

WARHAMMER
40,000



FIRE AND ICE

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FIRE AND ICE

PETER FEHERVARI

War is not a binary condition. Despite superficial appearances to the contrary it does not begin or end with a single discrete event. There may be catalysts and culminations, but their antecedents and consequences – cultural, material and even metaphysical – extend through times past and future like ripples in a river that flows two ways. Accordingly, the war between the Imperium and the Tau Empire did not begin and end with the Damocles Gulf Crusade. That conflict was the first great blossoming of our enmity and it will not be the last, but we have now entered a subtler phase of the game. Fifty years have passed since the crusade. Nothing has changed. Everything has changed.

Here on the margins of the Damocles Gulf we are embroiled in a cold war, an intricate game of deceit, manipulation and coercion waged against a master player. It is a delicate struggle, but never make the mistake of thinking it any less inimical to the Imperium than the voracious depredations of the tyranids or the bleak pogrom waged by the necrons, for the tau are playing for the hearts and minds of mankind. If they triumph our species may survive, but its destiny will not.

– Aion Escher, Grand Master of the
Damocles Conclave, Ordo Xenos

SMOKE

Watch for the smoke of discord if you seek to light the flames of revolution.

– The Calavera

EIGHTY-ONE DAYS BEFORE UNITY, KLIEST

Kreeger found his patron in the scorched hilltop temple he'd taken to haunting since they'd gone to ground on Kliest four months ago. It was a broken place on a broken world and it suited Haniel Mordaine's mood exquisitely. Of late, the disgraced interrogator had immersed himself in sketching the crumbling statue of Sanguinius Ascendant that loomed over the pulpit like a petrified angel, its wings spread wide to encircle the lost celebrants. It was primitive work, roughly hewn from the local granite, yet its brooding gravity drew Mordaine back day after day. Crumpled parchment littered the ground in testament to his increasingly frenzied attempts to capture the Angel's essence, and he would sometimes cajole or harangue the effigy as if it were actively opposing his efforts. Kreeger took it all in his stride. Mordaine was a noble and Kreeger had watched over enough of his kind to know they were *all* crazy. It was probably something in their blue blood.

'The conclave has our scent again,' he called, marching up the nave without reverence or reserve. 'It's time to move on, duke.'

'Again?' Mordaine turned reluctantly from his work. His eyes were like bloodshot sores in the shadow of a handsome face. 'Are you certain?'

It was an empty question because Kreeger was never less than certain of anything, but it was part of the ritual that had carried them from one failing world to another along the borders of the Damocles Gulf, always one step ahead of the Inquisition and ten more from hope. Perhaps half those worlds, Kliest among them, had been found wanting in their loyalty to the Imperium prior to the crusade, but all were paying the price in murderously increased tithes. Most would be stripped to the bone and abandoned within a scant few centuries.

It sends a message, Grand Master Escher had decreed. If your neighbour falls, you fall. Nothing stimulates loyalty like judiciously applied fear.

‘We need to be off-world tonight,’ Kreeger said, brandishing a sheaf of greasy identity papers. ‘I’ve wangled us passage on a Gulf freighter. No questions asked.’

‘Another cargo hold?’ Mordaine guessed sourly.

‘Fish tank,’ Kreeger corrected. Seeing his employer’s expression he pressed on quickly. ‘Relax, we won’t be sharing, duke. They’ll be filling up at the *other* end.’ He shrugged. ‘Can’t promise it’ll smell of incense and amasec, but...’

‘It will reek of a billion dead fish.’ Mordaine grimaced. ‘I despise fish, Kreeger.’

‘Lots of fish on Oblazt.’ The old soldier shrugged. ‘Fish, promethium and ice are about all they’ve got.’

‘Oblazt?’ The grimace became a frown. ‘The world with the floating hives?’

‘They call them anchor hives. Build ’em on platforms spiked deep into the ice so they *don’t* float. The Imperium’s been sucking promethium and fish out from under the ice since forever. There’s a whole ocean buried down there.’ As always, Kreeger had done his groundwork fastidiously. To his mind it was the trick to staying alive.

‘I’m not finished here.’ Mordaine gestured vaguely at the stone angel. ‘Anyway, perhaps it’s time to stop running.’ But there was no sincerity in his voice.

‘Oblazt is the subsector’s breadbasket and promethium wellspring in one,’ Kreeger pressed. ‘The kind of world the tau would make a play for.’

Mordaine hesitated, raking a hand through his lank, grey-streaked hair. ‘Do you have something?’

‘I’ve got a contact.’ Kreeger shrugged again. ‘He calls himself the Calavera.’

THIRTY DAYS BEFORE UNITY ABOVE THE DOME, VYSHODD ANCHOR HIVE, OBLAZT

The roof of the world was a convex plain of dark rockcrete, blizzard-scoured and barren save for a scattering of blocky maintenance outposts and comms towers. A tracery of thermal capillary pipes shone dully beneath the surface, hissing and steaming as they dissolved the rapacious ice before it could take root. The resulting slurry flowed down the dome into the perimeter recycling trenches, then on into the hive’s reservoirs. Much of it would be superheated and pumped back into the canopy, a greatcoat against the cold. It was a crude but efficient system that maintained the ambient temperature of the city a few notches above freezing, but decades of neglect had taken their toll. Scattered mounds of hard-packed ice glazed the dome like glistening cancers where the hydrothermal network had failed, yet the outposts were dark and no servitors or icebreaker teams laboured across the surface to purge the blight. Such was the way of things on Oblazt in the wake of the Damocles Gulf Crusade.

Two figures surveyed this entropy-in-motion from the shelter of an antenna-spiked relay tower. Both were swathed in heavy grey thermal robes, yet they were otherwise unlike. One would have towered over a tall man, yet his shorter companion was the stranger of the two, for there was a subtle aberration in the set of his shoulders and posture that suggested an altogether inhuman heritage.

