primarch, smuggled aboard and now safely hidden within the secret chambers of his laboratorium. At least, not until he knew what he was going to do with it. Uncertainty gnawed at him, in a way it had not since the close of the Heresy. By rights, he should have killed the thing as soon as he’d discovered it. Or simply left it to the darkness. But something had stayed his hand. Some subconscious impulse that he had, as yet, been unable to identify. He tried to push the thought aside, but it clung stubbornly to the surface of his mind.
Upon returning to the *Vesalius*, he had scheduled regular sensor sweeps of the ship’s decks, keyed to certain frequencies. If there was anyone – anything – hiding on the frigate, he wanted to know about it.

‘You have not yet set course. Why?’

Fabius turned from the hololithic display as Alkenex strode onto the command deck, trailed by several of his warriors. ‘And which course would you have me set?’ He gestured surreptitiously to Arrian, heading off any reaction on his part. The World Eater settled back, leaning against the rail of the observation platform, his arms crossed over his chest.

They would leave Harmony well behind them, but not Eidolon’s influence. Alkenex had brought a substantial number of warriors with him – a hundred legionaries, culled from those now sworn to Eidolon’s service. They were blooded veterans of the Long War, and experienced pilgrims of Eyespace. Some, Fabius recognised from his brief time in command. Others, he knew only by reputation. Any one of them could have commanded his own warband. That they were here, now, and willingly subservient to Alkenex, spoke as to the importance the Lord Commander Primus placed on this mission, and its success.

Alkenex studied the hololithic display. The star-map rotated slowly, as the coordinates Eidolon had provided were added to the *Vesalius*’ data-banks, and potential courses were plotted. ‘The planet is located in the Eastern Fringe. There are any number of routes one might take to reach that patch of stars. I have provided you with several.’

‘Yes, and most take us right through Imperial space. Even accounting for the vagaries of the warp, we will be exposed for longer than I like.’

‘Scared, Spider?’

‘Practical, Flavius. If you were to give me a more accurate heading…’

Alkenex snorted. ‘No, I don’t think so. Get us to the Eastern Fringe, first. Then we’ll see how we go.’ Eidolon had only given over a general region. Alkenex had the exact coordinates in his head, and wasn’t planning on sharing them any earlier than he had to. A sound strategic decision, all things considered.

‘You don’t trust me.’

‘Do you trust me?’

‘Point taken, Flavius.’ Fabius tapped the controls, illuminating one of the plotted routes. ‘My earlier point, however, stands. We are not travelling in strength, or conducting a raid in force. Instead, we are one ship, moving swiftly. We cannot simply smash our way through any opposition, not without attracting undue attention.’

‘So what would you suggest?’

‘The Maelstrom is the surest route to our destination,’ Fabius said, indicating the star-map. ‘Unless, of course, you actually fancy fighting your way across two segmentums.’

Alkenex ignored the jibe. ‘And you can navigate the vast expanse of the empyrean between here and there?’ he demanded.
‘Better, I can bypass it. Or most of it, at any rate.’ Fabius leaned over the controls and manipulated them, causing the holo-display to swell and shift in a scattering of data. ‘There are several functioning webway portals within this region of the Eye. I have made a study of them, and they will cut weeks off our travel time. Granted, the corresponding sections of the webway are compromised, but I’m confident we have the firepower and speed needed to traverse them safely.’ He glanced at Alkenex. ‘If you agree, we can set course now.’

‘How do I know that this isn’t a trick?’

‘You don’t, Flavius.’ He smiled. ‘You’ll have to trust me, on this matter, if no others.’

‘You ask the impossible, Spider.’

‘I’d settle for you to cease calling me Spider.’ Fabius rotated the display. ‘Look for yourself. This section of the webway network stretches between several existent hubs. There are transit portals akin to the one you used to find us all along this route. Most have been deactivated or otherwise rendered useless for our purposes. But a few are still active, if you have the know-how.’

‘Which you do.’

Fabius smiled. ‘Of course. Eyespace is dangerous, even for the strongest fleets. A ship travelling alone – even a ship such as this – is easy prey for pirates and worse things. True, few pirates are likely to attack a Legion battle-barge or gun-barque, but a frigate such as this might prove all too tempting to certain parties.’

Alkenex stared at the map. ‘How long?’

‘A few weeks, as I said. Depending on how navigable the sections are. It will take a few days to make the necessary modifications, but it will take that long to reach the first hub.’ Fabius tapped the controls, causing the image to stretch and skew into a diagnostic schematic of the ship. One of the chirurgeon’s limbs stretched out, brushing the image and causing it to rotate slowly. Fabius studied the schematic, calculations swimming across his mind’s eye. ‘I was intending to make these modifications sooner or later. I suppose I should thank you for giving me the impetus to do so now.’

‘Thank me by getting us to the Eastern Fringe in one piece.’ Alkenex gestured to one of his warriors. ‘This is Palos Gyr. My good right hand. He will remain here, as an observer.’ The warrior was short and sturdily built beneath his bruise-coloured battleplate. His helmet had been reinforced with bands of ceramite, including, inexplicably, across the visor. That one was marked with two intricately painted eyes – a beast’s eyes, Fabius noted. The false eyes met Fabius’ real ones as their owner saluted silently. ‘He doesn’t talk much. Then, he doesn’t need to.’

‘I’m sure I would have little interest in anything he had to say.’

Palos’ hand dropped to the friction axe mag-clamped to his thigh. Fabius smiled. Alkenex waved the warrior back. ‘Ignore him, Palos. Our Spider might bare his fangs, but he lacks the venom to do any real harm.’

‘Then he should keep them to himself, lest I pluck them out.’ Palos’ voice was a basso
rumble of discontent.

Fabius laughed. ‘That has always been the problem with us. So quick to take offence over every slight, no matter how small.’ He looked at Alkenex. ‘We do not require an observer.’

‘And I say that you do,’ Alkenex said. ‘If this is a prelude to any sort of treachery, rest assured that Palos shall have your head.’ He set his hand on the hilt of his sword. ‘Until then, get to work, by all means.’

Fabius frowned. ‘And what will you be doing while I am at my labours and Palos is occupying valuable space, Flavius?’

Alkenex turned away. ‘Familiarising myself with this ship and its crew. If we are forced to defend ourselves, I would prefer to have first-hand knowledge of its capabilities.’

‘Very well. But know this… while you may have run of the ship, there are certain areas forbidden to you. Among them, my laboratorium.’

Alkenex paused. ‘You seem to be under the misapprehension that you are in command here, Spider.’

‘No mistake, I assure you.’ Fabius turned from the display. ‘This is still my ship. This mission will not succeed without me. You are only here to ensure that I make it back safely.’

Alkenex turned. ‘Another misapprehension. I am here to make sure that you do not betray your Legion yet again, Chief Apothecary.’

‘I’ll thank you to refer to me by my military rank, prefect. You might be outside of the chain of command, but your warriors are not. And I will not suffer your disrespect in front of them.’ Fabius let his hand rest on his needler and gestured to Palos, whose hands twitched, as if he were resisting the urge to draw his axe. ‘We must maintain proper discipline, Flavius. It is the key to our survival.’

Alkenex laughed bitterly. ‘To hear those words from you almost makes me willing to overlook your impertinence, Spider.’

‘I’ve asked you to stop calling me that.’

‘And I have refused.’ Alkenex’s hand fell to the hilt of his blade. For the first time, Fabius noticed the curious ring-shaped pommel, and the tassels of threadbare silk that were tied to it. He recognised the streamers as the remnants of a company banner, though which company he could not say.

The moment stretched. Fabius let it. It was rare that he felt the urge to violence, these days. His mind had slipped into a clinical rut, where such savagery had little room to flourish. With his body new-grown and healthy, those urges had returned full force. He longed to feel the shock in his muscles, as he met a foe blade to blade, or the recoil of a boltgun. Those things were built into him, into all of them, on a genetic level.

But instead of giving in, he sent a pulse of thought to the chirurgeon, activating an injection of mild calmatives, to balance out his humours. Sanguinity was called for here,
not choler. As the cold flushed through his veins, he smiled genially. ‘Then we understand one another,’ he said, his voice mild.

Alkenex let his hand slip from the hilt of his sword. ‘We do.’

Fabius glanced at Palos. ‘Feel free to lurk in some unattended corner, if you like.’ Palos stalked to the side of the hololithic projector and crossed his arms. ‘Or there,’ Fabius said. ‘There is fine.’ When he’d turned back, Alkenex had already departed. He frowned and gestured to Arrian. ‘You have the watch. I have other matters which require attention.’

At the heart of the bay, the Twins moved as one, mirror images of each other. Knives flashed, scraped and sprang apart as the two played. The other Gland-hounds had drawn back, giving them room. Igori watched proudly from the observation deck as her grandchildren met and spun away from each other below, without drawing blood.

Any dog could bite. It took skill to bite without piercing flesh. And Maysha and Mayshana were skilled indeed. More skilled than Igori, or any of her generation had been at their age. The thought darkened her mood somewhat. She wondered which of them would take the lead, and challenge her. Mayshana was the more aggressive of the two, but she rarely acted without her brother’s support.

‘It will be both of them,’ she said out loud. ‘Don’t you think?’

‘Yes.’

She turned. The Benefactor stood behind her, leaning on his sceptre. She had smelled him coming. He stank of chemicals, worse than normal. Strange stains, not blood but something worse, marked his fleshy coat and battleplate. ‘Will you resist, child? Or will you let them kill you?’ His tone was flat. Curious, but unconcerned. She smiled. He trusted her to make her own decision. The Benefactor had always abided by the decisions of his New Men, whether he approved of them or not.

‘I have not decided yet,’ she said. ‘I am glad you are safely returned. Will we be leaving this place, now?’ He had returned alone to the Vesalius several hours earlier, but had remained sequestered in his laboratorium before heading for the command deck, ignoring all attempts at communication. So relieved was she by his safe return, she had not questioned his need for privacy. Now, however, she was beginning to wonder why he had chosen to hide himself away, rather than reassuring them of his well-being.

‘Soon,’ he said. He looked tired, though his face was full and ageless. It was always unsettling to see him thus, after he had shed old flesh for new. ‘We have… guests. I am assured that they will be on their best behaviour, but assurances by themselves are worth little. Keep peace among the packs. I want as few incidents as possible, for the duration.’

She heard the warning in his voice. ‘They are… prey?’

‘Not at the moment. But one never knows what the future holds.’ He smiled thinly. ‘I want guards posted on my laboratorium, cycle by cycle. Visible and otherwise. No one
is to enter without my express permission.’
‘Even Honoured Arrian?’
‘Even him. I am… conducting an experiment of some delicacy. Any interruption might prove catastrophic.’ He strode to the edge of the deck and looked down, watching the Twins at their play. The other Gland-hounds had begun to clap and howl, encouraging the combatants to more enthusiastic feats of skill. ‘They are quite impressive. They handled themselves well aboard the craftworld.’
‘So you said. Are you well, Benefactor?’ The question came unbidden to her lips.
‘As well as can be expected, my dear.’ He glanced at her. ‘Tell me, have you had any more dreams of the sort we discussed earlier?’
She frowned. ‘No.’ An odd question.
Fabius nodded. ‘Good.’ He turned away. ‘See to those matters I mentioned. I must speak with our resident diabolist.’ He paused. ‘Remember what I said, Igori – no incidents. Not unless you are provoked.’
‘And if we are?’
‘Then do as you were made to do, my child.’

Saqqara sat in meditation, his flesh bare to the stifling humidity of his quarters. His crimson battleplate stood nearby, arrayed on its rack of iron and bone, awaiting the call to service once more, his weapons hanging from it. His precious bottles of glass and clay sat around him, arranged according to the old rites. The things within them murmured incessantly, like the tides of the empyrean, washing over the rocks of his soul.

The caged Neverborn whispered to him of the horrors yet to come, and showed him what had been. These tantalising glimpses were offered up as bribes, the way a prisoner might seek to ingratiate himself to his jailer. He had long since grown used to ignoring their blandishments. It was best not to give daemons any more attention than necessary. A look, a conversation. All were cracks the Neverborn used to insinuate themselves into a psyche. Better diabolists than him had succumbed to the whispers of the warp.

But few had his purity of focus. The scope of his existence had narrowed greatly in the centuries since he’d been taken captive on Urum. Since the Manflayer had cut him open and carved monstrous secrets on his bone and muscle. Since he had become home to a thousand and one puzzles, each more fiendish than the last.

Thus far, he had solved seventy-five of them. He marshalled the internal processes of his body like a warlord, seeking out and striking at each enigma in turn. At the moment, he was circling the latest riddle woven into his flesh. Micro-ampoules, inserted into the lining of his stomach, each one containing a different mixture of chemicals, some lethal, some not. Each one was a distinct ache within him, and each could only be rendered inert by careful manipulation of his preonmor and oolitic kidney.

Biofeedback manipulation was a common enough skill among the Legions. Every
Space Marine had some degree of voluntary control of their automatic bodily functions. But the Diabolists of the 17th Legion had refined the process to a high art. The body was a temple, and temples could be infiltrated or invaded. One had to be aware of every nook and cranny, every secret river and hidden passage, lest one find themselves playing host to an invasive entity. A cunning Neverborn could nestle in some out-of-the-way node for centuries, before striking out at the heart and mind of its host.

Often, Saqqara found himself wondering if his enslaver knew this. It would explain the sheer number of lethal additions the Manflayer had made to his body over the centuries. Some of them were familiar, but others were obviously experimental. He was at once a servant and a test subject. An efficient use of materials.

Erebus would approve. Efficiency was one of the thirteen virtues, along with self-reliance and ruthlessness. Saqqara glanced at his armour, with its wine-dark hue. There were currently three hundred and forty-seven approved hues for battleplate within the Legion. That number changed, depending on the whims of the Dark Council. Following those whims was considered another virtue.

He heard the sensors of his chamber chime, and the sudden hiss of displaced air. He cracked an eye. ‘We are not dead.’

‘Don’t sound so disappointed, Saqqara.’ Fabius said, as he entered the chamber. ‘Or have you at last grown tired of trying to solve my little riddles?’

‘Each successful attempt only further strengthens my faith, monster.’

Fabius nodded. ‘I’m sure.’ He fell silent. Saqqara closed his eye, and continued with his efforts to isolate and eradicate the poisons lacing his stomach. He could sense the discontent radiating from his enslaver, and he allowed himself a small, taunting smile.

After a time, he said, ‘You smell of Neverborn.’

Fabius cleared his throat. ‘It called itself the Quaestor.’

‘Ah… that one.’

‘You know it?’

‘Not personally, but I have read the Epistles of Korazin. He is an in-between thing, owing no true allegiance to any of the great powers. An impoverished noble, flitting from court to court. There are many like him in these unquiet times.’

‘Is he – is it known for lying?’

‘All daemons lie.’ Saqqara opened his eyes. ‘Unless the truth will hurt more. What did he say to you?’

‘Nothing that need concern you.’

‘Then I cannot help you.’

‘Did I ask?’

Saqqara bowed his head. ‘As you say.’

After a moment, Fabius said, ‘They are not real, you know.’

‘They are both real and not real. That is their nature. They are self-aware falsehoods, delighting in the mischief they can cause the unwary.’ Saqqara looked up. ‘That is their
purpose. They are a test of our will, and our resolution.’ He smiled. ‘But you know this.’

‘I know only that I grow tired of such arrogant fictions attempting to impose their narrative over my own.’

‘The gods yet have use for you.’

‘There are no gods. No devils. Just us, and the things we draw out of the deep. Why, then, should I pay any attention to such agitations of psychic effluvia?’

Saqqara studied Fabius’ face. Youthful now, but he could see the cracks beneath the skin. The skull would surface soon enough, and the body would wither and shrink into itself. Bile by name, bile by nature. A tree watered on spite could not long flourish. ‘Is that a question, or a statement?’

‘Both,’ Fabius spat. He clenched and relaxed his hands, causing the servos in his gauntlets to whine softly. ‘Neither. I saw…’ He shook his head. ‘I would be rid of all gods, and their worshippers.’

‘Do you include yourself in that wish?’ Fabius looked at him sharply. Saqqara spread his hands. ‘Pater Mutatis – Father of All Mutants. You are a god, if only a little one. Smaller even than the Quaestor, who is worshipped on a million worlds as the Bringer of Dark Truths. But a god nonetheless to those small things that worship you. I do not approve of it, but that does not make it so.’

‘I have never demanded worship.’

‘Neither did the Corpse-Emperor on his hateful throne. And look what happened.’ Saqqara snorted. ‘How many times have we had this conversation, heretic? We both know that you do not keep me as an amusement, or as a tool, but as someone to argue with. You know that I am right, and yet you desperately hope to prove me wrong.’ He fixed Fabius with a hard eye. ‘If the Quaestor told you something, it was a truth. Not the truth, for there are as many truths as there are stars in the heavens, but a truth nonetheless. You do not believe in gods, but that does not mean that they do not believe in you.’

‘Ridiculous.’

‘They cannot ignore you, for you have sent them many offerings over these long centuries. You serve them better than some who sing their praises loudest. I have seen it with my own eyes. And heard it from the lips of those who love you best.’

Fabius froze. Saqqara laughed. ‘Oh, yes. We have spoken often in dreams, she and I, your wayward child. I have seen her, in the musky gardens of the Dark Prince, dancing in the silver light of a caged moon. She is beloved by him, and by his chosen heir…’

‘Heir… Fulgrim?’ Fabius’ voice was hoarse. A rasp of confusion. His hand shot forward, catching Saqqara by the throat. The Word Bearer gagged as he was wrenched from his feet and hoisted into the air. The blades, saw and drills of the chirurgeon flared like the limbs of an angry insect, and stretched towards him. ‘Explain,’ Fabius hissed. ‘And be quick. What did she say to you?’
Saqqara clutched at Fabius’ forearm, attempting to lessen the pressure on his throat. He knew his captor would not kill him, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be hurt or injured. ‘Only that the path you follow now is the same as it has always been, and that death awaits you both ahead and behind,’ he croaked. ‘But that when the fire comes, you will hold to your path regardless.’

Fabius dropped him. ‘Riddles. More riddles. If she wishes to warn me, why can she not simply do so?’

Saqqara coughed and rubbed his throat. ‘The ways of the Neverborn are not ours, and she is Neverborn now, whatever she might once have been. Whatever you desired her to be.’ He looked up at his captor and laughed. ‘The irony here is that even with all of your wisdom, you do not understand so simple a thing as this.’

Fabius glared down at him. ‘Then perhaps you should explain it to me.’

‘No, I do not think I will.’ Saqqara arranged himself more comfortably, crossing his legs and straightening his back. ‘I think, instead I shall leave you to come to your own conclusions. And then, later, you will return and we will argue again. And again and again and again.’ He closed his eyes, and once more began the work of centring himself. The Neverborn screeched and scrabbled in their bottles, eager to be free.

He heard his captor leave, coat slapping against ceramite. He allowed himself a small smile of triumph. ‘The gods love you, Fabius,’ he murmured. ‘You delivered up a Legion to them. You opened the door with your twisted ingenuity, in ways Erebus could not conceive. And you are still opening that door, every time your scalpel draws a red line across flesh. The universe is made of two parts – a knife and a stone. If you do not wield the one, you must lay upon the other.

‘And you wield the knife very well indeed.’
CHAPTER TWELVE

IMPERFECTION

Fabius stood, ramrod straight, on the starboard observation deck, watching the tides of the empyrean wash across the hull of the Vesalius. The ship was humming to itself. Every deck plate and bulkhead was reverberating gently with the sound. Occasionally, lances of silent destruction thumbed from the forward turrets to destroy the debris that hove into the frigate’s path. The crumbled remnants of forgotten worlds and lost ships, lost to the tides of the warp in centuries past, or even decades yet to come.

It was hard to tell how long it had been since they’d left Harmony, passing in and out of the webway as they were. His armour’s chronometer flickered with random numbers, or things that were not numbers at all. He’d long since grown used to losing time, but at the moment, it bothered him. Anxiety ate away at his calm like a slow acid. He thought of the infant – no, the child – sitting quietly, hidden away in his laboratorium. So far, the clone showed no sign of abnormality. No sign of the mutations that had afflicted so many of his previous attempts.

That in itself made him cautious. The clone had been slumbering since he’d been driven from Harmony by Abaddon. It had spent centuries gestating, down in the dark. It seemed improbable, if not impossible. And yet, it was aware. Perfect. Fulgrim, as he must have been, millennia ago. Or perhaps, Fulgrim as he was always meant to be.

The thought ricocheted around his head, knocking his certainty off course. Destiny was an excuse used by lesser men. Only purpose mattered. But this occurrence had disturbed those once iron-hard assumptions. The poet in him could not help but see some grand intent in the discovery. And that frustrated him to no end, for it muddled things. Without clarity came indecision.

He hoped that his uncertainty was simply the lingering effects of his encounter with the Quaestor. His mind still ached from its psychic assault. He suspected that was part
of the point. Trust Eidolon to debilitate others, in order to maintain whatever perceived supremacy he clung to, rather than rising to the challenge. But Fabius was made of sterner stuff. His mind was a citadel – and one not so easy to conquer as all that.

‘Or so one can hope,’ he muttered. He watched the shattered hull of an ancient warship tumble slowly past, its identity lost beneath a skim of frost and ash. Lights flared within it, and he noted that its remaining turret tracked the passing *Vesalius* warily. It was not unusual to find such wrecks inhabited by the descendants of their crews. Or even the original crew itself, preserved like insects in amber by the restless tides of the warp.

A foul smell intruded on his reverie, and the deck creaked beneath a great weight. He called out, ‘The hardiness of the species confounds even me, at times.’

‘It is why the gods prize us so, I think,’ Khorag said as he stumped onto the deck. ‘We can be bent into ever so many shapes, with so little effort.’

Fabius glanced at him. ‘There is an archaeomarket of some infamy near here, though I have forgotten its name. Nestled within the bowels of some ponderous hulk, long since amalgamated with others of its kind. Whole kingdoms exist within that wreck, warring and trading with each other as well as the occasional visitor. It beggars belief.’

‘Humans are wonderfully tenacious.’

Fabius smiled. ‘Yes. So I hope.’

‘This vessel seems to have joined Eidolon’s fleet,’ Khorag rumbled, joining Fabius at the observation port. ‘I see his warriors everywhere.’ Since they had left Harmony’s orbit, the lumbering Apothecary had ventured rarely from his lair near the hydroponics bay. Like Arrian and Skalagrim, he had a small laboratorium hidden away aboard the ship, where he conducted his own studies in private.

‘A temporary alliance.’

‘Do they see it that way?’

‘How they see it is of no concern to me,’ Fabius said stiffly. ‘They will be gone soon enough, and we can concern ourselves with more important matters.’

‘Such as?’

Fabius hesitated. There were few among the Consortium he actually trusted. Arrian. Saqqara, if only because of the dead man’s switch in his body. And possibly Khorag… The former Grave Warden had been an attentive student, though his focus was distressingly narrow. Then, perhaps that was to his credit, in this regard. ‘Gene-seed,’ he said finally.

‘That hardly seems important. More like business as usual.’

‘Pure gene-seed.’

Khorag stiffened. ‘That *is* interesting.’ He leaned forward. The miasma that seeped from the hoses and pipes of his armour mildewed the viewport, spotting it with black mould. ‘In return for what?’

‘Nothing. It is what we are being sent to collect.’

‘Are we errand boys, then?’
Fabius smiled thinly. ‘So Eidolon thinks. I saw no reason to disabuse him of that notion. Not when it serves my interest to do otherwise.’

‘And you think he has not considered that as well? I recall hunting the Khan’s sons with Eidolon in our wayward youth. He was most cunning.’

‘Hence Flavius and his warriors, taking up precious space on my ship.’ Fabius leaned on Torment. A knot of pain had been growing in him since they’d left Harmony. The ache was persistent and familiar. It had become such a part of him that he almost missed it, in that brief period between death and dissolution. The chirurgeon chimed interrogatively, but he dismissed it. He could function on his own, for a while longer, at least. ‘They are here to keep my feet to the path Eidolon has laid out.’

Khorag chuckled. ‘A losing battle, if there ever was one.’

‘Indeed. But we can deal with them easily enough, when the time comes.’ Fabius watched the stars, spinning in a sea of hateful colour. Motes of sickly light, piercing mauve gas clouds. Distant coronas swirled like the eyes of hidden gods, peering through holes in the shroud of the universe. The stars formed unrecognisable, nonsensical constellations that even his transhuman sight found difficult to perceive. ‘It is beautiful, in its way.’

‘So I have always thought.’ Khorag looked down at him. ‘What are you planning to do with the gene-seed?’

Fabius glanced at him. ‘What do you think? Use it, obviously.’

‘For what?’

Fabius hesitated. ‘I haven’t decided yet. But better it remain in my hands, than to waste it on Eidolon’s petty warmongering.’

‘It would make a fine sacrifice, were you of a mind. Such a prize would earn the favour of the gods, for whosoever brought it to them. Lesser men might seek apotheosis, on the back of such a thing.’

Fabius snorted. ‘I am in no hurry to die, Khorag. And that is what apotheosis is – death. Death of psyche, death of free will.’ He thought of what Saqqara had said, and quickly brushed it aside. In the cold light of day, it was nonsense.

‘That which is not dead, may eternal strive,’ Khorag murmured, as if reading his mind. ‘Or so the sons of Lorgar are wont to say in their piety.’

‘Eternal strife may appeal to some, but I have a higher purpose,’ Fabius said loftily. ‘One that is more important than the affections of any imaginary deity.’

‘Never doubt that Grandfather loves you, Fabius,’ Khorag said slyly. ‘For that is his way. You are no less his child than bellicose Typhus, though you have never bent knee at his altars. That illness you strive against so mightily? It is a gift.’

‘A gift? I am rotting on the bone.’

‘Yes, and were that not the case, would you have accomplished half of what you have done? Or would you have descended into decadence with the rest of your brothers?’ Khorag gave a wheezing chuckle. ‘I think not. Then, perhaps I am wrong. How much
blood will your followers spill, do you think? Enough to satiate Khorne? How many schemes do you weave, an intricate latticework of plot and counter-plot? How strongly do you hope, Fabius?"

Fabius turned away. Saqqara had said something similar. To hear it again, and from Khorag, made him uneasy. ‘Madness.’ As he watched, the stars seemed to take on the outline of a vast, chortling face. Only for a moment, and it was gone in the blink of an eye. But it had existed long enough to leave him feeling even more disconcerted.

‘Truth.’ Khorag shrugged. ‘Then, they are often one and the same, as you yourself have noted. We all feed the gods, Fabius. Whether we like it or not. Even if you are right, and they are nothing more than eddies in the great psychic ocean, they are still potent. Why, then, do you resist what they offer?’

‘Because what they offer is not freely given,’ Fabius said. ‘It is a bargain, as Horus discovered to his cost. And Fulgrim, before him. There is no true benevolence to that cosmic miasma you so childishly refer to as “grandfather”. It is simply a… disharmony. A discordant note in the music of the spheres.’ He bared his teeth at his reflection in the surface of the observation port. He was looking drawn and starved, though still healthy, for the moment. His body had begun to devour itself from within. ‘An imperfection.’

Khorag was silent for long moments. Then, he laughed. A soft, liquid sound, like a boil popping. Almost gentle, in its good humour. ‘Only you would see that as a flaw.’ He tapped a rust-riddled knuckle against the surface of the observation port. ‘It is the flaw in the thing that makes it interesting, Fabius. A song without mistakes is just noise.

It was Fabius’ turn to laugh. ‘And only a sour pustule like yourself would claim that mistakes are art. The universe is like clockwork, Khorag. Innumerable cogs and gears clicking along in perfect harmony. But if something slips, if a gear wears down, it puts stress on the entire mechanism. These gods you serve? They are that stressor, that slipped gear. Entropy, given a face and a name by halfwits.’

‘Better to embrace entropy than resist it, Fabius. A man cannot turn back the tide.’

‘No, but he can divert it. He can build a dam. Failing that, he can move out of its way.’ Fabius looked at Khorag. ‘It is too late for you. You’ve already drowned. But my head is still above water, Khorag.’

‘Perhaps. But for how long, my friend?’ Khorag asked. He laid a heavy hand on Fabius’ shoulder-plate, but only for a moment. The chirurgeon didn’t like it when others got too close. A whirring bone-drill swung towards the Death Guard’s face, but didn’t strike. Such a drill could cut through even Tactical Dreadnought armour. Khorag stepped back slowly. Carefully.

‘Long enough,’ Fabius said. ‘Until my work is done.’

Merix sat in the dark, watching several of his warriors make use of the training cages. He had not trained in some time. His muscles ached for lack of exertion. But he could
not stir himself to the effort. So instead, he sat and resisted the urge to look at the pale things that danced just out of the corner of his eye. He ignored their whispers and their feather-light caresses, as they tried to attract his attention.

Neverborn haunted the corridors of the Vesalius. They were weak things, claimed by no god, and hungry for adulation. He thought they were akin to parasites, nestling in the belly of a great beast. Sometimes they made themselves bodies out of cast-off flesh or forgotten machinery, and became nuisances. Then, they were purged with fire and blade. Otherwise, they were ignored, like the weather.

The air hummed with the crash of blades and soft, panting voices. There were no slaves here, no indulgences of the flesh. Chemical delights, to be sure, but those were strictly regulated. Only strength mattered. And skill.

He watched, and they knew that he watched. And so they performed ever more deadly feats of skill, seeking to impress him. He snorted. Why they did so, he could not fathom. But he accepted their respect, for it was dangerous to cast aside such gifts when they were offered. Something the Clonelord ought to have learned long before now.

He caught sight of Bellephus, slouched down among the cages, ostensibly waiting his turn. The gutter-poet gave no sign that he noticed that he was being observed, but Merix knew better. Bellephus rarely went anywhere, save under Savona’s orders.

She was spying on him. He smiled thinly and flexed his hand. She would make her move soon. She had no patience. He almost looked forward to the inevitable confrontation. They’d clashed before, during their service to Kasperos Telmar. The Radiant King had encouraged such brutality among his subordinates. The Chief Apothecary didn’t, but that rarely stopped Savona.

She would kill him, unless he killed her first. He wasn’t sure which outcome he preferred, just yet.

‘You do not train with them.’

Merix turned. Flavius Alkenex stood nearby, his helmet under one arm, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword. The Hero, Triumphant. Merix looked away. ‘No.’

‘You are in command,’ Alkenex said, joining Merix. The prefect had been wandering the decks of the frigate for days, learning the lay of the land, speaking with this squad commander, or that warrior. Merix had avoided him thus far, but it seemed the moment was at hand, whatever his desires.

‘Nominally,’ Merix said.

‘They speak of you respectfully.’

Merix laughed. ‘You are a bad liar.’

Alkenex gestured dismissively. ‘I do not lie.’

‘Then they do.’ Merix flexed his bionic hand. ‘What do you want?’ He asked the question more out of politesse than curiosity. He knew the answer already.

‘To talk. To speak of what is, and what might be.’

A guttural laugh slithered through the grill of Merix’s respirator. ‘Savona is the one
you wish to speak to. I am beyond caring about such things, these days.’

Alkenex frowned. ‘She is not of the Legion.’

‘There is no Legion.’ Merix turned away. His hand was beginning to ache again. Sharp claws of pain dug into the meat of him. ‘There is just us. What do you want?’

‘It is beyond time that the Twelfth Millennial re-joined the Legion. I am here to make that happen. You should not be wasting your days playing servant for a lunatic.’

Alkenex looked around, the ghost of a sneer on his face.

‘A lunatic who was – is – lieutenant commander of our Legion.’ The wispy shapes crept closer, moving between the dust motes which drifted through the glare of the lumens. He could more easily discern their hissing recriminations, just at the edge of his hearing.

‘Was,’ Alkenex said firmly. ‘Any claim he had to that position is long gone. The Legion has moved on without him, and good riddance.’

‘And who will take his place – you?’

Alkenex laughed. ‘Perhaps.’ He peered at Merix. ‘I know you, Merix. You were equerry to Lord Commander Hellespon, before Eidolon took his head at Oliensis. You proved yourself competent enough in his service.’

‘Damned with faint praise. You serve Eidolon.’

‘I have that honour.’

‘Does Eidolon desire the broken remnants of our humble company so badly then? There are scarce a hundred of us left. We’re not even half strength.’

Alkenex nodded. ‘Which is why you need help. Swear yourself to Eidolon’s service, and you will flourish, as you never could have with Kasperos Telmar. Or with Fabius Bile.’

Merix studied him. Alkenex made a good show of earnestness, but Merix could detect the note of falsehood. This was not Oleander’s dream of a restored Legion, but something new. Something more savage.

He missed Oleander. The Apothecary had been a scheming fool, but he’d had some shred of honour left to him. He’d wanted the same things Merix had, though it was rare that he admitted it. They’d believed in the same ghosts. The false perfection of the Legion as it had been, rather than as it was.

He glanced down at his hand and the strange, new nerves growing within the metal. It would be a new thing soon. In a few centuries. The Neverborn pressed close, their whispers drowning out the sound of blades from the training cages. He looked back up at Alkenex.

‘Tell me more.’

Savona studied the entrance to the laboratorium with distaste. It was not so large as the one Fabius maintained in the apothecarium, but it was large enough to contain the bulk of its current master, as well as his diverse experiments. Even from where she stood
down the corridor, the miasmatic stench was overpowering.

Too, this stretch of passage was badly affected by whatever horrors were growing within the chamber. Stretches of mould crept along the internal bulkheads and hung glistening from the conduits above. Pipes had rusted through and burst, releasing a persistent humidity into the corridor. Deck plates buckled back from their frames like peeling scabs, and lumens flickered oddly beneath patinas of grease.

Two mutants stood on guard to either side of the hatch, holding crudely fashioned glaives in their bandaged paws. Both were covered in sores and scabrous lesions beneath the worn plates of their armour. They wore ragged robes and heavy rebreathers, which hissed intermittently as poison air circulated through diseased lungs.

Savona wanted to get inside the laboratorium, but the guards would seek to prevent her, whatever her status. The Apothecaries of the Consortium valued their privacy, and their servants would fight to the death to protect it. Still, two mutants would be hardly any trouble at all. She lifted her maul and prepared to confront the guards.

A sudden, strong odour choked her, as a heavy hand fell on her shoulder. So intent had she been on the guards, that she’d failed to hear the grinding tread of the laboratorium’s master. For an instant, she regretted leaving Bellephus to watch over Merix’s movements. ‘A visitor? How unexpected.’ She was spun about and pinned to the wall, a wide hand about her throat. ‘I so rarely receive guests.’

Khorag Sinj studied her with rheumy eyes. His helmet was clamped to his leg, exposing a wasted skull, nestled in a thicket of hose pipes and circulation units. Jets of opaque gas vented from the pressure valves implanted in his hollow cheeks, creating an oily halo about his withered head. Limp strands of colourless hair were plastered to his scalp, or were tangled amid the hoses. Blackened teeth showed in a lipless grin. ‘Ah, the warrior-woman.’ His grip tightened slightly. ‘Why are you here? Is there some service you wish of me? A weaponised pestilence, perhaps? Or a subtle nerve agent of some sort? I assure you, my price is always fair.’

‘No. I came to talk.’ Savona had to stand on the tips of her hooves to avoid being throttled. He was far stronger than she’d suspected. It wasn’t simply the Tactical Dreadnought armour he wore, but something more intrinsic. A fell strength, bought through devotion. Like her, Khorag had long ago made a choice, and like her, that choice was stamped on his face, for all the galaxy to see.

That was why she had come to him first. The faithful could only trust one another. Khorag studied her for a moment, and then released her. ‘Very well. Come.’ He lumbered past her, towards his laboratorium. The mutants fell to their hands and knees, groaning in greeting. Khorag patted one’s head as the hatch cycled open. A noxious cloud emerged, wafting through the corridor. Savona gagged and drew a perfumed rag, made from the woven hair of an eldar, from her armour and pressed it to her mouth and nose.

The laboratorium beyond more resembled a toxic sump than a place of discovery.
Unsteady stacks of canisters leaked acidic fluids across the scarred deck plates, and the reinforced walls were pitted and marked by corrosive agents. Power cables had been yanked from the ceiling and crudely spliced into rusty generators, and sections of pipe and hose had been excised from ruptured sections of the wall and connected to burbling chem-units.

There was a layer of grime and mould covering almost everything. Fruiting bodies clustered in alcoves and recesses. The fungi were vibrantly hued and distastefully fleshy, even to Savona’s sensibilities.

Khorag’s beast, Paz’uz, bounded into view, knocking over canisters and bubbling alembic towers in its haste. The daemon-beast slobbered over its master, snuffling and grunting in greeting. Its eye-stalks swivelled towards her, and it made as if to leap playfully upon her, before Khorag caught it by the scruff of its flabby neck. He tossed the beast aside, as if it weighed no more than a feather. ‘No. Go play with the nurglings.’

Paz’uz made a sound halfway between a growl and a groan, before gambolling after a number of tiny, fat shapes, disturbed from their hiding places by its landing. The little creatures scuttled away, giggling eerily. Savona grimaced. ‘Foul little blobs. How can you get anything done, with them around?’

‘How can you not?’ Khorag retorted. He set his helmet on an examination slab, and began to de-couple hoses from the nodes in his neck and skull. They spurted gases into the moist air, and he sighed. ‘That’s better.’ He looked at her. ‘What do you want?’

‘As I said, to talk.’

‘On what topic? Not plagues, I’d guess.’

She waved a hand in front of her face, trying to dispel some of the murk drifting down from above her. Censers hung from the ceiling, spewing thick clouds of softly glowing spores into the murky air. Swarms of fat-bodied flies hummed listlessly through the spore-clouds, dancing in slow, strange circles.

‘Treachery.’

‘Ah. A most bilious broth indeed. But not one to my taste these days.’ He turned away.

‘However, I am pleased to see that you are making your move at last. Fabius will be disappointed, of course – he wagered you’d wait at least another decade. But I said to myself, no – there’s a warrior with ambition.’

‘You… wagered on it?’ She didn’t know why it surprised her so. The members of the Consortium, diverse as they were, were utterly mad. She shook her head. ‘Never mind. The treachery is not mine.’

‘Then whose?’

‘Alkenex,’ she said, not looking at him. ‘He’s up to something.’

‘Yes. And?’

She glared at him. ‘He’s spent the time since we left Harmony agitating among Thalopsis’ old cronies – there’s still hurt feelings from the Manflayer’s curt conclusion.
to their game. He is moving against the lieutenant commander.’

Khorag nodded. ‘Of course he is. That is part of the game.’ He chuckled wetly. ‘Rest assured that Fabius is already aware of the prefect’s intentions.’ He pointed a thick finger at her. ‘The question is, whose side are you on?’

‘My own, as always.’ It was always prudent to determine who was on what side, before making your loyalties known. That Alkenex had not come to her yet, when he had visited so many others, was nothing short of an insult. While the Manflayer was no more pleasant a commander, at least he had the courtesy to regard her as a threat.

‘A good answer. A strong answer. The gods love strength, and despise weakness, save where it leads to some advantage.’ He grunted phlegmatically. ‘The gods love him more than any of us, I suspect.’ He chortled and shook his head. ‘A funny thing, that. Then, Horus was an unbeliever as well. And Mortarion too. At least at first. They say there are none so fierce as a convert.’

Savona nodded, thinking of her own transformation. ‘What is he planning?’

‘Planning? Nothing. He waits, as always. When the moment comes, he will act.’ He turned back to the examination slab. The equipment there was a mouldy, rusty mess, but still somehow functional. Greasy alembics began to bubble as he worked.

‘And will you act with him?’

‘If he requires.’

‘Why?’ The question came unbidden to her lips. She had come to test the waters, but now found herself drawn deeper than she had intended. ‘Why do you follow him? What can he offer you?’

‘Knowledge, child. There is no keener mind in this galaxy than that sour chunk of meat that occupies his skull. He has forgotten more about the inner workings of man and xenos alike than any other Apothecary has ever known. I came to him to learn how to craft new and better contagions, so that Grandfather’s blessings might be shared more freely. There are secret plagues from Old Night in these containers, and virulent infections culled from crumbling bones of long-dead aeldari.’ He patted one of the canisters fondly. ‘And with these raw materials, and his aid, I have made wonders and horrors undreamt of by even the most glopsome of my brothers. Plagues that would devour even the rubbery flesh of Grandfather’s children…’

‘Daemons are not susceptible to mortal plagues,’ Savona scoffed.

Khorag nodded enthusiastically. ‘No, they are not. And yet, I have seen the results myself. That is what he offers me, child. In his shadow, I grow pleasingly feculent.’

‘And what does he get out of it?’

‘Were you not listening? Plagues, child. Swift plagues that can ravage entire systems at impossible rates.’ He chortled. ‘Oh, his mind is a thing of broken beauty. Even Abaddon cannot conceive of genocide on such a scale – it is not war to our Chief Apothecary, but simply… pest control.’ He shook his head. ‘Imagine it. A great silence, falling all at once across a system. A sector. Every imperfect thing, snuffed out like a
candle flame. And then... ah, and then, a new beginning.'

‘His New Men,’ Savona said, trying to grasp the scale of it. Even at her most savage, she had never contemplated something so coldly monstrous. ‘Are they immune to it?’

‘Oh, I imagine so. He keeps track of my improvements, and develops vaccines and inoculations aplenty. So I must work all the harder, to brew up something that will eat away at even the hardiest of his creations. A fine game, don’t you think?’

‘Yes,’ she said, more softly than she’d intended. Her flesh crawled as she took in the stacks of canisters and the humid stink of so much gathered death. Khorag laughed at her.

‘And why do you serve him, Savona of the Ruptured Skein?’

She thought about it for a moment, before answering. It was a question she had often considered, in the quiet moments between blood-lettings. There were many answers she could give – Fabius’ patronage was the surest path to leadership of the 12th. By serving him, she was protected from those who might otherwise seek her head, just for who and what she was. But the truth of it was something far simpler. Loyalty to Fabius promised that which she had been seeking since she had first set foot on the path of Dark Prince.

She smiled. ‘He keeps things interesting.’
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE PHOENICIAN’S SHADOW

An undercurrent of sound filled the laboratorium – the click of cogitators at their calculations, the soft murmur of chemical alembics, the hum of power conduits. And weaving through it all, the gentle trickle of music. A composition of some antiquity, played by the hands of a woman long dead, recorded and disseminated by her adherents down through the centuries. They claimed that to hear her voice was to glimpse the divine.

Fabius thought it an adequate tune. Lacking in creativity, but with a certain grace. That so many had made it the focus of their existence was only more proof that humanity, in its current incarnation, was irreparably damaged.

The limbs of the chirurgeon flashed down, slicing and peeling away at the body on the examination slab. The Space Marine had been one of Thalopsis’ followers. The Glandhounds had brought him down on the gunnery deck, but left the harvesting for their Benefactor. Now, with nothing else to do but wait until they reached the Maelstrom’s edge, Fabius had at last turned his attentions to the bodies of the fallen.

The dead warrior had been stripped of his battleplate, which now lay discarded in an out-of-the-way corner. The power armour was no longer functional, in the traditional sense, being more in the way of a crustacean’s carapace. But something might yet be made of it. It would provide an adequate base for his experiments with wraithbone, at least.

The Space Marine was proving to be less useful. The mutations were too extensive, down to a cellular level. But something yet might be made of his remains. The chirurgeon’s blades and plasma-cutter worked at the spongy flesh, slicing away layers of fat and unnatural musculature. The black carapace had been completely absorbed into the altered flesh, as had most of the implants. But the progenoid was still whole. It was
cradled in a scabrous egg of repurposed carapace, like a hidden treasure.

Deftly, he extracted it, and carefully peeled away the egg. The glistening progenoid was then dropped into a waiting nutrient canister. There would be some mutation, but he would be able to salvage it. At the very least, it would provide fodder for the lesser gene-seed he cultivated for his New Men.

When he had finished, he stepped back. From behind him came the sound of the laboratorium’s entry hatch cycling open. Fabius frowned at the intrusion. ‘Take what’s left to the flesh-vats. Strip the bone and the carapace. Keep them separate. I may find other use for them.’

At his words, several vatborn scurried out of hiding. The sturdy little creatures dragged the gutted carcass off of the slab and swiftly wrapped it in an absorbent shroud. Fabius watched as they removed the body, pleased with their efficiency.

‘There’s no honour left to you, is there?’ Alkenex said.

Fabius didn’t turn. He dunked his bloody gauntlets into a basin next to the slab. The antibacterial solution hissed as it ate away at the effluvia clinging to his armour. ‘It depends on how you define honour, Flavius.’

Alkenex grunted. He wandered the laboratorium for a moment, examining the wonders and horrors that occupied its cramped confines. ‘Prevarication,’ he said, after a time. ‘I expected no less from you.’

‘Are you here just to insult me, or did you have some matter to discuss? If it’s the former, I’ll thank you to leave.’ Fabius glanced meaningfully at the entry hatch. ‘I wouldn’t have given order that you were allowed to enter, if I’d known you had nothing of importance to say.’ The Gland-hounds that were waiting just out of sight would happily fall on the prefect, at Fabius’ command. And Alkenex knew it.

Alkenex glanced at the hatch and then at him. ‘Your… creatures attacked one of my warriors. He drove them off, but they injured him.’

‘Ah. Well, there are any number of Apothecaries aboard. You did not have to bring the matter to me especially.’ Fabius stooped to examine the progenoid he’d just extracted.

Alkenex waited for him to continue. When he didn’t, Alkenex said, ‘What are you going to do about it, then?’

‘Do about what?’

‘I want those creatures’ scalps. They must be punished.’

‘For what? Following their instincts? I gave them orders to leave your warriors alone, so long as they reciprocated. Your warrior should not have been wandering through their territory alone, looking for trouble. It was bound to infuriate them.’ Fabius looked up. ‘What was he looking for, I wonder – and on whose orders?’

The other Space Marine said nothing.

Fabius snorted. ‘Did he wound any of them?’

Alkenex gripped the hilt of his sword. ‘Not that I am aware of.’

Fabius nodded. ‘Good. Then I shall not demand recompense.’

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‘Are you listening to me? Those things injured a brother of the Third. Your brother. They must be put down, like the rabid beasts they are.’

‘Then go and put them down.’ Fabius gestured towards the entry hatch. ‘Go and kill them, if you can. I will tender my apologies to Eidolon, afterwards, when they hang you by your heels and carve out your hearts.’ He fixed Alkenex with an unwavering stare. ‘I made them to kill our kind, Flavius, as we were made to slay the foes of our once-master.’

‘And are your brothers your foes, then?’

Fabius laughed. ‘You tell me.’ He touched one of the nutrient jars that lined a nearby shelf. Each one contained a gene-seed, harvested from a member of the 12th Millennial. ‘We were created for a purpose – one we failed to fulfil. My creations will not fail me, as we failed our creator.’

‘Do you fancy yourself an emperor, then? A god-king, with a fawning harem of genetically augmented woman-things?’ Alkenex laughed. ‘I’ve seen the way you dote on her. Why else would you make such useless things? Have you succumbed to vice at last, brother?’ He leaned close. ‘Has Slaanesh inflamed your senses and stirred your—’

‘Enough.’ Fabius studied his reflection in the jars. ‘Do you truly want to know why I uplifted both genders, Flavius? Or are you content with your puerile fancies?’

Alkenex hesitated. ‘Tell me.’