‘Their world ends, yet they do not see it,’ the alien observed. It spoke Gothic with the chilly precision of one who has mastered the language like a weapon. ‘This blindness is the *lor ’serra* of your kind. The *shadow truth* of your nature.’

‘They are not my kind, traveller,’ replied the giant. ‘We parted company millennia before *your* kind possessed the wit to dream of touching the stars.’

‘Nevertheless you were forged from their bloodline, Iho’nen. Such bonds endure even after they are broken, like the ghost pains of a lost limb.’

‘You speak of your own wound,’ the giant called Iho’nen judged.

‘My wound is my purpose,’ said the traveller with glacial passion.

‘As is mine.’ But in Iho’nen’s voice there was no passion at all.

For a time they were silent, brooding on private shadows.

Finally the traveller spoke: ‘I walk the *vash’yatol*, Iho’nen. I cannot linger on this failing world. When do we begin?’

‘I have activated the Catalyst,’ the giant answered. ‘He is already here.’

TWENTY-NINE DAYS BEFORE UNITY

THE IRON JUNGLE

The locals called the inner skin of Vyshodd’s dome the Iron Jungle. Climbing through the gloomy industrial labyrinth bolted to the perimeter wall of Sector Nineteen, Haniel Mordaine felt it was an eminently fitting name. His path spiralled upwards, shadowing the dome in a tangle of catwalks and girders that heaved and groaned like an iron man bloated with corrosion. It was an arduous ascent, but he’d resisted the lure of the intermittent pneumatic lifts, preferring the certainty of a long, hard climb to the possibility of a short, infinitely harder fall.

If this architectural heresy kills me I’ll never know the truth of things, he thought grimly. I’ll never know the truth of him. Angel’s Blood, is this Calavera even a man?

For almost two months Mordaine had been lying low in a decrepit traders’ hostel waiting for word from their contact while Kreeger salved his anxieties with cheap Oblazti lodka and narcotic glitterfish oils.

‘The Calavera is in deep,’ his lieutenant had explained. ‘It’s the way he operates. How he sniffs out the rot.’

‘You make him sound like a dog, Kreeger,’ Mordaine had taunted.

‘A bloodhound,’ Kreeger had corrected, ‘the best the grand master had – and the only player in the conclave who buys your story. He’s all you’ve got, duke.’

‘And I’m grateful for his friendship, of course—’

‘Friendship?’ Kreeger had shaken his head. ‘No, duke, you’re *useful* to him. I’ve told you before, he thinks you’re the key to the real enemy.’

‘But I don’t know a damn thing!’

A shrug. ‘Maybe you don’t need to.’

And then Mordaine had tried the Question, as he’d done countless times before: ‘*What* is he, Kreeger?’

And as always, Kreeger had offered the same hollow answer: ‘Never met him. Nobody ever did except the grand master. All the rest of us ever had was a name.’

A name I never knew, Mordaine thought bitterly. *I was your protégé, Escher – your damned interrogator – but you never trusted me with the identity of your finest operative. And if you concealed that then what else did you hide from me?*

‘How did you find him?’ Mordaine had tried.

‘I didn’t,’ Kreeger had answered. ‘He found us.’

‘Yet the entire Damocles Conclave failed?’

‘Maybe because he’s been covering our trail.’

Watching over me as I scurry from one dismal backwater world to another like a frightened rat! Tugging my strings...

Mordaine snatched at a guardrail as his boot punched through a rust-riddled plate and sent fragments clattering into the abyss below. Frozen rigid, he waited until the shuddering walkway had steadied before gingerly sliding his foot free. Once again he cursed the Calavera for sending him on this lethal errand.

Word had finally come two days ago.

‘He’s found them,’ Kreeger had relayed. ‘The tau are here.’

‘On Oblazt?’ Mordaine had slurred through a lodka-soaked daze.

‘In this hive,’ Kreeger had said. ‘Whatever’s coming, it starts here. It’s time to step up and take control, interrogator.’

‘Interrogator...’ Mordaine had been ashamed of the sudden, gut-wrenching terror that seized him. ‘I’ll be exposed... The conclave will come for me.’

‘And they’ll find a man who’s done his duty.’ Kreeger had actually grinned then, but it was all teeth and no eyes. ‘This is where you make things right.’

‘I need to meet the Calavera.’

‘What you need is muscle. An army. This is what he wants you to do...’

And once again I'm dancing to the Calavera's tune, Mordaine thought miserably as he resumed his ascent. And the worst, most damnable thing about it is he's right! An army is precisely what I need.

Two levels further up, his army found him. The sentries surged from the shadows overhead, leaping between the swaying gantries with the wild yet graceful assurance of natural acrobats. Watching them descend, Mordaine understood why they'd made the dome's canopy their eyrie. Oblazt might not be their home world, but up in this vertiginous web they were its masters.

Save for the quirks of fate, these warriors might have been enemies of the Imperium, Mordaine thought. Savagery runs dangerously deep in the blood of the Iwujii Sharks. After all, they've been bred for it.

The military harvested its recruits young on Iwujii Secundus, Kreeger had explained, fast-tracking children into soldiers through a state-sanctioned programme of internecine wars that culled the weak and brutalised the strong. It was a barbarous tradition that predated the planet's assimilation into the Imperium, but one the Departmento Munitorum had been rather taken with, for the practice offered a steady stream of hardened troops for the Imperial Guard.

‘The Iwujii Sharks aren't what you'd call well-adjusted regiments,’ Kreeger had warned, ‘but they live, breathe and bleed the Imperial Creed. You've just got to handle them right.’

Offering neither threat nor submission, Mordaine studied the men who encircled him. They were all slight of build, with burnished copper skin and ebony hair that hung about their shoulders in elaborately braided dreadlocks. Their features were striking, with high cheekbones and sharply canted green eyes. Most didn't look a year past twenty and all exuded an energy that seemed to rage against stillness. They wore tight-fitting fatigues of viridian striped with crimson slashes like open wounds and a haphazard array of leather armour. The majority sported vambraces and greaves, one a pair of shoulder pads wrought with splayed claws, another a breastplate carved into the likeness of a snarling tree. These warriors were evidently Iwujii first and Imperial Guard second. They weren't the kind of troops Mordaine would have chosen, but they were the only regiment stationed on Oblazt.

Regiment? One company, Mordaine calculated soberly. Just three hundred men to seize the reins of a hive and expose a xenos conspiracy...

‘My lieutenant sent word to your commanding officers,’ Mordaine declared, hesitating only a moment before committing himself: ‘I am Inquisitor Aion Escher, Grand Master of the Damocles Conclave. By authority of the Holy Orders of the Inquisition I am hereby sequestering all Imperial forces stationed on this planet to assist me in the prosecution of the Emperor’s justice.’

Keeping his movements slow and steady, Mordaine drew a heavy seal from his coat and brandished it like a defensive ward. *The grand master’s seal* – the seal he’d stolen after watching his mentor die.

I didn’t know, Escher, Mordaine swore. I didn’t know that girl was an assassin...

He quashed the guilt, drawing strength from the awe in the troopers’ eyes as they recognised the stylised ‘I’ emblazoned on the seal. For a few brief weeks his every word would carry the sanction of the Imperium’s most feared authority.

I can do this, Escher, Mordaine promised, though he didn’t know if it was an apology or a curse.

TOWARDS UNITY ABOVE THE DOME

Veiled by the emptiness at the roof of the world, the outsider called Iho’nen watched as the Catalyst moved his design towards its apogee. The remote outpost he’d claimed and upgraded with xenos tech was awash with a fluid cacophony of information – tapped vox-communications and vid-feeds... economic and social statistics rendered as filigree neon algorithms and charts... a constantly updating parade of psych profiles... Iho’nen drank it all in like a giant data-devouring spider, assimilating, correlating and assessing a thousand facts every minute.

Days passed, yet he stood motionless, waiting as rigorously calculated probabilities crystallised into absolutes. Occasionally minor errors would manifest, prompting him to intervene through a reagent element, but this

did not trouble him. It was the errors, or more precisely their correction, that kept him from becoming irrelevant.

His fellow outsider, the xenos, did not watch with him, for he was travelling.

THREE DAYS BEFORE UNITY

HÖSOK PLAZA, VYSHODD ANCHOR HIVE

The first steps had gone smoothly enough, Mordaine reflected. Both the Iwujii Sharks and the hive's ruling oligarchy had acceded to his authority, albeit sullenly in the case of the Koroleva nobles. With his force swelled by the hive's Ironspine Hussars, he'd launched himself into the hunt with the fervour of a man racing death, which of course he was. If he didn't uncover something tangible before the conclave caught up with him, he would be finished. His life was almost certainly forfeit regardless, but there was still honour to fight for, and, somewhat to his surprise, he'd accepted that might be enough.

But everything hinged on finding the tau.

The spoor of the xenos permeated Vyshodd like a spreading disease. He'd discovered fragments of strange machinery in the manufactories – sleek, geodesic blasphemies that shrugged off dirt and sang with unholy life. Then there'd been the rogue tech-priest who peddled enhanced trinkets guaranteed to run for a lifetime without power-ups or prayer. Most unsettling of all had been the abominable xenos sculptures adorning a Koroleva pleasure mansion. The brash minimalism of those abstracts had been an affront to decent Imperial aesthetics! Individually they were petty-heresies, but together they pointed to a systemic infiltration that had been eroding Vyshodd for years, possibly decades. And then there was Unity.

Unity – a simple, beautiful and perfectly ruinous lie.

Rumour had it that a common fishery worker had formulated the creed in her rest periods, scrawling her ideas on scraps of packaging then spreading them by word of mouth. The doctrine espoused such deviant notions as the right to free speech and the wholesale redistribution of wealth, wrapping them up in a muddled entreaty to embrace some kind of galactic fraternity.

It was puerile nonsense, yet it had spread among the ignorant and the oppressed like wildfire, as insidious as any Chaos cult. Mordaine didn't doubt its true origins so he'd focused on rooting out the leaders, but all he'd found were followers – hundreds of them – who insisted that Unity had *no leaders*. How could it, when it was 'the Many of One'!

And throughout this dismal farrago there had been no word from the Calavera.

'Silence is good,' Kreeger would assure him. 'Silence means you're on track.'

'Then where are the warp-damned xenos?' Mordaine had railed. 'I've got nothing the conclave won't find themselves!'

With the hive's detention facilities overflowing and the population growing restive, Mordaine had tightened the screws, first with punitive rationing and curfews, then finally a string of executions, but nobody had come forward with anything he could use. Instead... *this...*

How can so many be so blind? Mordaine despaired as he weighed up the crowd gathering in the square below. He was crouched on a rooftop overlooking Hösok Plaza, a sprawling, statue-studded court dedicated to Oblazt's Imperial liberators. The symbolism of the venue was not lost on him, but it was the sheer numbers that appalled him. There were *thousands* of them, mostly scruffy manufactory bondsmen and icebreakers, but also a smattering of municipal clerks and free traders. All had daubed their foreheads with the concentric blue circles of Unity. Despite its simplicity, there was something inherently alien about the symbol that repelled him.