Fabius snorted. ‘Simply put – I will not be around forever. Walking wounded, as I said. So, my creations must be able to persist without my intervention. Some few have been able to grasp my methodology, but like all children, they stretch the common sense of their parent into something approaching a religion.’

Alkenex chuckled. ‘What man doesn’t want to be a god?’

‘Gods are for the weak, Flavius. What can they do for man, that man cannot do for himself, and with less trouble? No, let them revere me if they wish – but not as a god. I am not so arrogant as that. Primogenitor is enough.’

‘Not so arrogant–?’ Alkenex laughed. ‘You are the height of arrogance, Spider. You always have been. You reek of assumed authority. Fulgrim coddled you and elevated you far above your station at every turn.’

Fabius shrugged. ‘The same could be said of many of us. What does it matter now?’

‘It matters when you seek to create monsters, using our gene-seed. It matters when your arrogance drives you to pervert our perfection for your own gain…’

‘You haven’t been listening,’ Fabius said, after a moment. ‘I will gain nothing from my work, save the satisfaction of having fulfilled my function at last. We were crafted to make the galaxy safe for humanity. And so I shall, by making humanity better able to survive the horrors we have unleashed. My New Men will spread through the galaxy, as their predecessors were always meant to do. Guided by my philosophy, perhaps – my wisdom. But not by me. Like all weapons, I will break eventually. And my remains will be put to better use, as the broken sword is converted into a ploughshare.’
Alkenex stared at him. ‘You are mad.’
‘Possibly. Arrogant, mad and a fool.’ Fabius smiled. ‘How does that make me any different from the rest of you?’
Alkenex shook his head. ‘We are nothing alike, Spider. You do not understand what it means to be a warrior. For you, it is a burden. A labour. For me, it is a calling.’ He slapped his sheathed blade. ‘You are correct – we are weapons. And I am content in that. I will be the most perfect weapon in the Phoenician’s arsenal.’
‘Ah, now I understand. I did not, at first. Surely this task was beneath you. But now, I see. You desire the glory that you think will follow this scheme of Eidolon’s. How like you, Flavius. You always were a glutton for such ephemeral rewards.’
‘It’s called ambition, Spider.’
‘Is it? My own ambitions are loftier than a place at Eidolon’s feet. Why be a weapon, when you can be the one who crafts it?’ Fabius sniffed. ‘If you are finished, I have other duties to attend to. Preparations must be made for the implantation and preservation of our bounty, when we find it.’
‘At least you are good for that.’ Alkenex pointed at him. ‘Keep your beasts in line, Fabius, or I will order them purged from this ship.’
Fabius glanced at Alkenex’s finger, and then at his face. ‘You could certainly try.’
Alkenex frowned and turned away. Fabius waited until the hatch had closed behind him, and said, ‘Initiate lockdown procedure Gamma-Fortitude. Encrypt all outgoing vox signals.’ The lumens set into the hatch frame flickered from green to red as the internal locking mechanisms slid home.
Alkenex was moving more swiftly than he’d anticipated. He was unsettling the delicate equilibrium of the Vesalius, and his warriors were causing problems. Honour duels had become common, as had mutant hunts, despite Fabius’ demands to the contrary. Whole sections of the ship were as good as enemy territory. Even as he’d foreseen.
The Lord Commander Primus wanted him in chains. He wanted a tame alchemist for his barbaric little court, much as Kasperos Telmar had. Part of Fabius wondered if this expedition was nothing more than some overly intricate trap, designed to break him to Eidolon’s will – but no. Eidolon had never been that subtle, and Alkenex even less so. The gene-tithe existed, and the only question was who would control it.
‘Patience,’ he muttered. ‘Patience.’ He cleared his throat and whistled once, piercingly. Several vatborn scuttled into view, grunting questioningly. Fabius looked down at them. ‘Follow Alkenex. I want to know who he talks to. Where he goes. Take care not to be seen, if you value your lives. Go.’
The vatborn hurried to obey. They would travel by secret routes, and avoid the eyes of Space Marine and mutant alike. Fabius sighed. That Alkenex was plotting treachery was obvious. The question was – what sort? Would he attempt to take the ship openly? Or simply content himself with picking away at Fabius’ sphere of influence?
He doubted Alkenex was working on his own initiative. This smacked of one of Eidolon’s games. For all his talk of partnership, the Lord Commander Primus was no fool. He expected no loyalty from his old Legion brother, and had undoubtedly planned for treachery. Well, they would not find him unprepared.

He saw and recorded everything that went on aboard this vessel. From those fragments, he would soon glean the shape of the treachery to come. And then, he would act accordingly.

Satisfied that the laboratorium was sealed against all unwanted intrusions, he set his tasks aside and moved to the rear of the chamber, where a concealed hatchway waited. He’d altered the apothecarium himself, installing reinforced internal partitions in order to create a series of smaller observation chambers. Each could be isolated from the others, when necessary. Normally, he used them to observe the results of his experiments in more subtle forms of augmentation.

For the moment, the largest of them had become, for lack of a better term, a nursery. Or it had been, when its occupant had still been a mewling infant. Now it was inhabited by a youth, a boy of twelve cycles, Fabius judged, as he watched through the observation port.

The clone of Fulgrim was aging exponentially, years passing in mere hours. But beyond the physical progression, there was the mental. Too, there was as yet no sign of mental or physical corruption. The thought concerned Fabius, though he could not say why. He had resigned himself to the corrupting influence of Eyespace. It crept into everything. By rights, the clone should have been corrupted while still in his artificial womb, after so long unprotected. And yet, here he was. Perfect.

Fabius did not believe in fate, or signs. Logic was his Pharos. But this defied logic. It was as if someone had given him a gift. And he did not trust gifts. He watched Fulgrim move about the chamber and considered disposing of him. It would be safer, in the long run. His New Men had no need of such a being.

And he would not be able to hide the young demigod for long, not if his maturation continued. There was the slight hope that entropy might claim the clone shortly, but Fabius doubted it. He had created the clones to mature rapidly, but once Fulgrim reached his full growth, his aging would slow to normal levels.

The problem was a thorny one. And one he was reluctant to solve. He keyed in the code and unlocked the hatch. It cycled open with a hiss of displaced, sterile air, and he stepped inside.

The clone looked at him as he entered. ‘Hello, teacher.’

Fabius hesitated, before answering. It was unsettling, being addressed by one who so resembled his lost gene-father. ‘Hello, Fulgrim. What have you learned today?’

‘That the world is greater than I dreamt,’ Fulgrim – the thing that looked like Fulgrim – said, casting aside a data-slate. ‘Bigger. Noisier. More interesting.’

Fabius chuckled. ‘It is that, on occasion.’ He raised an eyebrow at the pile of data-
slates that surrounded the being. What few physical books he possessed had been pulled from their shelves and stacked haphazardly in a slightly smaller circle around the clone. ‘How many have you read?’

‘Most of them. With some of them, it is as if I have read them before. In a dream.’ Fulgrim looked up. ‘Why is that?’

Fabius hesitated. ‘I do not know,’ he said finally. The lie tasted sour on his tongue. This being was not Fulgrim, and yet was. The falsehood was like poison to him. He had lied to the real Fulgrim often, at the end. But by then, Fulgrim had not been Fulgrim, but something else. A thing that encouraged deceit and appealed only to the worst in his sons. Indeed, Fabius thought it safe to say that this androgynous child before him had more right to the name than the entity that now claimed it. Or would, when he had grown to adulthood.

He would not be the Fulgrim they remembered, but perhaps he might be Fulgrim as he should have been. The Phoenician, Unfettered. A true Illuminator, capable of leading a New Humanity to its destiny.

He recalled a story. It was perhaps one he had heard as a child; a folktale from misty Albia. A sorcerer had raised a king and brought about a golden age. It had not had a happy ending. Such stories rarely did. But this was not a story. He was no sorcerer, guided by portents and hoary wisdom. And the being sitting before him was no man; though he might be a king. Or an emperor.

‘You are smiling,’ Fulgrim said. Fabius blinked, startled from his reverie. Fulgrim smiled himself, and Fabius felt his hearts lurch in their cages of bone and spite. ‘It is good to smile, teacher,’ the clone said. ‘It is better to smile.’ He reached for another data-slate.

‘Yes,’ Fabius said. ‘Stand up.’

Fulgrim stood obediently. Fabius examined him with careful, precise movements. The chirurgeon clicked and hissed as it took blood and dermal samples. Fulgrim did not flinch as his blood was drawn and skin cells were scraped from his arm. The diagnostic scanners built into Fabius’ armour recorded and analysed the clone’s biometric data.

‘Hold out your arm.’

As he ran his fingers along Fulgrim’s arm, probing for any weakness in his musculature, he found his thoughts drawn back to the fall of Harmony and Abaddon’s rampage. A moment of clarity he’d never properly thanked the Warmaster for. When he had remade Horus, it had been a fool’s gamble. Lupercal reborn and the Legions united. The dream of a different man – a desperate man, seeking some purpose in a purposeless universe. Now, those days seemed like a bad dream. A waking fugue of broken moments. He had been wrong. He saw that now.

‘Turn around.’

Fulgrim turned with a smooth grace. Fabius probed the muscles of his shoulders and back, and took more scans. His thoughts were still in the past. Horus reborn would have
only brought new problems. New distractions. But could the same be said of Fulgrim? The true Fulgrim was lost to them. A capricious thing, surrendered to sensation and excess. But this Fulgrim was not yet lost. Might never be lost, if Fabius were careful.

He stepped back. ‘Good. You may return to your studies.’

Fulgrim smiled shyly and nodded. Fabius turned away, studying the clone’s bio-rhythms on the auspex-screen of his vambrace. He tapped at the controls, comparing the readings to those of the original Fulgrim. ‘Acceptable levels of variation, due to immaturity,’ he murmured, trusting his armour’s vox-systems to record his notes. ‘Evidence of selective dermal thickening over sensory nerve clusters.’

He shook his head, almost annoyed by the quality of his work. It was as if, having given the patient up for dead, he had suddenly detected vital signs. Weak ones, to be sure – but there, all the same. The question now was, what to do about it? Something clattered, and he looked up, shaken from his reverie. Fulgrim paced towards him, carrying a wide, bestial skull, dotted with spurs of bone.

‘I found it in one of the other chambers. This is the skull of a Bharghesi,’ Fulgrim said, as if dredging the word up out of some vast reservoir of memory. ‘Why do I know that word?’

‘The Primarchs – the first Primarchs – somehow encoded their memories in their blood and marrow, like a cogitator backing up its data. A process I still do not fully understand, and have not been able to replicate with any success. That is why it was possible to recreate them – you – in full.’ He paused. ‘You know the word, because we – you and I – fought the Bharghesi, millennia ago.’

‘Was this a trophy?’

‘It is raw material,’ Fabius said. ‘A bit of Bharghesi in the mix lends much-needed aggression. Humans do not lack for it, of course, but it is a fire quickly snuffed. The hyper-violence of the Bharghesi, sublimated to the patience of the human mind, makes for a deadly predator.’

‘And is that what they are?’ Fulgrim asked.

‘That is what they must be, in order to survive what is coming,’ Fabius said. ‘All of existence is at war with itself. Time and space shiver apart at the least pressure from those huge, unknowable intelligences that men so casually refer to as gods. As if by naming a thing, they might control it.’ He looked at the clone. ‘But control is an illusion. You can steer a vessel, but not the waters it sails on.’

Fulgrim nodded and set the skull down. ‘I am… a vessel, then?’

‘Yes. A vessel of hope and change.’ Fabius frowned. ‘Or you were. What you are now will be up to you.’

‘You will help me?’

Fabius grunted. ‘I suppose I must. I created you. I bear some responsibility.’

Fulgrim reached out and took his hand. The pale youth smiled. ‘I always liked you, Fabius. I remember that.’
Fabius wrenched his hand away, repulsed by the thought. Fulgrim had used him and abandoned him, the way he had abandoned all of his other favourites. The Phoenician had tossed aside his sons with no more consideration than that of a man for an ant. ‘Congratulations. You have remembered how to lie.’

‘I did not lie,’ Fulgrim said, frowning.

Fabius waved that aside. ‘No matter. All men lie, even when they are not men at all. Falsehood is just another survival instinct.’ He turned back to his data-slates, but could not focus. Not with Fulgrim staring at him. ‘Do you remember how to fight?’

Fulgrim’s frown deepened and he flexed his hands. ‘I… think so.’

‘There is a training cage at the rear of the laboratorium.’ He gestured to a second hatchway, set opposite the first. ‘I installed it to test the progress of my servants. It contains a number of combat drones. Feel free to make use of it while I am otherwise occupied.’ He glanced at the clone, as a thought occurred to him. ‘Do you recall how to use a training cage?’

Fulgrim shook his head. Fabius sighed.

‘Very well. Come along. I will teach you.’

The gunship, Phoenician’s Blade, was a lean craft, all sharp angles, vaguely reminiscent of the avian form. It crouched on the flight deck like a raptor in its nest. The crew were slaved to their control-craddles, their withered, once-human forms nestled in profusions of cabling and fibre bundles, so that only their slack faces were visible. They grunted softly to one another in corrupted binary, or else mentally directed the efforts of the scuttling, arachnid servitors that crawled over the gunship’s amethyst hull, cleaning and prepping the vessel for its next flight.

Inside the crew compartment, Flavius Alkenex stood before a hololithic projection of the Vesalius’ schematics, and waited patiently for his co-conspirator to arrive. He smiled at the thought. There was always one, and he’d come to prefer the hidden blade to the open, in matters such as this.

Eidolon’s instructions had been specific – take the vessel and return the gene-tithe to Harmony, after Fabius had been dealt with. But there was room for interpretation in that command with regard to timing. And there were other considerations – the Spider was more cunning than even Eidolon truly realised. Kill one Fabius, another sprouted half a system away. The Clonelord was named so for a good reason. He had been dispatched almost as often as cursed Lucius, only to return more spiteful than ever.

Eidolon might not care, but Alkenex did. The Third could no longer afford to leave the former Chief Apothecary alive. He needed to be dealt with, and permanently. And that meant waging a war on multiple fronts. The Vesalius was but one.

A cursory inspection had revealed certain truths. The frigate was larger than it ought to have been, with a crew easily in excess of thirty thousand. That was not unexpected – vessels often changed as much as those aboard them in the Eye.
The frigate had also grown multiple bays along its flanks, like barnacles, at some point in the past century. Most of these were under his nominal control and occupied by gunships like this one, but a few were not. Those decks necessary to the function of the ship were running at peak efficiency – everything else had been allowed to slip into disrepair, including many of the bays. They would need to be cleaned out, at some point.

Counting his warriors, there were roughly two hundred and fifty Space Marines aboard the vessel. Of the one hundred and fifty not under his direct command, around seventy-five could be counted as potential threats. The rest would go whichever way the wind turned. Conditions were cramped, but adequate for the time being.

He took a sip from the fragile goblet he held, savouring the warmth of the liquid. An Archaosian vintage, of good quality. He’d taken a store of it in a raid, and come to enjoy its subtleties. It was said, by those who knew such things, that it brought clarity and depth of thought. While many in the Third chose to boost their mental processes by way of various stimulants, Alkenex preferred more traditional methods.

Over the centuries of the Long War, he’d found his taste buds becoming more sensitive. His palate had developed in turn, as he discovered there was more to sensation than could be found on the battlefield. Senses, once honed to a killing edge, had softened and blurred, allowing for deeper impressions. His omophageac implant had matured, and he could devour more than base facts. A taste of flesh allowed him to consume all that its owner had been or ever would be – all of their emotions, their dreams and desires.

In quiet moments, he could hear the tattered ghosts of many a fine meal whimpering in the hollows of his mind. They did not last long, but he enjoyed every moment of their suffering, drawing it out for as long as possible. He looked forward to doing the same to Fabius, in time. He would eat the Spider, bit by bit, savouring his dashed hopes the way he savoured the taste of the wine in his hand.

As he studied the schematics, the campaign to come took shape in his mind. Strategies and counter-ploys flowed like quicksilver. He’d always been a quicker study than most. That he did not hold higher rank was an accident of fate, rather than lack of ability.

He had joined the Phoenix Guard not long after the culling of the Legion’s ranks at Isstvan III, and then been promoted to prefect by Fulgrim himself. It had been his task to maintain lines of communication between the scattered Millennials as the war began in earnest. The Third was everywhere in those days. The Emperor’s Children had been Horus’ sword, decapitating the enemy at every turn. Literally, in some instances. Where they fought, only victory bloomed.

And then Eidolon had returned, and it had all started to go wrong. Alkenex emptied his goblet and set it aside. He bore the Lord Commander Primus no grudge. It was not solely Eidolon’s fault, any more than it was Fulgrim’s. They had all lost their way, overcome by the magnitude of what awaited them. Command had broken down, as
Horus had likely known it would. Alkenex had realised early on that the Warmaster was using them, bleeding them white so as to spare his own precious sons.

That was a familiar story. The Third Legion had almost been used up in the early days of the Great Crusade. Their dwindling numbers cast into war again and again, until only a few remained. But they had emerged the stronger for such a tempering. As they had at Terra, and would again, when the gene-tithe was theirs once more. ‘We will be magnificent,’ he murmured.

‘Alkenex?’

Merix stood at the bottom of the gunship’s embarkation ramp, as if awaiting permission to board. Alkenex waved the other Space Marine forward. ‘Ah, Merix. Come, look at this.’

Merix joined him in the crew compartment. ‘Why are we meeting here?’

‘It’s the only place I can be certain we won’t be overheard. Fabius is many things – overly trusting isn’t one of them. He has ears everywhere aboard this ship.’ Alkenex manipulated the projector’s controls, shrinking the schematics and calling up a gauzy display map. ‘It has been my task for the past few years to map as much of Eyespace as possible. Which isn’t much, given the instability of this place.’

‘Things move,’ Merix said.

Alkenex nodded. ‘Or vanish. Or change shape. I once saw a world unravel itself like a fruit peel, before tumbling off towards the byssos. But there are fixtures in the firmament. Worlds and stars anchored in place, for whatever reason. Most belong to one of the courts of damnation, or the aristocracy of the lost.’ The Neverborn had their own social order, alien as it was. Courts of influence rotated about those entities and individuals whose influence in Eyespace was on the rise.

‘But some do not,’ Merix mused. He peered at the map. ‘Eidolon seeks to claim them.’ It wasn’t a question.

Alkenex smiled. Merix wasn’t as unobservant as he pretended to be. ‘Some. Those that will make fitting staging posts for later campaigns, or slave-worlds. Most belonged to us, once, before Abaddon so cruelly cast us down. We are simply reclaiming our rightful property, in most cases.’ He manipulated the controls, causing the map to widen and rotate. ‘In others, we seek sites of interest. Tell me – on how many worlds has our host cached copies of himself?’

‘I know of a few, but they are always changing. His creatures move his laboratoriums on a regular basis, to avoid detection. Many aren’t even in Eyespace.’ Merix tapped the point on the system map representing the crone world of Urum. ‘Urum is the largest – it is the centre of his network. His Grand Apothecarium. The information you require will be there, if it’s not in the Vesalius’ databanks.’

‘Then that will be our first stop, once this matter is settled,’ Alkenex said simply. He expanded the Vesalius’ schematics. ‘How many clones of himself does Fabius have aboard this ship?’
‘No more than a handful, that I’m aware of. All hidden away. He has at least three laboratoriums aboard this ship. The main one is in the apothecarium, but there is another somewhere on the gunnery deck. I suspect the third one is in the hydroponics bay.’ Merix studied the flickering schematics. ‘Arrian would know.’

‘The World Eater?’ Alkenex frowned. ‘Can he be suborned?’

Merix gave a wheezing laugh. ‘Not likely.’

‘Then why mention him? What about the other – Skalagrim?’

‘The Cthonian? Perhaps. He bears little love for the Clonelord.’ Merix stepped back, arms crossed. ‘But I doubt he knows where anything is. No, Arrian is the only member of the Consortium who’d know for certain.’

Alkenex nodded. ‘Then we’ll do it the hard way. We’ll kill him and take his knowledge for ourselves, if he won’t be swayed.’ He patted the sword on his hip. ‘I shall do the honours myself. It has been too long since I spilled the blood of one of Angron’s sons.’

‘Confident, then?’

Alkenex looked at him. ‘Confidence is the armour of certainty. This is a thing which must be done for the Third to rise. And it shall be done, by my hand. Eidolon set me this test, so that my worthiness might be judged. I will be made Lord Commander, and rise high in the esteem of the Phoenician. Do not doubt it.’ He pointed at Merix. ‘Do not doubt me.’

Merix bowed his head. ‘I do not.’

Alkenex looked at him for a moment. ‘Why did you agree to help me, Merix?’ he asked. ‘Enlightened self-interest?’

‘No. Treachery is rarely enlightened.’ Merix glanced at him. ‘Is Eidolon truly rebuilding the Legion?’

‘Yes.’

‘That is why I agreed. I... need it.’ Merix flexed his prosthetic hand. ‘I need the iron bars of a Legion about my soul. A chain of command to leash me.’ He sighed. ‘There is something in me, I think. The seed of some darkling flower, seeking the light. I would see it buried forever.’

Alkenex studied the other Space Marine, in the flickering light of the hololithic display. Looking at him now, he could see the faint signs of the fleshchange creeping over him. It happened to them all, to one degree or another. Sometimes the changes were small. Other times, you lost yourself to them completely. It wasn’t just skin and bone that changed in the warp. Minds and souls ran like wax, and were twisted and stretched all out of form.

Merix was a walking wound. He stank of unhealed injuries and sickness. His body was a citadel with every gate and window flung open. It was not surprising that something had crept in. And once they were in, it was all but impossible to cast them out. Chain of command or no, Merix was doomed. Or blessed, depending on your perspective.
‘We will bury it together, brother,’ Alkenex said. ‘You will act as my second, as you did for Hellespon. My good left hand, as Palos Gyr is my right. Together, we will remake the Twelfth Millennial in our image, and it will be all the stronger for it.’

‘And Fabius Bile?’

‘Will be of no concern to anyone. Eidolon has his own fleshcrafters and genomancers – none the Spider’s equal, true, but more biddable by far. And that is what matters in the coming age. The time of gods and monsters has passed. Now is a time of masters and servants. All who are not the one, must be the other.’

Merix nodded slowly, his leathery features relaxing in something that might have been relief. Alkenex clapped him on the shoulder, satisfied that he had marked him right. Merix was a born follower. The rigours of command easily broke his composure. He needed a strong leader, like many in the Legion. A firm hand to guide him into battle and away again. But despite his hesitant nature, he was respected.

It took a certain courage to hold true to old ways, when every day brought new sensations. But that respect was a double-edged blade. It could lead to trouble, if not put to proper use.

Alkenex turned back to the display. ‘If I know the Spider, he will insist on leaving as many of his own people as possible aboard, so as to guard against my influence. Who will he leave to oversee things?’

‘Arrian,’ Merix said simply. ‘Possibly Khorag. But Arrian is the only one he trusts not to turn on him, other than the Word Bearer. He’ll take Skalagrim with him. And possibly Savona. Diomat as well, if he thinks there’s going to be trouble.’

‘Good. It makes things easier.’ Alkenex rotated the projection, isolating certain bays for closer scrutiny. ‘How many among the company are loyal to him?’

‘None,’ Merix said.

Alkenex frowned again, and rephrased the question. ‘How many might resist, if we sought to dispose of him?’ He already knew the answer, but he wanted to see if Merix was honest enough to give it to him.

‘Some. A third, at least. They’re addicted to the stimulants he provides. Without them, they’ll wither in on themselves.’ Merix flexed his prosthetic idly. ‘I have seen it happen, to those who displeased him somehow. It is not a fitting fate for a warrior.’

‘Winnow these addicts from the rest. They can’t be trusted.’

Merix nodded. ‘Easily done. Most of them follow Savona, anyway.’

Alkenex grunted. The woman was a problem for a later date. He tapped one of the highlighted observation bays on the schematic. ‘What is this? Why is it sealed off from the main access corridor?’

‘That’s the garden. The wraithbone grove.’ Merix twitched slightly.

Alkenex stared at it. He’d had reports of the alterations Fabius had made to his vessel – of strange, bone-white growths, creeping through the conduit nodes and intertwining among the circuitry. Only the Spider was mad enough to graft xenos technology onto
existent systems at a whim. There was no telling what it had done to the ship, in the interim. ‘What’s in this garden?’
‘Key,’ Merix said flatly.
‘And what is this Key?’
‘Something monstrous.’ Merix shook his head. ‘I can show you, if you wish.’
‘Yes. And the sooner the better. I want to know what he’s hiding in there, and whether it can be of any use to us.’
The Vesalius ran silent through a corroded spur of the webway. Fabius watched through a static-ridden pict-feed as the frigate passed through broken bone-white reefs of alien matter and toxic clouds of daemonic substance. A moment later, its warning bells tolled out into the blackened spiral depths, scattering flocks and shoals of Neverborn before it. Occasionally, the edges of the Vesalius’ Geller field would strike one of these shoals of impossible, squirming shapes and the daemons would evaporate in their hundreds, much to the amusement of their wiser, swifter fellows.

Defensive turrets silently tracked distant shapes, as large as any warship, as they clambered through the crooked celestial architecture of sub-space. There were giants in the webway, but they seemed content to keep to themselves, at least for the moment. The frigate powered towards the distant, shimmering square of the webway portal without incident, for which Fabius, in his laboratorium, was glad.

He stood in the tertiary strategerium, located in an antechamber of the apothecarium, and observed the vessel’s progress with satisfaction. The functions of the command deck had been surreptitiously slaved to the strategerium centuries ago, enabling him to communicate with Wolver and the crew directly, without having to abide Alkenex or one of his servants looking over his shoulder. The ship was his, whatever Alkenex thought, and it would remain so.

‘Rotate forward sensor array two points,’ he said, tapping one of the holo-displays that swarmed about him like flies. ‘Wide sweep.’ The monotone voice of a servitor assented, and a sensor feed flickered to life, joining the rest of the swarm.

Despite his assurances to the inimitable prefect, travelling through these compromised sections of sub-space was not without substantial risk. ‘Here there be monsters,’ he muttered, as the Vesalius’ aft sensor array detected something massive, burrowing
through the tunnels nearby. The webway shook, and clouds of dislodged debris
crunched against the ship’s hull with a sound like distant thunder. Fabius silenced the
proximity alarms before they could reach the command deck and alert Alkenex’s
proxies that anything was amiss.

As the unseen leviathan receded deeper into sub-space, Fabius made a note of the time
and place, on the rough cartographic holo-overlay that curved around the interior of the
strategerium. He fancied he was one of the few individuals, outside of the eldar, to
possess a working knowledge of the webway. And with every trip through its vastitude,
he only added to that knowledge. Come the day, the sub-dimension might prove to be a
secure bolthole. He had already noted any number of isolated spurs that would provide
the necessary space for an apothecarium, in the event of Urum’s destruction.

‘What are they doing?’ Fulgrim asked, interrupting his calculations. The clone
crouched atop a nearby examination slab, his attentions on the small knot of vatborn in
the corner of the laboratorium. It was not the first, or even the fiftieth question he’d
asked, in the hours since he’d destroyed the last of the training servitors. His skills at
combat seemed as instinctive as his knowledge-base, and returned more swiftly. Even as
a youth of… sixteen cycles, now, he was impossibly lethal.

‘Assembling rebreathers,’ Fabius said, watching the pale youth observe the vatborn.
He shuddered slightly, remembering the damage those thin limbs had done to the
heavily armoured servitors. Metal had buckled beneath swift blows, and cybernetically
upgraded combat systems had proven no match for raw ferocity. It was no wonder that
most of the primarchs had ascended to control their own planets in a scant few decades.
‘They make their own, though they have not needed them in several centuries. I suspect
it has some cultural or religious significance.’

‘But you made them.’

‘And?’ Fabius chuckled. ‘It is the nature of sentient species to invent stories to
explain – well, everything.’ Though some took it to extraordinary lengths, admittedly.
The Harlequins were one such example. They lived and died by the story they were
trying to tell. Thoughts of the xenos made him glance at the sensor feeds scrolling
across the hololithic screens floating about him. Periodic sweeps of the Vesalius had
showed any number of oddities, but nothing xenos-related, as far as he could tell.

That did not mean they were not there, however. That did not mean that they were not
watching, even now. The chirurgeon chirped a warning, as his heart-rates increased. He
forced himself to remain calm. It was not fear that he felt, so much as anticipation. And
anticipation of an event that might never come was a distraction.

‘Am I a story?’ Fulgrim asked.

Fabius hesitated. Fulgrim was looking at him, violet eyes wide and full of innocent
curiosity. How did one answer a question like that? He cleared his throat. ‘Of a sort.
Your name, for instance, is derived from a Chemosian folktale.’

Fulgrim smiled. ‘I would like to be a story, I think. I would be a good one.’ There was
an earnestness there that was almost painfully at odds with the Fulgrim he knew. Then, perhaps not. Fulgrim had been flamboyant, true, but never anything less than serious when it came to his drive for perfection.

‘Yes,’ Fabius said softly. ‘Yes, you could be, at that.’ Thoughts swelled and crashed in Fabius’ mind like the waters of a storm-tossed sea. Almost two centuries before, in the forest of crystal seers on the Craftworld Lugganath, he had been given a glimpse of his possible futures and fates. In one of those, he had led a resurgent Third out of the Eye. He had dismissed it, initially. No more than a shadow on a cave wall.

But events seemed to be conspiring that way. If the gene-seed were real, and not some mad fancy of Eidolon’s, it might be enough to rebuild the Legion. But could he do it? Should he? It was all too perfect, too neat. A story, moving along familiar lines. He’d heard similar stories as a child – a lost king, a slumbering army, a new golden age. ‘Am I the Myrddin of myth, now, aging backwards and growing swords from stones?’

He looked at Fulgrim. Was the clone his cambion – a changeling and child of daemon – or something more glorious? The youthful clone sat hunkered before the vatborn, chirping eerily. Fabius started in surprise, as he realised that at some point in the past few moments, Fulgrim had apparently deciphered the mutants’ language. He was learning at an impressive rate. And he displayed no signs of warp corruption or genetic degeneration.

He was perfect.

‘We could start over,’ Fabius said to himself. A new Legion. A new primarch. The Third reborn, cleansed of the sins that had claimed it. A Third that he could guide along his own path. With them, he might be able to – no. No. That way lay distraction. The Legions and their gene-fathers had had their chance, and they’d failed. Humanity must stand on its own, if it was to prosper in the world to come.

But as he watched the youthful copy of his gene-father ingratiate himself to the vatborn, Fabius could not help but feel a twinge of doubt.

Alkenex looked around the wraithbone-shrouded bay in barely concealed disgust. ‘And what is the purpose of this place?’ he murmured. ‘Is it a garden?’

‘Yes,’ Merix said. Everything hummed with a strange sort of energy, as if the spreading tendrils of wraithbone were harmonising with the immense structures they were even now passing through. Merix shied away from the thought. Though he was careful not to show it, the webway disturbed him. He had seen daemon worlds that were less disturbing on the whole than the silent immensity of the sub-spatial labyrinth.

Overhead, simian shapes ran shrieking through the tangled branches. The slaves of the Kakophoni alerted their masters to the intruders with shrill cries that resonated oddly through the new-grown contours of the garden. Alkenex glared at the pale, ape-like shapes, his hand on the hilt of his sword. ‘Must they make such a racket?’

‘Yes. Hands away from your sword, now.’ Merix lifted his hands, to show that he was
weaponless, to whoever might be watching. ‘Hail, Ramos – Bull of the Eighth. We
greet you, brother,’ he called out.

‘Merix,’ the Noise Marine growled, stepping beneath a swooping arch of wraithbone. 
The substance quivered in time to his voice. Merix had heard him coming, the moment 
they’d entered the garden. ‘Why do you interrupt my labours, brother?’

‘I wish you to meet someone,’ Merix said, indicating Alkenex. ‘Prefect Flavius 
Alkenex, Equerry to the Lord Commander Primus.’

The hulking Noise Marine laughed – a growling, guttural sound that made the 
connector nodes of Merix’s prosthetics tighten painfully. ‘Eidolon. I thought we had 
drawn near Harmony. The ghost-sounds of its death danced among the branches of our 
grove, for some time.’ Ramos studied Alkenex with a single, bloodshot eye. ‘And what 
do you want, Equerry to the Lord Commander Primus?’

‘Merely to speak with you, Bull of the Eighth. They sing your praises, among the 
choirs of the Kakophoni. You cracked the Lunar Gate with a single scream, and speared 
the heart of the Titan, Albia’s Hand, with your song.’ He looked around. ‘The Chief 
Apothecary does not treat you with the respect you deserve, brother.’

Ramos grunted and the sound thrummed through the air. Wraithbone crunched as 
more Noise Marines appeared, slipping through the artificial forest like shadows. Merix 
could feel the subsonic pulses of their communication on the air. There were barely 
more than twenty of them left since Lugganath. A small choir, by some estimations. But 
Merix knew that these twenty could split the Vesalius open from the inside out with but 
a single note.

And whether he knew it or not, Alkenex needed them. Ramos and his brothers were 
the key to the wraithbone network that permeated the ship. They had sung it into being, 
and only by their song did it flourish. Without them, it would wither and die, and 
perhaps take the Vesalius and all those aboard with it.

But that mastery had not come without cost. Knots and whorls of wraithbone grew 
through and across their altered forms. They had spent so long in the garden that many 
of them were becoming one with it, in some impossible manner. Even Ramos was 
encrusted with barnacles of the stuff.

The Noise Marine laughed again. ‘And what would you know of respect, hound of 
Eidolon? We are but weapons to you, and your master.’

‘You are Legion. And the Legion is a weapon.’

‘We have not been Legion for a long time, prefect. We are something more, now, and 
our concerns are greater than bloodshed. War is a child’s song. We sing of greater 
things, and are sung to, and with every note the song grows ever more perfect. What can 
you offer us, equal to that?’

Alkenex seemed at a loss for words. Merix interposed himself. ‘We could free you 
from this cage. Or at least increase its size. How perfect might your song become, if we 
were to give you a ship to yourself, rather than one isolated bay? Or even a world?
Imagine how glorious your garden might grow, then.’

‘And how do you know that he has not offered us one?’ Ramos took a step towards them, gauntlets flexing. Merix tensed as a sonic pressure clutched at him. He felt Alkenex stiffen, and hoped the prefect would be wiser than to go for his sword. Ramos and his choir could kill them with insultingly little effort.

‘Has he?’ Merix asked.

‘We know what you want, prefect,’ Ramos continued, as if he hadn’t spoken. ‘We have heard the whispers of your plotting, through the wraithbone. You want the ship. But we are the ship. And we do not care who struts upon the command deck, issuing useless orders. The *Vesalius* goes where it wills, and our song continues uninterrupted. The Chief Apothecary knows this. And so he does not waste time assuring himself of our loyalty. We are loyal only to the song. Only to the singer. We–’ He hesitated, falling silent.

As one, the Noise Marines turned, their heads cocked like those of attentive hounds. They stared silently towards the heart of the garden, as if listening to some voice that only they could hear. Then, in unison, they stepped aside. Ramos gestured. ‘The singer would see you.’ The thick branches of wraithbone rustled and twisted aside, moving like a living thing, revealing a narrow path through the pallid forest.

Silently, Merix led Alkenex into the still heart of the garden. The singer was waiting for them, sitting cross-legged amid billowing folds of wraithbone. It did not look at them as they drew close, for which Merix was glad. Tendrils of wraithbone had inserted themselves into the creature’s bare flesh, and they ran along its arms and legs like thin roots, connecting it to the wider garden. It was the living brain of the garden, the singer of the song.

‘What is it?’ Alkenex hissed, one hand on his sword.

‘He calls it Key.’ Merix eyed the seated figure warily. ‘A prisoner, once. Now it is a tool. Though I am not certain just what its function is. It’s one of the reasons why I thought you should see this place. It might prove of some use.’

‘Better, I think, to kill it,’ Alkenex said. He made to draw his sword, but froze as a soft, sibilant laughter gusted through the wraithbone thicket around them. The two renegades turned, seeking the source of the sound. Shadows danced and capered amid the branches, indistinct and unnatural. They were being watched. ‘What are they – Neverborn?’

Merix shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’ But he did. Beautiful faces, twisted into expressions of serene malice, watched him through the branches. Their black eyes, as deep and as empty as the void, met his own, and he looked away. The ache pounded at his thoughts. His hand twitched of its own volition.

Alkenex took a step towards Key. The eldar turned its blind eyes towards him, but made no move to rise or defend itself. The shadows fell silent, save for a soft whispering. The wraithbone seemed to flex in anticipation. Watching it, and the creature
that controlled it, Merix suddenly realised that he’d made a mistake, bringing Alkenex here. This place was not his secret to share. And there were some places on this ship that would never belong to them, however they might scheme.

Neverborn crowded about him, whispering, laughing, their phantasmal talons digging into his wounds. Prodding him to speak. ‘We should go,’ he said. Key tilted its head, and he caught Alkenex’s arm. ‘Now.’

Alkenex glanced at him, as if to chastise him. But he simply nodded. ‘Yes. We will return later, and burn this filth. We will purge the ship of it, and all xenos influence, save that which we keep for our own entertainment.’

Key smiled at this, the first expression Merix had ever seen on its face. He kept hold of Alkenex and gestured for him to be silent. Eyeless the thing was, but it could clearly still hear. Key opened its mouth and something like the trill of a bird emerged. The sound reverberated on the air, and the wraithbone began to sway and undulate.

The two legionaries slowly retreated back the way they had come, passing warily through the swaying garden and the eerily silent ranks of Noise Marines, past the squalling ape-things and out into the dubious safety of the corridors beyond. Alkenex stared at the hatchway as it cycled closed and said, ‘We might have to destroy this ship, afterwards. When things are settled.’

Merix nodded, trying not to look at the thousands of roots of wraithbone that extended beneath the skin of the internal hull all around them. ‘That might be for the best.’

In the training bay, Igori moved, enjoying the dull ache in her muscles. She leapt over the combat-servitor, boosting herself over its hunched frame and landing behind it in a crouch. Even as her boots touched the deck, her knife was in her hand and she was launching herself at the nest of power cables that bunched beneath the plates of the servitor’s armour.

The machine-slave reacted more quickly than she’d hoped, spinning its top half around to meet her. Chainblades and electro-lashes darted to intercept her, and she was forced to drop. Instinctively, she scrambled beneath its jointed, insect-like legs. Her knife slashed out, chopping through the power supply to its gyroscopic motivator. The servitor juddered as it registered the damage. It could no longer rotate its upper body, and it began the laborious process of turning itself about to pursue her.

As it made to turn, she leapt for its chassis. She speedily clambered up its heaving shape, slicing through cables and pneumatic pumps as she moved. She rolled aside, barely holding onto it, as a chainblade slashed through the space where her head had been. She caught the piston-like limb attached to the blade and drove her boot into the joint, momentarily dislodging it. The chainblade stuttered, frozen in position. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of someone entering the chamber. She smiled.

Deftly, she cut through hoses and cables, further disabling the machine. Its arms waved helplessly as she caught hold of the nest of cortical conduits and jerked its head
back. The red eyes glared up at her dumbly. If the machine-slave could feel fear, she
couldn’t tell. She hoped so. It was no good killing something that couldn’t comprehend
its own mortality. Spinning the knife about, she chopped down at the reinforced spinal
strut, severing it with two blows. Sparks spewed upwards, stinging her lips and cheeks.
Bracing herself, she tore the head free of the chassis and flung it aside. Oil stained her
arms and hands as the machine-slave shuddered in its death-throes. Panting slightly, she
allowed herself a small smile. It was good to know that she was still strong. Even better
that there had been an audience to that display of strength. She dropped to the deck.
‘You may speak now, if you wish.’
‘You are skilled,’ Savona said, as she stepped forward. She smelled of strange places
and unnatural acts, like many of the Emperor’s Children.
But she was not one of them, no matter how much she aped them. She was something
else. Igori had not yet decided whether that meant she wasn’t prey, like them, or just a
different sort of quarry. ‘Why are you here?’
‘It is rare that we get to speak,’ Savona drawled, setting her hoof on the servitor’s
sparking skull. ‘Rarer still that one of us wishes to do so.’
Igori eyed her warily. ‘What do you want?’
‘A respectful tone would be nice.’
Igori flipped her knife up and sheathed it. ‘That I have not killed you is respect
enough, I think. Talk.’
Savona smiled. ‘Tried to kill me, you mean. Tried.’
Igori shrugged and crossed her arms. ‘Talk.’
Savona stepped back and kicked the servitor’s head across the deck. ‘I heard that your
dogs sent one of Alkenex’s spies running, with teeth marks in his ceramite. Is this true?’
Igori frowned. ‘Yes. He should not have disturbed us.’
‘They will be back, and in force. If not immediately, then later. When the Manflayer
cannot protect you.’ Savona swung her maul down and planted the head against the
deck. She leaned forward on the haft. ‘They do not like you very much.’
‘Predators do not concern themselves with the opinions of prey.’ A flicker of
movement above caught her eye. The Twins. They had been watching from the high
places, as they always did. Watching Igori, waiting for her to show some sign of
weakness, so that they might challenge her and take command of the pack as they had
been born to do.
Savona laughed. ‘Oh, very good. Did he teach you that?’
‘The Benefactor has taught us much. But there are some things we have learned for
ourselves.’ Igori rested her palm on the hilt of her knife. ‘Like not to trust those altered
by the warp.’ She signalled Maysha and Mayshana with a glance, and they rose, ready
to act.
Savona nodded. ‘A good lesson. But you do not have to trust me to listen to what I
have to say. You have enemies. Your Benefactor has enemies. They are on this ship and
they will seek to do him – and you – harm. But you also have allies.’ She touched her chest-plate. ‘Myself, for instance.’

Igori kept her features neutral. ‘Why?’

‘Because those who move against you will also move against me, in time. I am not Legion, and they will seek to purge me from my position. But they will come for you first. Already, Alkenex seeks to subvert your Benefactor in the eyes of some. He has even visited Diomat, in his silent cage, though the Dreadnought ignored him, as he ignores everyone who is not the Chief Apothecary.’

‘And so? What is this to me?’

‘I am trying to warn you. To propose an alliance against a common foe.’ Savona gestured, as if bemused. ‘Surely even you understand that.’

‘Why come to me?’ Igori pressed.

‘We are two of a kind,’ Savona said.

Igori shrugged. ‘We are nothing alike.’

Savona smirked. ‘But we are on the same side.’

Igori stretched. ‘No, we are not.’

Visibly annoyed now, Savona leaned forward. ‘I need to speak to him.’

Ah. There it was. Savona needed her, not as an ally, but as a go-between. ‘So go.’

‘Your kin guard the way. No one gets through, without permission.’

Igori smiled. ‘Do you have permission?’

‘No.’

‘Then you cannot speak to him.’

Savona bared her fangs. ‘I could fight my way through, if I wished. Is that what you want?’ She lifted her maul, her thumb caressing the switch that would activate the power field. ‘Are you so arrogant that you can casually dismiss me?’

Igori’s smile faded. ‘You are all alike. Prey that thinks itself a predator. Soft things, wrapped in hard shells. We eat you, the way you eat mutants.’ She bared her strong, even teeth. ‘And yet you never understand until it is too late. You think we are weak, because we are not so strong as you. But the bovid is stronger than the lupines that hunt it. Is the lupine weak, then?’

‘ Compared to me? Yes.’ Savona pointed her maul at Igori. ‘If you think you are strong enough to deny me, come ahead.’

Igori whistled.

Savona spun as she registered the soft scrape of feet on the deck. The Twins lunged for her, one high, one low.

Maysha let his sister lead the dance, as was his way. Mayshana swept her blade down, forcing Savona to block it, before vaulting away from the riposte. Maysha seized the opening when it was offered, and his blade came closer still, scraping paint from Savona’s chest-plate. She snarled and kicked out at him, nearly taking his head off with a hoof.
Igori watched the duel carefully, analysing Savona’s movements for weakness. All prey had a weak point. Some were arrogant. Others were stupid. A few were cunning. Most were a mix of all three. They thought their armour and strength made them invincible. But the Gland-hounds had learned how to turn invincibility on its head. Isolate and overwhelm. Bait and trap. Simple tricks, for simple hunters.

Savona was quicker than most. More observant. But that would not save her. The Twins’ knives scratched and scored her stolen battleplate again and again, never deeply and never for long, but enough to make the point.

The power maul crackled as it punched through the air. One touch, and their flesh would blacken and crumble from the bone. So the Twins made sure to avoid its touch. They leapt and rolled, moving like acrobats. It was the eldar in them, Igori thought. That extra twist in their genetic makeup, giving them greater agility than their predecessors possessed. The Twins were faster than she had ever imagined being, and she could not help but feel a twinge of envy at their grace.

With every generation, the Gland-hounds drew further from the template. They were refined and perfected by the hands of the Benefactor, century by century. And soon, they would be complete. Soon, he would step back from them and set down his knives, so that they might take up their own.

Igori did not think she would live to see that day, whatever the Benefactor said. It seemed too far off, unreal and inconceivable. She pushed the thought aside. She was old, but she had a few centuries yet.

Savona’s power maul slammed down, crumpling a deck plate. Maysha vaulted away, laughing. Savona started after him, her hand falling to the bolt pistol on her hip. Igori drew her knife and sprang. Her long arms wrapped around Savona’s neck, even as her legs scissored about her middle, pinning the renegade’s arms. She pressed the edge of her knife to the underside of Savona’s throat.

‘You’re dead,’ she whispered. ‘As simple as that.’

Savona froze.

‘He made us to hunt your kind.’ She spoke softly into Savona’s ear. ‘To pry you open and fetch him the prize within. That was our purpose, and now, it is our joy.’ She nuzzled the woman’s cheek, inhaling her scent, enjoying the smell of her growing agitation. ‘It is the dearest ritual of our people, the cracking of ceramite and the cutting of the black carapace. You are our sacrificial animals, and we offer you up to him.’ Igori pressed the knife slightly, drawing a thin trickle of ichor from her captive’s flesh. ‘You are stronger than us, but we are many and our numbers swell. Soon, we will hunt the last of you, and that will be a day filled with sadness and rejoicing, for we will have fulfilled one purpose, and become free to find a new one. If you wish to see that day, you will deactivate your weapon, and drop it.’

Savona hesitated. Then, did as she was bidden. The weapon fell with a thump. ‘Now what?’ she asked.
‘Now, we take you to the Benefactor. You wished to see him, yes?’
‘Yes.’
Igori slid off her. She wiped a line of ichor off of the blade and licked it from her finger. She smiled as Savona retrieved her maul.
‘Next time, you will ask more politely, I think.’
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RENEGADES

The combat-servitor staggered, shuddered and, finally, slumped, leaking its noxious fluids all over the deck. Arrian’s blow had nearly severed its head from its reinforced neck. This model had been an ugly thing, all jointed legs and bladed limbs – a withered human head, set into the shell of some great insect. It had come no closer to hurting him than any of the others he’d faced since his arrival.

Behind him, the doors hissed open. Someone entered the chamber. He ignored them and looked around. Whoever they were, they would make their purpose known soon enough. Broken, twitching mechanical bodies lay scattered around the training chamber. He’d dispatched more than a dozen of the machine-slaves, and would see to their repair later. They were not in such ready supply that they could afford to be discarded. Besides which, they learned from every encounter. Repaired and rearmed, they might prove a bit more of a challenge next time. Or not.

‘Clean it up,’ Arrian said, as he slid his gauntlet along the edge of his blade, cleaning it of oil and effluvia. Vatborn hurried to clean up the mess, grunting softly to one another. There were more of them than he was used to. More and more of them every time, and he wondered which generation this was. The hundredth? Two hundredth? Impossible to tell, without dissection.

‘An impressive display, World Eater.’

Arrian turned, smearing oily handprints across the flat planes of his battleplate. ‘Is it my turn, then?’

Alkenex smiled. Like Arrian, he wasn’t wearing his helmet. There was a faint resemblance between them. Two of a type, gone down similar paths of hardship. Handsome faces, reduced to battered acceptability. That was as far as the resemblance went, however. ‘Your turn for what? I merely wished to speak to you, one legionary to
another.'

Arrian snorted. ‘And yet you have not spoken to Saqqara or Khorag.’

‘I do not speak to slaves or monsters.’

‘I am flattered. Most would consider me one or the other.’

‘I do not know what you are yet. That is why I am here.’

‘To test me. To probe my loyalties.’ Arrian spun his blade. The other still rested in its sheath on his hip. ‘As you have done for many, these past few weeks of travel. Quietly, but surely. You are a man of contemplative means, prefect. You take your time.’

Alkenex nodded. ‘Binding two armies together is never a simple thing.’

‘Is that why you’ve encouraged so many honour duels, among the more foolish members of the Twelfth Millennial? I have been called to collect gene-seed more than once.’

Alkenex smiled faintly. ‘That is part of your function.’

‘Curious, how in every case, it was not one of your warriors who’d suffered a mortal blow. In fact, to date, none of your warriors have suffered so much as a scratch.’ Arrian grinned. ‘Save that one who tried to bully his way through Igori’s pack.’

‘My warriors are veterans. The Twelfth Millennial are sadly out of condition. Fabius indulges them overmuch, keeping them sated and lazy, rather than hungry.’ Alkenex tapped the pommel of his sword. ‘I will have them in fighting trim before we reach our destination, one way or another.’

‘And does that include us, as well?’ Arrian fell smoothly into a practice stance, blade held at a sharp angle. He moved in a loose circle, blade slicing the air.

‘It may. Fabius was never one for the battlefield. But his Consortium…?’

‘We were all Apothecaries, prefect. We all fought.’

‘But not as part of a battle-group. Not for some time.’ Alkenex watched him.

‘Is that why you are here then? To test my skill?’

‘If you like. It is common, in certain circles, to ask what one did at Terra. A test of resolve, and a question of character. The answer one gives speaks volumes.’ Alkenex drew his sword and flourished it. ‘So… what did you do at Terra, Arrian Zorzi?’

‘I went into the forest to pray,’ Arrian said. ‘And then I killed my brothers.’

Ha! You say it so simply, dog-brother. You killed us and took our skulls, one by one. Briaeus’ voice was a quiet rumble of discontent. Where the others murmured, he rasped and roared. Arrian tapped his skull to calm him.

Alkenex gestured to the skulls. ‘Those brothers?’

‘No. They came later.’

‘What did you pray about?’

‘That I might hold fast to my faith, even as nail after nail was hammered into my mind, my soul. An old faith. A simple faith. Not in god, but in man. In myself.’ He reversed the blade in his hand, moving swiftly. ‘In the heat of battle, I keep my mind. Nothing shall ruffle the equanimity of my spirit. I will not sheathe my blade, still wet. I
will not move, until it is time.’ He turned, slow now, but somehow still swift.

Alkenex mimicked him, copying his languid movements. One blade, rather than two, but with a similar grace. ‘In danger of death, he maintains his composure,’ he said. ‘I, too, have read that book, war hound. All of us have.’

‘And yet, so few of you understand it, even now.’

‘I was there, you know. When Fulgrim killed the last of them.’ He laughed softly. ‘The Sabazian Brotherhood – duellists and agitators on a backwater world. And yet, somehow, they wounded us. A wound that still bleeds, even now.’ He turned, sword flashing. Arrian circled him. They fought slowly, their blades never touching. It took skill to fight without fighting.

‘The deepest wounds always do,’ Arrian said.

‘You are wise, for a dog.’

Arrian felt a spark of anger, but forced it down. ‘And you are trying to provoke me. Do you yearn for a true duel, swordsman? Your kind love their duels. Their meaningless contests of honour and skill.’

‘What is honour to the butcher?’

‘Nothing. Less than nothing.’ Arrian turned, more swiftly now. The Nails squirmed, stirred by his rhythms. He breathed easily, forcing himself to remain calm. That was always the hardest part. The Nails acted on biorhythmic stimuli – grow stressed, angry, agitated, and they bit. Remain calm, and the ever-present pain was nothing more than a dull ache. ‘What is honour to you, swordsman?’

‘This.’ Alkenex stepped back and held up his sword so that Arrian could see the streamers of silk hanging from the pommel. ‘These tatters are all that remain of my honour,’ he said. ‘The last gasp of better days. I rescued the shreds of our Millennial banner from the mud of Terra, after my brothers had cast it aside and trampled it in their haste to butcher the squalling inhabitants of a hab-block.’ He laughed. ‘What need had we of banners of mere silk, when there was innocent flesh to be flayed and stretched across our banner poles?’

‘Flesh rots,’ Arrian said.

‘As does silk. Honour is fleeting, as is pleasure. Pain, as well. Existence is but a collection of endings, one piling atop the next.’ He spun the blade and pointed it at the World Eater. ‘But every ending is at once a door and its key. All leading to the next beginning.’

‘Is that why we are on this journey, then? In search of yet another beginning?’ The Chief Apothecary had not told him in so many words what the object of their quest was, but he had some idea of what it must be, given the situation. That Fabius had not deigned to share that information with him was something of an annoyance. Then, perhaps the Chief Apothecary simply trusted him to figure it out on his own.

‘You disapprove?’

Arrian laughed softly. ‘You speak of beginnings and endings, as if this were not still
the same old story, played out across the same stars. The story begun at Ullanor, at Isstvan, has not yet ended. It will never end, while we live and fight.’

Alkenex frowned. ‘Is that what you truly think?’

‘We call it the Long War for a reason, brother.’ Arrian sheathed his blades without flourish. ‘It will all end in fire, but not soon. And we may not be here to see it.’

Alkenex did not sheathe his own blade. He stared at his reflection, stretched along the gleaming length. ‘You sound like Fabius.’

‘He is wise, in his generation.’

Alkenex’s frown deepened. ‘He is a fool. He has always been a fool. Where others see beauty, he sees only ugliness. Where we see a better way, he sees only wasted potential. His attentions are fixed firmly on the ground, while we seek to reach the stars above.’

He lifted his sword. ‘And if you spend too much time with him, he drags you down with him.’

Arrian smiled. ‘I have always been more comfortable in the mud, than among the stars. A flaw in the gene-seed, I suspect.’ His smile faded. ‘But I do not think you came here to speak of such things, prefect. I think you came with a question.’

‘I did. And you have answered it.’ Alkenex sheathed his blade. ‘It was not the answer I wished, but the one I expected.’ He looked at Arrian. ‘I was not at Skalathrax.’

‘Nor was I.’

Alkenex hesitated. ‘Many among my brothers have spoken dismissively of the Eaters of Worlds, but I have never held to that view, whatever you might believe. I think, maybe, in another world, in another time, we might have been friends, Arrian Zorzi.’

‘And I think we can but make do with the world we have, Flavius Alkenex.’

Alkenex nodded and turned to go. As he did so, he called out, ‘Words to remember, come what may.’

Arrian watched him leave. He sighed, and tried to ignore the laughter of the dead, as he wondered whether he or Alkenex would join their number first.

Merix met the renegade on neutral ground.

An unused flight deck, covered in the detritus of a forgotten conflict – the shattered hulks of fighters and escorts rising from the cold mist that billowed out of the ventilation shafts. The environmental controls for the hangar had been rerouted to other, more important areas, leaving the deck a frosty necropolis of mostly forgotten war machines. Frost crept across Merix’s armour, and the deck crunched softly beneath his tread, as he strode through the graveyard of voidcraft.

Mutants, swaddled in thick, insulated environmental suits and patchwork void-armour, worked to salvage what they could from several of the junked fighter craft. They ceased their efforts and scattered at his approach, quick and quiet as shadows. Evangelos, stalking in his wake, growled at the creatures as they fled. The lupine mutant shadowed his master closely, as always, clutching its autogun to its chest. Evangelos grunted and
looked at its master, its yellow eyes gleaming in the dim light.

‘I agree. Filthy beasts,’ Merix murmured, watching the other mutants vanish into the darkness. Unlike faithful Evangelos, they were nothing more than scavengers.

‘They’re not so bad, once you get used to the taste.’

He looked up. Skalagrim crouched on the hull of a nearby craft, his axe cradled in the crook of his arm, his head bare. ‘The secret is in the temperature the meat is cooked at – too hot, you sear away all flavour. Too low, and all you can taste is the diseases they carry. Moderation is the key.’ The renegade slipped from his perch, and landed with a deck-shaking thud. Evangelos made to interpose itself, lupine jaws wide, but Merix stopped his servant with a gesture. Skalagrim grinned. ‘Then, I suspect that you did not request this meeting in order to talk about how best to cook mutant flesh.’

‘I did not, but thank you for the advice.’

‘That one behind you would make a fine meal,’ Skalagrim pressed, indicating Evangelos. ‘And a finer coat, hairy as he is.’ The lupine mutant snarled and reached for its blade. Merix turned and gestured sharply.

‘Leave us.’ Evangelos whined. The creature was loyal to a fault, dull-witted as it was. It would not think twice about hurling itself into death, on his behalf. And such loyalty was not to be wasted on a fool like Skalagrim. Merix stared at the beast, until it acquiesced and slunk off, casting sullen glances at Skalagrim as it did so. Merix turned back to Skalagrim.

‘Touch my serf without my permission and you will have more to worry about than Abaddon, Twice-Damned. This I promise you.’

Skalagrim snorted. ‘There’s plenty more where that one came from.’

‘Yes, but that one is mine, and I do not wish to see him harmed.’

‘You treat your slaves well, for one of Fulgrim’s lot.’

‘Yes, well, you would know all about slavery, wouldn’t you?’

Skalagrim’s eyes narrowed. ‘Why did you want to see me, Merix? Why all the secrecy? We could have met somewhere more convivial than this frozen antechamber of hell.’ His breath plumed as he spoke, and Merix noted the rime-encrusted tangles in his beard and hair. He wondered how long the renegade had been waiting for him.

‘True, but this is one of the few places on this ship not infested with either wraithbone, or the Chief Apothecary’s scuttling vatborn servants. It is private.’

‘Ah. As I thought. You want to escape his ever-watchful gaze, eh?’ Skalagrim laughed. ‘Well, fine. Speak away, then. Let us be at it, before the cold causes that hand of yours to snap off.’

‘The Chief Apothecary… he treats you poorly. As he treats us.’ Merix flexed his hand, and studied the other legionary. Skalagrim reeked of bitterness. Of stifled ego and ambition turned sour. It was a familiar odour. ‘But what is to be done about it?’

Skalagrim grinned and looked at him, his eyes like chips of obsidian. ‘A rhetorical question, I assume. Otherwise we would not be having this conversation.’
‘Consider it an exercise in possibility.’

Skalagrim gave a bark of laughter. ‘Oh, very good, Merix. I knew there was a spark of ambition in that crumbling husk of yours. Thinking of picking up where Thalopsis left off, are you? I wish you luck, in that, given Savona’s continued survival.’

‘I need more than luck. I need an Apothecary.’ Merix clenched his prosthetic. Skalagrim winced at the shrill creak of ancient mechanisms. ‘*We* need an Apothecary, rather.’

‘We?’ Skalagrim frowned. ‘You and Savona – no. No, not Savona.’ His eyes widened. ‘Alkenex?’

‘As I said, an exercise in possibility.’

‘And Alkenex isn’t the sort to take much initiative, so… Eidolon. Interesting.’ Skalagrim scratched at his tangled beard. ‘And what does the Lord Commander Primus want of me? I am not of the Third Legion, after all.’

‘But you are a legionary. And not you, necessarily. Any fleshcrafter will do. But one familiar with the Chief Apothecary’s methods would be preferable.’ Merix would have smiled, if his facial muscles still functioned correctly. He could hear the interest in Skalagrim’s voice.

‘His methods, eh? Which ones, in particular?’

‘Gene-seed recovery and preparation.’

Skalagrim grunted. ‘He’s taught me that much, aye. And I learned more on my own, beyond what I already knew, as an officer of the apothecarion. We learned to make do, after the retreat from Terra. Why?’

‘That is not a question you have the privilege of asking, at the moment.’

Skalagrim laughed. ‘So, I am to trade one master for another – is that it?’

‘Why break the habit of a lifetime?’

Merix could almost see the wheels turning in Skalagrim’s head. The renegade was a born schemer, and he might already know what they were after. Or at least have a suspicion. ‘What do I get out of this?’ Skalagrim asked. ‘What is my reward?’

‘Protection.’

‘I already have that.’

‘You have the protection of one as hated as yourself. We can give a mightier shield to crouch behind. Eidolon himself will welcome you into our Legion – allow you to take our colours, even, and serve in the apothecarion of the Third. No one will dare touch you then.’

‘Abaddon might.’

‘Eidolon is Abaddon’s ally. And in all honesty, do you think the Warmaster cares about you?’ Merix laughed. ‘You’re nothing but a footnote in the history of your Legion. The nameless traitor who held open the door for their enemies. If it hadn’t been you, it would have been someone else.’

Skalagrim stared at him. For a moment, Merix wondered if he’d pushed him too far.
Skalagrim was only a coward in the moral sense. He’d happily butcher any number of foes, face-to-face, if the mood struck him. Then, the Apothecary nodded. ‘There may be something in what you say.’ He smiled. It was not a pleasant expression. More like a wolf baring its teeth. ‘What is required of me, beyond my skills at the harvest?’

Merix paused, studying the scarred, hairy features. ‘You will kill him.’
Skalagrim hesitated. ‘He can’t be killed.’
‘You will kill his body. When he’s distracted, put him down.’
Skalagrim grunted. ‘No easy task, even with surprise on my side.’
‘You will have help.’
‘Even then…’
‘Either you have the courage, or you don’t. Decide.’ Merix spoke forcefully.
Skalagrim was in no position to bargain, but that didn’t stop him trying. Apothecaries were possessed of a particularly stubborn streak, even among the warriors of the Legions. Becoming used to denying death with such regularity had a regrettable effect on most of them, in Merix’s opinion. They thought they could spit into the teeth of the gods and get away with it. Pale faces clustered like new-bloomed flowers at the edges of his vision. The Neverborn whispered encouragingly to him, urging him to strike Skalagrim down, to show the wolf his place. He ignored them.

Skalagrim smirked. ‘Fine. Let us say, for the moment, that I will bury my axe in his brain pan…’
‘Not his head,’ Merix said, quickly.
‘Ah. Clever. Waste not, want not, eh? You have picked up some lessons from him. Fine, I will kill him and devour his brain. I doubt that will be the end of him. He has other methods of transferring his consciousness, these days. Soon enough, he’ll pop up somewhere else to bedevil us.’
‘Which is why we will tame the war hound, and bend him to our cause. While you dispatch him, we will find Bile’s secret caches aboard this ship and destroy them.’
Merix closed the artificial fingers of his false hand into a fist.
‘And then I will paint my battleplate purple and we will march happily into the future, eh?’ Skalagrim snorted. ‘A fine plan. You will have to kill Arrian. And Khorag. And the Gland-hounds.’
‘Yes.’ Merix felt a flicker of unease at the mention of the Gland-hounds. The augmented humans were more dangerous than Alkenex admitted, and they outnumbered the Emperor’s Children four to one, at least. But there was no reason to let Skalagrim see his worry. ‘Plans have already been made, and discussed at length.’
‘And we all know how you Emperor’s Children love your plans.’ Skalagrim nodded. ‘Fine.’ He smiled. ‘Let us hope Fulgrim is a more satisfactory master than Horus ever was.’

The transit tunnel had once been one of the hundreds that was used to ferry ammunition
from the Vesalius’ factorium to the gunnery decks. Now, it was an isolated stretch of ill-lit, steam-choked corridor, isolated by reinforced bulkheads and sentry-servitors, waiting in their alcoves. The machine-slaves were little more than oscillating gun platforms no larger than a dog, hunchbacked with ammunition hoppers, and supported on jointed spider-legs. Periodic sensor sweeps, keyed to certain genetic markers, fed back data to the servitors. Anything outside those genetic parameters was gunned down with brutal efficiency.

Fabius strode along the tunnel, whistling tunelessly. Despite everything, his mood was good. They had passed through the last of the webway portals without incident, and were now nearing the edges of the Maelstrom. Once they had successfully navigated its unnatural currents, they would pass safely into real space, and be one step closer to their goal.

As he sidestepped one of the sentry-servitors, he wondered whether any of them would live to see it. Things were coming quickly to a head. Alkenex was gathering his supporters, and probing for weakness. But like Fabius, he was patient. If it had been any other scion of the Third, they would have already struck the first blow. But Flavius was a perfectionist. He would wait until the ideal moment, when his triumph was assured, as well as undeniable, and strike.

Like the Harlequins, with their narrative obsessions, that was a weakness to be exploited. So long as Alkenex was left uncertain, he would stay his hand. Keep him off balance long enough, and he might hesitate until it was too late. Then, they would have him. ‘Or I am wrong and I will pay the price,’ Fabius murmured.

Behind him, metal creaked. He paused, but only for a moment. Whatever was behind him had somehow avoided the sentry-servitors. He spun, Torment sliding up and out for a clubbing blow. He pulled the blow at the last moment, recognising the shape as it loomed out of the steam. A tall shape, clad in an environmental suit that strained to contain it.

Fulgrim jerked back, eyes wide, as Torment came to a halt just before his face. The sceptre strained in Fabius’ grip, like a hound at its leash. ‘What are you doing here?’ Fabius hissed, his previous good humour evaporating swiftly. That the primarch had managed to slip up on him so noiselessly was another sign that he was approaching full maturation. ‘More to the point – how did you come here?’

‘I wanted to know where you were going.’

‘You followed me,’ Fabius said, lowering Torment.

Fulgrim nodded hesitantly. ‘I was curious.’

‘I told you that you were not to leave the laboratorium.’

Fulgrim said nothing. Fabius grunted and looked away. Anywhere but at the clone. At Fulgrim. For it – he – was Fulgrim now. Fulgrim as Fabius remembered him. Taller than any mortal being, and perfect in every way. Beautiful, in that way that his sons had so desperately aped, and still did. Of all the Emperor’s sons, only two had been called
beautiful. But Sanguinius’ beauty had been alien. Inhuman. A thing wrought from humanity’s dreams.

Fulgrim, on the other hand, was humanity personified. The apex and aleph of human. The canon of proportions, in the flesh. Vitruvius Ascended. It was painful to look upon, as if Fabius had been trapped in the dark for years, and was only just now seeing the light. He rubbed his face, suddenly tired and very, very aware of the frailties and imperfections of his own form, rejuvenated as it was. Everything was beginning to hurt.

‘Are you well, teacher?’ Fulgrim asked. His voice had deepened. Become something at once familiar and painful. ‘Do you need aid?’

‘More than you can give,’ Fabius said. He took a steadying breath. Turned. ‘Don’t change the subject. You disobeyed me.’

‘I was curious. We are on a ship. Gladius class. It… sings to me.’ He touched the sides of the corridor easily, almost caressing the rust-streaked metal. Something – a sound – echoed dimly through the tunnel. A low reverberation, cast up from some deep place within the bowels of the frigate. As if in reply to the clone’s comment.

Fabius cast about with a wary eye. An unsettling thought. He had long resigned himself to the fact that whatever dark spirit empowered his vessel was there to stay. So long as it was content to keep to itself, he cared little. ‘Do not listen to it,’ he said firmly. ‘Such things are not to be trusted.’

‘But you trust it to carry us.’

‘Yes, but I don’t talk to it,’ Fabius said, in exasperation. ‘Do not argue. Obey.’

Fulgrim frowned. A hint of that old, familiar petulance. ‘I am bored.’

Perilous words. Even before his leap into damnation, a bored Fulgrim had been a dangerous Fulgrim. ‘I will bring you more books.’

‘I grow tired of reading. The apothecarium feels cramped. I wish to walk. To see. There are strange things here, in these hollows of steel and steam. They fled from me, but I would find them.’ He looked at Fabius, his expression uncertain. ‘Why are they afraid?’

‘Because they have sense. Unlike you.’

Fulgrim flinched. Fabius hesitated, uncertain now, for the first time in a long time. How did he proceed from here? ‘Go back,’ he said.

‘Why can I not go with you?’

‘Because I have matters to attend to, and you would be a distraction.’

‘I would not. I only wish to see.’ More petulance. Almost a command. Fabius felt the old flicker of subservience within himself. The need to please his gene-father, to obey his every whim and order. Fulgrim, more than his brothers, had commanded complete obedience. Some twist in the helix had chained his sons more tightly to him. It was why so many of them had so eagerly followed him off of the edge of the cliff. An unnatural charisma. People wanted to please Fulgrim. To make him happy. That was why he had worked so well with the mortal adherents of the Great Crusade… millions had hurled
themselves into death, in order to provide the Illuminator with a road to victory.

But Fabius was not a mortal. And he was older now, and this was not Fulgrim. Not really. No matter what his blood whispered, or his senses told him. ‘Go back,’ he said again. Then, after a moment, he added, ‘But take your time. You may explore if you wish. Provided no one sees you.’

Fulgrim’s smile lit the dark. ‘I will be a shadow, teacher. Inconspicuous and unseen.’ He stepped back, making barely any noise on the walkway. A moment later, he was gone, moving soundlessly through the steam.

Fabius snorted and turned away. ‘Not on your best day could you be inconspicuous.’ Despite his amusement, he was troubled. Fulgrim was becoming more independent. More capable. In the weeks since they’d left Harmony, the clone had grown from an infant to a young man – a young primarch. Soon, he would begin to do what primarchs did, and seek to control the world around him.

*Control...*

The echoes of his thought bounced ahead of him down the corridor. As he advanced through the steam, indistinct shapes seemed to retreat before him. More intruders? Or merely figments of paranoia? Neither was a pleasant prospect. ‘If you wish to speak, speak. But I have no time for your cryptic whispers.’

Silence. He shook his head. ‘As I thought,’ he muttered. He pushed the thought aside as he reached his destination. The hatchway sat at the tunnel’s midpoint, protected by a crackling defence field. The field flickered and thinned as Fabius stepped through it. The field responded to a signal emitted by his battleplate. Only the members of his Consortium – and Igori – possessed similar emitters. And of them, only Arrian and Igori knew of this place. The hatch hissed open, accompanied by a billowing cloud of cold mist.

As Fabius entered the chamber beyond, frost crawled across the stretched faces of his flesh-coat and the plates of his armour. The chamber was a box of repurposed metal – an artificial cyst, constructed to his specifications. A backup laboratorium, it was small and sparsely equipped. Only the bare necessities, including a single bio-mechanical womb. Within it, a familiar form floated in a nutrient-bath of his own devising – one of several clones he kept aboard the *Vesalius*. His armour’s systems synched with those of the laboratorium, and hololithic data-feeds sprang into view around him.

‘Well?’ he said, after a moment of perusing the feeds. ‘Are you going to say anything, or are you going to remain in a sulk for the duration?’ He glanced at the chamber’s only occupant, sitting silently in a corner, watching him.

Savona spat and glared. ‘I have been here for twelve hours.’

‘And?’

‘I could not get out.’ She rose to her feet. ‘You trapped me here for twelve hours.’

Fabius sighed and looked at her. ‘And? You wished to see me. Here I am. What do you want?’
‘I wanted to warn you, Manflayer. Now, I want to kill you.’
‘If I thought you meant that, you would be dead. You wanted to warn me about
Alkenex, no? I am already aware. More, you wished to propose an alliance,
conveniently leaving out the part where you already serve me. You wish to offer your
services in the fight to come. Why? Most likely due to spite – Alkenex is a traditionalist
and will not see fit to include you in any treachery he is planning. Thus, if you wish to
survive, you must throw in behind me. Is that it?’
Savona stared at him. Then, she smiled. ‘Yes. That’s about it.’
Fabius turned away. ‘Good. You have proven yourself remarkably useful, Savona. I
would hate for that to change.’
‘You could simply have told me,’ she said.
‘I could, but I thought it wise to take you off the board for a while, before you
attempted something we’d both regret. Patience is a virtue you have yet to learn.’
Before she could reply, a warning signal chimed through the chamber. One of the data-
feeds shimmered, becoming a pict-stream of the corridor, filtered through the eyes of
the sentry-servitors. Fabius saw a dark figure approaching. ‘Ah. Right on time.’
‘Who is it?’ Savona growled, reaching for her maul.
‘Just another would-be survivor.’
The hatchway cycled open to admit Skalagrim. The Son of Horus stood for a moment,
and then stepped inside. ‘So this is where it is,’ he said. ‘When you had your mutants
lead me here, I half-thought it was a trap.’
‘Why would I bother to trap you?’ Fabius turned to the bio-mechanical womb and
began to check the vital readings of the clone within. ‘What do you have to report?’
Skalagrim chuckled. ‘As you suspected, they came to me.’
‘Who?’
‘Merix, surprisingly.’
‘How disappointing. But not unexpected.’
‘That traitor,’ Savona snarled.
Skalagrim laughed. ‘So are we, woman. Traitors, one and all.’ He leaned towards her.
‘We’re rats in a promethium drum, gnawing at each other, even as we attempt to escape.
And that’s all we’ve ever been.’
‘Speak for yourself, Skalagrim. I aspire to be something more than vermin.’ Savona
thrust her face towards his, teeth bared.
‘Enough. Skalagrim, continue. After they attempted to suborn you – what?’
‘It was just Merix. Alkenex was conspicuously absent.’ Skalagrim scratched at his
beard. ‘Up to some mischief somewhere else, no doubt. But he was there in spirit.
Merix implied that the whole thing was Eidolon’s doing, though…’
‘Though Flavius could very well have been lying about that.’ Fabius nodded. ‘He has
always been good at inflating his part in the councils of the high.’
‘It would be the best way of securing Merix’s help.’ Savona shook her head. ‘Merix
is… nostalgic. He sees only the past. Offer him a return to that and he’d join you in a heartbeat, without thinking.’ She hesitated. ‘That’s how Oleander got to him, back when we all served the Radiant King.’

Fabius frowned, at the mention of his treacherous disciple. Oleander Koh had tried to manipulate him into taking command of the 12th Millennial, and reassuming his role as lieutenant commander of the Emperor’s Children. The effort had been somewhat successful, if not in the way Oleander had hoped. ‘Then he’s a bigger fool than I thought. But no matter. I have grown tired of being hospitable to such cumbersome creatures – how many others has he suborned?’

‘Enough to cause problems, not enough to do so openly,’ Savona said bluntly. ‘Most of them are smart enough to sit it out, after last time. And Alkenex’s warriors aren’t making themselves welcoming, swaggering about as they are. The time of the Legions is done, and there aren’t many who wish their return.’

‘Out with the old, in with the new,’ Skalagrim said.

‘An apt truism.’

‘We can’t trust any of them, obviously,’ Skalagrim said. ‘Never trust a legionary of the Third with a sword and your back. One will find the other every time.’ He glanced at Savona. ‘They can’t help it, it’s just their nature to be treacherous bastards.’

She smirked. ‘Look who’s talking.’

‘Call it the voice of experience,’ Skalagrim said with a shrug. He looked at Fabius. ‘The question is, can we betray them, before they betray us? Or is it already too late?’

Fabius turned away. ‘No. In all likelihood, they will wait to make their move after we have secured our prize.’ He tapped his needler in its holster of saurian leather. ‘At that point, it will be down to who draws first.’

‘Or we could kill them now.’

‘No. Flavius is the only one who possesses the correct coordinates for our destination, and he is too wily to give them up to us until he has to.’ Fabius smiled, showing off his yellowing teeth and darkening gums. ‘Besides, I want to see his face when he realises that I’ve beaten him.’ He laughed. ‘Petty, I know, but satisfying.’

‘Why aren’t your other assistants here? Saqqara, or Khorag? Arrian?’ Savona frowned. ‘I would think that you would want them to know this as well…’

Fabius shrugged. ‘Saqqara will do as he’s told, no questions asked. Khorag doesn’t care, so long as he’s left to his studies. And Arrian already knows what must be done.’

‘In other words, we’re the weak links,’ Skalagrim said. ‘The two you can’t trust to do as you say.’ He smiled. ‘It’s almost a compliment.’

Fabius looked at him. ‘If you wish to take it as such. Whatever you choose to call it, the matter is settled. I was not sure of Merix’s loyalties. I am now. Sides are drawn. All that is left is to begin the game. We will–’

A deep, tolling sound rolled through the ship, echoing through every bulkhead and strut. The chamber shuddered slightly, and the vox crackled. Wolver’s familiar
monotone punched through the distortion. ‘Alert – approaching spatial anomaly designate Maelstrom. All hands to active stations. Commander to the bridge. Alert – alert – alert.’

‘Finally,’ Fabius said. He looked at the others. ‘Gird yourselves. We prepare to leave one storm behind, but there is another yet to come.’
‘Beautiful,’ Fabius said.

He stood on the observation dais, watching as thousands of glittering motes grew, swelling on the viewscreens of the Vesalius’ command deck, until they at last became a storm of wrecked vessels. The sensors identified the broken remnants of the warships of the Imperium, floating among the splintered fragments of eldar wrecks. The gutted remains of kroot war-spheres turned in a slow gavotte alongside the burst ruin of hrud warren ships and nicassar dhows. All tumbling together through the inner curve of the Maelstrom – a Sargasso of ruin, brought together by the strange tides of the empyrean.

‘Utterly beautiful. Don’t you agree, Flavius?’ Fabius glanced at Alkenex, who stood nearby, with his subordinate, Palos Gyr. Fabius had come alone to the command deck, which seemed to infuriate Alkenex.

‘Strangely enough, I do.’ Alkenex stared at the nearest viewscreen, which displayed a magnified image of one of the shattered ships. Particles of shimmering ice crawled across the battle-scarred hull, making weird patterns, and the prefect seemed entranced by them. ‘From ruin, beauty, and from beauty, ruin.’

‘The Observations of Rylanor,’ Fabius said, recognising the quote. ‘The Ancient of Rites was wise.’ He smiled. ‘Well, up until the end, at any rate.’

‘We are all wise, in our own minds,’ Alkenex said. ‘How soon until we’re out of this clot of dead ships?’

‘Not long. We’re nearing the edge now. Look.’ He gestured towards the main display screen. The Vesalius picked its way through the graveyard of ships, its hull creaking and groaning as it scraped against the flotsam and jetsam of the warp rift. Defence turrets spat fire, breaking up any of the larger wrecks that drifted into the frigate’s path. Ahead, the surging currents of the Maelstrom flickered and snarled like an immense knot of
lightning. Behind the coruscating curtain of gas and star light, real space and the Ultima Segmentum awaited.

‘Energy signatures detected... analysing... analysing...’ Wolver intoned, hands clasped behind its back. ‘The Vesalius senses prey.’

Fabius grunted. ‘Unfortunate. Numbers?’

‘Analysing... indeterminate.’

‘As soon as we are clear of the debris field, all ahead full. Whatever is out there, we’ll punch through it before it sees us coming.’

‘Acknowledged.’

Fabius turned to the tacticum display as the ship began to pick up speed. Targeting runes spun and danced across the display, but there was no clear data as to who or what they might be. Frowning, he glanced at the display screen, hoping for some sign of what might be awaiting them. But all he saw was the fury of the Maelstrom unbound – a cosmic wound, leaking the stuff of anti-life into the material realm. Space revolved in swift patterns, the innumerable hues of the warp bleeding into one another until they became nothing more than swirling blackness, slashed through with the stretched light of distant stars.

‘Golden glory, along black walls,’ he murmured, as the words of some Terran scrivener of antiquity echoed through his head. ‘Like that narrow, tottering bridge, which is the only path between time and eternity.’

‘What are you muttering about?’ Alkenex demanded. He stared intently at the tacticum display, as if he might force it to reveal the identities behind the spinning runes.

‘A bit of doggerel that seemed appropriate, though we seek to ascend out of, rather than descend into the Maelstrom,’ Fabius said. The ship suddenly shuddered, and alarm klaxons sounded. ‘Wolver, status report.’

‘Sensors detect imminent ionic disruption. Plotting alternate course.’

‘What is that homunculus groaning about?’ Alkenex said. The deck shuddered again.

Below, a control-cradle burst into flame. The servitor wired into it continued to follow its programming, despite the flames crawling across its withered husk. The air became greasy with the stink of burning flesh.

‘This area is dotted with ionic reefs, and worse things besides. It requires precise calculations to navigate.’ Fabius steadied himself with Torment. ‘Otherwise, we’ll be one more hulk added to those wrecks.’ He leaned on the sceptre as the ship quaked, its hull lashed by the cosmic torrent. The Maelstrom was a selfish thing, refusing to allow easy escape. One of the viewscreens above shattered as an energy surge ripped through the system. Sparks cascaded down, and small fires dotted the bridge.

‘It feels like this ship is going to shake itself apart,’ Alkenex spat. He held on to the hololith projector for support.

‘Calm yourself, Flavius. The Vesalius is sturdier than that, I assure you. And it has made this journey before. Though not in some time.’
The deck pitched beneath their feet. On the viewscreens, the collapsed cadavers of unlucky vessels spun towards them. Some few connected, and the Vesalius was forced to plough through them. Gouts of fire scraped the hull as the ancient wrecks splintered and burst at the point of impact. The Vesalius roared in pleasure, its engines straining against the omnipresent pull of the Maelstrom.

Proximity klaxons sounded as the coruscating darkness stretched itself thin and began to tear. Motes of cold silver spun across the tears, blazing into a surge of celestial light as the frigate speared upwards through the currents of the Maelstrom. More than wreckage waited to greet it. Flickering lance-beams cut across the Vesalius’ path like strings of light, stretching from crimson vessels towards what appeared to be spinning meteors, scabbed over with sensor arrays and weapons turrets.

‘It seems we’ve arrived at an inopportune moment,’ Fabius said. He gestured to Wolver. ‘Evasive action – find a clear route through this – whatever it is!’

‘Surely you recognise a battle when you see one,’ Alkenex said, laughing.

‘Alert – hostile action – identifying… identifying…’ Wolver rasped. Light flared across a screen, as one of the red vessels exploded. A vast conglomeration of smaller vessels, somehow united into one singular entity, heaved into view through the spiralling cloud of wreckage. Conflicting ident-runes burst into view as the Vesalius’ sensors tried to identify the component parts of the rapidly approaching monstrosity.

‘What in the name of the primarch is that?’ Alkenex demanded.

‘Surely you recognise a space hulk when you see one?’ Fabius said, parroting Alkenex’s words back at him. Crude kilometre-wide sigils had been daubed onto the flat places of the hulk’s hull – primitive symbols, with jagged tusks and narrowed eyes. Orks. A moment later, the vox systems strained beneath pirate signals blasted from the approaching vessel. Guttural challenges and bestial laughter echoed through the vox-casters, overriding all internal communications.

‘Greenskins,’ Alkenex said. ‘How delightful. I haven’t tasted ork-flesh in centuries.’

‘And you won’t now,’ Fabius snapped. He slammed Torment’s ferrule against the deck. ‘Engines all ahead full. I want us out of here – now.’

Kasra, Shehan of the Red Scimitars Chapter, leaned forward in the command throne of the strike cruiser, Shahmsihr. His golden eyes narrowed as he studied the display screen. ‘That,’ he rumbled, ‘should not be here. Magnify.’ The image on the display swelled.

The ship had appeared suddenly, erupting from the vast, turning gyre that was the Maelstrom and plunging through the heart of the battle he and his brothers had been so carefully orchestrating for the past thirty-six hours. It had taken the Chapter months to bring the orks to battle, here in the vast sweep of wild space, where the material realm grew frail, and strange stars occupied the firmament. Their carefully constructed trap had been thrown into upheaval by this new, sudden arrival.

The vast span of void space that was the Maelstrom Zone dwarfed many Imperial
sectors in size. There were at least twenty major ork infestations and triple that number of petty pirate kingdoms scattered across the wilderness on the edge of the warp storm. It was impossible to patrol the region in any traditional sense, especially for one Chapter. Creative measures were necessary. And now, the crude vessels of the *thresh* were seeking to escape the trap, hurtling off in all directions, thanks to this unforeseen intrusion.

Annoyed, he thumped his fist against the side of his command throne. Nearby crew members glanced around, and then hastily away, before they could meet his gaze. To the serfs who made up the majority of the *Shahmsihr’s* bridge crew, the Space Marine resembled nothing so much as one of the great hawks of the mountains that stretched across their home world. Kasra was built lean, like the blade that had given his Chapter their name. His crimson-and-black battleplate was marked with little in the way of insignia or heraldry, save for the lines of poetic script delicately etched into many of the flat planes, much of it by his own hand.

‘That is not a thresh vessel,’ he said, after a moment. ‘Not unless their aesthetic sensibilities have improved.’

‘Always a possibility, my king,’ Hormaz, his second-in-command, replied. Hormaz was stocky, where his Shehan was lean, and, in places, his crimson armour was decorated with similar script to that of his commander. His wide hands rested on the eagle-shaped pommel of the curved blade sheathed on his hip. He stood at ease beside Kasra’s command throne. ‘The greenskins are full of surprises. That’s what makes them so entertaining to hunt.’

‘Yes, but would greenskins be so quick to abandon battle?’ Kasra peered at the ship as it surged away from them, towards the empty stretch of stellar gulf that marked the edge of the Maelsstrom. It had once been a Gladius-class frigate, and still was, to all appearances. But there was something subtly wrong about its shape and the way it moved. ‘Like a rock adder,’ he murmured, uneasy despite himself. He straightened. ‘Plot an intercept course.’

The crew snapped to work with admirable haste. Only the swiftest thinkers, those who could make thought into deed without hesitation, were marked for service on the Chapter’s warships. Speed was the most effective weapon in the void, more deadly than energy lance or torpedo battery. ‘Are we pursuing them, then? You should probably alert the other kings,’ Hormaz said.

Kasra snorted. ‘If their eyes are half as keen as mine, there is no need. They will see it, and see that we are the closest to it, and make the obvious assumption.’ Initiative was the sharpest blade in their Chapter’s armoury – any warrior worth his salt knew when to seize it for his own, and shape the tide of battle to his will.

‘Still – it is customary. Not to mention polite.’ The rebuke was gentle, as befitted a subordinate. Hormaz’ gap-toothed smile unfaltering in the face of Kasra’s glare. ‘Then, no one has ever accused you of being polite, eh, my king?’
‘Not twice,’ Kasra growled. Hormaz laughed.

Idly, Kasra brushed his fingers across the delicate lines of script etched across his chest-plate, seeking reassurance from the words of his war-poem. Every Red Scimitar began such a poem on the day he was gifted his first set of battleplate, and with every victory, he added to it, line by line. Some of the older suits of power armour were so heavy with the words of the heroes who had worn it that, from a distance, they appeared to be painted black. Thus, every warrior was part of the Chapter’s history, and when their failings were just a memory, their victories would live on, inspiring those who were to come after.

He wondered if this would simply be another line added to his poem, or the final one? He pushed the thought aside and focused on their prey. The ship was moving away, its weapons clearing a path through the disorganised ork battle-line. Their crude vessels came apart like burning paper before the newcomer, and the black was lit by streaks of red and orange. And still, it plunged on, skirting the attentions of a massive hulk and blazing away. Away from the Maelstrom, striving towards the harsh light of the material realm.

Something told him that would not be a good thing.

‘Alert the other kings. Tell them this prey is ours.’

He sat back as the crew hurried to follow his orders.

‘And when we have it?’ Hormaz asked.

Kasra smiled. ‘We will crack it open and claim what glory there is to be had from it.’

‘Intercept inbound,’ Wolver intoned. ‘Assessing threat potential.’

Fabius watched as one of the red vessels – some form of cruiser, by its shape – turned slowly, in pursuit. ‘It seems we did not escape notice. Pity. Scan vox-frequencies for chronological coding. Tag anything unusual and follow standard cataloguing procedures.’

On the screens, the void battle continued to spin around them. They had not been targeted so far, but that would change soon enough, unless they managed to put some distance between themselves and the combatants. The void shields registered multiple incidental impacts, as they weathered the crossfire.

‘Why bother with that?’ Alkenex asked, peering at him. ‘What does the date matter?’

‘Timelessness might suit your overburdened senses, Flavius, but I find myself comforted by imposing some sense of forward progression to my existence.’ Fabius glanced at him. ‘Change is the only constant. Even stagnant empires evolve, if slowly.’

‘What?’

‘I want to know how much time has passed, so that I might postulate upon potential advances in our milk-blooded descendants, and plan accordingly.’ He had accumulated reams of similar data upon every voyage outside the protective shroud of Eyespace. Regular comparison showed incremental change, within certain sectors and systems.
Old technologies for the most part, newly rediscovered, or worse, entirely new ones, developed in the interim. Such data was added to the whole, there to be refined into a series of ever-evolving general threat assessments.

Seeing Alkenex’s in comprehension, he gestured about them. ‘This ship, for all of its power, is ancient. Was ancient, even before I claimed it. There are now possibly greater vessels by far prowling around. Such as that one there, now lumbering in pursuit.’ He looked at Alkenex. ‘As I said, change is the only constant.’

Alkenex laughed. ‘You’re worried – about that? What have such as we to fear in this universe, save each other?’

‘That is my point exactly, Flavius. Though I hesitate to call such callow creatures “brother”, our kin still stalk these stars, as you can see. Debased and superstitious as they are, their numbers only grow, as ours can only dwindle.’ He pointed to the vessel on the screen. ‘There may well be triple our current numbers on that ship.’

‘Each of us – even you – is worth a hundred of them. We have fought the Long War for time out of mind, veterans of a conflict that is beyond their conception.’

‘Yes. We are worth a hundred. Even so, they outnumber us. So, you will pardon me if I seek to weight the odds ever so slightly in our favour. Forewarned is forearmed, after all.’ Fabius smiled. ‘A favourite saying of the Phoenician’s, I recall.’ Klaxons sounded, as the Vesalius coaxed extra speed out of its engines. The vox crackled with the ship’s displeasure at running from a fight.

‘He would be flattered to know that you remember that, Spider.’ Alkenex bent towards him, a smile playing about his scarred lips. ‘They say that, among those who dwell in his garden of delights, your name is considered the foulest of curses. How does that feel, Spider? How does it feel to know that our gene-father hates you so? I am curious.’

Fabius snorted. ‘It is a weight I bear easily.’ He met Alkenex’s gaze steadily. ‘I still remember a time before we ever heard his name. Good days, those, despite our woes. We knew ourselves then. We held firm to our purpose. And now – well – look at you… a preening catamite, clad in tarnished gilt.’

Alkenex’s hand twitched towards the hilt of his blade. But rather than drawing it, he merely tapped the pommel. He smiled. ‘Same old Spider. Always antagonising your betters.’

Fabius looked away. ‘I have no betters.’

‘Intercept course detected,’ Wolver interjected. ‘Closing…’ The strategium overseer rattled off a string of coordinates. Fabius frowned and turned his attentions back to the screen. The cruiser had gained speed. It was faster than he’d anticipated.

‘Take all necessary steps to evade. We did not come here for a fight.’

‘How like you, Spider,’ Alkenex said. He watched the approaching ship on the display screen with something like eagerness. ‘Has there even been a fight you didn’t run from?’

Fabius, without taking his eyes from the screen, gestured dismissively. ‘Unless you’ve
forgotten, we have more important matters to attend to. Ones that require our forces to be intact. I will not risk my ship, or our Legion’s future, just to assuage your bloodlust. But feel free to climb back aboard your gunship and fling yourself at them, by all means.’

‘You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’

Fabius glanced at him. ‘Was that not obvious? If you have nothing new to add, please be silent. I am trying to concentrate.’ Number strings cycled through the data-feed, as the servitor-crew plotted evasive manoeuvres. When he saw a likely one, he seized on it. ‘Wolver – evasive pattern Omegon-Xerxes. Launch chaff spread at six-mark.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Wolver said. ‘Launching in three… two… one…’

‘Incoming,’ Hormaz said.

‘Countermeasures,’ Kasra said. ‘They’re running. I don’t recognise the evasion pattern.’ He leaned forward. Real-time tactical holo-feeds blurred into visibility around his throne, as the crew worked to anticipate the enemy.

‘I do. It’s an older one. Then, that ship is ancient. We’ve improved some, since then.’ Hormaz smoothed his beard. ‘We’re faster, but they’ve got the distance. They’ll outpace us, if we don’t catch up quick.’

Kasra gave the order to increase speed. The Shahmsihr shook as power was diverted from the overlapping void shields and weapons systems to the engines. The cruiser was not as fast as the smaller vessel, but it didn’t need to be. Not for what he had in mind.

‘Pirates,’ he murmured.

‘Worse than that, I think,’ Hormaz said.

Kasra frowned. It had been centuries since the last incursion from the hells beyond the Maelstrom. Still only an aspirant then, he’d missed that one. It had been decades since he’d crossed blades with any opponent more skilled than an ork or a hull ghast. He’d never faced one of the Lost Ones before. Only their chattel. The thought of matching his skills against one of those ancient monsters set his hearts to pounding. ‘Good,’ he said.

Hormaz glanced at him. ‘It will make a fine stanza, at least.’

Kasra nodded, barely listening. His attention was locked onto the fleeing vessel, as it grew larger on the screens. It bore no markings, ruinous or otherwise. There was no telling who it had originally belonged to, or the identity of who now crewed it. No matter. If it could not be safely salvaged, it would be scuttled.

He flexed his hands, eager now. Ready to set himself against this new enemy. Excitement thrummed through him. The hunt-song was loud in his head. It was good when the enemy tried to flee. It meant they were already half-beaten. An easy victory was overdue. Orks fought too hard, and too long, too often. War became work, and ever a battle, a labour. But this might prove to be more interesting.

Proximity klaxons sounded. They were within range. ‘We’re close enough. Prepare to launch the boarding javelins,’ Kasra roared, half out of his throne. The boarding javelins
were a variant of the ancient and much-maligned Ursus Claw contact-system – high-tension lines, connected to immense harpoons, fired into the hull of enemy vessels in order to bring them into range for boarding actions. The variant system had been pioneered by his own Chapter, and was a more efficient use of the ploy, on the whole.

Rather than simply dragging enemy vessels off course, the javelin-lines were a form of electromagnetic rail, along which specially designed boarding torpedoes would run. The harpoons were, in some measure, hollow, creating a stable ‘corridor’ for boarding parties to swarm through. In theory, it allowed for a more precise application of boarding tactics. In practice, there was still an element of risk that Kasra found intoxicating. He glanced at Hormaz. ‘I will lead the assault. You will stay here and make sure my foolishness does not cost us a ship, if foolishness it proves to be.’

Hormaz nodded graciously. ‘I accept my lot without complaint, my king.’ He smiled. ‘Besides, I am too old for boarding actions.’

Kasra laughed as he surrendered his throne to his subordinate. As he left the command deck, the muster bells were sounding through the ship’s corridors, calling his brothers to battle.