'I speak for the Many who walk as One!' someone called from the square – a tall woman with the gaunt, febrile features of a tormented artist. The crowd fell silent at her voice, as if at a prearranged signal. 'We offer you the open hand of friendship. Stand with us against the bloated tyranny that has betrayed this world!'

Mordaine could almost taste the seductive xenos heresy lacing her rhetoric. Yet despite her words the woman in the plaza appeared neither ignorant nor oppressed. Oblazt's ruling class was a race apart from the commoners and she had the look. Mordaine was unsurprised, for the most zealous prophets of change often rose from the ruling strata. Sometimes it was guilt that drove their heresy, sometimes merely ennui, but the Inquisition had long understood the perils of privilege.

‘Cast off the shackles of your dead god and bear witness to a living unity that embraces all as One!’ the demagogue implored.

‘The heretics spit in the face of Father Terra,’ someone hissed beside Mordaine. *Armande Uzochi*. Since Mordaine’s journey into the canopy, the young Iwujii captain had become his second shadow, devoting himself to ‘the great inquisitor’ with an awe that bordered on reverence. Unfortunately there was a rancid, tightly coiled violence about the man that made Mordaine’s skin crawl. He suspected Uzochi was quite probably insane.

The right man to have by my side today...

‘Give the order,’ Mordaine said, feeling disconnected – *disconnecting himself* – as Uzochi voxed the platoon leaders. Ranks of Iwujii Sharks rose along the rooftops like vengeful spirits, silent and watchful. There was a clatter of booted feet below, and white-uniformed Ironspine Hussars appeared at every egress from the square, lining up in neat formations. The crowd backed away, congealing at the centre of the square as if density might offer some safety, but the rebel speaker held her ground.

‘Truth cannot be silenced!’ she proclaimed, spreading her arms wide, palms open. ‘Every martyr you burn will forge two stronger heroes!’ Her eyes glittered a radiant azure, ignited by the passion of her belief.

Why did you choose me for this filthy work, Escher? Mordaine asked, as he’d done so many times before, but never of the grand master himself. *You knew I didn’t have the conviction to stomach it.*

Impossibly, the rebel seemed to be looking directly at him now.

‘An inquisitor must armour his soul in ice,’ Escher answered from the crumbling mortuary of Mordaine’s faith. *‘The ordinary mass of mankind is irrelevant, as are even the most exceptional individuals. It is the divine thread of our species that the Inquisition safeguards. All else is either expendable or inimical.’*

No. Mordaine strangled the dry, dead voice in his head. *You’re wrong, Escher. Otherwise what’s the point to any of it?*

‘Captain...’ he began.

‘Purge the heretics!’ Uzochi bellowed, misinterpreting him. ‘For Father Terra!’

No! Mordaine tried to scream, but he had no voice and a heartbeat later there was a surfeit of screams as his army opened fire.

Kreeger was waiting for him in the stairwell, smoking a lho-stick.

‘Tell the Calavera I’m done,’ Mordaine said, stepping past him.

‘He’s going to come in,’ Kreeger called after him. ‘He has a few loose ends to tie up first, but—’

‘Too late,’ Mordaine said flatly.

‘Only a couple more days, duke.’

‘It was too late from the start, Kreeger.’ Mordaine turned, letting the rage well up in his chest like purifying fire. ‘We’ve been played – you, me and most especially your precious Calavera! Vyshodd was a trap. This slaughter... We’ve given the xenos exactly what they needed. We’ve proven the Imperium is a monster.’

‘Always was.’ Kreeger shrugged. ‘Just like all the rest.’

Mordaine faltered, his fury leeches away by the other’s indifference. Perplexed, he studied his lieutenant’s deeply seamed yet oddly bland face, trying to make sense of the man who’d been saving his skin for more years than he cared to count. Everything about Franz Kreeger was grey, from his gaunt complexion and the dusting of stubble on his scalp through to the barren alchemy of his soul.

His story was fairly typical of his breed: twenty years a storm trooper in the Guard, including a stint at the Cadian Gate, then secondment to an Inquisition taskforce to Phaedra, a world somewhere on the fringes of the Damocles Gulf, where he’d impressed the presiding inquisitor enough to win a place on his retinue. Later that inquisitor had become the grand master of the Damocles Conclave and later still he’d assigned Kreeger to support a promising new interrogator.

‘Keep him by your side, Mordaine,’ Escher had advised, *‘and he will keep you alive.’*

This was certainly true. Without Kreeger, Mordaine would have stopped running long ago. Angel’s Blood, he wouldn’t have run at all.

‘This hive... This entire planet...’ Mordaine whispered. ‘It’s going to welcome the tau with open arms.’

‘We’re still in the game, duke,’ Kreeger said. ‘The Calavera has taken a prisoner.’ Then he offered a name.

Mordaine stared at him. And then he dared to hope.

FIRE

Once their hearts are ignited they will burn until hope itself has turned to ash.

– The Calavera

UNITY, VYSHODD ANCHOR HIVE

Liberation day dawned with a chain of synchronised explosions that levelled the nine Ironspine bastions, annihilating thousands of the Koroleva's Hussars with surgical precision. Simultaneously insurrectionists rose up in the hive's key facilities, fielding strange weaponry that outranged the archaic lasguns of the authorities. As the uprising spread its numbers grew exponentially, swelled by tens of thousands who knew they had nothing left to lose. After the atrocity in Hösok Plaza, few Oblazti harboured any illusions about Imperial mercy. Whatever hope they had lay in Unity.

But there was no hope.

The architects of the insurrection had made one fatal error, failing to consider the fragility of the anchor hive itself. The concurrent blasts that destroyed the Hussar bastions sent a shockwave of seismic proportions rippling through the hive's foundations, shattering dozens of anchorspikes and placing the remainder under intolerable strain. With each passing hour more disintegrated, causing the hive to buck and heave like a ship in a storm, tearing entire blocks apart. Whatever the outcome of the rebellion, Vyshodd had been mortally wounded.

At the roof of the world, the outsiders' hideout shuddered in sympathy with the hive's death agonies, but neither occupant appeared concerned.

'You did not foresee this instability, Iho'nen,' the traveller observed.

'It is irrelevant,' his giant companion replied, shutting down the outpost's power. This gesture was also irrelevant, but the centuries had made him fastidious. 'The deviation falls within tolerable parameters.'

'Unless the canopy collapses beneath us,' the traveller suggested with a trace of dry humour. 'Nevertheless, it pleases me.'

'The devastation?'

'Your fallibility,' the traveller said seriously.

'Then I will endeavour to disappoint you in future.' Iho'nen threw the hatch open and gauged the shuddering dome. 'It would be prudent to proceed swiftly.'

The hive was drowning in a swirling storm of smoke and snow, its harsh panorama of tenements and manufactories faded to coarse abstractions by the smog. Here and there angry reds and oranges bloomed among the dark blocks, marking the virulent spread of the fire. The streets were flooded with a deluge of citizenry, the dispossessed and the destroyers melded together into an amalgam mob by the impartial flames. They wailed and raged as they moved through the burning hive like trapped grubs, fighting and fleeing by turns.

High above the chaos, crouched on a girder like a bird of ill omen, Ujurakh, who his people called Sourblood, watched their terror and rejoiced. Although his perch swayed dangerously he was untroubled, for his blood was alight with the catastrophe. He had not felt so alive since the Empty One first brought him to this miserable world of ice and iron, many blood seasons ago.

A stir of movement on a rooftop below caught his attention. Curious, he craned his long neck sinuously, but the source eluded him. Clicking low in his throat with irritation he slipped beneath his perch, clinging on with his talons as he hung upside down, straining to pierce the snow-smog. Then he had them – a dozen prey beasts creeping across the flat roof, striving for swiftness and secrecy, but making a mockery of both. Half were dragging unwieldy cases while the rest flittered protectively around them with guns, and a taller creature hurried them along with a sabre. Ujurakh hissed with

surprise, recognising one of the elusive high breeds of the city. Unlike the squat, pallid commoners he had been forced to hunt, this creature was tawny-skinned, with an arrogant bearing that spoke of easy command. Usually the high breeds kept to their fortified palaces, shielded from the squalor, but the fire had finally flushed them out. He guessed this one hoped to make its escape across the rooftops, never imagining that its path would carry it into Ujurakh's hunting grounds.

What secret twists turn such proud enshrouded meat? Ujurakh wondered raptly. And what shifting, gifted shapes nest locked within?

He snapped his beak shut to catch the saliva pooling in his maw and considered: the Empty One had summoned him, but fate had cast this mystery in his path when the hunger was upon him. That he had gorged himself mere hours ago mattered not, for the hunger ebbed and flowed with the inconstant contours of the fleshweave. *What to do?*

Then the fugitives were directly below him and the time for doubt was past. Ujurakh drew his twin carving blades and hurled himself into the air with an ululating squawk of bliss. The prey beasts looked up, their flat, dull faces made duller by bewilderment, the surprise dissolving to terror as they glimpsed his lethal symmetry. A couple of the guards raised their rifles, but their movements were sluggish to Ujurakh's fervent eyes. He twisted in midair, hooting as he danced around the languid flurry of their first las-rounds, knowing the first would be the last.

As the ground swept up to meet him, Sourblood flipped over, angling himself to strike one of the guards with his extended talons. The attack tore straight through his victim, sundering the man and splattering his comrades with blood. Ujurakh's powerful legs bent to absorb the impact and launched him back into the air, pitching him over the heads of the panicked gaggle. As they turned with pitiful slowness he dived among them with a blade in each hand, a slashing, slicing predator among indolent cattle. They flailed about and screamed and died until only the highborn remained.

'Please...' the creature whimpered, throwing aside its sabre and falling to its knees. 'It's yours!' It waved at the fallen cases that had burst open, scattering glimmering trinkets across the roof. Such baubles might have tempted Ujurakh once, but he was Sourblood now and beyond simple wealth. He had saved the high breed till last to test its mettle and found nothing but a snivelling hatchling. 'There's more...'

Disappointed, Ujurakh beheaded the beast with a scissoring, twin-bladed swipe and plunged his beak into the foaming neck. Though its spirit had been weak, its flesh was delightfully free of the fish and fire oils that tainted the common herd. The Sourblood croaked deep in his throat and fed.

The wind was a constant companion outside the dome, yet Sergeant Thierry Chizoba could still hear the hive's death screams. Then again, maybe it was the wind itself that carried the screams so far. It was certainly malicious enough.

Oblazt. Even the name is bitter, he mused. It is no world for the Iwuji.

The sergeant flicked his lho-stick away and continued his patrol, keeping close to the walls of the maglev terminus where it was a fraction warmer. Like every building on Oblazt, the station was a monolithic slab of crumbling rockcrete, but behind its derelict façade it had been kept in pristine condition by an army of tech-priests and servitors. Their true charge was the vehicle within, a Chain Engine big enough to whisk away every aristo in the city if things got too hot. Chizoba had once walked the length of the titanic train, counting over two thousand strides as he marvelled at its wrought-iron hide and brass-girdled portholes. There were nineteen carriages in total, suspended well above head height on a splayed skirt that shielded its magnetic suspensors. Wheels weren't good enough for this monster! It would soar over the ice on a tide of blistering energy while the gargoyles perched along its crenellated heights glared their contempt at the land below. Chizoba could almost taste the patina of spite that enamelled the train. It was an *old* engine that had borne witness to myriad sins, both sweet and sour. Their unquiet residue ran through its cogs like phantom blood.