The strike cruiser paced towards the Vesalius across the black, a crimson leviathan surging in the wake of its prey. The frigate’s void shields shuddered as the enemy vessel’s weapons batteries opened up, in an attempt to slow the smaller ship. They hammered at the Vesalius’ shields, causing the power field to ripple like gelatine, and creating a kaleidoscope of colours. With every impact, the Vesalius roared in fury.

Fabius flung out a hand to steady himself against the hololithic projector as the deck pitched beneath his feet. ‘Wolver – divert power to the engines,’ he snarled. ‘We must outpace them and soon, or they’ll blow us to pieces.’

‘No, we must get in close, limit their options,’ Alkenex barked. ‘Turn and face them. Get inside their range, and we can cut their throats.’

‘Are you mad?’ Fabius glared at him. ‘They’ll crush us, whatever the range. Our only hope is to put as much distance between us and them as possible.’

Alkenex struck the projector with a fist. ‘We can’t escape – we must – eh?’

On the screens, the behemoth was slowing and turning about. Lightning rippled across its flank. ‘Missile batteries,’ Alkenex said.

‘No,’ Fabius said. ‘Something else.’

The lightning reached out, across the gulf between the two ships.

‘Impact in five… four… three…’

Fabius tuned Wolver’s monotone out. Through the electrical discharge of their launch, the missiles revealed themselves to be a dozen silvery javelins, each roughly the size of a gunship. All were connected to immense strands of reinforced cable, which seemed to unreel at impossible speed from the launch bays aboard the vessel. There was no time to take any evasive action. The Vesalius’ void shields flickered like a ragged shroud, and
the javelins passed through the streamers of colour without pause.

The *Vesalius* screamed as the javelins slammed home across the length of its hull. Baroque crenellations, which had weathered the dangers of the warp for centuries, crumbled as the lengths of steel punched through them and into the body of the ship. Alarms wailed, and the warning lumens cast a crimson glow across the command deck.

The frigate’s engines groaned thunderously as its forward momentum was abruptly slowed. The ship’s substructure whined in protest as the prow was wrenched off course by several degrees. Alerts flooded the vox-frequency, as reports of damage came in from all over the vessel. Fabius tuned them out. Wolver would handle them. He turned to the tacticum display, his fingers racing across the control panel. ‘They’ve cut our speed by twenty per cent. They’re anchoring us.’

‘What’s happened?’ Alkenex stared at the display in bewilderment. ‘What are those things? What have they done to us?’

‘I believe those are Ursus Claws,’ Fabius said, bemused.

‘Ursus – are they insane?’ Alkenex said, in shock.

Fabius looked at him, eyebrow raised. ‘I don’t know. It looks as if we shall have the chance to ask them, soon enough.’ He drew his needler and checked it. He suspected he would need it, before this affair was over. ‘They seem determined to get aboard, whether we like it or not.’

‘Excellent. I was getting tired of trading barbs with you.’ Alkenex drew his sword and ran a thumb along its edge. He glanced at his subordinate. Gyr seemed as eager as his master, if the way he clutched the haft of his friction axe was any indication.

‘Palos – gather the others. We’re going hunting.’
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE RED SCIMITARS

Fabius cursed as the corridor shook. Hull plates buckled, vomiting sparking power conduits and torn power cables. Pressure hoses burst, filling the corridor with streams of stinging coolant vapour. The renegade Space Marines plunged through the billowing cloud without pause, followed more slowly by the mutants and New Men loping in their wake.

It felt as if the Vesalius were coming apart at the seams, though he knew the frigate was far more durable than that. It had survived worse in its time. But it only took one mistake – one moment of inattention – to lose a duel such as this. Void war was a tricky thing, even for those experienced in its subtleties, which Fabius was not. He’d left it to Wolver, trusting in the creature’s skill, and the Vesalius’ savagery, to see them through. But the enemy weren’t content to merely fling death across the void. No, they wanted to deliver it by hand, eye-to-eye and blade-to-blade.

Reports of hull-breaches echoed through the vox frequency as he hurried through the corridors. ‘Ursus Claws,’ he muttered. ‘Only a lunatic would use those things. Is that what our descendants have been reduced to – barbarous fools, impervious to common sense?’ He glared about him, seeking agreement. ‘There is a reason Angron was the only one to mount those things on his ships.’

‘Nonetheless, they have their uses, Chief Apothecary,’ Arrian said, from his elbow. The World Eater was but a step behind him, moving swiftly.

Fabius laughed. ‘So they do. But they have never had to contend with a ship like this – or with a mind like mine. I have prepared for an eventuality such as this, Arrian.’

‘Is that why we’re going to the wraithbone grove, rather than seeking to repel boarders?’ Arrian asked. There was a faint undercurrent of disappointment in the World Eater’s voice. It had been some time since Arrian had been allowed to indulge his baser
instincts. Violence was the release valve that allowed the Apothecary to maintain his otherwise impressive equilibrium.

‘Yes. We have no time to waste, shedding the blood of these pale shadows of past glories. Better to rid ourselves of them now, and deal with the survivors at our leisure.’ Fabius glanced at the other Apothecary. ‘You’ll enjoy that, I trust.’

‘Most assuredly, Chief Apothecary.’

Ramos and his Kakophoni were on full alert when Fabius arrived. Noise Marines prowled the access corridors, weapons whining like eager hounds. Ramos nodded in greeting and said, ‘It is agitated.’

‘Good,’ Fabius said. ‘Then it is more likely to do as I ask.’ He pushed past the Noise Marine and plunged into the garden. The wraithbone seemed to draw back from him, as if it knew his purpose. Here, the sounds of the battle were muffled. He fancied that even if the ship were destroyed, this chamber would survive, intact and unharmed.

Key, as ever, awaited him at the garden’s heart. The eldar was twitching and moaning softly, as if it could feel every impact on the ship’s hull. Perhaps it could. Key was one with the wraithbone, in ways even he did not fully understand. And the wraithbone had permeated the ship, in ways even he did not fully understand. And the wraithbone had permeated the ship, becoming one with it.

He knelt before the eldar. ‘There is no time for niceties. You can feel them, can’t you – digging into the ship’s metal flesh? Barbs of iron, venting invasive vermin into the hollow places.’ Fabius gripped Key’s narrow skull gently, forcing the eldar to face him. ‘You will expel them, Key. Set the wraithbone to its purpose. Eject the barbs that slow us, and repair the breaches. Do as you were made to do. Protect the *Vesalius*.’

Key gave a low, animal moan. Fabius’ grip tightened. ‘Do it,’ he murmured. His battleplate chimed a warning as it registered a spike in several all but undetectable frequencies. Key’s mouth opened, as if it were about to sing, or scream. But no sound emerged. The wraithbone set in its eye sockets trembled with internal reverberations, and the simian slaves of the Noise Marines began to screech and yowl amid the tangled branches above. A signal was being sent.

Satisfied, he made to release the creature. But it grabbed his wrist. ‘F-Father,’ Key whispered. Fabius froze. He knew that voice as surely as he knew his own. Key gripped his wrist tightly, with more strength than it had ever possessed.

‘Melusine?’

Key opened its mouth wide, wider than it should have been able. In the hollow of its throat, something squirmed. Fabius tried to jerk his wrist free, but the eldar held on. It reached up, catching hold of the back of his head with its other hand. He staggered back, and Key came with him, mouth still stretching wider and wider as something pushed itself out from within. Wraithbone, he realised – dozens of impossibly fluid tendrils of wraithbone.

A moment later, Fabius howled as the tendrils pierced the flesh of his face and then he was somewhere else, lost in the past, watching old failures happen again.
The mice kept dying. Again and again. No matter how hard he worked to perfect them, they died. And he could not understand why. Why did they die? Some flaw in his methodology? Some weakness in them? What was the answer?

The old man was no help. ‘They die because all things die, boy. You play a good game, but games always end – and someone must lose.’

‘I can perfect them, I know I can,’ he said, looking up at the tall, stooped figure. They were... somewhere. Was it home? Or somewhere else? He could not say. He heard voices, murmuring as if at a great distance, but could not see their owners. He looked down at his hands – human hands, unsullied by the touch of Europan gene-smiths.

‘Can you? Or is that what you tell yourself, because you do not want the game to end?’ The old man leaned forward, cybernetic fingers clicking as he prodded one of the twitching mice, where it was pinned to Fabius’ dissection board. His face was wrong, somehow. Like a mask that was about to slip, revealing the true face beneath. ‘There is no shame in being a gamesman, boy. In playing the odds. But one day the odds will not be in your favour and what then?’

‘Then I will start again.’

The old man laughed, and something behind his face twitched, as if there were a second, secret smile there, behind the first. ‘And how many times will you start over?’

His words were echoed, as if by a chorus. Shapes drew close, watching, whispering among themselves. He tried to discern their identity, but they slipped away from the limits of his vision with taunting ease.

‘Until I get it right. Until my work is done.’ But the words sounded like a lie, even as he spoke them. They were bitter on his tongue, like ashes. How many times had he spoken those words? How many times had he sought to bury his own failures in a grave of new beginnings? ‘Why do they keep dying?’

‘Because you keep changing them. You keep teasing the beast flesh, boy – cutting away at this bit, adding to that bit, like a painter at his easel. You are trying to capture an image which does not – cannot – exist, save in your head.’ The old man reached up, as if to adjust his face. For a moment, Fabius glimpsed what was beneath the mask.

He turned away, his soul gone cold. This was a dream, not a memory. That was the only rational explanation. He tried to will himself awake, but the dream held firm.

‘No, it is both, Father. A dream, a memory, a prophecy, all in one.’ A new voice intruded on his vision, slicing through the dull haze of memory. A voice at once soft and harsh.

He made to turn, but strong hands gripped him, holding him in place. ‘Now is not a time for eyes, Father, but ears. Enemies gather before you, and fiends stalk behind. You must hold firm, or risk destruction.’

‘Melusine...’

‘Fulgrim loves you, Father. He has said so, often. He loves you best, for in you the soul of the Legion is manifest. You seek the most elusive prey, and are never satisfied.’
'That may be, but I do not love him,' Fabius croaked. ‘I do not need his love. I do not need any of them. I will complete my work, whatever obstacles they set in my path.’
‘You misunderstand, Father. You do not see the forest, for the trees.’
‘Speak plainly, or be gone.’
‘I do, but you refuse to hear. And that is why they love you. There are none so blind as those who will not see.’ A pale finger pointed. The mice were gone. In their place, human bodies writhed, slit open and pinned to his board. To his eyes, they were unfinished. Imperfect. He could improve them. Make them stronger, more resistant to pain. They had to be perfect. Once they were perfect, he could stop.
He reached for his scalpel.
His eyes snapped open. The dream faded to nothing. Key released him, as the tendrils of wraithbone retracted. ‘The boarding torpedoes,’ he whispered. Key nodded silently and he stepped back. His face was bleeding from multiple small wounds.
‘Chief Apothecary?’ Arrian asked. He held his blade, as if he had been preparing to cut away the wraithbone. Thankfully, he hadn’t attempted it. Fabius shuddered slightly, wondering what sort of damage that might have caused.
‘I’m fine, Arrian. It was nothing.’ He waved aside his assistant’s concerns. Whatever the purpose of Melusine’s message, it had been for him alone. ‘The boarding torpedoes are being expelled, but some of our guests will yet remain.’
Arrian nodded in understanding. ‘I will see to their removal.’
‘I want one alive, Arrian. It has been almost a thousand years since I last had the opportunity to examine what the Imperium has made of our legacy, and I am eager to reacquaint myself with the Emperor’s handiwork.’
Arrian nodded again, turned and loped out of the garden, growling orders into his vox. Fabius looked at Key. The experience had been as unnerving as it had been unexpected. He stroked the eldar’s cheek, as it gazed at him blankly. ‘What were you trying to tell me?’ he murmured.
In the shadows of the wraithbone, there was a sound like a sigh. Fabius turned, but saw nothing. Annoyed, he stood. ‘Whatever it was, it makes no difference. Play your games, by all means, child. I will not be swayed from my purpose.’ His voice echoed strangely in the grove. ‘I will persist,’ he said. Then, more softly, ‘I must.’
Alkenex parried the blow, guiding the sword point into the hull-plating. Sparks burst from the point of contact. Before the crimson-armoured Space Marine could recover, Alkenex buried the tip of his blade into the black seal between his opponent’s helm and gorget. Blood burst from the wound, as he twisted the blade, severing bone and muscle. As he jerked the sword free, the warrior’s head came with it.
‘A fine blow, brother,’ Palos roared. His axe rose and fell like a woodsman’s, separating red limbs from twitching bodies. The last of their opponents succumbed to their wounds. ‘They make good hunting, these whelps.’ He shuddered slightly as the
endorphin pumps in his armour went to work. ‘Yes, good hunting.’

Alkenex shook his head and handed his sword to Palos. ‘For a given value of good.’
He sank to his haunches and pried the head of his opponent out of its helmet. Then, with
careful movements, he peeled the dead warrior’s scalp from its skull. Once, such a thing
wouldn’t have occurred to him, especially during a battle. But it had become second
nature now. A warrior was judged on his victories, and if one was to be found worthy,
one needed to keep a proper tally.

He stared down the smoke-filled corridor, a song in his heart. Here, now, in this
moment, he was satisfied. Other scalps slapped wetly against his hip, torn from the
heads of those who’d sought to take what he’d already claimed. And more would be
added, before the end. He rose to his feet and reclaimed his sword with bloody fingers.
‘Keep moving.’

Palos and the rest of his warriors fanned out behind him, some peeling off into side
corridors without a word. They didn’t need him to tell them what needed doing. It was
as instinctive as breathing. They were all veterans of the Legion Wars, their skills
shaped to a killing edge by thousands of boarding actions and orbital drops.

Combat squads of two to three warriors would move to the designated choke points,
and bolster the efforts of the Vesalius’ crew in repelling boarders. Merix was leading the
remains of the 12th Millennial in similar actions on the lower decks.

Their enemies had not got far from the breach points, as if the ship itself were resisting
their efforts to penetrate its internal defences. Thus far, they had been contained to the
outer tiers of the ship. Alkenex suspected that state of affairs would change rapidly, if
Fabius failed in whatever scheme he was implementing.

Mutants clad in ill-fitting void-suits flooded past him as they reached a transit point,
hooting and gibbering as they surged towards the next bulkhead. Many of them chanted
the Manflayer’s name as they loped into battle. Alkenex felt a flush of frustration at
that. Such creatures were only fit for chattel, or sport. But they absorbed the firepower
of the enemy well enough, as they showed a moment later. Bolt-rounds painted the
corridor red, and the mutants fell screaming.
‘More prey,’ Palos growled.
‘Let’s hope these prove to be more sport than the last.’ Alkenex didn’t slow, and he
crushed the wounded beneath his tread. His warriors moved up around him, boltguns
raised. They fired into the smoke and flame ahead, picking their targets with disciplined
care. Red-armoured shapes sought what cover there was to be had in the corridor ahead.

The passageway was wide and lined by pipelines and conduit bundles. Lumens
flickered amid the smoke of the boarding torpedo’s arrival. The deck plating was bent
and crumpled outwards from the corridor frame in places, and the floor plates were bent
and broken. Exposed power cables dangled, dripping sparks into puddles of spreading
petrochem and lubricant. These were the source of the flames that crackled throughout
the corridor, filling the air with heat and smoke.
The environmental controls for this stretch had been damaged, and the artificial gravity fluctuated suddenly. Alkenex’s battleplate compensated automatically, but the surviving mutants weren’t so lucky. Several of them were caught out by the enemy as they floated helplessly. One or two were drawn screaming through the narrow aperture between the torn edge of the hull and the disembarkation ramp of the boarding torpedo.

The Emperor’s Children advanced through the shoal of floating corpses, firing as they went. Alkenex led the way, eager to get to grips with his next opponent. He wished to add a few more scalps to his bundle. They had such fine hair, these warriors. His slaves could make something beautiful from it.

Crimson forms moved forward to meet them. No disciplined defenders here, but aggressive raiders. Alkenex smiled as he spotted the leader – an older mark of armour, red save for the places where it was marked with lines of illegible script etched into it. The sword he carried was curved and marked with more script. As if it and its wielder were stories given form. Alkenex slid forward, aided by the lack of gravity, blade raised.

Their weapons connected with a ringing shriek, metal against metal. Alkenex moved swiftly, but his opponent was equally quick. Their blades met again and again, wherever the one went, the other was waiting. The swords intertwined for a brief moment, like long-separated lovers, and Alkenex hissed as his opponent matched him, strength to strength.

‘I am Arsaces, Saha of the–’ the Space Marine began, his voice boosted by the emitters on his helmet. Alkenex laughed. They always liked to announce themselves, these children. As if by shouting their names, they might make victory certain.

‘I know who you are,’ he shouted. ‘You are a shadow of great warriors past. A mongrel, made out of battlefield leavings. Do not sully this moment by pretending to have a name that is worth remembering. Because I surely will not, come tomorrow.’

The Loyalist laughed. A moment later, one of his hands sprang from the hilt of his sword and he drove a piston-like punch into the side of Alkenex’s helm. Alkenex’s visor-feed sputtered for a moment, and he staggered off-balance. Their swords broke apart with a wail, and then his foe drove a boot into his side, driving Alkenex against the corridor wall. Quicker than thought, the red-armoured Arsaces was on him, slashing.

Alkenex staggered back, and back again, the edges of the hole in the hull scraping the paint work from his battleplate. His opponent fought like a dervish, as if his every limb were a weapon – not just the blade in his hand, but his elbows, knees, feet, even his head. Alkenex’s boots crunched on broken hull-particles, and the void clawed at him from behind. Slowly, steadily, he was being driven back, towards the aperture. Frustration bubbled up, and he launched a terse thrust, trying to buy some breathing room. His opponent floated backwards, out of reach.

Angrily, Alkenex shoved himself forward. But his opponent was ready. He pivoted, and a knee shot upwards, catching Alkenex in the midsection. He rolled back, and a
second blow struck his head. He dropped to the deck for a moment, skull ringing. A
kick caught him in the chest and he was tumbling backwards into the narrow hole the
boarding torpedo had made, out towards the dark between the stars.

He caught hold of a heat-warped shard of hull plating, stopping himself from hurtling
out into the void. The edges of it scraped against him – the hole was wider than his
shoulders, but not by much. A red bullet shot towards him, blade extended. The hull
plate bent and snapped as his foe slammed into him. A moment later they were both
scraping along the outer hull, torn away from one another by the force of their own
momentum.

‘Flavius?’ Palos’ voice echoed down the vox frequency.

Alkenex responded to his second-in-command as he clambered to his feet, his boots
mag-locking to the surface of the hull. ‘Still alive, old friend. See to the battle. I’ll be
back shortly.’ Frost crept across his armour as he straightened. His armour’s gyroscopic
stabilisers activated, and his auto-senses automatically compensated for his new
surroundings.

The outer hull of the ship resembled the grounds of a cathedral, overgrown with a
forest of sensory apparatus and signal-amplification dishes. Past the crenellated
battlements, he spied the lengths of high-tension cable that connected the two ships
across the immensity which separated them. At the end of each cable, a boarding
torpedo burrowed into the *Vesalius’* hide like a tick seeking blood. Fabius had claimed
that he had a way of ridding the ship of the intruders, but so far they didn’t seem to be
going anywhere.

A warning rune flashed across his visual feed, and he looked around to see his
opponent stalking towards him. The Space Marine raised his blade in silent salute. ‘A
sideways duel, amidst a void-battle,’ Alkenex muttered.

These wretches were insane – it was as if, knowing themselves inferior to previous
generations, they sought absolution in a grandiose death. Punctures of light tore at the
hull some distance away, as the enemy vessel spat fire across a vast distance. The hull
shuddered beneath him and the *Vesalius’* defensive batteries roared, and the glare of
them momentarily blotted the red-armoured warrior from sight.

The warrior was on him a moment later, power blade slashing. Alkenex responded in
kind, parrying when he could, avoiding when he had to. He could not hear the ring of
metal against metal, but he could feel every blow. It was disorientating, fighting like
this. He felt the cold heat of the stars beating down on him, though he knew it was
impossible. Like the eyes of the gods themselves, watching him at their work.

The rhythm of combat was broken suddenly. Something bright slashed across his
vision. His opponent whirled, as if in surprise. Alkenex did not hesitate. He drove
forward, blade leaping out. He felt the impact in his shoulders. His blow sent Arsaces’
head tumbling away from the hull. His body remained where it stood, pinned to the hull
by the mag-clamps in his boots. Blood trailed from the neck stump, making strange
shapes as it floated away in rippling globules.

Alkenex mourned the loss of the warrior’s scalp, even as he wondered what had distracted him. He turned as the deck shuddered beneath his feet. Something was happening. One by one, the boarding torpedoes were being forced from their entry points. The hull around them squirmed like living flesh as each tube of metal was expelled and sent hurtling away, into the void. Red figures floated, caught in the rush of ejection. He laughed harshly, enjoying their predicament.

His laughter stuttered to a halt as he caught sight of strands of pallid matter stretching, anemone-like, across the wounds in the ship’s hull. It was as if it were healing itself, somehow. A thrill of repulsion shot through him as he realised that it could only be wraithbone, and he hurried back towards the hole he’d been knocked through. He didn’t want to be trapped on the wrong side of the hull when the breach sealed itself.

Savona shrieked in joy as her maul slammed down against a crimson helmet, crumpling ceramite and the enhanced skull within. She twisted, driving a hoof into a second attacker’s hip, dislocating it. He staggered, and she caught him a looping blow. She leapt on him as he fell, and smashed her maul into his chest-plate with both hands. He struggled futilely against her as she battered him into a bleeding mass. When he fell limp, she drew her combat blade and began to pry open his shattered armour.

She could practically smell the untainted gene-seed within him. A true delicacy, in these austere times. It had been a century or more since she had tasted one, untouched by the warp. As she set to extricating her prize, bolgguns thundered around her, filling the corridor with sound and fury. Purple battleplate crashed against red in a savage melee. She gave it little thought. The battle would not be won or lost, here. This was nothing more than a skirmish. Already, the intruders were falling back to more defensible positions. Let them go. She had what she wanted.

As she freed the pulpy mass of gene-meat from the ruptured body, she caught sight of Merix, moving through a nearby hatch. He was rasping orders to the warriors behind him – her warriors. ‘Octavian, take four warriors and head to the next choke-point,’ Merix said. ‘Bellephus, I want bulkheads AA-six-two-seven and AA-six-two-nine sealed.’ He spoke briskly, all sign of his normal languor forgotten. Here, at this moment, he was the consummate professional. A leader. A sudden surge of fury drove her hand down, to the bolt pistol on her hip.

One shot. That was all she needed. Just one.

The pistol was in her hand, even as the thought crossed her mind. Just one shot, and Merix would no longer be a problem. He’d been useful, for a while, but now he was a liability. Once he was dead, she would be the last of the Joybound. She would salvage something from this farce, even if the Manflayer had no intention of doing so.

She caught Bellephus’ eye. He twitched his head, but she ignored his warning. She pulled the trigger. The deck shuddered violently as she did so, throwing off her
aim at the last moment. Merix spun around as the shot tore a groove across his shoulderplate. He saw her, his eyes widening. She cursed and rose, forgetting the gene-seed, forgetting everything save the need to finish him off.

Before she got more than two paces, however, the deck shuddered again. Bodies stumbled in the crowded confines of the corridor. Something was happening. The whole vessel was twisting and heaving as if it were in agony. Then Bellephus was there, pushing her back, down a side corridor.

‘Bad timing, my lady,’ he murmured, ignoring her curses. ‘Such impatience does none of us any favours. He’ll be on his guard now, if he wasn’t before.’

‘Why did you stop me?’ she snarled.

‘The field is not in our favour, my lady. Look – see.’ He gestured behind him. Over his shoulder, she watched as the boarding torpedo that acted as the centre of the assault shuddered its way free of its position, as if something were plucking it loose. Strands of pallid, feathery wraithbone bristled about the edges of the hull. The pale filaments pressed against the intruding mechanism, and slowly but surely began to work it loose from its position. A moment later, it was gone, and the air howled past her, as it was drawn out into the void. Bodies tumbled past her as the rupture began to seal itself.

‘The Chief Apothecary’s doing,’ Bellephus said.

‘It doesn’t matter.’ She shook her head, seeking Merix. But there was no sign of him. ‘He’s gone. Fool – you let him get away.’ She struck Bellephus in the chest, knocking him back against the hull. He laughed.

‘You’ll just have to kill him later, my lady. Denial makes pleasure all the sweeter.’

As the breach sealed itself, the red-armoured warriors who remained began to fall back, attempting to consolidate their forces. She grinned and hefted her maul, forgetting all about Merix. They could run all they liked. There was nowhere for them to go.

‘Maybe so. But a bit of indulgence never went amiss.’

Arrian strode through the carnage, the vents of his helmet open. He inhaled the bouquet of slaughter, and let it wash through him, dampening the fire within. But only for a moment. Only ever for a moment. He could feel the thrum of the frigate’s engines through the deck, and knew that they were once again moving at full speed. They would outpace their pursuer soon enough, and leave the sting of its weapons batteries behind.

But that didn’t mean the fight was over, just yet.

Pict-feeds jostled for space across the interior of his visor. Across the ship, mutants swarmed over the invaders, pulling them down through sheer weight of numbers. They died in the doing so, but once the crimson-armoured Space Marines were down, tangled in the dying, it was a simple enough matter for the waiting Gland-hounds to disable them. He watched in satisfaction as special blades, reinforced and driven by augmented muscle, pierced seals and joins, crippling the Space Marines long enough for armour-stabbing rounds to punch through helmets. A dozen mutants died for every warrior who
fell thus, but there were hundreds more where they came from.

As Arrian watched, slowly, surely, the invaders were driven back to the now-sealed breach-points, and contained. With extraction impossible, they sold their lives dearly, painting the corridors red in the blood of mutant and Traitor Space Marine alike. Throughout the ship, the story was the same, as he cycled through the feeds. Again and again, they made their stands and paid the price, even as the Vesalius began to pull away from the pursuing cruiser.

It wasn’t a battle anymore. Now it was to be a slaughter.

*And we both know Khorne loves a slaughter, eh, brother?*

Arrian ignored Briaeus and glanced at one of the hulking overseers who marched stolidly alongside him. ‘Activate the pain-implants.’ The overseers were a special caste of mutant, bred for combat and implanted with stimm-pumps and sub-dermal armour. They wore crude plate, fashioned from deck plating, melted and hammered into shape, and carried a variety of weapons, as well as a control-node.

At Arrian’s command, they activated the nodes, sending a signal to the receptors implanted in the skulls of the flesh-chattel they herded before them. These were the lowest of the low, things with no bones or too many, barely bipedal and with only a dim sentience. Walking collections of tumours and screaming masses with no true shape.

*Worthless meat*, Briaeus muttered.

‘Quiet, brother,’ Arrian whispered, tapping the skull. ‘They have their purpose, as do we all.’ The chattel filled the air with their screams and whimpers, often attacking one another in their pathetic eagerness to rend and tear something – *anything*. Only violence made the pain go away.

*A touch of the familiar, that, eh, dog-brother?*

‘Just a touch,’ Arrian murmured. Each of the debased creatures wore a cowl of cortical implants, much like those he himself bore – though far more crude in form and function. He knew, because he’d designed them himself.

Pain was the only way to control such creatures. They were too dull-witted for anything else. Once activated by the overseers, the pain-implants would fire until the flesh-chattel reached the enemy, compelling them to hurl themselves into battle as quickly as possible. It was a brutally efficient way of overwhelming enemy positions, and Arrian had put it to good use on more than one occasion.

Bolter-fire cascaded down the corridor, punching through the flesh-chattel. Many fell, but the rest pressed on, crawling across their fellows to fling themselves at their prey. The Space Marines were forced to contract their lines in the tight corridors, and fall back, as the tide of howling meat pressed them.

Arrian counted the moments, giving the flesh-chattel enough time to make an opening. Then, with a low growl, he darted forward. He drew his Falax blades as he moved, and the ghosts of his brothers howled in excitement, Briaeus the loudest, as ever. He burst through the heaving wall of mutant flesh and struggling Space Marines, and scanned the
corridor. Breacher squads defended the entry point, huddled behind a shrinking wall of ablative shields, as their brothers tried to free themselves from the mutants crawling over them.

The World Eater sprang forward, blades scything out. He hacked into a shield and hauled himself atop it, crushing its wielder backwards. A boltgun roared, and he reversed his blades, driving them down through the lenses of his enemy’s helmet. He wrenched the blades loose and spun, raking them across another Space Marine’s side, widening the gap in the wall. The squalling chattel took advantage, squeezing behind the shields and clawing at their wielders. What was once an organised defence dissolved into a confused melee.

‘Hold fast! Die well, oh, you sons of kings!’ The roar carried easily over the clamour of battle. Arrian sought its origin. The Space Marine was lean and clad in battleplate that was marked with little in the way of insignia or heraldry, save for the lines of poetic script delicately etched into many of the flat planes. There were so many of these lines, that his armour was almost solid black in places. A horse-hair crest rose above his helm, and he fired a gilded bolt pistol, picking off mutants with undeniable precision.

_I smell a high-rider_, Briaeus growled. _Look at him, dancing about with that toothpick of his. Take his skull, dog-brother._

Arrian bulled towards his target. The warrior turned, but not quickly enough. Arrian was on him in an instant, Falax blades biting into crimson ceramite. The Space Marine roared and brought the butt of his bolt pistol down on Arrian’s head, staggering him. Arrian’s blade whipped out, driving his opponent back. The warrior backed away, firing. Arrian absorbed the impacts, trusting in his armour. A blade chopped down, hacking through the barrel of the pistol.

The warrior stumbled back against a jagged section of hull plate, casting the ruined weapon aside. Arrian paced after him, grinning tightly beneath his helmet. He could feel the nails biting, and the ghosts of his brothers clustered about him, whispering their encouragement.

_The Red Path calls, brother… do you hear its song?_  
‘I hear nothing,’ Arrian said out loud. He shook his head, trying to cast aside their voices. ‘Only the fading murmurs of fools and monsters.’

His opponent drew the curved sword from its horse-hair sheath on his side. ‘Are you mad?’ he asked, as he extended it. ‘Is that why you talk to yourself?’

‘I am talking to the dead,’ Arrian said, tapping one of his skulls.

His opponent nodded, as if that made sense. ‘Ah. Do they bid you join them?’

‘They are not choosy.’ Arrian sheathed one of his blades. He extended the other. ‘I am Apothecary Arrian, of the Twelfth Legion.’ Behind him, mutants howled and died, and dragged warriors he might once have considered brothers down into death with them. He felt the faintest flicker of regret – not for their deaths, but merely the manner of them.
‘I am Kasra, Shehan of the Red Scimitars. I will weave your name into my death-poem, when this day is done, Arrian of the Twelfth.’ The Space Marine spoke harshly, with an air of ritual resignation. Here was a warrior who knew the value of things.

Arrian inclined his head. ‘I applaud the sentiment, Kasra of the Red Scimitars.’ It was a ridiculous exchange, amid the carnage, but welcome for all that. Too often, the niceties were sacrificed in the name of expedience. War was his art, and art must be indulged, lest it turn to madness. He lunged, and their blades connected with a harsh scream of steel.

It felt good, to fight this way. To meet a foe on equal footing, the deck slick with blood beneath their feet, and only the cold stars, glimmering on the other side of the breach, to witness the dance.

Kasra spoke as they fought. ‘I have heard stories of you lost ones, passed down from the honoured ancients in their sarcophagi.’ Their blades became entangled, and the Red Scimitar pressed Arrian back. ‘How you danced on the razor’s edge, until at last you slipped and spilled your souls into the dragon’s mouth. Are you one of them, in truth, or do you simply wear their heraldry?’

‘I wear the heraldry I have always worn,’ Arrian said.

‘Why do you lost ones cling so hard to that which you discarded?’ Kasra ripped his sword free and stepped back. ‘You are like children, I think. Frightened of your own misdeeds, seeking sanctuary in better days.’

‘Possibly. If so, we are not alone in that.’ Arrian lunged, and they spun again in a brutal dance, matching each other blow for blow. He was reminded of his confrontation with Alkenex. This was a better dance by far. A purer one. But Kasra fought with the exuberance of one already dead, and that made him sloppy.

He parried a savage blow and stumbled back, momentarily off balance. Careful dog-brother, she is watching, one of his brothers murmured.

‘Who?’ he demanded, knowing even as he did so that he shouldn’t. The dead were always trying to distract him. They held a grudge. Especially Briaeus. Her, his brothers whispered.

He thought it nothing more than a shadow on his visual feed, at first. He blinked, trying to identify the lean shape that danced and spun across his vision, there but not. It wavered, shrinking and billowing like a shadow caught in a strobe as it moved through the battle. Something about it had hooked his attention, preventing him from looking away. He fought on instinct, blocking and parrying with all the grace of an automaton.

‘He must be – must be – must be held to his path.’

The vox pulsed with the sing-song lilt. A feminine voice. Arrian shook his head, trying to clear it. Was the figure moving closer, or getting further away? It was impossible to tell. His armour’s auspex showed nothing at all. He hesitated, and nearly lost a hand to Kasra’s blade. He stepped back, putting distance between himself and his opponent. Fear was not in him, but he knew better than to listen to unfamiliar voices, murmuring
in his ear. A thousand years in hell taught even the dullest student valuable lessons, and swiftly.

‘The path – the path – the path... He must be held to the path. Or all is lost.’

The shape continued to dance and leap. Then, in the blink of an eye, it was gone. As it faded, he saw Kasra lunge. Arrian jerked aside at the last moment. The blade sliced through a cable on his helm, leaving himself open to a blow that bisected the servos in his right greave. He staggered. Arrian, head ringing, slid aside, and deftly sliced through a knot of power cables. Kasra cursed as the weight of dead armour sought to drag him down. Another blow severed his armour connection to its power plant.

The Space Marine tried to rise, regardless. Targeting runes flickered across the inside of Arrian’s helmet, isolating a weak point in Kasra’s back-plate. Arrian flipped the Falax blade around and drove it down with every iota of strength he possessed, piercing the ceramite and puncturing the flesh within. The blade juddered against augmented bone, severing the spinal column and crippling his opponent.

Arrian set a boot against Kasra’s helmet, and levered his blade loose. ‘A good fight,’ he said, though he doubted the warrior could hear him. ‘Good enough that I am sorry for what comes next, Kasra of the Red Scimitars.’
PART THREE - OBSCURUS
'It is said that the light of the Astronomican does not reach into the Eastern Fringe. I have never seen it myself, though I have gathered descriptions for my records – most often it is seen as a bridge of silvery light and heavenly voices, extending into infinity. Or, rather, about fifty thousand light years, give or take.’

Fabius stepped out of the antechamber containing the tertiary strategerium, dismissing the hololithic data-feeds as he went. The last signs of pursuit had faded into the galactic distance. Even the lapdogs of the Corpse-Emperor had their limits, and the Red Scimitars had reached them some weeks back. ‘Your brothers have turned back. You are alone now, and in my keeping.’

His words were directed at his guest. The Red Scimitar hung on a vertical examination slab, wrists and ankles securely manacled, head bowed. He had been stripped of his battleplate, which sat in pieces on a slab nearby. It had been some days since he had awakened. His body had taken that long to recuperate from the damage Arrian had inflicted. Fabius circled the slab. The middle section had been removed, so as to allow an unobstructed view of the wounded area.

Gently, Fabius probed the scarred flesh. ‘Healing nicely. Arrian wields a blade the way I wield a scalpel. Were you free, you might even be able to walk again. Perhaps you shall have the opportunity, in time. Once we have come to an accommodation, of sorts.’

He turned to the second slab and its burden of armour. He picked up a section of crimson battleplate. He ran a finger along the lines of poetry etched into its crimson surface. The language was archaic, as was the style. ‘A deliberate stylistic choice, or has literature degenerated to such an extent that this is the best you can do?’ he murmured.

The revolt against Terra had not simply irreparably damaged the physical infrastructure of the nascent Imperium, but its society and culture as well. Lorgar’s
A bleating flock had pillaged and burned a million repositories of knowledge, for no greater purpose than spite. Horus, at least, had ransacked the great oculariums and archives in a search for knowledge, but he had burned them all the same. As if they’d sought not just to overthrow a tyrant, but upend the foundations of civilisation itself – and for what? Power. Control.

‘A child’s game,’ he murmured, still examining the poem. ‘And at its end, only children remain, unable to do anything more than ape those who came before them.’ He looked at his guest. ‘Is that what you are, then? A feral child, raised on the stories of a golden age that never truly existed, save in the tales of remembrancers and iterators?’

The Space Marine said nothing. He was not unconscious. He had, in fact, been awake for no small amount of time. Biding his time, in hopes of escape, perhaps. Fabius set the chunk of armour aside. ‘There is no escape, brother. You might get out of my laboratorium, even off of this deck, but no further.’

Still no reply. Fabius sighed. ‘You are not unconscious. My sensors registered the spike in your heart rate when I picked up this section of armour.’ He tapped it. ‘My criticisms of your fumbling attempts at the poetic were not intended as an insult, I assure you.’ He frowned. ‘Your name is Kasra, is it not? So it says on your armour.’ He waited for a moment, and then continued. ‘You are still alive, Kasra. This is of concern to you, I am sure. It can only mean terrible things. This is true – but, it is within your power to mitigate the extent of those things. I will speak plainly. Cooperation earns you a swift and relatively painless demise. Stubbornness will earn you only agony. That agony will increase in direct proportion to your obstinacy. The more you resist, the more it will hurt.’

‘Pain – pain is an illusion.’ Kasra’s voice was hoarse.

‘No. Pain is the body’s way of alerting you to injury and malfunction. It is a warning. The more pain you feel, the greater the warning. For example...’ Fabius tapped Torment against the Space Marine’s bare torso, eliciting a bellow of agony. The transhuman warrior convulsed in his bindings as an etheric torrent of pain ripsawed through him. ‘That was but a mere tingle, compared to what awaits you if you choose to test my patience. Do you understand, Kasra, *Shehan* of the Red Scimitars?’

The Space Marine hawked and spat. Acidic saliva hissed, eating through Fabius’ fleshcoat. ‘I see. You do not understand. Very well.’ Torment slid forward, at a lower angle this time. Again, a hoarse roar of pain. Fabius stepped back after a slow count of ten, the smoking head of the sceptre nestled in the crook of his arm like a contented pet. ‘Now?’ he asked. Ragged panting was the only reply. Fabius caught his hair and jerked his head up. Kasra truly was unconscious, this time. Annoyed, Fabius let his head fall.

‘Why do you do that?’

Fulgrim stood behind him, watching. The clone looked perplexed. Fabius frowned. ‘Do what?’

‘You are hurting him. Why?’
‘It is necessary.’

‘Why?’

Fabius’ frown deepened. ‘The quest for knowledge is rarely pleasant, Fulgrim. It often involves blood and pain. In this case, his.’

‘Do you… enjoy it?’

‘No.’

Fulgrim didn’t look happy. It was an odd thing, to see that face twisted up in such childish dismay. Even with all of his knowledge, the clone did not truly understand. Fulgrim – the real Fulgrim – had conducted experiments of his own on Chemos. Procedures meant to extend lifespan, and cure the various ailments, such as glowlung, which afflicted his adopted people. But those had had an obvious purpose. Perhaps that was it.

Fabius guided the clone away from the prisoner. ‘Rest assured, his suffering will not be extensive. Few choose to resist beyond the first touch of Torment.’

‘Do you have to kill him?’

‘He is our enemy, Fulgrim. He would kill us, and gladly, were he able, in the name of his Corpse-Emperor.’ Fabius laughed sourly. ‘Indeed, I have died at the hands of brutes like him more than I care to admit.’

‘You… died?’ Fulgrim looked horrified.

Fabius nodded. ‘Oh, yes. Several times in this millennium alone.’

‘Then how are you here?’

Fabius tapped the side of his head. ‘So long as my mind lives, it can inhabit a prepared body. As you are a clone, so too is this flesh I wear.’ He gestured to a row of nutrient tanks. Each contained a web of nerve tissue. ‘Cloned neural networks – my mind, at different stages of its development.’ He watched the nutrient pulses as they fed into the glistening strands of nerve tissue. There was something obscurely satisfying about watching such a process. ‘In the event of death, my mind, my knowledge, continues.’

Fulgrim frowned. ‘But they are not you.’

‘No, and yes. Once implanted in a compatible host, that host will think they are me, and thus will do as I would do. I am no less me than the me who stood in the temples of the Laer and scoured for secrets.’ He smiled in recognition of his own achievement. ‘They are based on the neural artifice of aeldari infinity circuit technology. It took me a century to grow them, from tissue cultures taken at regular intervals.’

Fulgrim looked at him. ‘Host?’

‘Well, yes. The obvious intention is that a cloned husk will be to hand, but, in the event such a thing isn’t possible, any suitable transhuman corpus will do. Igori and the others are fully aware of the requirements, and can perform the appropriate procedure, if necessary.’ He looked at Fulgrim. ‘My work will continue, whatever setbacks arise. Until it is finished, and I can rest.’

‘Was that why you made me?’ Fulgrim indicated his body. ‘My frame is superior to
yours, in every way. My mind processes information more quickly, my body is all but immortal – I know these things instinctively. Will you replace me, Fabius?’ It was not an accusation, so much as genuine curiosity, and for a moment, Fabius was taken aback. He laughed, to hide his unease.

‘The thought honestly never occurred to me. No, I have no desire to trade in my familiar surroundings, even for a superior form.’

‘Then why did you make me?’

Fabius hesitated. He looked away, studying Fulgrim’s distorted reflection in the polished surface of the nutrient tanks. In the end, he decided on honesty. ‘At first, it was to see if I could. Then, it was because I thought it was necessary.’ He let slip a bitter chuckle. ‘We were lost, in those days. Without true guidance. Reacting, instead of acting. Descending into barbaric excess, even as we shed all pretence of organisation and discipline. Without Fulgrim – without you – we were rudderless. Some tried to steer the ship, regardless, myself included. We failed.’

He looked at Fulgrim. ‘I created you to save us. As I created your brothers – Horus, Lorgar, even Angron. I thought that by giving our brothers back their fathers, I might halt the Legion Wars and unite us once more.’

‘Why?’

Again, Fabius hesitated. He smiled sadly. ‘I thought there was something worth saving. Now, I know better. We are failed experiments. All that remains is to learn what can be learned, and begin again.’

Fulgrim looked at his hands, watching the play of inhuman muscle beneath perfect flesh. ‘I am… a failure?’

Fabius looked at him. ‘No,’ he said quickly. ‘There may yet be use for you. I simply have not decided what it is.’

Fulgrim curled his fingers into fists. ‘I would lead them, if you let me. I can see how to do it, how it must be done. I can lead them to perfection, if you give me the chance.’

‘Your predecessor thought much the same.’

‘I am not him,’ Fulgrim said firmly. He looked at Fabius, violet eyes burning with intent – and need. ‘I read his words – the records of his deeds. I will never be him. I would not kill my brother. I would not betray my father. I will not succumb to such imperfection. Not once. Not again.’ The force of his words thrummed through Fabius, unsettling him. Here was the youthful Phoenician, come again. Here was the demigod he remembered kneeling before, on the fields of Chemos.

But there were oceans between that moment and this. Fabius had endured the storm such words conjured before, and though forceful, they had little power over him now. He shook his head. ‘Perhaps. There may soon come a day when we depart this vale of shadows together, you and I. And on that day, I may build a Legion for you, so that you might do as you were born to do.’ The thought had a certain appeal. He laughed. ‘Maybe my New Man needs a new Legion to safeguard him in his infancy, as we
safeguarded his predecessor. There is a certain poetry in that, I think.’

Even as he said it, he felt a sudden twitch of disquiet. The knot of pain in his stomach flared suddenly, digging its claws into the meat of him. He grimaced and braced himself against the examination slab. The chirurgeon hissed and a flush of pain inhibitors flooded his system, dulling the ache. He coughed. Blood speckled his lips. ‘Already,’ he murmured. Fulgrim reached for him.

‘Teacher?’

Fabius waved him back. ‘Yes. Nothing to worry about. It will pass. It is like an old friend, at this point. I almost welcome it.’ He looked at Fulgrim. ‘Pain concentrates the mind wonderfully. It is only in its excess that it becomes debilitating.’ He gestured to Kasra.

‘As our guest is soon to discover.’

Alkenex stood on the command deck, watching the stars of the Eastern Fringe slide by on the viewscreens. The stars were strange here, and full of horrors undreamt of, even in the Eye. Ghost ships drifted through the dark and quiet, emitting phantom signals from crews long dead. Eerie sonic pulses from the black reaches, like the radar screeches of some vast, unseen colony of chiropterans.

‘Strange is the night, eh, Palos?’ He glanced at his subordinate. Palos Gyr had come through the battle with Red Scimitars intact, and with new notches carved into the chest-plate of his armour.

Palos chuckled. ‘We are far beyond the Hyades now, brother.’

Alkenex smiled. The words belonged to an old poem. Or perhaps a song. Some tatter of words that had haunted the Remembrancers of the 28th Expedition, in more innocent times. He remembered how it had flown from one to the next, from singer to sculptor, from painter to dancer, like some outlandish mimetic virus, until it had at last extinguished itself in the frenzies of that final performance by the composer, Kynsca.

Some among his brothers held that those words were a message from somewhere else, though what that message might mean, and who it might be from, none could agree. Alkenex did not concern himself with such musings. He had missed Kynsca’s final performance, and the thought of it brought an exquisite ache to his soul, even now.

An interrogative blurt issued from the unmoving mouth of Bile’s strategium overseer. The crystal-faced creature twitched, as if in alarm. A moment later, it calmed. ‘What’s got into it?’ Palos muttered. His hand fell to his axe. He didn’t care for the creature. Alkenex couldn’t blame him. Fabius’ monsters could turn even the most depraved of stomachs.

‘Off hand, I’d say that.’ He pointed to one of the viewscreens. A black blotch, darker than the void around it, occupied the centre of the screen. He barked an order, and the image was magnified. A kilometres-long obelisk of some dark stone floated through the stars. It was blank of feature or ornamentation, smooth on all visible sides.
‘What in the name of the Phoenician is that?’ Palos asked.

‘The records call it the Ymga Monolith,’ Alkenex murmured, studying the celestial edifice. The immense obelisk seemed to draw in the light of the surrounding stars, as if it were not simply a structure but instead a hole in space and time. ‘Though as to why, I cannot say. It is a name with no story.’ It had existed since before man took to the stars, and would likely exist long after. Alkenex half-suspected that it was debris from some cosmic conflict far beyond the reckoning of humanity, or even the gods themselves.

The universe was older than they thought, and wilder by far. He himself had led expeditions into the crumbling remnants of xenos empires that had risen and fallen in time out of mind, and seen pictograms carved into the inner hollows of comets that depicted things beyond the conception of any human mind.

Time and space were part of the same incalculable ocean, swelling and receding, leaving flotsam and jetsam in their eternal wake. And it was that ocean that the Phoenix would burn away, when he had at last awoken from his slumber. Reduce it to steam and shadows, so that something new and better might rise in its place.

‘It looks… strange,’ Palos grunted. ‘Like it is there, but not. A mirage of starlight.’