It is a proud and vicious beast, Chizoba had sensed with a shudder. Dangerous.

How the bluebloods had raged when Inquisitor Escher had seized their secret engine for his headquarters, but they weren't going to argue with three hundred Sharks!

Except we're less than half that now... Chizoba cast a baleful glance at the storage shed where the bodies of his comrades had been stashed like frozen meat. We knew something was coming, yet Grandfather Death took us like un-blooded fools!

He'd been on the dawn watch when the hive had broken out in a rash of explosions, as if hit by an orbital bombardment. Moments later the station concourse had been awash with the pneumatic rhythm of gunfire and Chizoba had dived for cover as a hulking abomination forged from metal and bloodless flesh stalked from the terminus, spitting bullets from the barrels fused to its arms. More of the living dead machines had emerged from the hangar, bearing down on the nearest Sharks like Grandfather Death's heralds. Over a hundred men had been lost before the last of the combat servitors went down. Doubtless the attack had been the work of the cog priests who tended the train. There was no telling how many of the machine-worshipping scum had turned traitor – or why – because they'd all vanished by the time the fighting was done.

Another tremor shook the ice and Chizoba eyed the dome of the hive warily. An hour ago there'd been a thunderous splintering and a fissure had split the canopy wide open, ejecting torrents of black smoke into the roiling sky.

How long can we wait for the captain? Chizoba mused. *We bled to hold on to that damned train. It owes us a ride out of here.*

His eyes wandered guiltily to Lieutenant Omazet. She was kneeling outside the warehouse, chanting the death rites for the fallen, as was her sacred duty. She was an officer, but her authority ran deeper than any mundane rank could convey for she was also La Mal Kalfu, a priestess who had dedicated herself to Father Terra in his darkest aspect as the Midnight Judge. Her kind were rare and revered among the Iwujii and the Third Company was graced by her presence, but the troops feared her more than any commissar.

She is a blessed curse, Chizoba thought. He was reluctant to disturb her, but with the inquisitor and the captain absent she held authority here. She turned as he approached, breaking off the ritual to freeze him with her terrible, eyeless gaze. He knew the black pits of Adeola Omazet's eye sockets were just a contrivance of lens-grafts and paint, but when combined with the skull tattooed across her face the effect was uncanny. Besides, his *spirit* knew the truth of her.

'You have a question, Thierry?' she asked softly. He shivered at the sound of his name on her lips. It was customary for La Mal Kalfu to address their charges by their first names, lending their words an intimate threat.

‘Do you think they still live, lieutenant?’ he croaked.

‘I believe they do,’ Omazet said. ‘And we will stand vigil until they return.’

He bowed his head, knowing she’d seen through to his true question: *When can we flee this place?*

‘Faith is best served blind, Thierry.’ She returned to her sacrament, dismissing him. There would be no flight.

His eyes raw with smoke, the hem of his scarlet greatcoat smouldering, Mordaine staggered through the burning streets, struggling to keep up with his surviving troops. The trio of Sharks dodged or leapt the debris in their path without breaking stride while he stumbled around it, wheezing hard. He’d lost sight of Kreeger and Uzochi a few blocks back, when they’d got tangled up in a skirmish between some desperate Hussars and what seemed like a whole sea of rebels. After that their orderly retreat had become a frantic race for the terminus.

‘Back up!’ the lead Shark yelled. ‘That whole block’s coming down!’

There was a rending screech as the upper storey of the building ahead sheared away and came tumbling down, ricocheting between the neighbouring tenements like a colossal, infernal die. Mordaine skidded to a halt, flailing wildly for balance.

‘Down!’ someone snarled, shoving him to the ground as blazing fragments sizzled overhead, decapitating one of the troopers and almost tearing another in half. The third lost a leg at the thigh and whirled about like a one-legged dancer until another shard ripped a tunnel through his chest.

‘Up!’ Mordaine’s saviour rose beside him, looking like a wiry scarecrow in black flak armour. *Kreeger*.

‘I told you this was a bad idea, duke,’ the veteran said.

Yes, you did, Mordaine admitted. His lieutenant had argued sternly against re-entering the hive, urging him to sit tight and wait for their ally, warning that the Calavera had *insisted* on it. That had been the tipping point for Mordaine and *he’d* insisted on leading an expedition into Vyshodd to assess the uprising. It had been irrational but, after the string of humiliations he’d endured in the Calavera’s name, the need to defy his shadowy benefactor had been irresistible – and disastrous. They’d turned back as soon as they’d run into the first mob, but it had already cost them dearly.

It was necessary, Mordaine thought furiously. I am nobody's fool.

'We should get moving, duke,' Kreeger said, watching him quizzically.

'I thought you'd fallen, Kreeger,' Mordaine said, but it was a lie. He couldn't imagine this grey man dying. He gestured at the rubble-choked avenue they'd been following. 'Is there another way to the terminus?'

'This is a hive.' Kreeger shrugged. 'There's always another way.'

Sourblood... The Empty One's call stirred inside Ujurakh's skull, a brittle but insistent whisper like the echo of something unforgettable forgotten. Lost in the rapture of his feeding he tried to ignore it, but the whisper became a whine, threatening the bright, obliterating pain that bound him to his master. Once he had mocked pain, as all great warriors did, but that was before he'd learnt what pain truly was. That did not lessen the rage and shame he felt at his bondage, though he doubted any of his blood kindred would have endured the torment any better. *Blood kindred?* He had none. They had named him Sourblood and cast him out!

Ujurakh realised his feast had grown quiet. The summons had numbed his palate to the delicate riddle of the flesh. Furious, he surged to his feet, letting the silent meat slip from his beak. Once again the Empty One had stolen his joy. With a squawk of disgust, he sheathed his blades in their leather harness and sprang into motion, sprinting for the parapet. He leapt at the last moment, soaring over the gulf to crash down onto the adjacent rooftop. Without pause he hurtled on, skittering over the frozen skin of the burning city, chasing the beacon that chained him.

'Sergeant,' a trooper called. 'You need to take a look at this.'

Keeping low, Thierry Chizoba crept over to the squad crouched by the gates of the terminus. They'd reinforced the position with the company's precious heavy bolter to cover the icebound expanse between their sanctuary and the great dome.

Chizoba squinted, trying to make out the figures approaching through the fluttering weave of snow. There were two of them, both clad in grey robes, their faces hidden in arched cowls. They were walking at a measured pace, seemingly untroubled by the soldiers watching them. One seemed impossibly tall, yet it was the other one that troubled him most deeply. There was something wrong with its gait, a subtle hop, almost as if its joints

were deformed. Or built differently to those of a man...

'There will be someone else coming,' the inquisitor had warned before he left. *'You'll know them when you see them.'*

'Go get the lieutenant,' Chizoba ordered, unsure why he was whispering.

Keeping low, Kreeger peered round the junction ahead. They'd almost reached the outer wall of the dome when a babble of voices had slowed them to a crawl and they'd found a throng of Oblazti gathered in the next street. Perhaps a desperate Koroleva captive had led the mob here or perhaps it had been blind chance.

'How many?' Mordaine whispered, already certain the answer was *too many*.

'It doesn't matter,' the veteran said. *'We're out of time. We have to go through them.'*

'Kreeger...' Mordaine began uneasily.

'Surprise and shock,' his lieutenant interrupted. *'We hit them hard and push through to the terminus. Don't stop for anything.'* He unclipped a strangely fluted grenade from his bandolier. *'When the numbers are against you...'*

His words were drowned by a clamour of gunfire and shouts from the street behind them. Mordaine spun and saw a ragged band of Sharks charging towards them with Armande Uzochi at their head and what looked like half the hive on their tail. The Iwujii captain was laughing wildly as he snapped off shots at his pursuers.

'I guess we're done with surprise,' Kreeger muttered, twisting the casing of his grenade. *'Shock'll have to carry it.'*

He hurled the explosive into the adjacent street and ducked back. There was a bright flare and a *whoosh* of heat and then he was moving again. *'Go!'* Bolt pistol in one hand, shock maul in the other, he leapt round the corner before the concussion had faded. Mordaine drew his pistol and followed.

'Tears of Sanguinius...' He stopped in his tracks, appalled by the carnage in the next street. The grenade's blast had sounded insignificant beside the cataclysm tearing the hive apart, but it had exacted a terrible toll in the close-packed avenue. Through a haze of dust he saw bodies everywhere, charred and smoking. Those who could still stand were staggering about

blindly, clutching at faces that had been scorched to the bone.

‘Quit dreaming, duke!’ Kreeger yelled from somewhere up ahead.

As the dust settled Mordaine saw the blast had only broken half the mob. Further along the street at least thirty still stood and Kreeger was already among them, swinging his maul like a madman. The survivors were sluggish with shock and armed with makeshift weapons, but their numbers would be telling once they rallied. All sported the concentric circles of Unity on their foreheads, marking them as wilful traitors rather than hapless folk caught up in the chaos. Suddenly that austere icon seemed to symbolise so much – lies within lies, encircling and constricting Mordaine’s own fate into an unbroken and unbreakable spiral fall...

If I die here the Imperium will remember me as a traitor, he realised, if it remembers me at all. He wasn’t sure which possibility troubled him more.

Filled with bleak rage, he set his antique laspistol to rapid fire and charged the mob. He was no marksman, but skill mattered little against such numbers, especially when a man was wielding an Argent Repeater. Kreeger had often mocked the baroque weapon as a vanity piece, but it was vindicating Mordaine’s faith now.

Only the thread matters, Escher’s words spun through Mordaine’s head, over and over, like a mantra of exoneration for the lives he was ending. *Only the thread...*

Smoke billowed abruptly from his pistol’s casing. As Mordaine fumbled with the setting a hulking rebel swung at him with a masonry-tipped pole. He flung himself backwards and the block whipped past his face with an inch to spare, then came arcing back like a pendulum. This time it whirled over his head as he slipped and crashed onto his back, mercifully holding on to the Repeater. As his attacker loomed over him he levelled the pistol with both hands and fired. The weapon whined and died. The rebel grinned as a bolt-round tore through his skull from behind.

‘I told you to keep moving, duke!’ Kreeger yelled, offering his hand. ‘We—’

A spike erupted from his throat, spattering Mordaine with blood. Kreeger’s eyes rolled down to peer at the tine jutting from his neck, then swivelled back to Mordaine like painted glass orbs. There was no fear in them, not even shock or pain, just a profound ambivalence. Stunned, Mordaine saw Kreeger try for a shrug. Then the spike was yanked free and the grey man

toppled into oblivion.

Were you always dead inside? Mordaine wondered numbly. *Or did something make you that way?*

Mordaine rolled aside as Kreeger's killer, a one-eyed fishery worker, jabbed at him with the blood-slick harpoon. Desperately the interrogator feigned a roll, grabbed the spike and thrust back on it. Taken by surprise, his foe skidded over, losing his grip on the weapon. Screaming holy obscenities like a possessed man, Mordaine swung the harpoon about by its spike, striving to keep the traitors at bay.

With an ululating war cry Armande Uzochi leapt past him, whirling his heavy-bladed machete like a crazed dancer. A handful of Sharks followed, one stopping to haul Mordaine up as he passed. The interrogator glanced round and saw the pursuing horde was almost upon them. There was a mania driving that sea of wild, broken faces that had nothing to do with the ideals of Unity.