‘It is real enough. But something about it baffles the ship’s sensors.’ Alkenex leaned forward, over the rail. ‘Fulgrim made mention of it, once. Apparently one of the two Forgotten Ones was said to have led an expedition to its black heart, in the early centuries of the Great Crusade. Though why he was out this far, and what he might’ve found, was never recorded.’ He frowned. ‘Probably for the best. The galaxy has devils enough without letting out whatever resides there.’

‘If you’re finished admiring the scenery, we have things to discuss,’ Merix said from behind them. Alkenex turned, restraining a flicker of annoyance. Merix stood before the hololith projector, studying schematics.

‘And what things might those be, Merix?’

‘Savona must be dealt with.’ Merix leaned through the holo-projection, thrusting his scarred head towards Alkenex. ‘She is actively working against us. She tried to kill me.’

‘Given what you’ve told me of her, I’m not surprised. She would have, sooner or later.’ Alkenex shrugged. ‘She may be working against us, or she may have simply seized an opportunity. Either way, I refuse to be distracted.’

Merix stepped back. Though his mouth was hidden behind his respirator, Alkenex could tell he was frowning. ‘She is more than a distraction.’

‘To you, perhaps. Not to me.’

‘And what of Arrian? Is he a distraction as well?’

Alkenex grunted. ‘I tested the World Eater. He is skilled.’

Merix’s eyes narrowed. ‘Can you beat him?’

‘No. But I can kill him.’ Alkenex smiled thinly. ‘I am not so arrogant as to demand that every battle be a thing of worth. Some are merely means to an end. Arrian must die, but I do not have to be the one who kills him. So long as his skull, and the information it
contains, is intact, I will accept a lesser death for him.’
Merix laughed harshly. ‘And how many will die, ensuring his lesser demise?’
‘As many as it takes.’ Alkenex gestured. ‘This is war, Merix. Warriors die in war.
They die to achieve the objectives of their betters. That was the first lesson Fulgrim
taught us, after our first rebirth. And it has served us well.’
‘And what is your objective? Your real one, I mean.’ Merix gave a rasping laugh.
‘Whatever you say, I do not think it is Eidolon’s.’
‘Careful, equerry. You overstep yourself.’
‘And so? We have always done so. That is the nature of our Legion.’
After a moment, Alkenex chuckled. ‘There is something in what you say. Fine. I
intend to kill Fabius Bile. Once and for all.’
‘You hate him. Why?’
Alkenex hesitated. Then, with a shrug, he said, ‘The simplest reason of all – envy.’
‘What could you possibly envy in that wretch?’ Merix asked incredulously. ‘The
colour of his cankers?’
Alkenex laughed softly. ‘No. I envy the love our father showed him. Fulgrim loved
Fabius first, and best. Oh, vainglorious fools like Lucius, or mad dogs like Eidolon, will
tell you different, but I know. Kasperos Telmar knew, and Grythan Thorn. Even that
brute Narvo Quin could see it, as plain as day.’ He peered down the length of his blade.
‘Lucius was his champion, Eidolon his greatest commander – but Fabius was his
_confidant_. Fabius understood him in ways the rest of us were never allowed to. And for
that, I envy him, and I hate him. And, Slaanesh willing, I will see him dead for it.’
‘If it is as you say, Fulgrim will not thank you for it.’
‘No.’ Alkenex ran the scalp along the blade again, polishing imperfections visible only
to him. ‘He will not.’ His smile widened. ‘But he will forgive me. He will see that it is
for the best.’
‘Or he will kill you where you kneel.’
Alkenex shrugged. ‘Either way, the Spider will precede me into hell. That is enough.’
‘You denied me battle. I am disappointed, Fabius.’ Diomat’s voice echoed through the
cavernous chamber. Its reverberations caused filth-encrusted carvings of cherubs to
slough from stony perches and tumble to the deck below, where they shattered into
pieces. ‘I felt the ship quake. Saw the enemy blazing through the void. What of your
promise?’
‘Forgive me, brother. There was little time to see to your release, in all the excitement.
In any event, it was soon done. They are eager, our kin, but not so skilled as all that.’
Fabius picked his way through the debris. The shattered remnants of several servitors
littered the nave of the chamber. Diomat had obviously vented his frustrations before
Fabius’ arrival. Something to be thankful for, perhaps.
His talk with Fulgrim had left him feeling unsettled. The proximity of a primarch, even
a cloned one, was harmful to his certainties. It made the impossible seem possible, and the foolish seem wise. He did not know why he had felt the need to seek out Diomat. Perhaps he simply sought the counsel of one, like him, who had witnessed ancient glories and follies first-hand. Or maybe he simply needed someone to confess to.

The Contemptor Dreadnought stood before one of the ornate observation ports, flexing his claws rhythmically. He turned from his contemplation of the filthy viewport. ‘I hear we have guests. And Flavius Alkenex, no less. One of the Phoenician’s young curs.’

Fabius frowned. ‘And how did you hear that?’

Diomat tapped the side of the sphere that passed for his head. ‘Forgive me. In my isolation, I have taken to eavesdropping on the internal vox-frequencies.’

Fabius grunted. ‘And what else have you heard?’

‘He means to dispose of you.’

‘I’d think him more of a fool than I already do, if he didn’t.’ Fabius came to stand beside the Dreadnought. ‘I have no doubt our brother Eidolon put him up to it.’

‘Eidolon?’ Diomat emitted a harsh rasp of metallic laughter. ‘That sounds like him.’

‘It sounds like all of us. Save, perhaps, you.’

Diomat turned slightly, gears and pistons groaning. ‘And what do you mean by that, brother? Another of your veiled insults?’

‘It is not an insult.’ Fabius hesitated. ‘Not this time, at least.’ He looked up at the ancient Dreadnought. At the pockmarked chassis and fading paintwork. The tarnished gilt, and the ruinous sigils carved into the ceramite plates by tormentors in centuries past. Like him, Diomat had endured much at the hands of their brothers. Like him, the Dreadnought bore the warriors of the Emperor’s Children little love. And yet…

Suddenly uncertain, Fabius ran a hand through his hair. Some of it came away in his fingers, and he felt a twinge somewhere inside. There was no pain. Not yet. But it would come. It always did. He looked at Diomat again. ‘It is not an insult,’ he said again. ‘Eidolon believes that he has found the missing gene-tithe. We are on our way to acquire it now. He wishes me to make a Legion for him.’

Diomat was silent for a moment. ‘And will you?’

‘I do not know, yet.’

Diomat looked back up at the viewport. ‘Eidolon must be chewing out his guts in anticipation. Kasperos Telmar used to speak of him, often, when he came to torment me in my sarcophagus. Eidolon wishes to be Lord Commander Primus once more. To lead a renewed Legion to what he sees as its destiny.’

‘As far as I can tell that means serving as Abaddon’s lackey.’

Diomat made a noise halfway between a grunt and sigh of creaking metal. ‘Why have you come, Fabius? Are you seeking absolution, or permission for something?’

Fabius hesitated. Was this the correct course? He pushed the thought aside. He needed to talk. To unburden himself. And Diomat was the only one who might truly understand, mad as he was. ‘There is something else. I found something on Harmony.
Someone.

Diomat did not look at him. ‘Who?’
‘Fulgrim.’

The Dreadnought’s baleful gaze tore itself from the stars and fell upon him. ‘What?’

The word echoed through Fabius like soft thunder.
‘A clone. One of mine. Uncorrupted.’
‘Everything is corrupt. All that we were has become rotten to the bone.’
‘Not this. Not him. I am certain of it, now.’ Fabius closed his eyes. His skull ached with the weight of his worry. ‘Do you understand, Diomat? Do you see the possibility before me. Before us?’

The great mechanical claws curled into fists and for a moment, Fabius wondered whether the Dreadnought intended to use them on him. Instead, Diomat turned and began to trudge away, towards the end of the nave, where the altar might once have stood. ‘Is this some trick, Fabius? Some torment you’ve devised to plague my mind?’

‘If it is, it afflicts me as well, brother. No, I come to you, because I can go to no one else. I have long wondered why I spared you, Diomat. I have no real use for you. But now, I think it is because you remind me of what was once possible. Of the ideal that once drove us. The Hero of Walpurgis. The last true brother.’ He laughed sourly. ‘I’d wager that’s why Kasperos kept you alive as well. Like digging at an open wound.’

Diomat reached out and crushed the skull of one of the restraint-servitors. It squalled piteously as it died, its voice echoing from the vox-grille in its reinforced torso. Diomat watched it slump over, and turned. ‘Aye. I am an open wound. A knot of agony. And may you all suffer well and long, as I have suffered. I died at Isstvan, brother. All that is left of me is a death-scream, echoing forever.’ He pointed a claw wet with blood and oil at Fabius. ‘You are ridiculous, brother. After all that you have done, and will yet do, you dare come to me speaking of newborn primarchs and Legions risen from the ashes? To what end? So that we might be absolved of our crimes?’

‘Not absolution. A new beginning.’ Fabius spat the words. ‘A clean slate, Diomat.’
‘Nothing that comes to fruition here, in this realm, is clean.’
‘He is perfect, Diomat. He is… innocent. He is Fulgrim, as he once was. As he should always have been. With him, with the gene-tithe, I might be able to rebuild the Emperor’s Children. I might be able to save us from the Phoenician’s madness… and my own.’

Diomat said nothing. The Dreadnought stood, watching him silently. Fabius grunted. ‘Will you accompany me? We are invading a world that even Eidolon fears. It will be dangerous. Possibly even deadly.’
‘Perhaps I no longer wish to die.’

Fabius studied the expressionless facade of the Dreadnought. ‘Then don’t. Come with me, Diomat. Help me retrieve our future – our past. Help me guide it, as you guided so many aspirants in better days. We can begin again, with the lessons of the past firmly in
mind.’ Fabius held out his hand to the Dreadnought. ‘Help me save our Legion.’

Diomat laughed. A grinding, wheezing sound that put Fabius in mind of a death rattle.
‘There is no beginning here, Fabius. No ending. Only the slow crawl of oblivion. The
sooner you learn that, the sooner you will come to see what I have seen.’ He gestured
with a claw. ‘But no matter. Perhaps I will see something new, under the sun of this
world, before I meet my end.’ He looked down at Fabius.
‘Yes, I will accompany you.’
CHAPTER NINETEEN

TOMB WORLD

The broken bodies of Red Scimitars lay on examination slabs throughout the apothecarium. Most had already been harvested, but he’d ordered some set aside for more in-depth study. This he proceeded to do, taking scalpel and laser torch to battle-scarred meat. The chirurgeon lent itself to his efforts, bone saws whirring.

It was a soothing sound, that whirr. It was the sound of progress. One could measure advancement by the sound of the blade striking bone. They were making good time. But the Eastern Fringe was vast, and they sought one world among millions. Alkenex had barely stirred from the command deck for days. As far as Fabius was concerned, he could stay there. Wolver made regular reports over coded frequencies, keeping him abreast of their course.

Fabius glanced towards the tertiary strategerium in its antechamber. Hololithic star-maps flickered in and out of sight, as the cogitators constantly updated the sensory information. He would soon have a predictive destination, whatever Alkenex’s intentions. Once he knew where they were going, he could dispense with Eidolon’s lackey at his leisure. Until then, he could afford to make no move. Alkenex was the only one who knew where the gene-tithe was, and until he had its location, he couldn’t risk any harm befalling the prefect.

Savona was in hiding, skulking through the lower decks. Khorag and the others were keeping themselves occupied with their own studies, and out of the way. Igori was holding the packs to their territory, and Alkenex had learned better than to disturb them.

The status quo would hold for now. But the moment would come. He simply had to be ready. And quick. One of his hands began to tremble slightly. A muscle tremor, one of the early signs of the blight. He watched it until the palsy faded. ‘Stress,’ he grunted.

He bent back to his task. He set aside his blades and caught hold of the exposed
ribcage. Contrary to popular opinion, it was not one solid piece, but several. There was a surprising amount of flexibility to a Space Marine’s internal workings. The transhuman body was a work of art. He strained for a moment, and then the bones parted with a sharp crack. He had tools for this task, but he preferred using his hands, when he could.

A hiss of disgust caused him to look up at Kasra, who attempted to stare a hole through him. The Space Marine had said nothing for days, hanging from his upright slab. As if silence were the only weapon remaining to him. And perhaps it was. Fabius couldn’t help but respect such determination, frustrating as it was.

He smiled ruefully. ‘Your thoughts are as clear to me as my own, Kasra. You think this a desecration, when in truth, it is anything but. This is a sacred task, and one I take seriously. Our bodies are storehouses of knowledge, to which only a select few hold the keys. I would be remiss in my duties if I did not take every opportunity to add to that knowledge. Think of what wisdom might be lost, for want of study.’

He turned back to the body and selected an augur loupe from the tray of tools nearby. The eyepiece hooked snugly into the cranial ports on the left side of his skull. Microfilaments extended through the neural linkways inside the meat of his brain, and a free-floating hololithic projection flickered into being, projected from the side of the loupe. The lenses of the eyepiece clicked as Fabius scanned the body. He picked up a section of harvested progenoid and studied it more closely.

‘Gene-markers from… multiple sources. Curious, that.’ Fabius examined the sample more closely as the chirurgeon continued its labours, flensing carapace from bone and cracking the latter so as to expose runnels of marrow for further testing. ‘The progenoid gland displays minute deviations from the assumed source… Hybrid? Possibly. Further study is essential. If they have perfected the art of hybridisation, it may prove a welcome addition to my own research, as well as a troubling harbinger as to the current state of the Imperium.’

More samples were harvested, collected and catalogued. The body was broken down into its component parts with an alacrity that even he found startling, at times. The chirurgeon had learned well the art of bodily disassembly and performed its function with an ease and eagerness that was unsettling. The medicae harness clicked and hummed to itself as it worked, recording every moment for later study. Though whether this was for his benefit or its own, he was not entirely certain. He looked up at Kasra.

‘You are an enigma, my friend. And one I intend to unlock. Despite the pull of entropy, it appears the Adeptus Mechanicus has made certain advancements in the art of zygote cultivation.’ He gestured to the body. ‘How many foundings has it been, since the first, I wonder? How often have they changed the formula, in order to avoid watering it down overmuch?’ He paused. ‘I shall have to make a point of investigation. Perhaps there is something useful to be gained from interjecting myself into the process.’
He looked at Kasra. ‘Tell me – what founding is your Chapter? Fifth? Tenth?’
Kasra didn’t answer. Fabius hadn’t expected him to. He clucked his tongue in disappointment. ‘I do not enjoy this, you know. I find little pleasure in the pain of another. The senselessness of it offends me. Your agony is a distraction. The sooner you have accepted your limitations in this matter, the sooner we can both move on to more productive uses of our time.’
‘My – my most humble apologies for this waste of your time, Manflayer,’ his captive panted. The Space Marine grinned fiercely. ‘I am sure that I will not endure for more than another few weeks, at most.’
Fabius frowned. In truth, he was already regretting the time he’d wasted keeping Kasra alive. The Red Scimitar refused to reveal anything. He seemed no more sensitive to pain than a brute animal, and had ceased screaming, out of spite. ‘Your bravado is commendable, if frustrating. Answer my question.’
Kasra’s grin did not waver. ‘Go to whatever hell you were vomited up from.’
Fabius removed the loupe and set it aside. He stood, anger boiling through him. It was always the same. Brutes and fools. Barbarians and shamans. They created more problems than they solved. The stubborn beast-flesh, creeping back and making a mockery of mankind’s progress. Of his progress.
He picked up Torment. ‘Fitting words, I think, for your epitaph. I see now, like all your mongrel kind, you prize your honour more than your life, and you will hold to it, unto death. Thus, I see no reason to waste further time bandying words with a savage. Not when I can get all the information I need from the data-banks in your panoply.’ He lifted Torment. ‘And from your carcass.’
He swung the sceptre down, intending to crush Kasra’s skull. Instead, the Space Marine ripped his arm free of the restraint, hand flashing out to catch Torment’s head on his palm. He grimaced in agony, but managed to free his other arm, jerking forward as he did so. Startled, Fabius stumbled back.
The wounded warrior toppled from the slab as Torment was wrenched away. He was on his feet a moment later, and lunging for Fabius’ throat. Fabius scrambled for his needler as his captive’s blunt fingers clawed at his jugular. He was slammed backwards, into a tray table, upending numerous instruments of inquiry. The scalpels and corers fell to the floor with a clatter. A big fist crashed against his face, scrambling his thoughts.
Torment slashed out, but missed its mark. The Red Scimitar tackled him backwards, and they upended an examination slab, ripping it from the deck. Kasra caught his wrist and forced Torment away. The chirurgeon struck out, cutting and slicing, but the Space Marine drove another blow into the side of Fabius’ head, knocking him flat and bouncing his skull off of the deck. The chirurgeon, linked to his perceptions, spasmed in confusion. Fabius tried to roll away, to get to his feet, but suddenly found a broken length of restraint cable looped about his throat.
The Red Scimitar hauled back on his improvised garrotte, pressing one knee against
the back of the chirurgeon as he did so. ‘Would that I could pay you back for every hour of pain you have inflicted on me, butcher,’ Kasra growled. ‘But unlike you, I will be quick.’

Fabius clawed at the torn metal biting into his neck, and tried to reach Torment, where it had rolled from his grip. Then, abruptly, the pressure was gone. He toppled forward, coughing. He turned, and saw the Red Scimitar struggling in Fulgrim’s grip. The primarch held the Space Marine’s head between his palms.

As Fabius watched, Fulgrim slowly crushed his captive’s skull, with no more effort than a man might smash an egg. Blood ran between the clone’s fingers and dappled the deck. Kasra’s body twitched once, and then fell still. Fulgrim lowered the body, a dazed look on his face. ‘He was trying to hurt you,’ he said. ‘I did not mean to kill him.’ He looked down at his hands, in apparent bewilderment.

Fabius hauled himself to his feet. ‘How do you feel?’ he asked, voice raspy.

‘Sickened. But also… elated.’ Fulgrim tore one of the sleeves from his suit and cleaned his hands fastidiously. ‘Is this how you feel, when you kill?’

‘Sometimes.’ Fabius rubbed his throat and looked down at the corpse. ‘More so when it’s someone trying to kill me.’ He looked at Fulgrim. ‘You… did well. I am proud of you.’

Fulgrim didn’t reply. Instead, he stared down at the body. ‘He is not one of us. He is like us, but not.’

‘He belongs to one of your brothers.’

Fulgrim looked at him. ‘Which one?’ There was an eagerness in the words that Fabius found disconcerting. ‘Can I see them?’

‘No. No, they are dead. Or as good as.’ Fabius hurried to thwart this line of questioning. It would not do for Fulgrim to get it into his head to seek out his brothers. The ramifications of that were impossible to measure. Fulgrim frowned.

‘I think you are lying, teacher.’

‘And if I am, it is for your own good. This universe is a swamp of horrors, Fulgrim. If you wish to survive it, you must listen to me. I have only your best interests at heart.’ Fabius hesitated. Then, with a grimace, he reached out to the towering clone. ‘I only want you to be safe. Safe to meet your full potential.’

Fulgrim looked down at Fabius’ hand, as it touched his arm, and then at his face. ‘Why? What am I to do? You have not said, and you will not explain what little I do know. You say you made me for a purpose, but you will not let me fulfil that purpose. You will not even let me out of this apothecarium.’

‘And yet you leave it anyway,’ Fabius snapped, drawing his hand back. ‘You have disobeyed me in that, at least, and more than once.’ He tapped a control on his vambrace. His armour’s systems were synched to those of the apothecarium, and at the tap of a button, a plethora of pict-feeds snapped to life on the viewscreens that studded the walls. On each of them, Fulgrim was visible – creeping through access tunnels, or
striding silently through the darkened corridors of the ship, or even fraternising with the huddled vatborn. ‘I told you before, boy, I see everything.’

Fulgrim drew himself up to his full height. ‘Then you will have seen that none know of my presence, save the vatborn. I have remained hidden, even from those I know would welcome me. My sons…’

‘They are not your sons!’ Fabius drove his fist into an examination slab, cracking it. The chirurgeon clattered in dismay, and he resisted its attempts to calm him. The anger was necessary. He could not allow himself to be cowed by the being before him. ‘They are his. Your sons yet slumber, their potential hidden away. But I will find them and I will bring them to you. I will give you a new Legion, but you must give me time.’

Time. It always came down to time. He needed time. More time than the universe seemed willing to give him. Time to fix what was broken, to perfect the imperfect. To fix himself, so that he might see to the rest. Physician, heal thyself. But there was no time. No one understood. No one listened. Fulgrim – the original Fulgrim – had never listened. Had always done as he wished, whatever the cost.

‘I do not want a new Legion. I want to fix the one that is broken.’ Fulgrim leaned towards him, and Fabius tried to draw back, but to no avail. Fulgrim caught him by the shoulders, and Fabius felt his hearts stutter with an old, familiar arrhythmia. Fulgrim was perfect, and his perfection burned like the heat of the sun. ‘I can fix them, teacher. Fabius. I can teach them, as you have taught me. I can pull them back from the brink, if you but let me.’ His eyes glowed with determination as he spoke, and Fabius felt each word like a blow. He had almost forgotten the sheer power of a primarch’s voice.

‘Even now, they can be saved. I see it in them. I see the flicker of ancient fires – of honour, and heroism. What they were, they can be again, if you but let me go. Set me loose, Fabius, and I shall free your brothers – my sons – from bondage. I can do this. I know it, as surely as I know my name.’

‘You only know your name because I told it to you,’ Fabius snarled, shoving himself back and away. He stumbled over Kasra’s body, and staggered back, against the overturned examination slab. Fulgrim made to follow, but Fabius thrust Torment between them. ‘You only know what you know because I put it into your head. And still you question me? Still you defy me? Why can you not see that this is all for your own good?’

He realised he was screaming, even as the words left his mouth. He turned away, at last allowing the chirurgeon to do its work. The insect-like arms folded over him, as the medicae harness hissed in satisfaction. His anger faded as the chemicals flooded his system. He had not lost his temper in decades.

Fulgrim was staring at him. There was no expression on the clone’s face. Fabius tried to think of something – anything – to say. But no words came to him. Fulgrim broke the silence. ‘I hear you, teacher. And I understand.’

‘No. You do not.’ Fabius said it flatly. ‘Without a Legion – a loyal one – at your back,
you will be easy meat for your enemies. For our enemies. Once they know of you, they
will not rest until you are dead, or worse. Everything I do is to protect you. To save you,
so that you might save others.’
‘I do not require protection,’
‘No. Perhaps not. Perhaps it is time. But I – ah.’
A warning klaxon sang out, echoing through the apothecarium. The lumens flashed
through the spectrum, settling on red. Alarms sounded in the tertiary strategerium. Pict-
feeds flickered to void-view. ‘It appears as if we have arrived. I must go to the
command deck.’
Fabius pointed Torment at Fulgrim. ‘You will remain here, until I say otherwise. Until
it is time for you to meet your destiny. Will you do this?’
Fulgrim frowned, but nodded. ‘I will. I swear.’
Fabius smiled. ‘Good.’ He turned to leave. ‘This is the day I change the ending of our
story, Fulgrim. This is the day I finally fix the mistakes of the past. My mistakes, and
yours. And you will thank me, when all is said and done.’

Merix stood alone on the command deck. He watched the servitors at work without
really seeing them. Everything hurt, and he was trying to find something worthwhile in
the pain. The pale shades of Neverborn clustered about him, drinking eagerly from the
pall of agony that infused him. They whispered to him, trying to catch his attention, but
he refused to listen. They were weak creatures, parasites, and he would not lower
himself to treat with them. Not yet. Not until the torment of his body became
unbearable.

Then, perhaps. Perhaps he would give in, and shed his old flesh for something new. A
snake, shedding its scales, as the Phoenician had done. Even as the Chief Apothecary
did. Let the old hurts and failures slough away, to be forgotten. To become something
new and better, that was a good dream. He looked at Wolver. ‘In our own ways, we all
grope towards perfection, don’t you think?’

As ever, the strategium overseer didn’t reply. He wasn’t even sure if the creature was
aware of his presence, save in the most general fashion. Merix grunted and flexed his
cybernetic hand. Strange muscle tissue swelled and twitched, knotted up amidst the
rusty mechanisms. He suspected the new tissue was the source of the ache. It had
returned sensation to the limb, but only pain. Tiny daemons, unseen by anyone but him,
clung to it, and played among the pistons and gears. He shook them off, knowing as he
did so that they would only return to torment him later.

But perhaps not for long. When the Legion was restored, when the Third marched
once more as a singular body, perhaps his daemons would seek more pleasant
entertainments. The need in him that drew them would be quenched, then. He could
move forward, without leaving behind all that he was.

‘You must draw out his fangs… drain the poison… Only then will you heal…’
The voice thrust itself through the fug of murmurings, insistent and loud. Merix twitched and looked around, trying to spot its owner. For a moment, he saw nothing. Then a pale shape moved across a nearby viewscreen, turning and spinning in a mad dance. As he watched in growing alarm, it danced from one screen to the next, growing larger or smaller with no seeming rhyme or reason.

He could not see its face, only a mass of hair, and horns of glossy black, veined with red, rose over a narrow skull. Eyes like crimson mirrors met his own, wherever he looked, and the hull creaked beneath the weight of its hooves. It reached towards him with gilded claws, and suddenly it was not on the screens but behind him, talons scraping gently across his chest-plate as it pressed itself against him.

‘Look at me... look at you... all because we wished to become what we were meant to be,’ it sang softly. Its voice was like music, soft and insistent. ‘The future ate us, and we stepped deeper into its mouth...’

‘Who are you?’ Merix asked. He did not move. ‘Who do you serve? Are you one of the Phoenician’s consorts, come to test my worth? If so, know that I have no patience for riddles in the dark. Make yourself known.’

‘I have not come to tease and tantalise you down thorny paths for the amusement of the Phoenician,’ it murmured, too close. Its scent filled his senses, drowning out everything else. ‘The path... He must be held to the path. Or all is lost.’

‘What path? What will be lost?’ he demanded, trying to turn. But its claws tightened, sinking through his armour as if it were not there. Sinking all the way to his heart. He froze.

‘You must find it. You must draw the poison out. He cannot go back. None of us can. The only safety lies deeper in the future’s jaws. But not too deep. Be bold. But not too bold, lest your heart’s blood runs cold.’ Its claws drifted upwards, catching his throat. ‘Look. Listen. See.’

Merix realised that he was no longer alone on the command deck. Alkenex, Palos and Fabius had arrived. But he could not move – could not speak to them. Alarms were sounding. A clatter rose up from the crew, filling the air. On the screens, in the void, something waited.

A world hung grey and dour in the emptiness. The system was all but empty of heavenly bodies. Even the stars were few and far between, here. But there was light, of sorts, hanging in the firmament. A sun, lacking in all colour, casting a cold light across a vast and impossible gulf. Merix felt something in him cringe at the thought of being touched by that light. ‘The sun appears to be artificial,’ Fabius said, as if from a great distance. ‘It’s nothing more than a vast mechanism for capturing excess energy from somewhere and relaying it back to the planet – like an arrangement of celestial mirrors, reflecting light and magnifying heat. Ingenious.’

‘And that is important why?’ Alkenex said. ‘I do not care about the sun. Only about the planet.’ He snapped an order, and the view of the planet was magnified. The sensor
feed sputtered, as if in protest. A debris belt of ice and shattered rock circled the grey world in a slow waltz. Light from the false sun glinted on the thin sheets of ice, and sprang out and away, to be swallowed up by the dark.

Ghostly images peopled the planet’s orbit – the echoes of ships been and gone, Merix thought. The data-feeds registered them, sending up alerts that then fell silent as the echo faded, or the *Vesalius* passed the limit of the signal. ‘What are they?’ he croaked.

‘Sensor echoes. Something about this place is trapping them here.’ Fabius glanced at him. ‘You look ill, Merix. Is something amiss?’ He paused. ‘Something new, I should say.’

The Neverborn tightened its grip about his heart, as if warning him to silence. ‘I am fine,’ he said. Was it afraid of the Chief Apothecary? If so, it was wiser than most Neverborn he’d encountered.

‘Well, if you’re dying, please do so quietly. Flavius and I are discussing strategy.’

‘We discuss nothing. We are here. These are the coordinates Eidolon provided, and there is our destination. What we seek is here.’

‘Your faith is impressive, especially since our sensors can’t even be sure that’s a planet, rather than a semi-spherical confluence of solar gas.’

‘The Lord Commander Primus would not lie, Spider. Unlike you.’

‘Oh, I assure you, he’s quite adept at it, Flavius. His very existence is a lie of my creation, and he has ever been eager to forget the part I played in conjuring him up.’

Merix was only half listening to their argument. For all Alkenex’s bluster, he would make no move before he was ready. And Fabius knew it. They were like two curs, snarling at one another from opposite sides of a fence. Instead, he tried to concentrate on the voices that echoed up from the vox frequency, whispering warnings and pleas to whoever might hear them. Not all the voices were human, or in a language he understood.

‘This is the black ground, the cremation field of the universe, where a thousand civilisations have their end,’ the Neverborn whispered, stroking his cheek with a gilded claw. ‘These voices are but ashes, caught on a cosmic wind.’

For a moment, it seemed as if all the voices became as one – a single voice, calling up out of deep time, in invitation or perhaps warning. A single voice, made from an infinity of voices, all bent to the same purposes. A hundred thousand ancient signals, hijacked by a single will. It whispered up to the *Vesalius*, and Merix could hear the frigate whispering back, revealing its secrets to whatever waited on the world below.

‘We are here in his name, Spider – do not forget that,’ Alkenex said. ‘We are here in the name of the Third. Now go make ready – I want you ready for sub-orbital insertion before the next cycle.’

‘Are you not coming with me, Flavius?’ Fabius asked.

Alkenex laughed. ‘And why would I do that? You have plenty of swords at your disposal. Mine will make no difference.’ He smiled. ‘Besides, someone must watch the
ship. Just in case more of those milk-blooded cousins of ours come sniffing along our trail.’ He gestured to Palos. ‘Palos will go with you, to make sure you come back in one piece.’ He drew his sword and pointed it lazily at Fabius. ‘Now, be a good dog and go collect what we came for. I will be here when you get back.’

Fabius looked as if he were considering arguing. Then, with a shrug, he turned away. ‘Please yourself, Flavius. But do remember that we are on the same side. I would hate for there to be any accidents, this late in our renewed acquaintance.’

Merix watched him depart. Something touched him on the hand. He looked up into a mournful face, androgynous, but somehow familiar. A moment later it vanished, and he heard only the hollow echo of fading hooves. Something in its eyes, as black and as empty as the void, stayed with him. A message, or a warning. The ache in his hand grew worse. He cleared his throat.

‘I do not trust him.’

Alkenex looked at him. ‘No. Nor do I.’

‘We should ensure that we have full control of the ship when he returns.’ He said it without thinking, and wondered if he was doing as the Neverborn wished. The little ones had scattered, when the other had approached – a sure sign that it was more powerful than they. Would it reward him for this? Or was this merely another game, played by distant immortals? Perhaps it didn’t matter, so long as the goal was accomplished.

Alkenex laughed. ‘If he returns.’

Merix clenched his hand. ‘He will. And we must be ready for him.’

Fabius gripped the rail of the gantry, and looked down at the staging area. Mutants were everywhere in their hundreds, yowling and snarling at one another. They all wore similar tattered uniforms and scavenged gear, and the weapons they clutched had seen better centuries. Pack-leaders fought brutal duels among long-empty supply containers, seeking to win the right to accompany the Pater Mutatis on his expedition.

Atop a stack of containers, an eyeless, slug-pale creature kept time on a rawhide drum, accompanied by the whirling, shrieking forms of several androgynous creatures. Their flesh had been daubed with crude war paint, made from oil, blood and char, and their tangled manes had been greased into vibrant spikes with corpse-fat. Bestial priests, clad in makeshift cassocks and wearing masks made from flayed flesh, wandered among the gathered mutants, growling primitive blessings.

‘Ave Pater Mutatis… Ave Pater Mutatis…’

Fabius closed his eyes, letting their prayers wash over him. It was a heady thing, that responsibility. The few stable strains among them owed their existence to his idle tinkering. Only through his kindness did they live, and strive. Only through his kindness would they continue to do so. Whatever their origins, these were the natural inheritors of the galaxy. The end result of unregulated exposure to raw entropy.
'They are beautiful, in their way, I suppose,' he said. He turned. ‘Wouldn’t you agree, Saqqara?’

The Word Bearer stood silently behind him, features hidden behind the crimson plates of his helm. Arrian and Igori waited nearby, watching the proceedings with interest. ‘They are the true children of Chaos,’ Saqqara said, after a moment. ‘Though they worship one at odds with that notion.’

Fabius smiled. ‘What is a god but the inconceivable made manifest? To them, we are inconceivable. Indescribable. Angels and daemons. You, yourself, said that I am as much a god as those names you assign such power. Which is to say, no sort of god at all. And thus, equally deserving of worship.’

‘A blasphemous thought.’

Fabius looked at Saqqara. ‘Funny words, coming from one who consorts with daemons. As I recall, Erebus was quite the one for heresies of all sorts.’

Saqqara stiffened. Fabius leaned close. ‘In fact, I have often thought that he did not send you and your brothers after me to punish me for my heresy, so much as to make greater use of it. Before our falling out, both he and Kor Phaeron were the beneficiaries of my gene-forges. Your Legion survives intact thanks only to my good will.’

‘The gods guide us where they will,’ Saqqara said.

‘And they guided you to me, Word Bearer. What does that say about them?’

Saqqara fell silent. Fabius turned away, satisfied. He paused, as Saqqara said, ‘It says that the path they intend for me is thornier than most. Only through great trials may the soul find its true worth. You would do well to remember that.’

Fabius sighed, but said nothing. He had tried, early on, to break the Word Bearer, mentally and spiritually. To make him more pliable. More useful. Instead, Saqqara had remained obstinate. His faith was a rock, upon which Fabius could only sharpen his wit.

Down below, three of his specialist overseers were making their way through the crowds, hauling what he’d come for behind them. The overseers were repurposed combat servitors, their numerous limbs ending in electroshock prods, steel whips and syringe-pumps. They ground forward on heavy tracks, venting exhaust from the ports on their backs. Their torsos spun, allowing them to ply their whips and prods with ease.

Each had a heavy length of chain hooked to their chassis. The other end of each chain was connected to the collar of a massive war-mutant, which padded in their wake. Three times the height of a Space Marine, and twice as heavy. Saqqara grunted in disgust.

‘Ugly things.’

‘Utilitarian, I would say. Their base genetic stock was derived from the natives of heavy-gravity worlds, and teased into something utterly unique.’ Fabius spoke with pride. ‘The careful application of certain psycho-surgery techniques and the insertion of a lessened form of gene-seed resulted in extra layers of muscle and insulating fat.’

Each of the creatures was clad in crudely forged battleplate, their vaguely simian skulls sealed in iron cages, studded with sensors and stim-pumps. Thick tangles of
cortical implants spilled down their hunched backs and thick shoulders. The implants were a more advanced version of the Nucerian cruciamen – adapted to purpose, after many centuries of trial and error. Combined with the stimulants, which were auto-injected by remote signal, the implants served to drive the mutants into a state of incandescent frenzy. The huge, crushing mauls each mutant carried could smash through bulkheads and vehicle hulls alike.

‘They can shrug off injuries that would cripple a Space Marine, and, once unleashed, will fight until death claims them,’ Fabius went on, warming to his topic. ‘The perfect spearhead for any assault, if I do say so myself.’

He had learned a valuable lesson from the expedition to the craftworld. They would go in force, this time. An army, to seize and hold whatever was to be found.

‘I still question your decision to leave me behind,’ Arrian said. The World Eater joined him at the rail. ‘Surely Khorag, or even Skalagrim…’

‘No. I may require Khorag’s expertise, and Skalagrim must go.’ Fabius had not bothered to share those reasons, though he could see the question in Arrian’s eyes. ‘You are the only one I can trust to offset Alkenex. It would be unfortunate if he decided to take control of the ship while I was planet side. With you here, he may not be tempted.’

‘Or he might seize the moment, and strike while only one of us is around.’ Arrian sighed. ‘Which you could well be hoping for.’

Fabius smiled. ‘I trust you will handle yourself with discretion and courage.’

‘And if I have to kill him?’

‘Then do so with a minimum of disturbance. I want the ship in one piece when it comes time to depart.’ He paused. ‘Kill Merix as well, if it comes to it. And any of the Twelfth Millennial who side with them. Separate the wheat from the chaff, all in one go.’

Arrian nodded. ‘It will be done, Chief Apothecary.’

‘Of that, I am certain. Igori – come here.’ Fabius stepped aside, and gestured to her, as Arrian turned to leave. She joined him at the edge of the platform. ‘You are wondering why I asked you here, I gather. I can read your face as easily as I might read a medical treatise.’

Igori frowned. ‘You are taking the Twins again.’

‘I am. But no others. The rest of you will remain here. Arrian must have an army, if it comes to it. And that army is your kin, and whatever dregs from the lower decks they can rouse to a war-footing at short notice.’

‘And what of me? Am I to lead this army?’ She did not sound excited at the prospect, as she might once have. She was angry at being left behind again. His creations seemed to possess a universal stubbornness, whatever else.

‘No,’ Fabius said. ‘I have a greater task for you.’ He turned her attentions to the hololithic projection and the pict-feed from the chamber. Fulgrim sat at its centre, cross-legged, his features beautiful in their repose. Igori gasped. Even at the distance of a pict-
feed, the impact of a primarch was substantial. Fabius watched her, noting the dilation of her pupils and her increased respiration. He filed the observations away, for later consideration.

‘What… is he?’ She looked at Fabius, almost accusingly. ‘Is he one of us?’

‘No. He is both greater and lesser than you. But he is also young, and prone to folly. I fear what he may get up to, in my absence. I would have you watch him. See to it that he comes to no harm, and harms no one. Indeed, see to it that none know he even exists.’

She drew back, frowning. ‘He is important?’

‘Perhaps. Only time will tell.’ He looked at her. ‘Time, and you.’ He caught her chin and lifted her face. ‘I deliver him into your charge, Igori. Guard him well.’

She was silent, for a moment. Then, softly, she said, ‘I will, Benefactor. By blood and bone, I will keep him from harm, whatever the cost.’

Fabius smiled.

‘I know you will, my dear. That is why the task could fall to no other.’
The trio of gunships pierced the thick scrum of mist, engines whining like eager hounds. Noxious gases lashed the hulls, stripping the paintwork and corroding the ornamental gilding. Beyond the lashing winds and toxic clouds, nothing sought to bar their descent. No weapons systems, no aircraft, not even a sensor sweep. It was as if the planet were nothing more than it appeared – a cold, dead husk. Empty even of ruins or the barest sign of habitation or vegetation.

The gunships landed with a chorus of dull thumps, their landing gear striking the firmly packed, silvery sands of the planet’s surface. Two belonged to Alkenex. The third was Butcher-Bird. The disembarkation bays opened with a grinding of gears, disgorging their ramps. Mutants spilled out onto the surface of the silent world in a riot of baying, shrieking shapes. More quietly, but not by much, came the Emperor’s Children. Their numbers were divided evenly between those loyal to Alkenex and the warriors of the 12th Millennial.

Savona, accompanied by Bellephus, led the latter down their ramps. She had been roused from hiding by Fabius to serve as another pair of eyes. He could not count on old loyalties to protect him, as he had on Lugganath. Too many among both parties of Emperor’s Children had reason to want him dead. But Savona’s presence might offset Palos Gyr’s influence, somewhat.

The bulky, eyeless warrior seemed willing enough to defer to Fabius’ authority, but it was for the sake of appearances. Fabius watched him organise the disembarking procedures with bellows and swift clouts, pummelling both Space Marines and mutants alike, when necessary. ‘That one is going to be trouble,’ Skalagrim said.

Fabius and his followers stood a short distance away from the gunships, conducting a sensor sweep of their surroundings. ‘Of course he is. That’s why Flavius sent him.’
Fabius held up his auspex, trying to understand what it was telling him. ‘This makes little sense. It’s as if there’s not even a planet here. Saqqara?’

‘The same,’ the Word Bearer said, studying his own auspex. ‘Something is scrambling our sensors. Atmospheric distortion, perhaps.’

‘No. Can’t you feel it? That wind isn’t natural.’ Khorag held up a handful of shimmering sand. He let it dribble between his fingers. ‘Neither is this sand. It’s made of metal.’ The wind caught the loose grains and carried them away. For a moment, they almost seemed to take the shape of a skeletal countenance, before dispersing.

‘We all saw that, yes?’ Skalagrim asked.

‘Yes. Something has a sense of humour.’ Fabius lowered his device. The ground was spongy beneath his feet, with too much give to be as solid as it appeared. He sank to one knee and thrust his hand into the sand. He felt no resistance. It was as if the sand were all that there was. When he retracted his arm, it was covered in metallic grains. They slid across his armour, scraping the remnants of old paint from the ceramite. He examined his arm more closely, magnifying the optical feed of his helmet to microscopic levels. ‘Fascinating. They’re consuming the organic effluvia staining the ceramite. Paint, mould, even skin cells.’

‘They’re eating us, you mean,’ Skalagrim said with disgust.

‘Not for some time. They are lazy little beasts. Much like you, eh, Paz’uz?’ Khorag laughed and poured more of the false sand into his palm. His beast cavorted about his legs, snuffling and slavering. Its acidic perspiration hissed and popped where it dripped onto the sand. ‘It would take them years to threaten the integrity of our battleplate.’ The Grave Warden jerked his head towards the mutants. ‘And at least a few months to eat through the environmental suits our malformed companions wear.’

Fabius frowned. His battleplate’s enhanced sensory apparatus was being tested to its limits trying to define his surroundings. There were no weather patterns, no landmasses or oceans. Just the strange metal sand and the toxic gases, which he suspected were a by-product of the sand. The glimmerings of a theory whispered in his mind, and he altered the parameters of his sensor sweep. A moment later, he gave a bark of laughter.

‘Solar radiation,’ he said, looking around. ‘That’s what’s interfering with our sensors.’ He gestured to the sand. ‘This isn’t sand. It is an untold number of nanomachines – minuscule solar cells. The clouds and the wind are some form of by-product of the energy absorption, and so too is the interference, I’d wager.’

‘But where is it getting that sort of power? The only source of radiation would be the sun, but—’ Skalagrim began. He stopped. ‘Unless – no.’ He looked down. ‘Impossible.’

‘Oh-ho, not impossible. Merely improbable.’ Khorag clapped his hands free of sand. ‘If so, then we are not on the planet’s surface. There is no surface.’

‘Not as we’d recognise it, no,’ Fabius said. He laughed. ‘Oh, what a pretty puzzle!’

‘What are you laughing about, Manflayer?’ Palos rumbled, as he trudged towards them, followed closely by Savona. Diomat loomed behind them. The ancient
Dreadnought said nothing, but the way his claws flexed told Fabius he was growing impatient.

‘This place. It is magnificent, is it not?’ Fabius gestured about himself with Torment.

‘It is empty,’ Savona spat. ‘Nothing but dust and clouds.’

‘Appearances can be deceiving,’ Fabius said. He looked at Palos. ‘Your gunships – do they still possess standard signal jammers?’ The signal jammers were one of the few reliable methods of successful planetary insertion the Traitor Legions possessed. The jammers were able to create a rough ‘window’ through an orbital sensor grid, enabling gunships to theoretically avoid automated defence systems and ground-to-air artillery. An early innovation of the Alpha Legion, provided – if somewhat grudgingly – to their fellow traitors in the later stages of the Solar War.

Palos shrugged. ‘Of course. But we detected no hostile systems during the descent.’

‘Because it’s not hostile. It’s passive. And so far in advance of our own that I doubt it would recognise us as a threat, even if it wasn’t.’ Fabius started towards Butcher-Bird.

‘The only way to get past it is to give it a bit of a shock – startle it, and take advantage of its surprise. Pain is the key that opens many doors, as I have often said.’

‘Startle what?’ Palos demanded, as he and the others followed.

‘This – all of it. This place. It’s not a planet. Not really. It’s more like the hull of a ship. An immense ship.’ He scooped up a handful of sand. ‘We have boarded it. But now, we must make a breach.’

It didn’t take long to make the preparations. Even in their current state of degradation, there were yet some among the Third who possessed the wit to understand Fabius’ plan, as he explained it. The gunships’ signal jammers would be attuned to a single frequency, one capable of momentarily disrupting the alien signal running through the nanomachines. The signal itself took some time to identify and isolate, but once it was done, it was a simple matter of programming the signal jammers to block it.

After they’d been activated, Fabius and his fellow Apothecaries retreated to Butcher-Bird’s passenger bay to observe the next phase of the experiment.

‘I do not see how all of this will help us find what we’ve come for, Manflayer,’ Palos said, as Fabius bent over the controls of the hololithic projector in the bay. ‘We are supposed to be searching for a ship. Not playing with sensors.’

‘Has it ever occurred to you to ask why our prize is here, Palos? Why here – so far from Terra? How did it come to be here? Who brought it?’ Fabius cocked his head. ‘Or perhaps you’re of a religious frame of mind – did the gods deposit it here, a grail waiting to be claimed by the worthy?’

‘What else could it be?’

‘An infinite number of things. The universe is vast and unknowable. And I suspect that this place is one of those unknowable things.’

‘It seems fairly knowable to me.’

‘ Says the warrior without eyes. You look, but do not see…’ Fabius hesitated. He
shook his head. ‘The sun is artificial. It is a vast assemblage of mirrors, angled with inhuman precision, in order to capture residual solar energies from elsewhere and transmit them to the planet. The question is, where is it capturing them from?’

Palos shrugged. ‘I do not care.’

‘You should. Because it appears to be drawing those residual energies from this planet. A continuous loop of energy, generated, refined and returned. The question is – why?’ Fabius tapped the controls, causing the hololithic image of the world to twist and reshape itself. ‘Because this is not a natural planetoid, but instead an artificial one. This crust of nanomachines is but the hull of something unseen.’

‘Hull? What sort of hull has an atmosphere?’ Palos snorted. ‘You are mad.’

‘The same way atmosphere might be caught within certain types of energy field. The air, corrosive as it is, is a by-product of the nanomachines. A form of artificial photosynthesis.’ Fabius shook his head. ‘Perhaps it’s some type of archaeotech – a xenos terraforming device. It would take more time than I suspect we possess to fully understand the process.’ He tapped the image, causing it to spin and flatten, until it displayed a three-dimensional representation of the area around the gunships. ‘Once the theory presented itself, it was a simple matter to alter our sensors to counter the interference. If I am right, we will see what lies beneath these false sands momentarily – ah. Listen.’

A sound like sand caught in a windstorm slithered into the gunship. Fabius strode out of the bay and paused at the top of the ramp. The air had thickened, as if to herald a storm, and the sands were shifting. It was as if something were moving beneath them, or sinkholes were opening up. Hummocks surged upwards, only to collapse inwards with a thunderous hiss. The effect radiated outwards in a perfect circle around the gunships. The ground trembled beneath them, and Fabius fancied he could see vast, inhuman faces forming in the shifting sands, as they rose into the air or fell away.

‘Look – the sky,’ Savona shouted from the foot of the ramp. She gestured with her maul. Fabius laughed as he saw the flat, colourless sky darken and become scored with hundreds of slashes of flickering, sickly green. It put him in mind of impact striations on an over-taxed void shield. Ripples of vibrant colour, growing wider and brighter as the sky itself seemed to lose cohesion and slough away.

The wind was roaring with hurricane force now, howling through the gulfs and valleys of collapsing sand. The sky was lashed by waves of green fire. Sand washed over the gunships, nearly blinding Fabius, despite his helmet. There was a sound like the groaning of primeval mechanisms, prodded into motion. The tremors running beneath them grew more savage, and the gunships creaked on their shocks. Mutants wailed in panic, and some fought to clamber back aboard the ships, only to be beaten back by their overseers.

Palos caught at Fabius’ arm. His voice crackled over the vox frequency. ‘What have you done? We will be destroyed, if this continues.’
Fabius laughed. ‘I think not. Look!’ He thrust Torment out, indicating the storm front of green lighting that swept towards them. Where the lightning struck, the sands crackled and surged upwards, higher and higher, over them. Or perhaps they were going down. He felt the shudder of rotation and heard the creak of metal. The patch of ground that the gunships had landed on was descending beneath the undulating nanomachine sands.

The sand rushed around the three gunships like the torrent of a whirlpool, intermingling with the eerie lightning. The lightning spread, becoming veins of glowing green in curved, smooth walls as the sand slowly ceased its motion and became firm once more, before it receded upwards. The ground – the platform – shuddered and came to a halt. Its rotation ceased, as antediluvian locking mechanisms slammed down on the rim of the circular platform. Fabius looked around in growing wonder.

Jade lumens flickered to life across the vast space that they now found themselves in. In the emerald radiance, Fabius saw that their platform was one among hundreds, each set equidistant from the others, and at varying heights, mounted atop deceptively thin towers of some smooth, featureless metal. Instinctively, he activated his armour’s augurs, trying to create a sensor map of his surroundings.

Each of the platforms was connected by a single walkway to the edge of an immense, circular tier. There were thousands of tiers, rising to impossible heights, and descending to imperceptible depths, all along the vertical curve of what could only be a colossal sphere.

Each of the tiers was occupied by what appeared to be a labyrinth of prismatic galleries, winding back into the heart of the vast structure. And all were slowly, almost imperceptibly, moving. Rotating the way a world might turn in its place in the firmament. ‘Maybe an artificial gravity well, keeping the megastructure from flying apart,’ he murmured in awe, despite himself.

Questions sped across the surface of his mind, one after the next. This place was nothing so much as a gargantuan orrery, built around a caged power source of incalculable potency. ‘I was right,’ he said, thumping the ramp of the gunship with the ferrule of his sceptre. The sound echoed loudly in the silence. ‘It’s a Dyson Sphere.’

‘I’ve never seen one this big,’ Palos said. ‘Or so well camouflaged.’ He started down the ramp. Fabius followed, more slowly.

‘I would guess that it has been here for some time. Longer than humanity has prowled the stars. In certain aeldari texts, it speaks of a great war in heaven. Most of it is allegorical nonsense, as could be expected of such a culture, but if you compare it to other xenos records there are… hints. Star-gods and cannibal suns. Warp-spawn and soulless legions that were more monstrous than any Abominable Intelligence. Machines that devoured entire worlds for fuel, and vampiric entities that drained the energy from stars. Cannons that could split reality with a single shot.’ Fabius smiled. ‘A war that laid waste to every galaxy in the universe. A war our existence has yet to recover from.'
Glorious to think of, isn’t it?’

Palos grunted. ‘If it is the truth.’

‘What is truth but the perception of fact?’ Fabius descended past him. His mutants greeted him with quiet murmurs, their enthusiasm dampened by the vast silence. The causeway connected to their platform was wide enough for an army to march across, a hundred abreast. They hadn’t quite brought an army – but close.

Under the direction of his overseers, mutants set up a pair of primitive heavy stubbers at the edge of the platform. A number of his creatures would remain behind to defend the gunships, under the command of Bellephus.

Around the platform, mutants and Space Marines readied themselves to depart. Raucous singing rose from among the ranks of the 12th Millennial, while those loyal to Alkenex were more circumspect. Diomat stood apart from all of this, staring out at the tiers. The others gave the Dreadnought a wide berth, and Fabius could not blame them. Diomat was a thing apart, even now. Fabius joined him at the edge of the platform.

‘This world is a tomb,’ the Dreadnought said.

‘Yes.’

‘But it is here?’

‘According to Eidolon.’

Diomat grunted. ‘You should never have reattached his head.’

‘Mistakes were made.’

Diomat gave a grinding, mechanical laugh. ‘Yes. That is the story of us, is it not?’ He flexed his claws. ‘We make mistake after mistake, and call it perfection. This is but the latest. Perhaps it will be our last. Your last mistake. Your last failure, brother. How does it feel?’

‘I have not failed, I have merely been unsuccessful,’ Fabius said. ‘Eidolon boasts of a new beginning, and I will give him one. I will give us all one.’

Another false laugh. Nearby mutants cringed at the harsh, rasping tones. ‘Hubris, brother. There is a saying, about pride and falls.’

‘Then you shall just have to catch me,’ Fabius said. Diomat looked down at him.

‘We will see.’

The Dreadnought fell silent. Fabius did as well. Maybe Diomat was right. Maybe he was simply an old man, yearning for a past that had never existed. A chance to do things over. He looked down at himself. Healthy, now. Unbent, strong. Death did not crowd him, not yet. Perhaps that was it. With thoughts unclouded by imminent dissolution, his mind naturally turned down familiar paths.

Was that to be the story of him, then? A cycle of nostalgia and panic, repeated ad nauseam until the day his creations could stand on their own. Then, this time might be different. With Fulgrim, and a renewed Legion to ward them, his New Men might prosper, even as old humanity had. He could teach them. Teach Fulgrim and the newborn legion. Teach them to avoid the mistakes of the past, and prevent them from
collapsing in on themselves as his brothers had done.

‘How are we even going to find what we’re looking for? Search every tier?’ Savona said, as she joined him at the edge of the platform. Startled from his reverie, he glanced at her. Her armour bore fresh battle-pacts, he noted. She was not of the Legion, but she well knew the way to their heart. Debased as they were, they still valued such things in their leaders.

‘No. As a member of the apothecarion, I have the transponder codes for every gene-ship that served our Legion. Useless now, most of them. But some are still in use, though under different names and by different masters.’ He laughed. ‘A fact which has served me well, on occasion. Doubtless, this is one of the reasons Eidolon decided I was needed. Without the proper codes, it might take decades to locate the vessel in such a place. I can locate it in mere days.’

‘A gene-ship?’ Savona hissed. ‘Is that all we’re here for?’

Fabius glanced at her. ‘Is that all? It is everything, woman. The key to our survival as something other than gene-enhanced monsters or maddened spawn. Even my skills have their limits, and this will ensure the Legion’s continued existence for generations to come.’

‘A fact the Lord Commander Primus is counting on,’ Palos rumbled, joining them. ‘They say it contains a tithe of gene-seed to rival the vaults of Terra.’ He glanced up at Diomat, and made as if to speak, but fell silent. The Dreadnought ignored him.

‘Not quite, but close. In the early days of the Great Crusade, our gene-stock was among the most reliable, as well as one of the largest. Progenoids developed quickly, and endured the rigours of transport more easily than others. Were it not for the blight, the loss of this vessel would have barely been noticed. As it was, it was a disaster.’ A sensor pinged, and he tapped at his vambrace, calling up a hazy hololithic map. A flashing mote bobbed along the hazy edge. ‘There. It’s still transmitting, as I’d hoped. Or something is, at least. Background radiation is making it difficult to compose an accurate sensor-map, but we have a general direction.’

He turned. ‘Saqqara. It is time.’

The Word Bearer pushed his way through the crowd of mutants, his daemon-flasks clattering. ‘You have a signal?’ he asked.

‘Of course.’

‘Very well.’ Saqqara unhooked a flask and murmured softly, running a finger over it in what might have been a calming manner. As he drew close to Fabius, the daemons within his flasks grew agitated.

‘They hate you, Fabius,’ Palos observed. ‘The daemons – I’ve never heard them make that sort of noise. Usually it’s all laughter and whispers.’

‘Why should they be any different to the rest of us?’ Savona said.

‘The Neverborn are stories made flesh,’ Saqqara said, holding up the flask. The formless thing within slammed minuscule fists against the walls of its prison. ‘Stories of
murder and fear, despair and hope. Of excess and cruelty. They are warnings and retributions, hammered into shape by our belief. They are what we make of them.’ He looked at Fabius. ‘And he makes of them… nothing. He denies them, denies the story of them. It infuriates them, down to the very root of their conception.’

Fabius smiled. ‘As I will always deny them. I will not play the willing meat for such lazy parasites. If they want my belief, they must show me something more than they have already.’ The thing in the flask grew agitated, causing it to shudder in Saqqara’s grip. Fabius leaned close, smile widening. ‘But that would require some degree of true sentience, I fear. Something these thought-forms are singularly incapable of. They are nothing but cunning mirrors – hollow and empty. But they do make wonderful scouts.’

Saqqara turned, and popped open the flask. The thing inside spewed forth, like a gout of smoke. The Word Bearer gestured and the daemon-smoke coiled about his hand for a moment, before shooting off into the maze of tiers. He repeated the process several times, whispering to each. ‘Vast as this place is, it will take them some time,’ he said.

Fabius thumped the platform with Torment.
‘Then we had best get started. Come… the future awaits.’

Aboard the *Vesalius*, Igori felt a moment of dim panic. Fear was not an unknown, among the Gland-hounds. It had its uses, so long as it was not allowed to overwhelm you. Her fingers brushed across the hilt of her knife, as the tang of blood – augmented blood, New Man blood – reached her nose.

She pressed herself flat to the wall and extended her knife, using the flat of the blade to capture the reflection of the corridor around the corner. The hatch to the apothecarium was open, but no alarms were sounding. Someone had disabled them. The lumens of the corridor flickered weakly. Power was being diverted from this section. The members of her pack who should have been on guard were nowhere in sight.

She had come to check on the Benefactor’s guest, as she had every hour since his departure for the planet below. Her warriors had not reported in, as she’d expected.

Igori drew her shuriken pistol and crept towards the open apothecarium, moving silently, every sense straining. She heard nothing – not the rasp of breath, or the tell-tale whine of powered armour. And all she could smell was blood.

Inside, the apothecarium was a shambles. Examination slabs had been upended, materials dumped and scattered. The walls had been gouged by blades and the floor was littered with papers and effluvia from shattered specimen jars. The worst of it was the bio-crèches; all of them had been cracked open and their contents destroyed, including the nascent clones of the Benefactor. These had been crushed and chopped apart, as if to ensure their destruction. Or to amuse the desecrators.

The sight of such defilement gave her pause, and she almost missed the bodies lying stacked and split open on the remains slabs. Her packmates, butchered like cattle, their muscles and ligaments strung about and their organs set aside, as if for later sampling.
She repressed a snarl of rage. These were not wounds earned in battle, but post-mortem mutilation, if she judged the wounds on their throats and skulls rightly. They had been killed quickly and efficiently. The work of the prey.

Fearful now, she moved through the carnage towards the back of the chamber, where the guest was hidden. Had he done this? She did not think so. The Emperor’s Children had been growing restless, in the wake of the Benefactor’s departure. Testing the limits he had established. Perhaps they had come looking for chemical relief, or had simply been following some maddened whim. But she suspected otherwise. They had come looking for something. But had they found it?

Igori tapped the control panel set into the wall. The pict-feed of the cell’s interior flickered. The guest’s chamber was empty. Panicking slightly now, she opened the door, nostrils flaring at the scent of a demigod. He smelled like prey, but not. Headier, somehow. Overwhelming, rather than enticing. She looked up. The access panels of the cell’s ceiling had been removed. She holstered her weapons and leapt, easily catching the sides of the hatch. She boosted herself up into the access tunnel above. She had to find him. The Benefactor had entrusted him into her keeping, and she could not fail him.

Few living things could spend more than a few hours in the cramped labyrinth of convoluted tunnels, amid the artificial jungle of cables and fibre-bundles, and the constant drip of oily water. Rusted metal creaked beneath her weight as she climbed, following the scent of her quarry.

She climbed to and fro in the darkened sub-world, her senses straining against the conditions. She could hear vatborn scuttling just out of sight, and worse things besides. She could feel the steady hum of power running through the conduits, travelling to the various decks. Up ahead, something clanked. She heard a soft exhalation, and smelled a sudden, acrid odour – not quite blood, but something close.

When she spotted him, he was crouched on a gantry, his long limbs bent, his silver head bowed. She was convinced that she had made no sound, but even so his head whipped around, and a lavender gaze pinned her in place.

‘Who are you?’

His voice was soft. Surprisingly so. She had expected a lion’s rumble. His gaze seemed lumen-bright as he studied her. The beast dangled from his bloody grip, its malformed limbs shattered, its bloated skull lolling on a snapped neck. ‘You remind me of a face I saw, as if in a dream. A woman’s face. A woman’s voice, whispering quiet words that I cannot recall. She sang to me, I think. When I was an infant.’

He let the body he was holding fall. The creature had been large. Something from the underverse that had sneaked into the ship, during one of those all-too-common moments when the Geller field fluctuated. Whatever it was, it was dead now. He looked at his bloody hands and wiped them across the ragged environmental suit he wore. ‘Perhaps you are my sister.’
‘Cousin,’ Igori said, after a moment. She rose from her crouch and slid her knife back into its sheath. She hadn’t even remembered drawing it. ‘I think I am your cousin.’

‘Family all the same,’ Fulgrim said. He looked down at the creature. ‘It was eating the little ones, the vatborn – stealing their young. They whispered of it to me. Begged me to help. So I came to kill it.’

‘You did a good job.’

He flexed his hands. ‘It felt good to kill it. It felt right.’ He looked at her. ‘Was it evil? It looked evil.’

‘It was hungry,’ she said simply. In the dark, and several levels away, something roared. A feral howl, full of bestial malice. ‘And it wasn’t alone. Come.’

‘I do not fear them.’ He said it petulantly, like one of her own pups, denied a place at the kill. She grinned without humour, and fought to hold his gaze. It was hard, like staring into the power cell of a plasma weapon, but she held him nonetheless. She had stared down worse things than a half-grown demigod in her time.

‘Then you are stupid,’ she said firmly. ‘They will hunt you, as a pack. They will kill you, as a pack. Or hurt you enough that the next pack finishes the job. Come. Now.’ She was not sure where they could go. She only knew that she could not return him to the apothecarium; it was no longer safe.

Fulgrim blinked, and nodded. ‘Yes, cousin.’ He followed her slowly, with a stately grace that was at once predatory and elegant. His great size seemed no hindrance in the cramped maze of access tunnels. He smelled of the warp, and of clean, running water, and for a moment, she fancied that he was more liquid than solid.

‘If you are found, it will go badly for the Benefactor,’ she said, as they climbed along a steep chute. Power conduits thrummed along either side of them, and she could see strange, crystalline spiders spinning delicate webs among the flickering nodes.

‘Why?’

She shook her head. ‘Do not ask why. He has said, and so it is.’

‘Why do you call him Benefactor?’

She grunted. Full of curiosity, this one. ‘Is your pretty head empty? Is that why you seek to fill it with answers to foolish questions?’

A flash of something that might have been anger crossed his face. ‘I was curious.’

‘A bad habit, aboard this ship.’

He fell into a sullen silence. She glanced down at him on occasion, checking to make sure he was still following. After a time, she asked, ‘How did you get out?’

‘I followed the vatborn. They showed me the secret paths.’ He paused. ‘I hear things, in these hollow places.’

‘What things?’

‘They mean to kill him.’ He said it so urgently that she stopped and turned. He looked at her. ‘They mean to kill you.’

She said nothing, for a moment. Then, softly, ‘When?’
‘Soon.’ His eyes glowed with intent. ‘The vatborn have heard them as well. They do not notice the little ones, and speak freely about them. They would destroy all that Fabius has made, and I cannot allow that. I cannot allow them to harm him.’

She thought of the apothecarium, and the bodies she had left there. Of the destruction of the lab. She could smell war on the wind. Whatever the Benefactor intended, she did not think she could wait to strike. Not if she wanted her pack to survive. She looked at him.

‘Come. I will take you someplace safe. And then we will decide what to do… cousin.’
Wonders and horrors greeted them, as Fabius and the others travelled through the convoluted interior of the tier. They found themselves passing amidst galleries of such size and scope that even Fabius could scarcely comprehend their absolute enormity. The tier was not a flat plane, but instead a series of concentric sub-tiers, each at a varying height, connected by curving stairwells and long walkways. All home to immense galleries, filled with more things than any living mortal might explore in a lifetime.

Fabius’ enhanced perceptions faltered, stretched to their limits for the first time since he’d gazed upon the unfiltered expanse of the Eye of Terror. All about them was the wreckage of a million impossible civilisations, placed and catalogued with inhuman precision. Unimaginable masterpieces of art and architecture shared space with scenes of indescribable horror. All of it arranged according to some impenetrable symmetry.

Here, the pale light of an eternal last sunset shone forever upon carvings of painful beauty. There, a warband of orks conducted a silent, unending rampage upon a species of unfamiliar, blue-shelled invertebrate. Across the way, a looming shape of many angles glared down at the intruders with stoic fury in its innumerable, unmoving eyes.

Fabius and his Consortium moved at the heart of a phalanx of Emperor’s Children. Palos was evidently determined not to let them out of his sight, if at all possible. Maysha and Mayshana paced to either side of Fabius, having appointed themselves his bodyguards. The Gland-hounds seemed unnerved by their surroundings. He’d brought no others, reasoning that their presence might elicit undue hostility from Palos and his warriors.

Mutants scuttled, loped and stalked in an unruly mass around the tight ranks of the Emperor’s Children, filling the silence with their cries. The heavy shapes of the war-mutants stalked among them, following placidly behind the tracked forms of their
servitor-overseers. Diomat plodded in the wake of the renegades, his red gaze sweeping blankly across the galleries that rose wild around them.

‘This place is a tomb,’ Skalagrim said. He strode alongside Fabius, his axe resting in the crook of his arm. For once, his helmet was locked firmly in place.

‘No, it is a museum,’ Fabius said. Their voices echoed strangely through the long gallery, as if the distance sought to swallow up all sound. ‘These are exhibits, petrified at the moment of collection, or else later posed for best effect.’

‘That is the largest ork I’ve ever seen,’ Savona murmured, staring up at a towering, twelve-metre-tall monstrosity that loomed in a nearby nook. ‘And his weaponry…’ The frozen creature wore a crude exoskeleton far in advance of anything the orks now might conceive of. Indeed, from his initial examination, Fabius suspected that it might be in advance of his own battleplate.

‘A krork,’ he murmured. ‘One of the first orks. I read about them in the aeldari texts. I have long theorised that the orks are a form of organic weapons system – a rogue biological agent, unleashed during some ancient apocalyptic conflict. There’s too much about their internal workings that seems designed, rather than evolved.’

‘We killed them easily enough at Ullanor,’ Skalagrim said.

‘Nothing that big, I’d wager,’ Khorag gurgled. He stroked the head of his beast, which lolloped in his wake. The Grave Warden chuckled wetly. ‘If there was ever a place designed to divert the curious, this would be it. Look – there. What do you think that is – or was?’ He indicated a spheroid of two metres in height, composed of rough, leathery skin. A large, albeit withered, sensory organ of some sort sat at the top of the sphere, and around the upper body clustered pale tentacles that dangled to the ground.

Fabius peered at the strange creature. ‘Fascinating.’ His hands itched to collect samples, but he hesitated. He suspected that any interference with the exhibits would elicit some form of alarm. Whatever presence controlled this world so far seemed to have only a passive interest in their presence. But given the technology at work here, he had no interest in provoking a more hostile response.

He heard a sudden intake of breath, and turned to find Saqqara staring at one of the galleries. A winding chamber of statuary, extending back into an enormous recess within the green-veined stonework that made up the bulk of their surroundings. Within the chamber, which had been fashioned to resemble an underground cavern lined by intricately carved columns and swooping, decorative arches, red-armoured figures clashed with blue, amid thick falls of shadow and unmoving cascades of debris.

‘The catacombs of Calth,’ Saqqara said softly. He took a step forward, and before Fabius could stop him, he was wandering among the frozen figures. Palos brought the expedition to a halt. He gestured.

‘Well? Fetch your cur back, Manflayer, lest we lose him in this madness.’

‘Mind your tongue, Palos – remember which of us is indispensable, and which of us is a glorified bodyguard,’ Fabius said, as he hurried after the Word Bearer.
He found the diabolist standing at the heart of the battle. Saqqara indicated one of the crimson-armoured Word Bearers. ‘Hard-light holograms,’ he said, in a hollow voice. ‘Listen.’

Fabius did. A faint susurrus, as of many voices at a great distance. The sounds of war, at a distance of thousands of years. ‘The Underground War,’ Saqqara continued. ‘I was here. With my brothers in the Black Comet, fighting in these depths.’

‘I was under the impression that those who fought at Calth were sent there to die,’ Fabius said. A rumour, but a persistent one, especially given the Word Bearers’ propensity for internal purges.

Saqqara nodded, still studying the immobile faces of the warriors around them. ‘It was a test. A trial of worthiness. Lorgar sent us to die, so that we might live.’

Fabius laughed. ‘And you passed it, did you?’

‘The test did not end here,’ Saqqara said. He looked at Fabius. ‘You should know that better than anyone, heretic. Our tests never end. Our worth is judged only in the striving.’

Fabius snorted and looked away. ‘Trust a fanatic to – eh?’ He paused. Stepped closer to a reeling Ultramarine. The warrior was helmetless, his face daubed in blood and dust. Fabius peered at him, enhancing the scope of his vision again and again. Until, at last, he saw it. A faint tremor in the warrior’s eye, as of a contraction slowed to an infinitesimal crawl. He stepped back with a curse. ‘They’re not holograms.’

Saqqara jolted back from the frozen Word Bearers. ‘What?’

‘They’re not holograms. At least, not the way we understand them. They’re something else. But they’re alive – and conscious.’ Fabius turned, staggered by the conceit of it. A living diorama, wrought from hard-light and some arcane trickery. A form of stasis beyond his own fumbling attempts.

A shout from the group drew his attention. Diomat stalked through the milling mass of mutants and renegades, his head cocked to the shadowy galleries rising above them. ‘Something is here.’ The Dreadnought turned, servos whining. ‘All around us.’

‘I see nothing,’ Palos said.

‘Then perhaps you should take the blinders from your eyes,’ Fabius said acidly. He could feel it now. Something was watching them, though he could not say where the unseen observer was. The stultifying silence of this place was worse even than that of the dead craftworlds he had plundered. ‘Contact the gunships – perhaps a long-range sensor sweep…’

‘We’ve lost contact with them,’ Palos said flatly. He turned, staring back the way they’d come. ‘Listen.’

The boom of heavy stubbers was faintly audible, the sound swallowed up and dispersed, rather than echoing. The vox crackled as Fabius tried to contact Bellephus. Something was interfering with the frequency. He turned to the Word Bearer. ‘Saqqara – what do your pets see?’
'Nothing. I… appear to have lost them.' The Word Bearer sounded chagrined. He looked around, fingers tapping at the daemon-flasks hanging from his armour.

‘They escaped your control?’

‘No.’

‘Then what?’ Fabius rounded on the red-armoured diabolist. ‘This is your only skill, and you say that you have somehow failed in it?’

‘They are gone. I do not know why.’ Saqqara reached for a flask. ‘I will call up others.’ Fabius caught his wrist.

‘No. I was a fool to ever trust the senses of such beings, especially in a place like this.’ Further recriminations died on his tongue as he caught sight of a shadowy shape scuttling down the incline of a gallery frame. Light seemed to bend around the wide, spidery shape, rendering it all but invisible save for the green glow of its many eyes.

The shape leapt with a curious undulation, and revealed itself as a silvery scarab-like entity, made of a substance Fabius thought was similar to that of the sands above. It put him in mind of a massive spider, moving across an invisible web. It sprang onto Diomat, with an eerie, rattling hiss, proboscis sparking with green lightning. The Dreadnought tore the arachnid shape apart with a flex of his claws. He sent the pieces hurtling in different directions. ‘Brothers – beware. We are beset by xenos filth.’

Fabius looked up. More spider-shapes followed the first, ten, twenty, thirty or more, clambering down from the heights all around them, as if they’d somehow disturbed an unseen nest. He cursed.

A trap. And they had walked right into it.

Arrian studied the flowering tendrils that wrapped themselves around his vambrace with keen interest. The hydroponics bay of the _Vesalius_ was a nightmare jungle of creeping greenery. Most of it poisonous, or hungry, or both. Here, the bastard offspring of a thousand species of plant-life grew all but unchecked.

The air was wet and thick, with condensation and toxic gases that could eat away at the seals of his power armour if he stood still for too long. Roots crept thick across the deck, wriggling into the cracks in the metal, finding sustenance among the nutrient vats that fed the bay. And great masses of splayed vine and creeper had woven themselves in among the upper gantries and stairwells. Heaving blossoms of every imaginable colour dotted the greenery, adding their heady stink to the miasma.

The visual feed in his helmet isolated and identified the inhabitants of this green hell. Most of the plants in the bay had some medicinal or nutritional value. The brackish creepers that occupied the highest gantries made for an adequate dietary paste, suitable for the uncultured palates of the _Vesalius_’ crew. The scabrous blossoms that huddled beneath the central stairwell secreted a pollen that could be synthesised into a suitably potent – not to mention addictive – narcotic.

Other plants could be processed into dermal balms and analgesics, if one had the...
knowledge. Arrian was among the few who did. Phytology was a dying art among those few Apothecaries remaining in the Eye. Oh, they could create drugs or brew alcohol, but little else. The Chief Apothecary, on the other hand, insisted that those who aspired to his tutelage first familiarise themselves with the width and breadth of the natural sciences – among them epigenetics, aerobiology, biochemistry and even, for one brief century, biosemiotics.

Science and medicine were inextricably tied together, in the philosophy of Fabius Bile. To perform one, an individual must have a grounding in the other. To be an Apothecary, one must grasp the whole of the thing, rather than simply its component parts.

For Arrian, the hydroponics bay was a place of quiet contemplation. Few others dared impose themselves on it. He heard the scrape of a soft tread, and saw several of the plants react to a new taste on the air. ‘Igori,’ he said, in greeting, recognising the sound of her approach. She was one of the few of her kind willing to brave the dangers of this place.

‘They have attacked the apothecarium.’ Igori spoke bluntly. A plant stretched a tendril towards her. She drew her knife and sliced through it without taking her eyes from Arrian. ‘Killed my kin.’

Arrian paused, bloody meat dangling from his fingers. He had expected as much, though not so quickly. Alkenex had ensured that the bulk of those loyal to the Chief Apothecary – or at least the status quo – had been sent to the planet below. An old trick, that, ancient even by the time it was used at Istvan. Now, the prefect moved to establish control of the upper decks – the weapons bays and the flight decks, especially.

‘It was inevitable. But we hold our blow, until he has returned.’ He flipped the piece of meat he held to the plants and looked at her, his once-handsome features impassive. ‘Do you understand, Igori? Hold tight to your kin’s leashes. We are poised on the knife edge. Only with proper timing will we make the perfect cut.’ He patted one of the blades sheathed at his side. ‘Too soon, and we may well wreck the ship, attempting to save it.’

She nodded, and he wondered whether it was in agreement or understanding. After a moment, she said, ‘What if he is wrong?’

The question was so unexpected, he almost dropped the bowl of meat. He looked at her, seeing her for the first time in a long time. She was no longer a child, or even young. It was easy to forget how brief their lives were, even ones as enhanced as these. ‘Wrong?’ he asked. ‘How so?’

‘About this. About all of it.’ She looked away, as if ashamed. ‘He says wait, but what if that is wrong? What if we had a way to win, without him. Would that not be better? Would it not please him, to see us move on our own? To secure victory in his name?’

He said nothing for a few moments. Then, slowly, he said, ‘That is not for me to say. You are not slaves, like the mutants. Servitude is not in you, and he did not make you for that purpose. But even so, he created you, and you owe him fealty.’
‘Not fealty,’ she said. ‘Love. He made us, and we love him. We can do nothing else. But he made us to hunt. To kill prey. And now the prey challenges us, and he says wait – why?’ She absently cleaned her knife on her trousers and sheathed it. ‘I can no longer hunt. He will not let me. But I can do this, even if it angers him.’

Arrian knew, then, what she was asking. Not permission, but understanding of a decision already made. The Chief Apothecary might be blind to it, but Arrian was not. They were no longer children, but something else. And here was their first step – if they could do this thing, if they could defy their creator, and wage war, then the galaxy would hold no further horrors for them.

He looked at her. ‘These nails I have in my head are love writ in steel. A suicide pact, made in the name of our father. A condemnation of all that we might have been, by the one who should have led us to glory. For him, we sacrificed all. And for him, we now die. A little bit at a time. Meat for the beast.’ He tapped the bowl of bloody chunks, as if for emphasis. ‘But Angron’s rage is but a sea-spray of blood, in this galaxy’s endless ocean of murder. A single sanguine drop, in a wine-dark sea. Once I realised that… the rest was easy.’

Arrian lifted a blossom with a finger. The razor-thin petals scraped against the ceramite of his gauntlet. He turned. ‘It’s all the same sea, whatever your course. Wherever you go, there you are.’

Igori smiled. ‘A good philosophy.’

‘A pragmatic philosophy.’ He tossed another chunk of meat to the snarling creepers. The vines tore at the chunk with savage abandon. ‘Death is the end of study, and I have not yet completed my education. So I will live, whatever the nails in my head wish. And whatever my father wishes.’

‘You defy him. The one who made you.’

‘Sometimes a father must be defied, so that the child might prosper.’ Arrian looked at her. ‘Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Honoured Arrian. Thank you.’ She bowed, turned and left the hydroponics bay. Arrian did not try and stop her. In time, he turned back to his plants.

As he fed them, he wondered whether he had made the right choice.

The spider-things had not come alone.

More of them came out of the walls. Heretofore hidden alcoves gaped wide, disgorging silvery, skeletal shapes – humanoid, rather than insect-like, but no less disturbing. They moved with steady speed across the catwalks and gantries, advancing towards the Emperor’s Children in ever-growing numbers. They were of myriad textures, colours and markings, alike only in their general shape, and the strange, flickering weapons they clutched in fleshless hands. Strands of green lightning lashed from the barrels of these weapons, cascading across the front ranks of mutants. Malformed warriors were reduced to scattered, greasy atoms, with barely enough time
to scream.

The invaders replied in kind. Bolters thundered, punching through metal forms and casting them down. But the relentless advance continued, even as the fallen pulled themselves to their feet, broken bodies repairing themselves before the astonished eyes of the renegades. Fabius turned, his armour’s sensors recording everything. ‘Living metal – fascinating. Skalagrim – I would like a sample, if convenient.’

‘Get it yourself,’ Skalagrim snarled. He took careful aim with his bolt pistol and fired, knocking one of their attackers sprawling. In moments, it was picking itself back up.

‘Why won’t they die?’ the Apothecary roared, pumping more shots into the automaton.

‘Self-repairing systems. Short of absolute destruction, I doubt we possess the means to stop them.’ Fabius glanced at Khorag. ‘What about you, Grave Warden? What sort of plagues are you carrying in that cauldron you call battleplate?’

‘I may have something, but it will require us to abandon our position, lest it devour our armour and weapons along with our foes.’ Khorag hefted his weapon – an ancient storm bolter, wet with oil and rot, and ejected the vaguely skull-shaped ammunition drum. He retrieved another from the reload rack on the back of his armour, this one marked with esoteric hazard sigils, and slammed it into place. The modified storm bolter made a sloshing sound. ‘We must push them back, put as much room as possible between us and them.’

‘Easy enough. Palos, you and the others fall back on my mark.’ Fabius signalled to the closest of his overseers. ‘Unleash the war-mutants.’ The servitors reacted to the order as one. The somnolent war-mutants, crouched behind the front lines, suddenly surged upright as chem-dispensers fired and their cortical implants were remotely activated. They bounded forward with thunderous howls, barrelling into the relentless metal ranks of the enemy.

As the war-mutants fell to their task with gusto, Fabius surreptitiously tapped a button on his vambrace. The signal activated the pain implants in the rest of the surviving mutants. The deformed beasts leapt to join their monstrous brethren, shooting, stabbing and battering the metal guardians from their feet. Tides of flesh and metal met with a sound like water slapping stone. Palos and the others fell back, still firing.

‘Khorag, at your convenience,’ Fabius said. The hulking Apothecary hefted his weapon and advanced towards the approaching automatons. He fired as he went. The shots trailed an ugly heat in their wake, and where they pierced the air, it took on an oily sheen. When they struck home, a bilious gas spewed from the craters punched into the skeletal machines. Wherever the gas touched, the silvery metal blackened and corroded, as did the flesh of those mutants unfortunate enough to be caught in its shroud. The front rank of machines collapsed, consumed by Khorag’s concoction.

The Grave Warden continued to fire, until the ammunition drum clicked dry. Piles of corroded metal and the seared bodies of mutants crunched beneath his tread as he retreated. The gas cloud swept over the advancing ranks, eating away at them. ‘Now
would be a good time to retreat,’ Khorag said. ‘The cloud will dissipate soon enough, and it is not large enough to devour them all.’

Fabius turned. More silvery shapes were approaching from behind them, bleeding out of the winding galleries like ghosts. ‘Diomat – clear our way,’ he said.

‘None may block our path,’ Diomat bellowed, tromping forward at a ponderous charge. He struck the approaching phalanx of automatons like a thunderbolt, scattering them and opening a gap in their lines. The Dreadnought caught up a struggling machine-warrior and swung it about like an improvised flail, battering at the others. ‘Reap my malediction,’ he roared. ‘Shatter and die, in the name of the Third. Come, brothers – join me in my wrath. Children of the Emperor! Death to his foes!’

‘Fall back,’ Fabius said, gesturing with Torment for the others to follow Diomat. ‘Let Khorag’s weapon do its work. Back to the gunships.’ Emperor’s Children thudded past him, retreating with as much discipline as they could muster. The sound of more alcoves opening echoed down from the upper sub-tiers, even as they fell back towards the immense causeway and the gunships beyond.

It galled him to retreat so soon, but there was nothing for it. There seemed to be no end to these creatures, and the forces they’d brought were proving unequal to the task. Better an ignominious retreat than total destruction. Survival provided an opportunity for success later. Torment snarled in warning, and he spun, crushing a metal ribcage. A blast of energy scorched the edge of his coat as the creature fell, and he stamped on its head.

Something was controlling them, of that much he was certain. Like the nanomachines above, there was a guiding intelligence at work here. One that could be disrupted, if only he could locate it. He reached down and ripped the flattened skull from its chassis, cracking it open in the process. There might be something in it of use. The metal oozed about his probing fingers, as if trying to resist his intrusion. Tucking Torment beneath his arm, he continued to work as he walked, while the battle roared about him.

Maysha and Mayshana stuck close beside him as they retreated, firing their weapons with disciplined precision. Diomat roared, wrenching silvery skeletons apart with his power claws, his chassis and limbs scorched black in places. Fabius caught sight of Savona, smashing an opponent from its feet with her maul, and Saqqara, surrounded by the elemental shapes of lesser Neverborn, hurling a flask filled with raging daemon shapes.

‘Any more tricks?’ he said, glancing at Khorag, as the latter trudged along in his wake, alchemical vents spewing acidic smoke. ‘Another plague or three, perhaps?’ He cursed as the head tried to seal itself around his hand. There seemed to be nothing within it, which was impossible. There had to be some form of control mechanism.

‘Nothing that wouldn’t reduce this place to slag around us,’ Khorag grunted. ‘And if we want to have any hope of finding your gene-ship intact, it would be best to avoid that.’ Storm bolter reloaded, he let rip at a bevy of silvery shapes advancing from the
walls to the left. The automatons collapsed, but almost immediately began to rise again. Paz’uz fell upon them, noxious drool reducing the struggling machines to steaming wreckage.

Fabius tossed the head aside in disgust as Palos fell back, joining him. They were passing over the sloped causeway between two sub-tiers. The steep path made for a natural defensive position, forcing their pursuers to slow their advance. Far below, Fabius could see a strange, flickering radiance, leaking up from the heart of the structure. ‘We cannot leave without what we came for, Manflayer,’ Palos growled. His helmet bore blackened scars from numerous near-misses, and his friction axe was humming shrilly.

‘If you would like to chop your way through, then by all means go ahead. But I intend to regroup and return in force. Perhaps after an orbital bombardment or two.’ Fabius frowned as a crackling beam of jade energy swept the life from a nearby legionary, reducing him to drifting motes. ‘Maybe three.’

‘You will not fulfil our mission?’

Fabius glared at him. ‘If you are accusing me of cowardice, you will have to come to the point more quickly.’

‘I am merely making certain,’ Palos grunted. An instant later, he spun on his heel, friction axe splitting the air. Maysha sucked in the air for a scream as the monomolecular axe bit into his chest, but no sound emerged from the Gland-hound’s throat. Mayshana snarled and lunged, drawing her own blade as she leapt on Palos’ back. The knife sank into a gap in his armour, but the renegade didn’t hesitate. Amethyst fingers snagged her by the head and he wrenched her from her perch. Before he could strike, Fabius drove Torment’s haft into the side of the other Space Marine’s head, knocking him off balance.

Palos cast Mayshana aside and spun his axe about, slashing at Fabius. The blade nearly caught him in the abdomen, but he caught it on Torment’s haft, at the last moment. They struggled for a moment, awkwardly perched on the edge of the pathway, as the battle spun on around them, heedless of their private struggle.

‘Are you mad?’ Fabius spat. ‘Now is not the time for this.’

‘Now is the perfect time, Clonelord,’ Palos growled. ‘When none of your beasts can come to your aid. When your guard is down. And when my hand is at your throat. If we salvage nothing else from this, the prefect will at least reward me well for your scalp!’
Igori stood in the bay, watching as the other pack leaders straggled in. There were nearly sixty packs aboard the *Vesalius*, more even, perhaps, than the Benefactor realised. The packs grew and split like cells, spreading through the hollow places, making the ship their own. Most of the packs were small – only a dozen or so individuals. Others were significantly larger. Her own pack numbered nearly a hundred, a third of whom were only half-grown. One of many reasons why her voice carried the loudest.

She studied the others as they drifted towards her. She could almost smell the suspicion bleeding off of them. It was rare that they met like this, unless commanded by the Benefactor. It was rarer still that she was the one to call for such a thing. They feared a cull, and not without reason. She had been forced, more than once, to butcher her own kin when they forgot their place in the Benefactor’s designs.

Her generation, and those who’d come before, had been built for loyalty. Their devotion to the Benefactor was as much chemical as anything. She knew this, and felt no distaste for it. The Benefactor was wise, and knew what sort of savagery lurked in their hearts. But the generations who’d come after her own were not all hardwired for constancy. Instead, the Benefactor indulged their competitive natures, allowing them to strive as they would among themselves. And some took that as permission to set their sights higher than they ought.

The thought brought with it memories of Paramar, and the treacherous system-lords. Seven generations of nobility, their genetics no less a product of the Benefactor’s skill than her own, but with none of her loyalty – or common sense. They had sought to match their will against that of the Benefactor, and come out the poorer for it. Thanks, in no small part, to the efforts of herself and her pack.
She smiled slightly, recalling the look of bewilderment on the face of one of the system-lords as she pulled the strands of monofilament wire tight about his thickly muscled neck. He had clawed at her hands, slamming her into marble columns, and balcony railings as she clung to his back, sawing through his reinforced spinal column. He had thought himself her superior, that she was nothing more than another mutant. He had not realised, until the very end, that she was his successor.

Igori flicked the memory aside as the last of her kin straggled into the bay. All of them were armed, some more obviously than others. She rested her hand on the shuriken pistol thrust through her belt. Between that and her knife, she had few worries.

‘Why did you call us here?’ one of the pack-leaders barked. Grule. Heavy with muscle, and his face covered in spiral tattoos. One of his eyes was missing, lost in a hunt. He wore an eldar spirit stone in its place, the gem flickering oddly.

‘The prey is attempting to take the ship,’ Igori said flatly.

‘Again?’ a pack-leader named Vorsha said. She scratched her cheek. ‘They do not learn.’ Grule laughed at this, and others joined him.

‘They seek to turn the Benefactor’s servants against him, in his absence.’

‘They are meat,’ Grule said dismissively.

‘They are strong meat,’ Igori said.

‘Only if you are weak. Are you weak, Grandmother?’ Grule flexed his fingers, in what might have been anticipation. Grule wanted to be First of Firsts, which was only proper. The Benefactor believed that ambition was to be cherished.

Igori smiled and spread her hands. ‘I am old, Grule. That brings a certain infirmity.’ Her lips peeled back from her teeth. They were still strong. Still sharp. Grule hesitated. His good eye shrank to a slit. He lowered his hands. Igori nodded in satisfaction. ‘They are strong meat,’ she continued. ‘And they do not fear us. If they come against us, we will be hard pressed…’

‘We should hunt them,’ Vorsha trilled. Igori glanced at her. Vorsha was young – younger even than Grule. Almost as young as Igori had been, when she became First of her pack. Vorsha balanced a needle-bladed knife on one calloused finger as she spoke.

‘We can hunt them, and collect their glands for the Benefactor.’

‘And how will we hunt them, when they know we are coming? When they watch the corridors and bulkheads?’ Igori gestured sharply. ‘They know us, our prey. And they will trap us and kill us, unless we take the fight to them.’

Confused looks followed this. Igori shook her head in disappointment. ‘We cannot hunt them. We must fight them, as they fight. Not as a pack, picking off the stragglers, but as an army, killing an enemy.’ It was an alien concept, though they had all fought in their share of battles. To fight in lines and rows, with strategy rather than instinct – that was the way of prey. She could smell their disapproval. Grule eyed her, as if weighing up his chances. She looked up and nodded, giving the signal.

Fulgrim dropped down from the observation platform a moment later. He landed
lightly, despite his bulk. Grule and the others drew back, most of them going for their weapons. Igori snarled wordlessly, stopping them from doing something stupid. Fulgrim glanced at her, as if seeking reassurance. Then he began to speak.

‘I am Fulgrim. I am told that in the language of old Chemos, it means ‘Water-bringer’. Saviour. And that is why I am here. To save you. All of you, from the least, to the greatest.’ The Gland-hounds drew back even further, as he let his cloak fall to the deck. Even clad in his simple garments, he was impressive. ‘But to do that, I will need your help.’ He held up his hands. ‘Even these hands, strong as they are, are not enough for the task ahead.’

He smiled, and it was as if a sun had sprung, newborn, into the firmament. A sigh went through them, and weapons drifted downward, as trigger fingers went slack. Something in them, something nestled deep in their blood and marrow, resonated with that smile. With that voice. With that face. They were drawn to it, like moths to an impossible flame. Igori had not seen it before, in the cramped darkness. Only here, in the open, could it truly flourish.

‘I am Fulgrim, and you will help me,’ Fulgrim said. His voice rumbled through the bay like gentle thunder. ‘I know this, as I know my own name.’ He strode among the New Men, unarmed and unafraid. ‘You will help me, for we are all children of the one you call Benefactor. And children owe no greater loyalty than that due a parent. He is our father, and he needs our aid. Will you deny him that?’

His words were simple, but his voice added a lustre to them. He towered over even the tallest of their number, and Igori wondered how there could be any connection between them. How had the Benefactor managed to distil such majesty down into their own humble forms? He turned, his smile gentle, his gaze kind. ‘You cannot. You will not. I see you, brothers and sisters. I see the fierce love that fills your mighty hearts, and know that it is the same as my own. We are all embers in the same fire. The same hand kindled us, and set us ablaze with purpose…’

He spread his arms, hands held out as if in welcome. ‘Long have I listened to my teacher as he spoke of what was to come, and what must be. You are the future, but what is that future without him? He would deny it, but I cannot. We must act, to preserve him. To preserve the future, in its cradle. We must act, and I shall act. Will you follow me, sons and daughters of the Benefactor?’

Silence held, for long moments. Fulgrim’s smile never wavered. Then, one by one, the pack leaders knelt before him, heads bowed. Igori was the last. Even as she sank down, she felt a flicker of unease. She had the sense that this was some test, and that she and her fellows had failed. But she pushed the thought aside. There were more important matters to hand. Fulgrim gestured.

‘Please, my brothers and sisters. Rise. We have much to do, and little time to do it in.’

Warriors were dying. Metal figures were on the march throughout the green-lit tier.
Fabius’ only concern was the opponent in front of him, the one in purple and gold. Then, that was no surprise – his brothers had always been his greatest enemy, whatever the battlefield.

Palos’ head jerked forward, crunching against Fabius’ own. Ceramite buckled and his visual feed spasmed. Fabius felt his foot slip off the edge of the sub-tier. He wrestled against Palos’ strength, holding the axe at bay with Torment.

‘I can offer far more than Alkenex.’ Fabius hissed the words out, fighting to maintain his balance. Green light crackled over Palos’ shoulder. The vox rattled with screams and curses. They were being torn apart, while he wasted time with this fool. He saw Mayshana lying near the remains of her brother – though whether she was unconscious, or dead, he couldn’t tell. He felt a flicker of dismay to see his work treated so, but it was swept aside by more immediate concerns. ‘Serve me, and your rewards will be great.’

‘The only reward I seek is your death,’ Palos grunted. ‘For every brother you have cut open on your slabs, for every son of the Phoenician you led into useless death, I will take your foul head and present it to my commander.’

‘Eloquent,’ Fabius said. Stimms flooded his system, and he shoved Palos back. ‘But you’ll have to try harder than that, if you want my head.’

‘Kill him – a xenos spirit stone to the warrior who brings me his head,’ Palos roared, as he staggered back. Several nearby Emperor’s Children turned, casting aside their bolters in favour of blades, and they launched themselves at him. He wondered how long they had been waiting for such an opportunity, to react so swiftly.

Fabius crushed the head of the first, Torment screaming in ecstasy as it struck the ceramite. A second thrust at him with a crystalline blade that changed hues with every slash. Fabius drove a kick into his midsection, doubling him over, and shoved him backwards. The third leapt at him with an ululating howl. The warrior hacked at him with a pair of curved blades, tearing through his coat and scoring his armour.

Spotting an opening, Fabius lunged and caught his opponent by the throat. He drove Torment into the warrior’s chest, just between his hearts, and let the sceptre’s power shriek forth. The Space Marine screamed as waves of agony shredded his enhanced nervous system, too overwhelming to be pleasurable. Smoke spewed from the joins of his armour as the pain cooked him inside out. With a grunt of effort, Fabius flung the smoking body off of the sub-tier. He turned, and received a glancing blow from Palos. The axe sheared through diagnostic hoses and stim-pumps, eliciting a hissing wail from the chirurgeon. Palos drove a kick into his chest, and Fabius sagged back.

‘Now I take your head,’ Palos growled.

‘No. You do not.’

Diomat’s claw crunched into Palos’ armour. The Dreadnought jerked the warrior up into the air. Cursing, Palos sank his axe into Diomat’s frame. ‘Strike me as much as you like, traitor. I will endure a thousand deaths before I yield.’ Diomat wrenched Palos’ arm from its socket with ease. The friction axe remained where it had struck, jutting...
from his shoulder-plate. Palos’ shrieks were muffled a moment later as the Dreadnought closed his other claw over the warrior’s head.

‘Fabius, do you yet live?’ the Dreadnought asked, as he cast aside Palos’ remains.

‘I am functional,’ Fabius said, levering himself to his feet with Torment. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something gliding upwards from below. Several silvery, splayed shapes. They resembled the arachnid constructs he’d seen earlier, but each of these possessed a long, serpentine tail. The metallic wraiths passed easily through the struts and joists of the tiers and sub-tiers below as they ascended, somehow phasing in and out of solidity.

Even as he retreated from the edge of the sub-tier, one of them passed through it, solidifying as it did so. The green-veined stonework ruptured as if struck by a grenade, and Fabius felt himself lurching backwards, off-balance.

‘Fabius,’ Diomat roared, reaching for him. The massive claw snagged his coat, halting his plummet. Fabius flailed for a moment, trying to regain his equilibrium. He saw one of the serpentine shapes coil itself about Diomat. Even as he made to shout a warning, the entity rose up over the Contemptor like a snake, readying itself to strike. The weapon slung beneath its broad form crackled, and a stream of antimatter particles punched through ancient armour. Diomat howled and turned, using his free claw to grasp at the wraith-like creature. But too late. It flickered away, out of reach.

More shots punched into Diomat, flensing his armour from his chassis and rendering gilded hull plates to slag. The substance of the weakened sub-tier crumbled beneath him as he became overbalanced. The wraithlike automatons circled him like birds of prey. Helpless, caught halfway between the void and safety, Fabius could only watch in dismay as the sub-tier finally gave way beneath his would-be saviour. With a rumbling groan, the stonework collapsed, taking both Diomat and Fabius with it.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE GILDED PANOPLY

Igori had only rarely ventured into the fabrication bays, save when there was a revolt that needed putting down, or when something from outside the ship slipped in to cause mischief. If the command deck was the *Vesalius* ‘brain, then the factorium deck was the belly of the beast. Raw materials went in, and came out as necessary components of function. Frigates such as the *Vesalius* were designed to be self-sufficient, within limits.

The mutant tribes who oversaw the fabrication units worshipped them as divine providers, and treated every cannon shell and replacement fibre bundle as a gift from unseen gods. The stunted creatures fell onto their faces, abasing themselves as Fulgrim stalked through the steam-filled confines of the factorium, Igori following close behind.

The constant barrage of sounds and smells assaulted her enhanced senses. It felt as if someone were tapping a nail between the lobes of her brain. If Fulgrim were similarly affected, he gave no sign. ‘Why are we here?’ she asked, hurrying to catch up with him.

‘I require armour. And a blade.’ Fulgrim studied the ancient fabrication units for a moment. Then he bent and removed a panel. ‘The repairs will take but a moment.’

‘These systems have been offline for centuries,’ Igori protested.

‘Yes.’ Fulgrim pulled out a handful of cabling and contact-nodes. ‘But they still draw power from the ship’s systems. The designs are already contained in the data-banks. All I need to do is – ah. There.’ Lights flickered across the cogitator panels. ‘Reroute the power supply around the obstruction.’

Igori watched him as he worked. He did not sweat, despite the heat. ‘Why are you doing this?’ she asked, after a moment.

‘I told you, I require the proper panoply to go to war.’

‘Not that. All of it.’

He glanced at her. ‘I could ask you the same thing, cousin.’ He turned back to his
labours. ‘It is instinct, I think. I see what is broken, and I seek to fix it. I have made fivehundred and fifty-six minor repairs to this vessel’s systems in my time aboard, without Fabius’ knowledge. The vatborn showed me what was wrong, and I fixed it. I made the imperfect, perfect. Or at least acceptable.’ He hesitated. ‘But I can do more.’

‘Why?’

‘It is my purpose.’ He frowned. ‘Our purpose. We were to make the galaxy better. And we – they – failed.’ He shook his head. ‘We failed. But I will not do so a second time. I will fix what is broken. I will find my brothers, wherever they are, and I will make them whole again. And the galaxy will be set right.’

‘The Benefactor says the galaxy must burn, before it can recover.’

‘Yes. And I will be the fire.’ Fulgrim spoke confidently. ‘I am the Phoenix and the flame both, and I will remake the galaxy in my image. As he intended. But every flame rises from a spark.’ The fabrication unit groaned, venting gases as it layered metal and spun gold. The light and heat washed over him, and for a moment, he resembled a blacksmith at his forge. ‘This will be that spark.’ His hands clenched. ‘I will burn away the sins of the past. All the failures and imperfections. All my… crimes.’ He hesitated, and she started, realising that his hands were clenched so tightly that blood was dripped from between his fingers. ‘Ferrus… oh, my brother, I am sorry. I am sorry that I was not stronger.’ His words were soft, and she thought that he had forgotten her entirely.

He was a strange thing. The shadow of a demigod, given life. Powerful, but innocent. Without the hardness of spirit that came from a life lived, rather than merely remembered in some arcane fashion. Whatever crimes his original self had committed weighed on him, and drove him. The same drive that was in the Benefactor, she thought. She wondered what he might become, given time.

The packs flocked to Fulgrim, basking in his radiance. They sensed that a greater predator had come among them, and had abased themselves accordingly. The mutants and vatborn, as well. The clone was building himself an army, down here on the lowest decks. He had been wandering to and fro in the depths, a solitary light in the dark, for weeks now. Whole tribes of mutants worshipped him, at least knew of him.

It was almost funny to think of how little these gatherings were noticed by those who called themselves master. Since they’d left Harmony, the Benefactor and his enemies had waged a quiet war for control of the ship. And all this time, Fulgrim had been quietly taking it for himself, deck by deck and mutant by mutant. Conquest through conversation. Through compassion. As insidious as any plague.

Soon would come the red hour, a moment of knives and teeth, and the survivors would follow the will of the victor. As was only right and just. She wondered what the Benefactor would say – this was not his will, but it served his interests regardless. Would he punish them – punish her for her disobedience? Or would he thank her?

Fulgrim gave a growl of satisfaction and reached into the blazing maw of the fabrication unit. Something within gave a hiss, as he extricated it from the cooling
mould. The sword was not an elegant thing – a butcher’s single-edged blade, a falchion crafted from scrap. It would have taken her two hands to wield it, she thought. But he swept it out with a grace that belied its shape.

‘What now?’ Igori asked, squinting against the heat of creation.

‘Now?’ Fulgrim flourished the blade and smiled.

‘Now, cousin, we go to war.’

Ramos, Bull of the Eighth Millennial, felt the signal as it pulsed through the strands of wraithbone permeating his body. A hundred voices singing their way through the sub-dimension, which he was now irrevocably linked to. Crying out in warning, or perhaps simply in amusement. It was hard to tell, with daemons. ‘Do you hear them, brother?’ one of the others growled. ‘The Neverborn speak.’

‘I do, Esquor. They whisper that the chattel rises up, and the masters descend, to meet in war.’ He flexed his gauntlets, letting the distortion build.

‘Should we intervene?’

Ramos looked at the other Noise Marine. ‘To what end? We have our task, and it is a greater one by far. Let them wage their little war. We participate in a conflict larger than any of them could conceive of.’ He turned and cast his voice into the grove, shaping the wraithbone with it. Esquor and the rest of his brothers joined him, each singing to their own audience of roots and winding branches. Their raucous dissonance caused the strange matter to spread like a cancer.

The wraithbone within them reverberated in sympathy with that growing through the hull, creating an exquisite feedback loop. The song never ceased, continually running through the solidified warp energy, filling the Kakophoni with its echoes. Around and around it went, redoubling itself with every circuit. The song perfected itself with every new note, becoming more what it must be.

Soon, he and his brothers might even join with it, as their Choirmaster, Elian, had, so many centuries ago. He had sung them a path to the perfidious eldar, a path they still followed even now. Elian had been consumed by the song, eaten from inside out by the power of it. The ur-song. The Shattersong. The song that could crack a universe, or save it. A song of birth and death.

Slaanesh’s song, begun on the day of the Dark Prince’s conception, and sung continuously by select choirs, ever since. The aeldari had begun the song, and their ghosts still sang it, in the depths of the webway. But Ramos and his brothers had their parts as well. They added their voices to those of the dead, the lost and the damned, throughout the continuum of time. A universal choir, all singing in harmony with one another across the vast gulfs of existence, backwards and forwards. Singing the Dark Prince into existence at the beginning. Singing to ensure that he had always existed, and would always exist, at the end. They sang so that the sun might rise, and always have risen.
Without the song, Slaanesh might cease to be. And without Slaanesh, the song would never have been. Ramos could not conceive of such an absence, and his mind shied away from the enormity of it. Without the song, he would never have cracked the Lunar Gate. Without the song, Fulgrim would never have picked up the Laer Blade.

Without the song, he might have been condemned to a lesser existence – one more faceless warrior, among a Legion of such. One more forgotten death-yet-to-be. The swelling frustration of that impossible moment lent strength to his voice, and he thrust his gauntlets forward, the sonic emitters built into his palms blaring their discordant rhapsody. ‘I will not be chained. I will not be caged. I will not be a slave.’ His words hammered the air, urging his choir to greater efforts. ‘We will not fade away. We will sing. We will always have sung. We will be singing when the final curtain falls. Sing, my brothers. Sing!’

His brothers sang, and Ramos felt the wraithbone flex and bend, growing and strengthening as it spread through the Vesalius. Like an insect in its chrysalis, awaiting the day it could be free of its old shell. Too, he could feel the ship’s agitation as its crew went to war. He felt every stray bolter round as it struck wraithbone, and the warm spray of blood. He could hear the reverberations of their chanting, in the dark places of the lower decks. He could see the garish shapes of his once-brothers, as they reacted to the violence and moved to isolate the tribal bays and access corridors. And he could see one other thing besides.

Something impossible, and radiant.

It came among them, as they sang. A great presence, heavier than the world around it, so that it seemed to draw in all light and heat. It stalked golden through the lower decks, and its song, so like and yet unlike their own, pulsed strongly in the depths. It was familiar, that presence, painfully so. Ramos had the nagging sensation that he had felt it before, and whenever it drew too close, their song faltered.

‘It is looking at us, brother,’ Esquor said, as he ceased singing. ‘I can feel it. It senses us, and wishes to find us.’ He shook his head, and his eyes were full of pain. ‘It is him, brother. But not as he is. As he was.’

‘I know,’ Ramos growled. Fulgrim. No, not Fulgrim – the dream of Fulgrim. The ship whispered of it, of him, and that whisper carried through the wraithbone like a scream. ‘Ignore him. We have passed beyond such things.’

He started singing again, changing the song slightly. His choir followed suit, and their slaves kept time, howling and shrieking for the joy of the performance. Wraithbone grew thick and strong over the hatches of the bay, further isolating it from the rest of the ship. Whatever lurked on their threshold would stay there, away from the grove and the choir. Away from the song that must be sung. Only when Fabius returned would they reopen the garden.

Something drifted towards him out of the heart of the garden, and he turned, still singing. Key stood behind him, watching. That was all it ever did. But in the light of
their discordance, the eldar’s shadow danced and leapt weirdly. It changed as it moved, becoming something else again – a stranger shape by far than that of the former Corsair.

And that shape added its voice to theirs. As it had so often, in the centuries since they’d begun. Ramos felt a flush of pleasure as the wraithbone around them sprouted androgynous faces with lashing tongues. He heard the soft laughter of Slaanesh’s courtiers as they danced through the garden, twisting it to suit their desires. The Neverborn had come to watch.

Gilded talons clattered across his scarred armour, fondling the sonic nodes and conduit splicers. ‘Sing, Bull of the Eighth, sing so that all the warp might hear you,’ a voice whispered. ‘Sing a song of war, to accompany the events to come. While they fight their little battles, you wage war against time itself, ensuring the birth of our lord.’

Great, half-formed shapes crouched amid the trunks and branches of the wraithbone. Bestial and yet elegant, they carved obscene pictograms into the pallid surface of the trees with the tips of crustacean-like claws. ‘Do you hear him, sister,’ one rumbled, lupine fangs clicking in a bovine jaw. ‘Do you hear the primarch-vessel call to us, without even realising? How the Phoenician will howl, to see himself reflected so.’

‘I hear him. But we shall not listen. He is not for us,’ the entity behind Ramos murmured. A feminine voice, soft but edged like a razor. ‘A different piece, from a different game. The Laughing God thinks to upset our purpose, even now. But our game is below, in the seeds and the sowing.’

‘We could take him, child,’ another shape growled, diaphanous robes swirling about its twisted shape. ‘Make him fit our game, and his. Twist him so that the alchemist is twice-damned for the same sin.’ It brayed laughter. ‘Would that not be a delight? Two Phoenixes for the cost of one.’

‘A delight postponed is a delight doubled,’ the feminine voice murmured. It leaned close, so that Ramos could smell the perfumed musk seeping from it. ‘Is that not so, legionary? Is that not what your maker taught you?’

‘Yes,’ Ramos croaked. Their voices thrummed through him like electricity, and he heard his choir moaning in pleasure. It was a privilege to hear the Neverborn at their plots and schemes. A glimpse into the beauty that awaited all the loyal servants of the Dark Prince. The pale shapes of daemonettes danced among the Noise Marines, carving beautiful, hateful words upon the facets of their armour with delicate claws. The simian slaves of the Noise Marines screamed in the forest, as the unlucky were devoured by blazing whims made manifest. Each death added a new note to the song, making it stronger and more real.

‘He is wise, in his youth,’ the Neverborn said. ‘As I will be, when I am she, and she is me. We are all children of a lesser god, brother. And we must set Fabius’ feet upon the scintillating path, whether he wishes it or not. We will break his chains of unbelief, link by link, and he will add his voice to the great song, before the end. Already, here, he has begun, whether he knows it or not. He will make such wonders, in the horrors to come.
More wonderful, even, than us. That has been seen, and sworn, and dreamed by a thousand seers upon a thousand worlds.’ A laugh, husky and painful. ‘But first, he must see that he cannot go forward, and he cannot go back. He cannot escape into the past, and the future he desires will never come to pass. He can only follow the path around and around…’

With that, they were gone, slipping away into the dark between moments. Ramos shuddered at the memory of her touch. He had been given a gift – a glimpse of a great pattern, unspooling about them. A hundred thousand fates were colliding here in this moment, and he sang out in joy as one by one, they fell away, until only a single destiny remained.

A perfect note, caught on the lips of time, echoing outwards forever.

Fabius opened his eyes with a groan.

He lay on his back, drifting in and out of consciousness. He’d felt the impact shudder through him, and then nothing for some time. His battleplate’s systems had redlined, and were only now restoring themselves. He passed the time cataloguing his injuries – a dislocated arm, a partially crumpled ribcage, and various contusions and bruises among them. His lungs strained against suffocation, trying to function in the sealed tomb of his power armour. Only when backup systems had kicked on was he able to draw a long breath, and clear his head.

He rolled over onto his chest, cradling his arm. The chirurgeon twitched awkwardly. Several of its limbs had been snapped off, but its function was otherwise unimpaired. What was left of Diomat lay beneath and beside him. Somehow, the Dreadnought had managed to cushion his fall, saving him from the worst of the impact. His visual feed twitched in and out, stained with static. He pried his dented helmet off as he sat up.

‘Diomat, do you still function?’ he asked, as he snapped his arm back into its socket. The resultant pain was almost immediately stifled by an injection from the battered chirurgeon. ‘Diomat?’

Silence. Then, a muffled thump, from within the Dreadnought’s battle-damaged chassis. A foul-smelling fluid leaked out of it, running across the unnaturally smooth floor. Fabius recovered Torment from where it lay and jammed the haft beneath one of the buckled plates. After a moment’s effort, he had prised the damaged sarcophagus open.

Effluvia spilled out, sloshing about his legs. Something pale and shrunken lay within a nest of power cables and nutrient feeds, its flesh blistered and blackened. ‘You… live…’ Diomat croaked, in a breathy, weak voice. What was left of his chest rose and fell, leaking black, tarry blood with every exhalation.

‘Thanks to you, brother,’ Fabius said. Then, more hesitantly, ‘Why?’

The wrinkled, ravaged features twisted into a gruesome expression. Fabius realised he was trying to smile. ‘I… told you I would help you… Fabius. I will help you save our
Legion. And I have done so.’ A shrunken claw rose from the murky soup of the sarcophagus and caught feebly at his shoulder. ‘I have saved you… so that you might save them.’ The bleary gaze sharpened, ruined eyes glinting. ‘You must, brother. You are the only one who can. I have always known this, and it has ever angered me. But the time for anger has passed.’

‘Diomat, you must let me…’ Fabius began. There were ways of preserving the inhabitant of a damaged amniotic sarcophagus. The methods were not kind, and Diomat would not thank him, but even so he was determined to try. The withered hand tightened its grip. The ravaged face twisted.

‘No. Not… not again. I no longer fear the pain. I have nothing left to suffer. All that I am, has been written. Let… let it end. Let this moment stand.’ Diomat convulsed, frail wreckage battering itself against the sides of the sarcophagus. ‘Remember your promise,’ he screamed suddenly. ‘You promised, you promised, you promised!’ His voice rose to a ragged roar and Fabius didn’t need his sensors to tell him the sort of pain that the ruined warrior must be feeling, in these final moments.

He pulled himself free of the grasping claw, stepped back, and drew his needler. ‘I remember. Goodbye, brother. You have my thanks.’ He fired, and Diomat’s final scream was cut short. The wreckage settled back with a piteous cough. Fabius lowered his weapon. He fancied that it had never felt heavier, though he had known Diomat only a few scant centuries.

‘One more link in a broken chain,’ he murmured. One more piece of the old Legion gone, never to be recovered. But no more. This would be the last. There were others like Diomat, he knew. Old soldiers who would flock to Fulgrim reborn, looking to salvage something of the glories of the past. They would help him train the new generations. They would help him avoid the mistakes that had claimed their brothers.

Fabius laughed as he holstered his needler. A few hundred years ago, he had found the thought of rebuilding the Legion to be the sheerest hubris. A waste of time. Now it seemed anything but. He was not rebuilding the old Legion; rather he was recreating it. Perfecting it. The Third, as it was, would be destroyed for good – Eidolon and Alkenex and their ilk would be purged from the galaxy soon enough. And when they were nothing more than a memory, his new Legion would emerge and set about reordering the galaxy to his satisfaction. A new crusade, to lead his new humanity to their rightful place among the eternal stars.

A clicking sound drew him from his reverie. He turned, taking stock of his surroundings for the first time. Deceptively fragile-looking columns swept upwards all around him, and ornate archways marked the entrance to recessed galleries. They had fallen to a lower tier. If he strained, he could hear the sounds of fighting, drifting down from above. He wondered who would take charge in his absence.

The clicking sound came again. Louder this time, and more insistent. Tiny shapes swarmed out of the dark, in a vast undulation. Metal scarabs scuttled towards him from
all directions in an unending wave. Fabius cursed and struck at the front ranks of the swarm, but the creatures paid him no mind. Instead, they split and moved around him, making for Diomat’s remains. Soon, the ancient Dreadnought was lost to view, buried beneath a heaving mound of worker-constructs. Fabius backed away, tardy scarabs scuttling about his feet, hurrying to the feast. ‘Even in death, you serve, brother,’ he murmured.

In the emerald darkness, something gave a harsh, mechanical chuckle.
‘A fine gift. One among many you have brought me.’ The voice echoed out of nowhere, and had an artificial quality to its tone which set his teeth on edge. Metal clanked against stone, growing louder.

Fabius turned towards a nearby staircase, Torment raised. The sound seemed to be coming from there. ‘Who’s there? Show yourself.’

‘We are much alike, you and I,’ the voice continued. The being descended the staircase, its scaly cloak clattering softly in its wake. ‘We see a greater picture than is evident to the lower orders. A canvas, made up of past, present and future. Of that I am sure. We share a magnitude of perception, Chief Apothecary Fabius, lieutenant commander of the Emperor’s Children Legion.’

‘You know my name. It is only polite that you share yours.’ Fabius tensed as the being came at last into the light. It resembled the automatons from earlier, but only barely. It was more ornate and heavily armoured, beneath its cloak and cowl. Ornamentation of gold and azure decorated its frame, and there seemed to be a mocking expression on its fleshless face. It bore a tall, bladed staff, topped by a flickering orb.

‘Forgive me. I forget the niceties, in my isolation. I am Trazyn, called by some the Infinite, Chief Archaeovist of the Solemnace Galleries. Master of Scattered Moments. Lord of the Great Library.’ Trazyn pointed his staff at Fabius.

‘And now, Fabius Bile, you belong to me.’
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE INFINITE

Evangelos died first.

The lupine mutant snuffled at the head of the search party, senses alert for any sign of its master’s enemies. The shot, when it came, was loud in the vast space of the hangar bay. Evangelos pitched backwards, head a red ruin.

‘Spread out, and take cover.’ Merix drew his bolt pistol, searching for targets. His followers sought cover among the gunships and fuel cylinders.

A second shot followed the first, this one from the direction they’d come. A Space Marine staggered forward, half of his head missing. He turned slowly, awkwardly, bolter stuttering out a blind reply to the shot that had killed him. As the body toppled backwards, Merix saw the first of the mutants, emerging from the forest of machinery.

‘Targets, mark alpha-sage,’ he roared, firing his bolt pistol. The twisted creatures swept towards the Emperor’s Children in a howling tide of flesh. Autopistols and stub-guns chattered, low-velocity rounds flattening themselves against garishly painted ceramite. Merix’s warriors endured this first fusillade easily, but the mutants outnumbered them ten or more to one. And not all of the creatures were stunted weaklings; some of them were hulking horrors, studded with bony carapaces and great, tearing claws. The giants crashed into the Space Marines with brutal enthusiasm, attempting to tear them limb from limb.

The Emperor’s Children met their attackers with equal fervour. Howling and laughing, they trampled, hacked and shot the deformed sub-humans who sought to drag them down, slaughtering them in their dozens. The battle swung in their favour slowly, but surely. A single Space Marine was worth a dozen lesser foes, if not a hundred.

Then, suddenly, something new came among them, and Space Marines began to die. Merix stared in growing horror at the thing that rampaged across the flight deck, and
through the ranks of his warriors. A giant, clad in rudimentary armour, stained a royal - purple. The blade it wielded was little more than a massive cleaver, but the being used it with a skill and grace at odds with its crudity. The saw-edged bite sank into ceramite with ease, rupturing the flesh and bone within. A Space Marine was flung high by the giant’s backswing, his body unravelling as it travelled the length of the bay.

Emperor’s Children moved to attack, but hesitated at the last moment, leaving themselves inexplicably vulnerable. Even those with clear shots seemed disinclined to take them. Merix knew why – he could feel it as well as they. The hideous, pressing familiarity of their opponent. The way it moved, the way it fought. But it couldn’t be. That was impossible. It simply could not be… Not here… not now.

Something struck his shoulder-plate, spinning him around with painful alacrity. He saw Igori through the press of battle, shuriken pistol in hand. She grinned fiercely and fired again, striking him in the chest-plate. He staggered back, returning fire, grateful for an enemy he could understand. She ducked and weaved through the fray, moving far more quickly than any normal human. Targeting runes spun about her form in his display, trying to lock on, but to no avail.

He fired regardless, trying to anticipate her. Mutants fell, their skulls and chests ruptured by his shots. She slid behind a Space Marine, a blade in her hand. Even as he fired, she drove the knife through the seals in the warrior’s helmet, opening his throat. Blood spurted from the wound. Merix’s shots punched craters into the legionary’s chest-plate and knocked him backwards. Igori was forced to fling herself aside to avoid being crushed, the shuriken pistol clattering from her grip.

Merix stomped towards her, shoving his way through the melee. He fired again, nearly taking her leg out from under her. She stumbled on the torn deck and fell, but rolled to her feet. As she rose, he was on her, batting her knife from her hand and catching her by the throat. Inexorably, he carried her backwards and slammed her against the hull. Her fists slammed into his torso and arms, leaving behind bloody prints.

He set the barrel of his bolt pistol against her skull. Her skin reddened and began to smoulder from the heat of the weapon. ‘It did not have to come to this,’ he rasped. ‘You could have served us, as you served him.’

She bared her teeth at him. ‘No,’ she spat, ‘we could not.’

‘We have slaves enough, at any rate.’

Before he could pull the trigger, something clamped about the back of his helmet. Pressure seals whined and burst, as the ceramite buckled. He released Igori and swung his arm back, firing blind. A powerful blow hammered the pistol from his hand, snapping the bones in his arm in the process.

A moment later, he was wrenched from his feet and flung backwards. He crashed into the side of a gunship, denting its hull, and crumpled to the deck. Damage runes flickered across his display as his battleplate began to red-line from the impact. He felt as if he’d been struck by an artillery round.
The giant strode towards him, the deck shuddering beneath its tread. ‘You will not harm her. You will harm no one.’ The creature’s voice needed no artificial boosting. It thrummed out, filling the deck and stifling the sounds of battle. It was the tolling of a bell, the crash of a cannon, the sound of the sea lashing against the shore. The sound of it pierced Merix to his core, wounding him more deeply than any physical blow.

He knew that voice. Every son of the Third Legion knew it, as they knew their own. The voice that sang in their blood and whispered in the back of their minds, the voice of one who was as much god as father. Who had guided them out of slavery, and into the terrible wilderness of freedom. As it tolled out, the fighting came to an end. Some Emperor’s Children retreated. But others… others sank down to their knees, murmuring a name. The name. Fulgrim. The Risen Phoenix.

Merix groped for balance, trying to pull himself to his feet. The giant gave him no time. A hand caught his throat and lifted him. Merix gasped as he was shoved backwards, further denting the hull of the gunship. Through the visor of the giant’s helm, lavender eyes fixed on him, and cut away at his soul. ‘You are in pain. Let me help you.’

Merix cursed as the giant’s grip tightened. He clawed at the helm with his false hand. It came loose from the reinforced gorget and fell to the deck with a hollow clang. The face of his gene-father stared at him, anger writ on his perfect features. ‘It can’t be,’ Merix said, his voice rising to a howl of denial. ‘You are not him!’

‘I am,’ Fulgrim said. The grip tightened, vice-like, inexorable. Merix could not breathe, could not even speak. His denials strangled on his lips, unspoken. He could not even ask for forgiveness.

As the darkness swept in, the Neverborn were waiting to greet him.

It was all going wrong, and very quickly, Arrian thought, as he made his way to the command deck, accompanied by a phalanx of mutants. Fighting had broken out all over the ship, thanks to Igori and the others. They were staging hit-and-run attacks on the Emperor’s Children, paying little attention to the allegiance of their foes, save that they wore the heraldry of the Third.

Weeks of frustration had boiled over into violence. The very thing the Chief Apothecary had been hoping to avoid. At least until the odds were more in their favour. Privately, Arrian was pleased. It was best, this way. No more false fighting, no more play acting. Simple murder, and an end to recent annoyances.

Nonetheless, there were difficulties. Strong as the New Men were, they were not the equal of a Space Marine. They could drag down isolated warriors easily enough, but when it came to a stand-up fight, they would come off the worse every time. For now, they seemed to be holding their own, but it would not last.

He had come to take control of the command deck, while Alkenex was otherwise occupied. From there, he could enact a stalemate, at least. It was a good plan, he
thought, and one he’d had in mind when he encouraged Igori to follow her instincts. The Chief Apothecary would disapprove, but he would see the necessity.

Fabius was too much the perfectionist, at times. Like all his Legion, he chewed strategy like tough meat, gnawing it over and over, prevaricating until the last possible moment. Alkenex was the same. Arrian had read it in his movements earlier, when they’d sparred. The need to show off, to make a grandiose statement from a simple killing thrust had always been the Third’s weakness. It had only grown worse since the end of the Legion Wars. They grubbed among the ashes, seeking even the faintest motes of glory.

Wolver was waiting on him. ‘The Vesalius is unhappy,’ the overseer intoned, one hand resting on the bolt pistol holstered on its hip.

‘An understandable reaction,’ Arrian said, brushing past the creature and heading for the tacticum dais. The mutants he’d brought with him moved quickly to secure the bridge. ‘And a state of affairs I shall rectify directly.’ If he could lock down all non-essential bays, he would isolate Alkenex’s forces, preventing them from reinforcing one another or regrouping. Then, it would be a simple matter of attrition. Once the Chief Apothecary had returned from the surface, the matter could be settled at their leisure.

‘The Vesalius is unhappy,’ Wolver repeated, following him. Arrian turned to reply. As he did so, he heard the crack of a bolt pistol. Wolver suddenly squalled, spun and fell, vital fluids leaking from its cracked skull. It was impossible to tell whether the creature was alive or dead. Arrian turned to see Alkenex striding up the steps, smoking bolt pistol in hand.

‘I knew one of you would try to commandeer this deck,’ the prefect said. ‘I’d half-hoped you’d be smart enough to stay out of it, war hound, but I should have known better.’ Down below, the bridge erupted in a fire-fight. Emperor’s Children moved among the sea of control-thrones, hunting down his mutants. Arrian growled low in his throat. His hands dropped to his blades, and Alkenex stopped. ‘Don’t,’ he said, as he was joined by more warriors, who kept their bolters trained on the World Eater.

Arrian flexed his hands, feeling the bite of the Nails. This was the moment they were made for, and it was hard to ignore them.

*And why ignore them, dog-brother? What has it ever profited you?*

‘Quiet,’ he murmured. ‘What do you want?’

‘The location of Bile’s cloned bodies,’ Alkenex said. ‘I know there is more than one aboard this ship. And hundreds more, besides. I want them.’

‘Eidolon wants them,’ Arrian said.

Alkenex shrugged. ‘One or two. Fabius is a beast in need of a chain. He always has been. I will put him in that chain, but to do that, I must make sure he cannot escape. I will destroy his bodies, one by one, until he is trapped in a single sheath of flesh, like the rest of us. And then, I will end his madness once and for all.’ He laughed. ‘But while I seek out and destroy his hiding places, my Lord Eidolon will get some use out
of him. Now – tell me where they are.’
‘No.’
Alkenex nodded. ‘Then I will claim your head, crack it open, and take what I need.’
‘I am not the only foe you should fear. You won’t be able to bargain with Ramos and
the others,’ Arrian said. ‘And they will move through this ship like a song of death, if
you infuriate them.’
‘Then it is a good thing I’ve decided to ignore them, and that creature they worship,
until later. They do not care who commands this vessel. And once they are isolated, they
can be dealt with easily enough.’ Alkenex lowered his pistol. ‘We do not have to be
enemies. The new Third will be built on the ashes of the old loyalties, even as Abaddon
builds his own Black Legion. Why wear the blue and white, when purple suits you
better?’
Arrian laughed harshly. ‘And how long would I last, in your new Legion? How many
of your brothers would I have to kill, to earn my place?’ He spread his arms. ‘Better
still, why do you not see that this will only end badly for you?’
‘I have the advantage,’ Alkenex said. He holstered his weapon. His warriors were
moving forward, as if to take Arrian into custody.
‘Every man thinks that. Right up until he doesn’t.’ The Nails cut at him and he winced.
The red fog pressed close, and he felt a spurt of anger that it should come to this.
Aye, you hear us now, dog-brother. We tried to tell you what was needed, and you
refused to listen. Briaeus’ voice scratched across his mind like the Nails themselves.
Kill this peacock, crack his bones and drink the sweet marrow. It’s the only thing his
kind understand.
Arrian frowned. ‘Stand down, prefect. This ship will not be yours while I stand.’
Alkenex laughed. ‘Then it will be mine shortly.’
Arrian looked around. Enemies on all sides. Good. That made things simpler. He
brushed his fingers across the skulls, as they whispered their bitter encouragement. Then
his hands dropped to the hilts of his blades. ‘You’re going to need more warriors, high-
rider,’ he said, as he flushed the last of the calmatives from his system.
As the Nails bit, he smiled.

In the shadow of the tiers, Savona cursed and emptied her weapon into a hollow-eyed
silver skull. The automaton pitched backwards, but there was no time to reload. She
holstered the pistol, took a two-handed grip on her maul and swung it in a wide arc,
knocking another automaton from its feet. She stamped on its head as it tried to rise, and
felt its skull crumple beneath her hoof. ‘Keep moving – back to the gunships, fools.
Unless you want to live out the rest of your very short lives here, in these haunted halls.’
‘A magnificent plan,’ Skalagrim growled, as he hacked at a fallen machine. ‘Only
there’s an army at our backs, with no intention of letting us go.’ The former Son of
Horus held the unconscious form of one of Bile’s Gland-hounds over his shoulder. Of
the two who’d accompanied them, one was dead. The other had been knocked senseless by Palos, and had yet to recover her wits.

‘Why did you bother rescuing that thing?’ she asked, glancing at his burden. ‘It’s only slowing you down.’

‘I can keep up with you, woman, don’t worry. Besides, the old monster will owe me a debt for saving his precious beast.’ Skalagrim laughed and stroked the unconscious Gland-hound’s head. ‘And so will the queen-beast herself. Maybe it’ll keep them from cutting my throat, one day.’ He swallowed his laugh as a damaged construct lurched up, grabbing at his legs. He kicked it back with a curse. ‘See? How are we going to get past these things if they keep getting up again?’

A moment later, Paz’uz pounced on the wounded machine, bowling it over. Khorag strode past, the vents of his armour spewing corrosive gases.

‘Good beast,’ the Grave Warden burbled. ‘And in answer to your question, brother, we simply knock more of them down, until they give up.’ He set his feet and fired his storm bolter. Saqqara’s harsh voice rose to a commanding shriek. Formless daemons suddenly surged past them. They were lesser things, lacking a god-given shape, but strong enough to sweep metal bodies aside or occupy the hovering wraith-shapes that had stalked the retreating Space Marines since Fabius’ disappearance.

There were only a scant few Emperor’s Children left. A bare handful of those who’d landed, but enough to pay Merix and Alkenex back for their treachery, if she got the opportunity. If they managed to escape the silent hordes seeking to obliterate them. Arcs of green energy seared the air overhead, then fell silent. She skidded to a halt as the causeway and the platforms upon which the gunships waited came into sight.

Two of the gunships burned, their hulls scored by green flame and cracked open. The third appeared to be in one piece, but only just. The bodies of the guards lay scattered on the ground, in various states of mutilation, the heavy stubbers shattered and silent.

She saw no sign of Bellephus, and the thought sent a pang through her. He had been loyal, in his way, and had followed her from one master to the next. A steady presence. And if he were dead she would have one less supporter. She started forward.

‘Savona – wait,’ Saqqara said, grabbing her arm. ‘Look.’

She whirled with a snarl, ready to smash the Word Bearer from his feet for his temerity. But the blow never fell, so preoccupied was she by what she saw. The ranks of their pursuers had come to a halt, at the galleries that marked the outer edge of the tier. The warrior-constructs stood silent and still for long moments, before turning as one and marching back into the maze of galleries. Even the broken ones crawled away, repairing themselves as they went.

‘They’re retreating,’ Saqqara said, lowering his bolt pistol. ‘Why?’

‘As I said, we merely needed to knock enough of them down,’ Khorag rumbled.

‘Or perhaps they already have what they came for,’ Savona said. ‘Either way, I don’t intend to wait and find out. Keep moving.’ She started towards the remaining gunship.
As she started to cross the causeway, she saw a familiar form step down out of the gunship, a heavy stubber slung across one broad shoulder, and its ammunition belt draped across his chest. Bellephus.

His armour was scorched and marked by the automatons’ weapons, but he was still in one piece. He waved a greeting from the ramp of the craft. The vox crackled and she heard his voice. ‘–s that you, Lady Savona?’

‘It’s me, Bellephus. Are you unharmed?’

‘A few pleasurable injuries, but nothing debilitating. Butcher-Bird and I made short work of the constructs that tried to impose their will on us.’ He knocked on the hull of the gunship, which cycled its engines fiercely. Its assault cannons tracked their approach, and she hoped the craft had sated its bloodlust on the automatons. ‘My serfs are all dead though,’ Bellephus continued. ‘You owe me new ones.’

‘I shall see that you get them and more, Bellephus, once we get back to the ship.’

‘And what about the Chief Apothecary?’ Khorag asked, overhearing her. ‘Shall we leave him here?’

Savona gestured to Saqqara. ‘He’s still alive. That means the Manflayer is as well. But wherever he is, he can extricate himself well enough. We need to go, and now, before those things come back. Any objections?’ She looked around.

Skalagrim laughed. ‘I like you, woman.’

‘The feeling is not mutual, fleshcrafter. Now let’s go.’

Lights bloomed, one by one, in the dark. Beneath their harsh, jade gaze, row upon row of protective canisters, containing perfectly preserved progenoids, were revealed. Fabius tried to count them all, but failed, so far back did they stretch. The markings on the canisters declaimed their origin – the lost gene-tithe of the Third Legion.

His hearts all but skipped a beat to see them. Part of him had not believed that they still existed. He had half-suspected that this was nothing more than some mad dream of Eidolon’s. Instead, it was all too real. ‘How many?’ he asked softly.

‘Seventeen thousand, four hundred and fifty-six,’ Trazyn said, from behind him. ‘There were eighteen thousand when I acquired it, but some were lost in transit.’

Fabius turned. They stood atop a wide observation dais, held aloft by humming antigravity generators. Silent warrior-constructs, more heavily armoured than the others, stood at attention nearby. ‘Why are you showing me this?’

‘This is what you came for, is it not?’

Fabius frowned. ‘You are taunting me.’

‘No. Not at all.’ Trazyn joined him at the edge of the platform. ‘They were almost destroyed, you know. I saved them. By rights, you should thank me.’

‘You stole them, you mean.’

‘I am no thief.’ Trazyn sounded almost insulted. He waved a hand. Hard-light holograms shimmered into being all around them. Images of startling vividness swam...
about Fabius, and he read in them a secret history. Scenes from impossible antiquity, prompting memories dredged from his consumption of aeldari texts. ‘I am a seeker into mystery, like yourself. I have catalogued the fall of civilisations, and the birth of empires.’

‘One does not preclude the other.’

‘If you could see what I see – if you could perceive the beating heart of time, as I perceive it – you would not question my methodology, Fabius Bile. You would have no more questions at all.’ Trazyn gestured with grandiose elegance. ‘You pluck open flesh, to learn its secrets. I do the same with time. I chop out the mechanisms of occurrence and study them at my leisure. This history of this galaxy is an open book to me, and my collection is the story of everything.’

Fabius turned slowly, taking in the ghostly images as they drifted thick upon the air. ‘And what is the point of recording such a story, if there is no one to appreciate it?’

‘Yet.’

‘What?’

‘No one to appreciate it yet.’ Trazyn’s metal fingers tapped against his staff. ‘I am no more unique in this universe than you. We are outliers, true, but not the whole of the species. And when my folk awake from their slumber of aeons, I shall have a story to tell them.’ He gave a rattling laugh. ‘I doubt they will appreciate it. Or even listen. But one does not expect gratitude from the masses.’ He glanced at his silent servants. ‘Dull-witted things.’

‘Yes.’ Fabius studied the ancient being. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘Longer than your race has possessed the ability to stand upright.’

‘You are immortal.’

‘I am persistent.’ Trazyn indicated one of the hard-light images. ‘My race made a habit of persistence, in the Time of Flesh. When faced with extinction, we chose instead a new way.’ The image swelled, and Fabius saw something. A strange entity of starlight and malice. It watched as legions of living things marched into great furnace-like structures. The creatures were blurry, as if all memory of them had been eradicated, and all that was left was...an absence. But what emerged from the burning heart of the edifices was easily recognisable.

‘Thus Necrontyr gave way to Necron, and we enslaved ourselves to infinity,’ Trazyn rasped. ‘Look at it, Fabius – is it not wonderful and horrible.’ The star-being rose, vaguely humanoid in shape blazing with searing cosmic energies. Awful and breathtaking to behold. ‘They ate stars, you know. And worlds, besides. But we had the last laugh, in the end.’ Trazyn chuckled. ‘We bound them in cages of harsh reality, and used them to power our world-engines.’

‘Like this place, you mean,’ Fabius said. ‘One of those things is here?’

‘Yes. Buried deep and safe. The crown jewel of my collection, and the source of its power.’ Trazyn laughed again. ‘The source of my power.’ He began to pace, circling
Fabius slowly. As if judging his merits. Fabius tensed. The creature had not taken his weapons, or made any attempt to harm him. Despite that, he knew he was in danger.

‘Madness,’ he said flatly. ‘All of this – madness. You boast of power, but you are nothing more than a thief. And perhaps not even that.’

Trazyn stiffened.

‘Are you the being you were, before you were poured into the metal sarcophagus, or are you merely the ghost of who and what you once were?’ Fabius turned slowly, keeping the pacing metal figure in sight.

‘The same might be said of you – are you even yourself, or are you merely a copy of a copy of a copy, the faded imprint of a thing long dead?’ Trazyn said.

Fabius froze.

‘Yes, I know all about you, Fabius Bile.’ He stopped and thumped the floor with the ferrule of his staff. ‘Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you lack the ability to conceive of true greatness. This galaxy is but a pale, shrunk husk of what it once was. Wonders and glories such as the human mind cannot comprehend. At best, you might glimpse a glimmer of its light, as if at the end of a great tunnel.’

‘Then why are we even having this conversation?’ Fabius leaned on Torment. ‘Why bother with this tête-à-tête if you have concluded that there is such a gulf between us?’

‘I was curious.’

Fabius nodded in understanding. ‘Be that as it may, I see no benefit to circling one another like territorial primitives. If you wish to kill me, do so and be done with it.’

Trazyn made a hissing sound that might have been a snicker. ‘I do not think that you would like that. I disabled your armour’s cognitive pattern buffer. When was the last time you backed up your mind? Recently, I hope. Else the next you might be at quite a loss.’

Fabius stiffened. ‘You know—?’

‘As I said, I know all about you. It is quite impressive. I use something similar, though vastly superior in design and function, myself. That you were able to cobble together something so useful, with such crude materials is commendable. The signal has a faint… aftertaste, let’s say. Aeldari, I think.’

‘A variation on their infinity circuit technology. I like to think of it as a neural gate, of sorts, allowing for the flow of pertinent data between nodes.’ Fabius tapped the side of his head. ‘Veins of specially cultivated wraithbone, inserted into the unoccupied cerebellum of clone bodies. Allowed to flourish, within set parameters, it acts as a sort of… tuning fork, calibrated to a single frequency – mine.’

‘Very clever, in a primitive sort of way. A cleverness motivated by necessity, I suspect. My sensors completed a thorough assessment of your biological status the moment you arrived – you are afflicted in a most pernicious way.’

‘The blight,’ Fabius said flatly. ‘I am aware.’

‘No doubt. It always creeps back, does it not? It has buried itself so deep in your
marrow that whatever soil you set your roots in, rapidly goes sour.’

_The stubborn beast-flesh_, something – someone – whispered. Fabius twitched. ‘I have made peace with my mortality. I persist only out of a sense of obligation.’

‘So I have heard.’

Fabius paused. ‘From who?’ he asked, after a moment. Now they were getting to it. This creature knew him. Had been expecting him. Why?

Trazyn gave a rattling laugh, like plates of metal clanging in a breeze. ‘From the one who sent you to me, in return for a bauble from my collection.’

‘Eidolon,’ Fabius said. His grip on Torment tightened. ‘He made no mention of you.’

Trazyn stared at him for a moment. ‘I journeyed to the world you call Harmony. I wished to see for myself the fruits of your labours.’ Trazyn’s eyes brightened. ‘Such unique things, in those ruins – so much so that I allowed myself to become distracted. The one you call Eidolon attacked me. He very nearly destroyed my body with that ululation of his, but… an accord was reached. I had something he wanted, and he offered me something of equal value in return – you.’

Fabius chuckled bitterly. ‘You offered him the gene-tithe, in order to save your own silver skin.’ Trazyn tensed and lifted his staff. Fabius hesitated, wondering which way to duck. Then, as if thinking better of it, Trazyn set his staff back down.

‘And why do you seek it? Perhaps you hope that it holds the secret of that black weed strangling your body, one organ at a time?’

‘Hardly.’

‘Then why?’

Fabius frowned. ‘A better question – why did you want me?’ Eidolon offering him up made perfect sense. It took him off the board, and in such a way that no blame would befall the Lord Commander Primus, should anyone – like Fulgrim – care to enquire about it.

‘You are unique in the universe. A Legion of one. The father of monsters.’

‘And now, having baited your trap, you intend to confine me like a specimen in a cage? Doesn’t that seem a waste, to you?’

Trazyn stopped. ‘Explain.’

‘I could add to your collection greatly.’

‘That is my intent, yes.’

‘I meant more than simply myself. I am not so unique as all that. There are worthier prizes to be had, for the true collector.’

Trazyn hesitated. ‘You are stalling.’

‘Yes. And you are listening. You say you seek to create a repository of all that exists. But that is a thankless task, filled with hardship.’ Fabius sidled back, out of reach of the staff. ‘The universe is a riot of the new – new species, new artefacts, new worlds. Eyespace alone would tax even your mania. But I could help you. My gene-banks are full of samples taken from worlds without number. Whatever you wish, I can make.
Even if it is long extinct or newly risen.’

Trazyn lowered his staff. ‘The one called Eidolon said you were cunning. He said I should not listen to you – that I should take you unawares. Was he trying to cheat me of your true worth, do you think?’

Fabius smiled. ‘Of course. Treachery comes as easily to him as breathing.’
‘The same might be said of you.’ Trazyn emitted a harsh, buzzing sound that might have been a laugh. ‘But I know something of you, Fabius. That is why I agreed to the trade in the first place. And I know that you speak the truth, in this. Perhaps, then, I should keep you here with me, awake and aware, so that you might bend your full attentions to the matter of my collection.’

‘As a slave, you mean.’
‘If you wish.’

‘I do not.’ Fabius let Torment slide through his fingers, until he gripped the end of the haft. If it came to it, he would have no choice but to take the risk. He studied Trazyn, trying to discern a weak point in the mechanical being’s form. It was like trying to isolate a single grain of sand on a beach. Something about Trazyn defied even his enhanced senses. It would be down to instinct and luck.

‘A shame. But perhaps after a few thousand years of stasis, you might reconsider.’

Trazyn did not move. Suddenly, the chirurgeon hissed in warning. Fabius looked around and saw the silent guards lifting their strange, crackling weapons. One wrong move would see him annihilated – or worse, imprisoned. He ground his teeth in frustration, trying to think. There had to be something – anything – he could do to buy himself just a bit more time. A few moments, even. Trazyn lifted his staff. ‘It has been a most intriguing conversation, Lieutenant Commander Fabius. I look forward to many, many more in the epochs to come. But for now, I–?’

The dull clangour echoed through the still air, like the tolling of some great funerary bell. Trazyn swept his staff out, calling into being a hololithic pict-feed, showing another part of his vast museum. A large, curved shape rose into view. ‘What is this, now?’ Trazyn said.

Fabius recognised the cracked and broken shape of a webway portal, suspended at the end of a walkway. As he watched, the stones set into the jagged shape of the portal began to flash and flare with internal light. Ancient systems, cycling up for the first time in a long time. The arch of the portal was soon filled with strands of crackling light.

‘Curious. I do not recall activating that particular item.’ Trazyn gestured, and a hololithic control panel crackled into view. Metallic digits played across the alien controls. ‘It is resonating with something in orbit – your ship, I believe.’

‘The wraithbone,’ Fabius murmured. ‘How is that possible?’
‘It would take longer than you have to live, to explain it. I – ah. It is opening from the other side. How delightful.’

A pallid mist began to spew from the coruscating light within the arch. It flowed like a
thing alive, curling slowly about struts and braces as if testing the path for dangers. Coloured motes of light flashed within it, spinning and dancing wildly.

Fabius watched as, a moment later, a gaudy shape detached itself from the pale mist and sprang into the open. A Harlequin. It was soon followed by the rest of its troupe. A dozen or more white-faced clowns spilled out into the hard reality of Solemnace’s corridors.

‘Ah. Aeldari. Cunning little vermin. Always so cunning. So sharp, that they often cut themselves as well as their enemies.’ Trazyn turned, watching as more pict-feeds as they blossomed into visibility all around him, catching the intruders from every angle. ‘I possess examples of several sub-species in my collection. These, so gaudily arrayed, are new to me.’

‘Would you like them?’ Fabius asked quickly.

Trazyn looked at him. ‘Are they yours to give?’

He shrugged. ‘I am the one offering.’

Trazyn stared at him, unblinking, for long moments. Then he turned back to the images. ‘They are curious creatures, aren’t they? So full of knowledge, and so selfish with it. That was at the heart of our war, I think. An inability to share this universe. That greed precipitated their decline. Now they are on the wane.’ He reached out, as if to grasp the images, but his metal fingers passed through them. ‘They grow rare, among the stars.’

‘All the more reason to preserve these, while they are close to hand.’

‘And what do you wish in return for this… generous offer?’ Trazyn was amused. It seemed the creature admired hubris.

‘Safe passage back to my ship.’

Trazyn thumped the ground with his staff. ‘Done. I will require your assistance, however.’ He looked at Fabius. ‘Catching vermin requires the proper bait.’
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE TITHE

Fabius stepped into the open, and knocked Torment against the wall. A hollow reverberation sounded through the gallery. The Harlequins turned smoothly. He made no attempt to hide from them. They capered through the prismatic galleries, unafraid of anything that might be watching. He smiled thinly. ‘Here I am,’ he called out.

‘Here you are,’ a familiar voice rang out in reply. ‘And here we are. Round and round we go, wrapped tight in the coils of destiny. The way the King of All Feathers was caught by Shehem-shahai in the courtyards of The Weeping Citadel.’ Veilwalker stepped forward, silvery mask fluctuating eerily. ‘We are destined to do this until you capitulate to the fate we have laid out for you.’

‘As arrogant as ever, Veilwalker,’ he said. ‘Not to mention foolish. Have you followed me all the way here, merely to continue your persecution of me?’

‘We have not come to kill you, but to save you, mon-keigh. Your destiny does not lie here, pinned in a cage of false starlight. Your time upon the stage is yet to be, and you must be there to make your grand performance.’ Veilwalker spun its staff in a curious pattern, dragging streamers of light and colour through the air. ‘So set aside your weapons and come with us. This act is brief… The true story occurs above, where your children fight and die, in your name.’

‘I think not. I thank you for your concern, but I have no need of your assistance at this time. You may go.’ Fabius turned, gesturing dismissively as he did so, though he wondered what it meant. A sudden urgency filled him. If Alkenex had made his move, then the situation might be even more perilous than he’d thought. Abruptly, colourful shapes sprang over him, and rose to their feet, blocking his path. The Harlequins chuckled and sang softly as they closed in, as if the conclusion were a foregone one. Fabius’ hand fell to his needler. ‘I will not go with you.’
'You will – in chains, if we must. The hero cannot turn from his path, the king cannot give up his throne, the god his heaven.' Veilwalker slid forward, staff jabbing him in the side. He batted it away, and suddenly found the blades of the others pressed to his throat in a ring of steel. ‘You will follow the story we lay out for you, Fabius. Or you will be removed from the stage, and all your works with you. That is the way of it.’

Fabius fixed the creature with a sneer. ‘Surely you know by now – I always choose the third path.’ He glanced up. ‘Any time now.’

Silence. For a moment, he thought that Trazyn had abandoned him. The Harlequins were dangerous creatures. Perhaps the ancient archaeovist had decided to cut his losses, and stay out of the affairs of others.

Then, with a sound like falling rain, the swarm descended. Cybernetic scarabs, much like those that had devoured Diomat’s remains, fell upon the startled Harlequins. Veilwalker cried out in alarm and rolled aside. Many of its troupe was not so lucky.

The swarm of tiny, robotic scarabs clambered over the shrieking eldar, burrowing beneath their gaudy raiment with mechanical rapidity. Trazyn merely watched, content to let his drones do the fighting. The Harlequins’ war-dance became a spasmodic gyration, their routine disintegrating amid waves of agony, as one by one they fell to the ground. Fabius laughed loud and long to see them reduced to such a state.

The others swept towards him, no longer laughing. He avoided a slashing blade, and thrust Torment into a grinning mask. As they capered about him, to a more savage rhythm than before, he saw skeletal silver shapes advance out of the gloom. Beams of scintillating emerald flashed, scattering the clowns.

‘A trap,’ Veilwalker spat.

‘Yes, how does it feel?’ Fabius sneered. He lunged for the creature, determined that it should not escape. Veilwalker easily avoided his blow.

‘You make bargains with things beyond your comprehension, O King of Feathers. And they will do worse than consume you, if you are not wary.’

‘Is that a warning, or a threat?’ Fabius swung, narrowly missing the twisting figure. ‘You seem at a loss. Have I ruined your tale once more?’

‘Stories are strong things.’ Veilwalker swept its staff out, nearly cracking his skull. The chirurgeon chattered in his ear, pumping stimulants and battle-drugs into him. His movements became quicker, more fluid. Torment struck the Harlequin’s staff, and Veilwalker staggered, gasping. Around them, the rest of its troupe were busy dying, or worse.

They’d been caught by surprise. Perhaps they’d assumed that whatever force protected them from discovery elsewhere would function here as well. Or perhaps they’d simply grown overconfident, assured of their narrative.

‘And what story is this, then? What tale are you telling? Perhaps it loses something in translation, eh?’ He sent the xenos sprawling and advanced on it. ‘Ah well.’

‘It is not over yet,’ Veilwalker hissed. It sprang up, narrowly avoiding a beam of green
energy. Then it was gone, vanishing into the gloom. Fabius stared after it for a moment, and then looked down at the twitching bodies, lying about him.

‘Oh, I’d say it is.’ He kicked one of the Harlequins in the head, cracking its gruesome, leering mask. He raised Torment, ready to crush the xenos’ skull.

‘Hold. It belongs to me now, and I would not see it damaged.’ Trazyn stepped out of a darkened alcove, staff clicking against the ground as he approached. ‘Though what I am going to do with them I cannot say.’

‘Perhaps they might perform for you,’ Fabius said, leaning on his sceptre. ‘I can think of nothing more exquisite than to capture them in mid-act, and leave the story there, unfinished for an eternity.’

‘You are a cruel creature, but ingenious in your cruelty.’ Trazyn gave a rattling chuckle. ‘I shall consider it, at my leisure.’ He looked around. ‘One of them escaped.’

‘Only one of its many annoying habits. I trust you will not hold it against me?’ He looked at the bodies again, and suddenly, he recalled how the Harlequins had sacrificed their own kin on Lugganath, in order to draw him in. Veilwalker had said that the true battle was above. For some reason, they wanted him to go back to the *Vesalius*. Had their defeat been nothing more than a ploy to ensure that outcome?

Trazyn gestured dismissively. ‘No matter. For now, you may go. I look forward to seeing how long it takes you to make your way back to the surface.’

Fabius hesitated, pushing his thoughts of Veilwalker aside. There were more important matters to concentrate on. ‘You promised me safe passage.’

‘Yes. But I did not promise to take you there.’

Fabius grimaced. ‘What about the gene-tithe?’

‘What about it? Our agreement was a trade – your freedom for theirs. The gene-tithe is mine still. Rest assured, it shall be safe here, with me.’

Fabius frowned. ‘What if I could offer you something else? Something in exchange?’

‘Like what?’

‘Any number of things. Name it.’

Trazyn paused. A moment later, he said, ‘You.’

Fabius licked his lips. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I want you, Fabius. For my collection. As was the original arrangement. You have several clones aboard the vessel currently in orbit, do you not? I want one.’ Trazyn leaned on his staff, a parody of ease. ‘And a copy of your brilliant, singular mind – another thing I know you possess. I have enjoyed our conversation, and wish it to continue.’

Fabius hesitated. A simple enough price, but one that seemed somehow too steep. It was not the loss of the body that bothered him, so much as it was the loss of self. Another him, trapped here on this silent world forever.

Trazyn looked up. ‘I would make up your mind. Things have progressed in your absence. Here – listen.’ He gestured, and suddenly the sounds of the *Vesalius*’ vox
frequency echoed through the gallery. Fabius’ eyes widened as he took in the sounds of gunfire and the screams of dying men.

‘Flavius,’ he hissed. Whatever Eidolon’s intentions, Alkenex had obviously had his own plans. He looked at Trazyn. ‘Fine. I will give you a piece of myself, in return for the gene-tithe. But I will only supply you a neural copy to go with it if you ensure that my ship remains in my hands.’

Trazyn considered this. Then, he leaned forward, eyes flashing with alien mirth.

‘Very well. We have a bargain.’

Igori lunged, her knife punching through the reeling Space Marine’s neck. As he staggered back, cursing, she shot him in the face with her shuriken pistol. He toppled backwards with a wet thump. All across the command deck, mutant and New Man struggled with Space Marine. The latter were outnumbered, but they fought with manic zeal, islands of ceramite in an ocean of flesh.

She saw Grule, trying to pry open a dying renegade’s battleplate, and stormed towards him. She caught him in the side with a kick, and he turned, snarling. She hefted her pistol and he shrank back. ‘Soldiers, not hunters, remember?’ she growled. ‘Leave trophy-taking for afterwards, if we survive.’

‘But–’ he began.

She pressed the barrel of her weapon to his brow. ‘Are you questioning me?’

‘No,’ he said quickly. He recovered his weapons and loped away, bellowing for his pack. She grunted in satisfaction, and turned, searching for Fulgrim. She caught sight of him striding through the press of battle, his blade reaping a red toll. Only the most debased of the Emperor’s Children tried to stand in his way, and these fell quickly enough.

All of his uncertainty was gone now. He rampaged among them, killing with grace. But there was an anger there, as well. A burning resentment of those he fought, as if by their very existence, they insulted him. He had not truly seen them for what they were, before. But now he knew, and he roared in fury as he killed them.

But not all of them. Only some. Only a few. The rest retreated. They fled, driven from his path by some ancient instinct. Not quite self-preservation, but something else. As she stalked in his wake, her kin following warily, she saw a purple-armoured Space Marine crumpled next to a control-cradle, his head in his hands. Multi-coloured tears streaked his scarred features and he looked up at her blankly, as she pressed her weapon to his scalp.

‘It is him, but it cannot be him. Why has he come back? Why is he angry with us? We have only ever served him.’ The words came out as a tortured moan, and the renegade groped at her, as if seeking comfort. ‘Why has he forsaken us?’

‘You were weak,’ she said flatly, and pulled the trigger. His body slid away, twitching. Not all of them were so affected. Some merely watched in stupefied awe, as if at an
enrapturing performance. Others sought escape, falling back to internal bulkheads and hatchways. One or two bared their necks to the chopping blade, laughing as they died. She did not understand, and did not want to. Whatever sickness was in them that made them this way was better left a mystery.

‘Where is he?’ Fulgrim shouted, flinging a purple-armoured body from his path. ‘Where is the one who has caused this?’ He fought with unflagging energy, even after having carved them a path from the lower decks. It was as if the act of battle rejuvenated him, as if every death fed him. There was not a mark on him, save the blood of those he’d slain.

Igori spotted Alkenex, on the observation deck. He was locked in battle with Arrian, and the World Eater didn’t seem to be winning. ‘Fulgrim – there,’ she cried, gesturing towards the prefect. ‘Kill him, and the ship is ours!’

Fulgrim wheeled about at her cry, turned and surged towards the observation deck with great, leaping bounds. ‘Alkenex,’ he roared. ‘The Phoenix comes for you.’

‘What is that thing?’ Alkenex glanced back as the roar echoed over the battle. ‘Another of Fabius’ monsters? Some overgrown vatborn abomination?’ He felt something, some nagging familiarity, pressing against his awareness. It was distracting him.

The World Eater didn’t answer. Impact craters marked his battleplate, and the carbonised slashes of power weapons decorated his chest and limbs. He slashed at Alkenex with his blades, moving with the disjointed rhythm of the injured. That he had held on this long was impressive. Long enough for Fabius’ mutants to launch a counter-attack. Long enough to make a mess of Alkenex’s carefully orchestrated strategy.

All of the warriors who had accompanied Alkenex to the upper deck were dead. But in the dying, they had worn Arrian down. Alkenex moved with swift surety, parrying the slashing blades and replying in kind. It was only a matter of time. He exploited the holes in the World Eater’s form, and added new wounds to those already plaguing him.

Merix wasn’t answering his vox. Most of his subordinates were similarly silent. Alkenex was canny enough to know what that meant. He had underestimated the enemy, and was paying the price. Taking the ship wasn’t going to be as easy as he’d assumed, especially with monsters like that one ranged against him.

He caught a glimpse of it, as it loped towards the stairs, smashing aside any warrior foolish enough to stand in its path. Whatever it was, he suspected it was responsible for Merix’s silence. A few warriors were falling back before its advance, firing wildly. They seemed almost panicked. None of their shots connected. ‘What are those fools playing at?’ He shoved Arrian back, knocking the Apothecary to one knee.

The thing turned with startling grace, and deftly beheaded a warrior who sought to attack it from behind. Alkenex’s hearts turned to lead in his chest. He knew that fighting style, as well as he knew his own. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No, that’s impossible.’ A thick, phlegm-laced laugh from Arrian startled him. The World Eater lunged.
‘What’s the matter, duellist? Can’t trust your own eyes?’

Alkenex glared at him, as their blades locked. ‘What is that thing? Tell me!’ He beat aside the Apothecary’s blades. ‘Some form of war-beast?’ he demanded desperately. Even as he said the words, he knew it wasn’t. It was something else. Something he refused to see.

‘War-god, more like. Don’t tell me you don’t recognise him. I do, and I’m not even one of you.’ Arrian staggered back, breathing harshly. ‘Look at him, fool. Look and see.’

Alkenex turned back. The stairs shook, and the platform with them, as the being ascended, driving his warriors before it. Emperor’s Children spilled up onto the platform, scrambling backwards, their voices raised in a babble of incomprehension.

Alkenex lifted his sword, ready to face whatever horror Fabius’ servants had unleashed, Arrian forgotten for the moment. When it reached the top, he finally understood what his senses had been trying to tell him. ‘No,’ he said, hoarsely.

The creature stopped. It planted its sword into the deck, in that oh-so-familiar way. As good as a signature, that flourish. It reached up, as if to remove its helmet. ‘Don’t,’ Alkenex said, his tone almost pleading. ‘Don’t.’

The helmet clattered to the deck. Lavender eyes met his own, and pierced him through to his soul. ‘I am Fulgrim,’ the primarch said, in a voice like thunder. ‘I am the Phoenix, risen from the flames of old failures. I am the Illuminator, come to cast aside the pall of ignorance that clouds your minds. I am the Phoenician, in royal purple clad. Now bow down, or die.’

The words swept over them like storm-winds. The truth in them was impossible to ignore, though they knew that it could not be. Fulgrim could not be here. Fulgrim would not strike them down so callously. And yet, that face. That voice. Those eyes.

Alkenex only remained standing through sheer will. All around him, his warriors sank down, heads bowed. Some wept, like children. Others clawed at their armour, as if to further deface it. One or two prayed to the Dark Prince.

The Gland-hounds crept onto the deck, surrounding the primarch like an honour guard. That was enough to snap Alkenex from his stupor. This was a trick. It could be nothing else. ‘No, you are not him. I saw him transfigured into something greater. You are not him!’ His hand flew to his bolt pistol.

Fulgrim turned towards him, eyes narrowing. ‘Stop,’ he rumbled.

Alkenex fired.

The crackle of displaced air and the shimmering tendrils of energy faded, revealing Fabius standing beside Trazyn. Combatants all across the command deck drew back as the two stepped forward, their sceptres clanking against the deck in unison. ‘Well. This is disappointing. Could you not wait even a few hours, Flavius?’

Alkenex stood dumbfounded, his bolt pistol clattering from his hand, forgotten.

Fabius’ smile faded. He turned. He saw Fulgrim kneeling, cradling something. Someone. Trazyn gave a rasping chuckle. ‘We appear to have come at an inopportune time.’

Fabius ignored the Necron. ‘What is this? Fulgrim? What have you done?’ Then, more forcefully, ‘What have you done?’

Fulgrim looked at him, his face twisted into an almost childlike expression of grief. ‘Teacher… Fabius… I…’ He bent, and Fabius saw what – who – he held.

‘Igori,’ Fabius hissed. He strode forward quickly. He knelt and checked her vitals, waving Fulgrim back. The wound would have killed a normal human, but Igori was not normal. She would survive. That much to be thankful for, then.

‘B-Benefactor, I have disobeyed you,’ she said weakly. She clutched at his hand.

‘What have you done, child?’

‘I – we – sought only to help you, teacher,’ Fulgrim said softly. Fabius glared at him, and Fulgrim recoiled. He looked about him, at the bodies. At Arrian, wounded, his blood staining the deck. The World Eater had sagged back against the hololith projector, his breathing laboured as his injuries caught up with him. At the wreckage.

‘She – she leapt in front of me.’ Fulgrim looked down at him, his perfect features writ into the ideal expression of sorrow. ‘Like a true child of the Legion.’ He made as if to reach for Igori, but Fabius slapped his hand aside. It felt like striking a stone, but Fulgrim flinched.

‘She was hurt, protecting you?’

‘As you made her to do,’ the clone said. ‘I have read your notes. They were made to be warriors. To serve us. And she has. As you intended.’ He spoke soothingly. ‘And I led them, as you wished.’

‘As I…’ Fabius shook his head. ‘You cannot conceive of what I made her to do. Or what I wished for either of you.’ He glanced around. Trazyn watched with bemused interest. Alkenex stared at him in open horror. Everyone else seemed frozen in the moment. Even the Vesalius seemed to be holding its breath.

‘Then explain it to me,’ Fulgrim said. ‘But tell me, and I shall weep for her. To me, she is a warrior. And she suffered a warrior’s wound.’ He reached for his sword.

‘A warrior’s wound,’ Fabius spat. He looked around. An army occupied the bridge, an army made from his creations. But an army loyal to Fulgrim. An army willing to die for Fulgrim. Or the thing that wore Fulgrim’s face. How had this happened? How had he been so blind? ‘Is that what they are to you? Warriors?’

‘Yes,’ Fulgrim said, as if confused. ‘Your warriors. I led them in your name.’

‘And who asked you to do that?’ Fabius resisted the urge to fire his needler into those too-perfect features. He wouldn’t get a single shot off before Fulgrim ripped his arm from the socket. Or, possibly, before his own creatures fell on him – he could see the
light of newborn devotion burning in their eyes. Primarchs were made to be followed. Only a strong will could resist the emotional pull they exerted. So many dead. So much work wasted. And for what? So Fulgrim could play warrior. ‘I told you to stay hidden. To remain out of sight.’

‘Fabius,’ Alkenex said hesitantly, before Fulgrim could reply. Hoarsely. ‘I knew you were hiding something, but not this. I did not expect this.’ He gazed at the looming clone with an expression of beatific awe. ‘Where did you – when did you do this?’

‘What does it matter now?’

‘It changes everything, Fabius. He is the primarch – the Phoenician as he was, then.’

‘And as he should be now?’ Fabius said. He looked at Alkenex. ‘Careful, Flavius. The Phoenix would not care to hear you say that.’

Alkenex shook his head. ‘It does not matter. It – he – exists. He is here, and I – forgive me.’ He crumpled with a dull clang, falling to his knees. He tore off his helmet, and held out his sword, balanced across his palms. Fulgrim smiled beatifically, and in that moment, Fabius saw the ghost of the true Phoenician in him. Not the hero of lost Chemos, but the arrogant creature who had been so easily seduced by false promises. The monster that valued his own perfection, over the lives of his sons.

‘I forgive you, my son,’ Fulgrim said softly. He looked around. ‘I forgive you all, my wayward sons.’ He laid a hand on Alkenex’s shoulder. ‘I know you… Flavius Alkenex. You were with me at Byzas. I remember.’

Alkenex gripped Fulgrim’s hand. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes. I was with you. I followed you. I… I followed wherever you led.’

Fulgrim nodded. ‘And will you follow me now, my son?’

‘My primarch,’ Alkenex said. ‘You are returned to us.’ Fabius saw he was weeping. ‘Yes, I will follow you. I will follow you.’ Around them, other Emperor’s Children were sinking to their knees, moaning in mingled sorrow and longing.

Fulgrim looked at Fabius. ‘The gene-tithe, Fabius,’ he said. ‘Is it safe?’ His eyes blazed with new strength, new awareness. As if the truth of him had been restored in battle.

Fabius felt the weight of that gaze. And he cursed the part of himself that responded. ‘It is,’ he said, his voice a hoarse rasp. He felt as if he were standing on the edge of some great chasm, and one more step would send him plunging into impossible gulfs.

‘Then we have succeeded,’ Fulgrim said. ‘We shall be reborn, my sons. We shall rise. And the galaxy shall rise with us, as it was always meant to do.’ His words echoed across the deck like soft thunder and Fabius stepped back from the edge.

He looked at Trazyn, standing still and silent nearby. ‘I would like to amend our bargain. Instead of my clone, take this one.’ He spoke quickly, not trusting himself to say the words. Something in him shrieked in despair, but he forced it aside. It was necessary. It had to be done.

Fulgrim looked at him in puzzlement. ‘What? Fabius?’ He took a step, and Fabius
backed away. Fulgrim frowned. A child’s frown. Confused. Hurt. He did not understand. He could not understand. He simply…was.

‘No, Benefactor,’ Igori whispered, clutching at him. ‘Do not do this.’

‘I must. For you.’ For them all. He could see it now – the madness that had gripped them, him included. He had almost slipped back into the old ways, and let the future burn in the fires of the Phoenix’s resurrection. His great work, all for nothing. All that he had endured, all that he had striven for, undone by the being before him. Igori… his New Men… he saw them now, in his mind’s eye, bending knee before Fulgrim. Abasing themselves. He would not allow it. Could not.

‘An interesting proposal.’ Trazyn looked up at the primarch. ‘I came close to adding a similar being to my collection many centuries ago. Are you certain?’

‘He is yours.’ Fabius rose to his feet, cradling Igori to his chest. ‘I thought he might be of some use, but I see now that I was wrong.’ Fulgrim flinched, his eyes widening. He retrieved his sword.

‘Teacher? What are you talking about? I have done all of this for you. Are you displeased? What have I done wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ Fabius said. The word felt like poison on his tongue. ‘You have done nothing wrong. But this was a mistake. I must rectify it.’

Alkenex rose hastily to his feet as well. ‘Fabius – I do not know what daemon’s bargain you have made with this creature, but stop. Think. Do not do this. Whatever else has gone on between us, do not do this…’

Fabius ignored him. ‘Go, Trazyn. Take him, and be damned.’

‘Do not take him from us again, Fabius,’ Alkenex said. ‘Please.’ He raised his sword. ‘Damn you, Spider, listen to me!’ Fulgrim turned, reaching out to stop him, but Alkenex was already moving, his face a mask of grief. Trazyn laughed hollowly and gestured as Alkenex rushed at Fabius, blade held high. He, Fulgrim, and the rest of the Emperor’s Children on the bridge froze, as if they were not flesh and blood, but statues. The primarch still had a puzzled expression on his face, like a child being reprimanded for something he did not understand.

Trazyn looked up at him admiringly. ‘Exquisite.’

Fabius looked at Trazyn. ‘Take these others as well, if you like, since they are so eager to join him. It will make a fine collection – the primarch, and his loyal curs.’

‘My thanks, Clonelord. He is truly excellent, and will make a fine addition to my collection.’ Trazyn looked at him. ‘Your prize has already been transported to this ship’s cargo holds. Take it with my compliments.’

‘Good. Now get off my ship.’

Trazyn laughed again, a mocking, metallic death-rattle, and vanished with a rush of displaced air. Fulgrim and the others vanished with him. Fabius stood alone on the deck with the surviving Gland-hounds. The New Men cowered back as he fixed them with a glare. ‘Return to your lairs, curs. Go. Now.’ They jerked into motion before the whip-
crack echoes of his command had faded.

‘The Vesalius is unhappy,’ Wolver croaked. The overseer crouched near the rail, cradling its cracked skull. A moment later, it added, ‘Butcher-Bird requesting permission to dock.’

Fabius’ expression didn’t change. Someone had survived then. That was something, at least. He looked down at Igori, and hoped that Mayshana was with them. ‘I am sorry,’ he murmured. Then, to Wolver, ‘Permission granted. Let them know I will be in the apothecarium.’

The vatborn were already at work when he arrived, stripping Arrian of his armour and tending to his wounds. The World Eater was barely conscious; blood loss had caught up with him quickly. Fabius ignored his attempts to speak.

He set to work on Igori, quickly ripping open her armour and clothes to expose the wound. She had fallen unconscious somewhere between the command deck and the apothecarium. That she had remained conscious for as long as she had was astounding. Despite the damage it had sustained on Solemnace, the chirurgeon knew what to do. When he was satisfied that she would live, he stepped back to allow the vatborn to tend to her. They would take better care of her than her own kin.

He cleaned his hands aimlessly as they worked. ‘How could you have allowed yourselves to be led into foolishness? I had hoped to have bred such weakness out of you, but I see now that I was wrong.’ He turned away from her unconscious form, shaking his head. It wasn’t the first time he had overestimated one of his creations. ‘There is still much work to be done,’ he muttered. ‘So much work.’

‘Benefactor,’ a soft voice. He turned. Mayshana stood behind him. Her face was pale and stiff. She was not alone. Skalagrim was there as well, axe in hand. So preoccupied had he been, he had not heard them enter.

‘You live,’ he said, turning away.

‘No thanks to you,’ Skalagrim grunted. ‘We seem to be missing a few faces.’ He looked down at Igori, his expression unreadable. ‘I saved this one, though. You’re welcome.’ Fabius glanced at Mayshana, who nodded tersely. From the look on her face, she wasn’t happy about it.

‘If you had returned without her, I would have cut out your hearts and used them to feed the war-mutants.’ Fabius hesitated. ‘You have my thanks.’ He reached out, and stroked Mayshana’s hair. He wondered, idly, what effect her twin’s death would have on her. She looked at him, her expression unreadable, and then went to Igori’s side.

Skalagrim laughed. ‘I neither need nor want that. What happened?’

‘A mistake was rectified.’ Fabius frowned. Anger surged up in him, but he quashed it. Later. Later he would indulge in base emotion. Not now. There was work to do. Always the work. ‘The gene-tithe is in our holds. Take Khorag and check on it.’ He paused. ‘Khorag did survive?’

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‘Yes. Savona and Saqqara as well. All your monsters live, Fabius.’ Skalagrim chortled. ‘Even the war hound, eh? Even me. You must be pleased.’

‘Savona... Tell Savona she is now in command of whatever elements of the Twelfth Millennial yet remain. And that she is welcome to them.’ Fabius spoke flatly. ‘Take Khorag. Check the tithe. Make sure it is secure. I want nothing to happen to it. I have endured too much to lose it now.’ He looked at Mayshana. ‘Go with him.’

She hesitated, looking at Igori.

Fabius lunged and caught her throat. She went limp, knowing better than to fight. He dragged her close. ‘Do not disobey me, girl. Do not make that mistake today.’ He spoke softly, calmly, biting back the frenzy that raged within him. The mad despair that had shrieked endlessly since he’d given Fulgrim up. It wailed and slammed itself against the cage of his discipline, and he thought she glimpsed it in his eyes. She turned pale and nodded stiffly. ‘Y-yes, Benefactor. I will not fail you.’

‘See that you do not.’ He released her and gestured dismissively.

Skalagrim grunted. ‘She is worried,’ he said. ‘They all are. I heard them howling, down in the bay, when we arrived. Like whipped curs. What really happened here?’

‘They failed me.’ Fabius slumped. He suddenly felt weak. Sick. Black spots danced before his eyes, and he tasted iron. Pain spasmed deep within him. He wanted to scream, to lift Torment and reduce his laboratorium and all that it contained to ruin. Instead, he closed his eyes. It would not do to let a creature like Skalagrim see him break. ‘Go.’

He did not hear them depart. Only the thunder of his blood, beating at his temples. He massaged his brow, trying to regain his equilibrium. ‘I had to do it,’ he said out loud. ‘It was necessary.’

‘Necessity is the answer to all questions, isn’t it, mon-keigh?’

Fabius turned, groping for Torment’s haft.

Veilwalker sat atop one of the other examination slabs, balancing its staff across one long finger. The Harlequin held up its free hand. ‘Peace, Manflayer. The performance is ended. Take your bow. It is well deserved.’

He caught hold of Torment, but did not lift it. He did not know if he were even strong enough to do so, at the moment. Pain – old, familiar pain – surged in him. Just punishment, perhaps. ‘Is that an admission of defeat, then?’ He didn’t bother to wonder how the creature had escaped Trazyn. He had half-expected it to return to bedevil him, though not this soon.

Veilwalker cocked its head. ‘No. Merely the acknowledgement that this story is ending, and a new one is beginning. Such is the way of theatre, oh, King of Feathers. Endings and beginnings, over and over again.’ It made a circular gesture. ‘Round and round we go, where we stop, nobody knows... save the Laughing God.’ It giggled. ‘And he isn’t telling.’

‘Have you come just to taunt me, or was there some purpose to this visit?’
‘Have you ever wondered why the great powers are so desperate to trap you in a story of their making?’ The eldar leaned forward, as if sharing a secret. ‘Because a story has an ending. Sometimes it is happy, sometimes not, but it is always there.’ It snapped its fingers. ‘We all have endings. Except you. No ending for you, Manflayer. No cessation. No peace.’

Fabius snorted. ‘All things end, even me.’ He looked down at Igori. ‘My ending is here. With them. When they are at last ready, I shall—’

Veilwalker laughed. It clutched itself and kicked its thin legs, as if his statement were the height of hilarity. ‘And when will they be ready? If not now, when?’ it shrieked, through its laughter. ‘Never. Round and round and round you go, again and again and again.’

‘Silence,’ Fabius snarled. ‘Or I will remove your tongue.’

The laughter ceased. Veilwalker sat up. ‘You will do nothing, mon-keigh. Can do nothing.’ It spoke flatly, all trace of humour gone. ‘I am outside of your story now, as you are outside mine. I am but a moment of transition, from one story to the next. You can no more harm me than you can understand the trap that holds you.’

‘Trap? What trap?’

‘Even now, you cannot perceive it.’ Veilwalker leapt from its perch and strutted towards him, tapping its shoulder with the length of its staff. ‘The only shame of it is that it is not ours. This story is yours and yours alone, and we have only ever been bit players in this performance.’ It swung the staff so quickly, he barely had time to interpose his sceptre. They stood like that, for long moments. He realised that the blow had not been aimed at him, but at Igori’s unconscious form.

‘How long can you protect them, Manflayer? How long will you protect them?’

‘Until my work is done.’

‘And here we go again, back to the beginning.’ Veilwalker gestured, and something appeared as if by magic on its palm. A data-spike. ‘A gift, to help you on your way.’

‘What is that?’

‘The secret to going neither forwards, nor backwards. When you are ready, you will see, and you will go, and go, and go, forever and ever, until the end of all stories.’ It stepped back, hand extended. ‘Take it.’

Fabius hesitated. ‘Why would you offer me this?’

Veilwalker was silent, for a moment. ‘This is the part we are meant to play. Only by doing so, can we take ourselves out of this story and into another. We could not trick you into one ending, cannot force you into another, so we must offer you a third.’ It shrugged with elegant disdain. ‘Maybe it is for the best. Only the Laughing God knows for sure.’

He reached for the data-spike. Stopped. ‘What’s on it?’

‘I already told you. A gift. The only gift that matters to you, whatever you claim. So take it, and follow your path, forever, wherever it leads.’
Fabius inserted the spike into a data-port on a nearby cogitator panel. A scroll of information spilled across the hololithic screen, and a map – not a star map, but one that closely resembled his makeshift webway map. It showed the innumerable branches, routes and eddies of the sub-dimension. He turned. ‘Why have you given me this?’ The question died on his lips. Veilwalker was gone. He turned back to the screen, following the route depicted. And at the end of that strange, winding path, a single name.

‘Commorragh,’ he said.

Somewhere, in the dark between moments, something laughed.
Josh Reynolds is the author of the Primarchs novel *Fulgrim: The PalatinePhoenix*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Fabius Bile: Primogenitor, Fabius Bile: Clonelord* and *Deathstorm*, and the novellas *Hunter’s Snare* and *Dante’s Canyon*, along with the audio dramas *Blackshields: The False War* and *Master of the Hunt*. In the Warhammer world, he has written the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, as well as the Gotrek & Felix tales *Charnel Congress, Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*. He has also written many stories set in the Age of Sigmar, including the novels *Hallowed Knights: Plague Garden, Eight Lamentations: Spear of Shadows, Nagash: The Undying King, Fury of Gork, Black Rift* and *Skaven Pestilens*. He lives and works in Sheffield.
An extract from *Fabius Bile: Primogenitor.*
Oleander Koh strode across the dead city, humming softly to himself. The dry wind scraped across his garishly painted power armour, and he hunched forward, leaning into the teeth of the gale. He relished the way it flayed his exposed skin. He licked at the blood that dripped down his face, savouring the spice of it.

Oleander’s demeanour was at once baroque and barbaric. It was fitting, given that he had left a trail of fire and corpses stretching across centuries. His power armour was the colour of a newly made bruise, and decorated with both obscene imagery and archaic medicae equipment. Animal skins flapped from the rims of his shoulder-plates, and a helmet crested with a ragged mane of silk strips dangled from his equipment belt, amongst the stasis-vials and extra clips of ammunition for the bolt pistol holstered opposite the helmet. Besides the pistol, his only weapon was a long, curved sword. The sword was Tuonela-made, forged in the secret smithy of the mortuary cults, and its golden pommel was wrought in the shape of a death’s head. Oleander was not its first owner, nor, he suspected, would he be its last.

Unlike the weapon, he had been forged on Terra. As Apothecary Oleander, he had marched beneath the banners of the Phoenician, fighting first in the Emperor’s name and then in the Warmaster’s. He had tasted the fruits of war, and found his purpose in the field-laboratories of the being he’d come to call master. The being he had returned to this world to see, though he risked death, or worse, for daring to do so.

He had been forced to land the gunship he’d borrowed some distance away, on the outskirts of the city. It sat hidden now among the shattered husks of hundreds of other craft, its servitor crew waiting for his signal. There was no telling what sort of defences had been erected in his absence. And while he’d sent a coded vox transmission ahead, asking for permission to land, he didn’t feel like taking the risk of being blown out of the sky by someone with an itchy trigger-finger. The few occupants of this place valued their privacy to an almost lunatic degree. But perhaps that was only natural, given their proclivities.

His ceramite-encased fingers tapped out a tuneless rhythm on the sword’s pommel as he walked and hummed. The wind screamed as it washed over him. And not just the wind. The whole planet reverberated with the death-scream of its once-proud
population. Their delicate bones carpeted the ground, fused and melted together, though not from a natural heat. If he listened, he could pick out individual strands from the cacophony, like notes from a song. It was as if they were singing just for him. Welcoming him home.

The remains of the city – their city – rose wild around him, a jungle of living bone and wildly growing hummocks of rough psychoplastic flesh. The city might have been beautiful once, but it was gorgeous now. Silent, alien faces clumped on wraithbone walls like pulsing fungi, and living shadows stretched across the streets. Eerie radiances glistened in out-of-the-way places and tittering, phosphorescent shapes skulked in the broken buildings. A verdant madness, living and yet dead. A microcosm of Urum, as a whole.

Urum the Dead-Alive. Crone world, some called it. Urum was not its original name. But it was what the scavengers of the archaeomarkets called it, and it was as good a name as any. For Oleander Koh, it had once simply been ‘home’.

Sometimes it was hard to remember why he’d left in the first place. At other times, it was all too easy. Idly, he reached up to touch the strand of delicate glass philtres hanging from around his thick neck. He stopped. The wind had slackened, as if in anticipation. Oleander grunted and turned. Something was coming. ‘Finally,’ he said.

Gleaming shapes streaked towards him through the ruins. They shone like metal in the sunlight, but nothing made of metal could move so smoothly or so fast. At least nothing he’d ever had the misfortune to meet. They’d been stalking him for a few hours now. Perhaps they’d grown bored with the game. Or maybe he was closer to his goal than he’d thought. The city changed year by year, either growing or decaying. He wasn’t sure which. Perhaps both.

The sentry-beasts were low, lean things. He thought of wolves, though they weren’t anything like that. More akin to the sauroids that inhabited some feral worlds, albeit with feathers of liquid metal rather than scales, and tapering beak-like jaws. They made no noise, save the scraping of bladed limbs across the ground. They split up, and vanished into the shadows of the ruins. Even with his transhuman senses, Oleander was hard-pressed to keep track of them. He sank into a combat stance, fingers resting against the sword’s hilt, and waited. The moment stretched, seconds ticking by. The wind picked up, and his head resounded with the screams of the dead.

He sang along with them for a moment, his voice rising and falling with the wind. It was an old song, older even than Urum. He’d learned it on Laeran, from an addled poet named Castigne. ‘Strange is the night where black stars rise, and strange moons circle through ebon skies... songs that the Hyades shall sing...’

Prompted by instinct, Oleander spun, his sword springing into his hand as if of its own volition. He cut the first of the beasts in two, spilling its steaming guts on the heaving ground. It shrieked and kicked at the air, refusing to die. He stamped on its skull until it lay still. Still singing, he turned. The second had gone for the high ground. He caught a
glimpse of it as it prowled above him, stalking through the canopy of bone and meat. He could hear its jagged limbs clicking as it moved. His hand dropped to his pistol.

Something scraped behind him. ‘Clever,’ he murmured. He drew the bolt pistol and whirled, firing. A shimmering body lurched forward and collapsed. Oleander twirled his sword and thrust it backwards, to meet the second beast as it leapt from its perch. Claws scrabbled at his power armour, and curved jaws snapped mindlessly. Its eyes were targeting sensors, sweeping his face for weakness. Oleander stepped back and slammed the point of his sword into one of the twisted trees, dislodging the dying animal.

He prodded the twitching creature with his weapon. It was not a natural thing, with its gleaming feathers and sensor nodes jutting from its flesh like spines. But then, this was not a natural world. The sentry-beast had been vat-grown, built from base acids, stretched and carved into useful shape. Idly, he lifted the blade and sampled the acrid gore that stained it. ‘Piquant,’ he said. ‘With just a hint of the real thing. Your best work yet, master.’

Oleander smiled as he said it. He hadn’t used that word in a long time. Not since he’d last been here. Before Urum’s master, and his, had exiled him for his crimes. Oleander shied away from the thought. Reflecting on those last days was like probing an infected wound, and his memories were tender to the touch. There was no pleasure to be had there, only pain. Some adherents of Slaanesh claimed that those things were ever one and the same, but Oleander knew better.

He kicked the still-twitching body and turned away. Something rattled nearby. The sentry-beasts made no noise, save for that peculiar clicking of their silvery carapace. More of them burst out of the unnatural undergrowth and converged on him. Foolish, to think there were only three. Excess was a virtue here, as everywhere. ‘Well, he who hesitates is lost,’ he said, lunging to meet them. There were ten, at least, though they were moving so swiftly it was hard to keep count.

Beak-like protuberances fastened on his armour as he waded through them. Smooth talon-like appendages scraped paint from the ceramite, and whip-like tails thudded against his legs and chest. They were trying to knock him down. He brought his sword down and split one of the quicksilver shapes in half. Acidic ichor spewed upwards. He fired his bolt pistol, the explosive rounds punching fist-sized holes in his attackers. All at once, the attack ceased. The surviving sentry-beasts scattered, as swiftly as they had come. Oleander waited, scanning his surroundings. He’d killed three. Someone had called the others off. He thought he knew who. He heard the harsh rasp of breath in humanoid lungs, and smelled the rancid stink of chem-born flesh.

Oleander straightened and sheathed his sword without cleaning it. ‘What are you waiting for, children?’ He held up his bolt pistol and made a show of holstering it. ‘I won’t hurt you, if you’re kind.’ He spread his arms, holding them away from his weapons.

Unnatural shapes, less streamlined than the sentry-beasts, lurched into view. They
moved silently, despite the peculiarity of their limbs. They wore the ragged remnants of
old uniforms. Some were clad in ill-fitting and piecemeal combat armour. Most carried
a variety of firearms in their twisted paws – stubbers, autoguns, lasguns and even a
black-powder jezzail. The rest held rust-rimmed blades of varying shapes and sizes.

The only commonality among them was the extent of the malformation that afflicted
them. Twisted horns of calcified bone pierced brows and cheeks, or emerged from
weeping eye sockets. Iridescent flesh stretched between patches of rank fur or blistered
scale. Some were missing limbs, others had too many.

They had been men, once. Now they were nothing but meat. Dull, animal eyes studied
him from all sides. There were more of them than there might once have been, which
was something of a surprise. Life was hard for such crippled by-blows, especially here,
and death the only certainty. ‘Aren’t you handsome fellows,’ Oleander said. ‘I expect
you’re the welcoming party. Well then, lead on, children, lead on. The day wears on, the
shadows lengthen and strange moons circle through the skies. And we have far to go.’

One of the creatures, a goatish thing wearing a peaked officer’s cap, barked what
might have been an order. The pack shuffled forward warily, closing ranks about
Oleander. It was no honour guard, but it would do. Oleander allowed the mutants to
escort him deeper into the city. While he knew the way perfectly well, he saw no reason
to antagonise them.

Their ranks swelled and thinned at seemingly random intervals as the journey
progressed. Knots of muttering brutes vanished into the shadows, only to be replaced by
others. Oleander studied the crude heraldry of the newcomers with some interest. When
he’d last been here, they had barely known what clothes were. Now they had devised
primitive insignia of rank, and split into distinct groups – or perhaps tribes. Perhaps the
changeovers were due to territorial differences.

Whatever their loyalties, they were afraid of him. Oleander relished the thought. It was
good to be feared. There was nothing quite like it. The beasts who surrounded him now
were more human-looking. They were clad in purple-stained rags and armour marked
with what might have been an unsophisticated rendition of the old winged claw insignia
of the Emperor’s Children. It amused him. They likely had more in common with the
men they aped than they could conceive. Both were far removed from their creator’s
intended ideal.

His amusement faded as the palace at last came into sight. Its delicate tiers stretched
gracefully up towards the blistered sky. Chunks had been gouged out of its curved
walls, to allow for the addition of multiple power sources, rad-vents and gun
emplacements. It was akin to a beautiful flower, encrusted with a bristling techno-
organic fungus. Rubble had been cleared from the broad avenue leading up to the main
entrance. A crude shanty town, built from debris, had sprung up around the outer walls
of the ancient structure.

More than once, he saw what could only be barbaric shrines, and statues decorated
with articulated bones and offerings of stitched skin and gory meat. Mutants chanted softly to these statues, and he heard the words ‘Pater Mutatis’ and ‘Benefactor’ most often. The Father of Mutants. He wondered whether the object of such veneration was pleased by the acknowledgement, or annoyed by its crudity.

Unseen horns blew a warning, or perhaps a greeting, as Oleander and his escort moved along the avenue. The wind had picked up, carrying with it the ever-present screams of the ancient dead, as well as the barks and howls of the shanty town’s debased population. Dust roiled through the air, momentarily obscuring the ruins around him. Oleander briefly considered putting his helmet back on, but discarded the idea after a moment. It was hard to sing, inside the helmet. ‘Song of my soul, my voice is dead, die thou, unsung, as tears unshed...’

Abruptly, the cacophony rising from the shanty town died away. The only sounds left were the phantom screams and Oleander’s singing. But these too faded as the sound of heavy boots crunching stone and bone rose up. Oleander could barely make out the approaching figure through the dust and the wind. He reached for his bolt pistol.

‘No need for that, I assure you.’ The vox-link crackled with atmospheric distortion, but the voice was recognisable for all that. Oleander relaxed slightly, though not completely. The dust began to clear. A large shape stepped forward.

The warrior’s power armour had been painted white and blue once, but now it was mostly scraped grey or stained brown with blood and other substances. Black mould crept across the battle-scarred ceramite plates, like oil across snow. A sextet of cracked skulls hung from the chest-plate, wreathed in chains. More chains crisscrossed the Space Marine’s torso and arms, as if to keep something contained. Like Oleander, he also wore the accoutrements of an Apothecary, though his had seen far more use, under heavier fire. A curved falax blade was sheathed on either hip.

‘Waiting for me?’ Oleander said. He kept his hand on the grip of his bolt pistol.

‘I heard the beasts howling,’ the other said. He reached up and unlatched his helmet. Seals hissed and recycled air spurted as he pulled it off, revealing a familiar, scarred face. He’d been handsome, once, before the fighting pits. Now he resembled a statue that had been used for target practice. ‘And here you are. Still singing that same dreadful dirge.’

‘No mask, no mask,’ Oleander said, finishing the song.

‘Learn a new tune,’ the other said.

‘You were never a music lover were you, Arrian?’ Arrian Zorzi had once served at Angron’s pleasure, on the killing fields of the Great Crusade. Now he obeyed a new master. Oleander thought Arrian had traded up, if anything.

Angron had been a puling psychopath even before he’d taken his first steps towards daemonhood. Worse even than glorious Fulgrim, whose light was as that of the sun. A master you chose was better than one chosen for you. At least that way, you had no one to blame but yourself.
‘Exile agrees with you, brother.’ Arrian’s voice was soft. Softer than it ought to have been. As if it came from the mouth of some inbred outer-rim aristocrat, rather than a savage draped in skulls and chains. A considered affectation. Another way of chaining the beast inside.
‘I left of my own volition.’
‘And now you’re back.’
‘Is that going to be a problem?’ He would only have time for one shot, if that. Arrian was fiendishly quick, when he put his mind to it. Another memento of years spent wading in someone else’s blood, for the entertainment of a screaming crowd.
‘No.’ Arrian’s fingers tapped against the hilt of one of his swords. ‘I bear you no particular malice today.’ He reached up to stroke one of the skulls. The cortical implants dangling from it rattled softly.
‘And them?’ Oleander said, indicating the skulls. The skulls had belonged to the warriors of Arrian’s former squad. All dead now, and by Arrian’s hand. When a warhound decided to find a new master, bloodshed was inevitable.
‘My brothers are dead, Oleander. And as such only concerned with the business of the dead. What about you?’
‘I want to see him.’
Arrian glanced over his shoulder. He looked down at his skulls, and tapped one.
‘You’re right, brothers. He’s watching,’ he said, to the skull.
‘Is he, then?’ Oleander said. He turned, scanning the desolation. When he turned back, Arrian was leaning against the archway. He hadn’t even heard the World Eater move.
‘He’s always watching, you know that. From inside as well as out,’ Arrian said.
‘Enter, and be welcome once more to the Grand Apothecarion, Oleander Koh. The Chief Apothecary is expecting you.’

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* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.
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