The tau will never understand us, Escher had once observed. They cannot because they lack our infinite capacity for insanity.

'Inquisitor!' Uzochi snapped. 'We must go!' The captain was radiant with violence, his sharpened teeth stained with blood.

At least Kreeger never enjoyed the killing, Mordaine thought vaguely.

Ujurakh vaulted over the wall of the station compound and flattened himself in the snow, listening for sentries. He could hear the prey beasts jabbering in the distance, but none were close. Predictably they had all flocked to the main gate, drawn only to the obvious threat.

Such blunt unthinking eyes with which they see with and seem to be like, the Sourblood mocked. *Their thoughts are as flat and feeble as their faces!*

After leaving the hive he'd set out across the ice and circled back, approaching his destination from behind, as the Empty One had instructed. For once he'd been grateful for his master's call, for without it he would have been swallowed by the white nothingness. Keeping low, he crept towards the building ahead, seeking the great engine his master had described.

Thierry Chizoba steeled himself as he returned to the gates where the robed giant waited, looming over the Sharks like a harbinger from the old tales.

The stranger's face was shrouded inside his cowl, but he was obviously watching the road to the hive, indifferent to the shadow he cast. Only Lieutenant Omazet seemed unaffected, but then she was a shadow creature herself.

'I have secured the prisoner,' Chizoba reported, 'and Ironfingers has awakened the engine's machine-spirit.'

'They are coming,' the grey giant said. His voice resonated with a sibilant metallic harmony, doubtless due to a helmet of some kind, yet it was surprisingly soft. Not at all the kind of voice Chizoba would have expected from a Space Marine, for surely the stranger could not be anything else.

'I see nothing,' Omazet said.

'My eye sees truer than either of yours,' the giant answered.

Mordaine hurtled round another corner and suddenly he was past the canopy and racing straight into the biting teeth of the blizzard. He could see the dark smudge of the terminus ahead, just a few hundred metres away. Uzochi was still at his side, but the other Sharks were gone, devoured by the gestalt beast at their back.

It will follow us out onto the ice, Mordaine sensed, and on into perdition.

He heard Uzochi yell the watchword as the station's defenders came into sight. They were just vague sketches in the white maelstrom, and poor ones at that, for one of them seemed unfeasibly tall. As Mordaine tried to make sense of that deviant figure the rest opened fire. Las-bolts and solid rounds hissed past him, leaving steaming contrails in the flurry. He glanced round and saw the front ranks of the mob fall, but the rest surged on regardless – numberless – uncoiling from the hive like a serpent.

Even if we reach the train, the Dragon of Vyshodd will overtake us...

And then a small sun detonated behind him, washing the swarm with flames and beheading the serpent. The shockwave hurled Mordaine forwards and smashed him into the ice with a bone-crushing force then sent him tumbling towards darkness.

His back was on fire! Frantically he rolled over, screaming as his shattered ribs protested. Gasping breaths of jagged glass, he spat blood onto the ice. Blearily he saw Uzochi stagger past. The captain was howling with pain as he fought to cast off his blazing coat. Then Mordaine heard other, angrier howls as a pack of survivors lurched out of the smoke. Their flesh was

blackened, but the murder in their eyes was undimmed.

You were right, Escher, Mordaine thought. *When we fall, we fall hard.*

An explosive mechanical roaring erupted over the wind and the damned were torn asunder. Dazed, Mordaine turned his head and saw a robed giant striding towards him. It was wielding the Sharks' heavy bolter as a mortal man would wield a rifle. The warrior spun about at the waist, scything down the traitors with blunt efficiency. Uzochi crashed down beside the reaper and caught sight of its hooded face.

'Grandfather Death comes for us!' he cried. Mordaine couldn't tell if it was terror or rapture that moved the captain, but in that scream he heard the last thread of the captain's frayed sanity snap.

Then the stranger was standing over Mordaine and he understood that Uzochi was right, for it *was* death incarnate. The wind had whipped away its cowl, revealing a stylised bronze skull whose eye sockets were melded into a single dark aperture. A crystal orb burned in the recess, embedded just above the bridge of its nasal cavity, lending the harbinger a cyclopean aspect.

'Calavera,' Mordaine whispered, knowing it must be so.

ASH

After the inferno has devoured itself, fall to your knees and scour the ashes, for that is where you will find Truth.

– The Calavera

SEVEN HOURS AFTER UNITY, UNDER THE SHADOW

The broken man opens his eyes as he is carried into the hanger. He is almost overcome by terror when he sees the train squatting on the maglev track, for it looks like a titanic serpent – and wasn't a serpent hunting him just moments ago? But then he remembers that the vengeful serpent was made of flesh while this one shines bright silver. He even remembers that such serpents are called Chain Engines because they link the anchor hives of Oblazt. And then he also remembers that he cannot breathe and the terror returns twofold as he begins to choke on his own blood.

'Will he live?' a woman with the face of a skull asks as he slips away...

He joins Grand Master Escher in the brig of the *Enshrouded Eye*, the flagship of the Damocles Conclave. His mentor has brought him to see a tau prisoner captured at the tail end of the crusade. It is a tall, almost skeletally thin being that Escher calls an *ethereal*, one of the tau ruling caste. The creature regards him through the glass walls of its holding cell, assessing him as if he were the prisoner and it the captor. Its stillness runs blood deep, giving it the appearance of a surreal statue, a distended parody of a man forged to embody absolute serenity. Or superiority.

‘Tell me, interrogator, what do you see?’ Escher asks from the shadows. The question paralyses the broken man for he is both repelled and fascinated by the xenos prisoner. He understands that this is a test because *everything* Escher asks of him is a test, but even after years of service he has no idea what the ageless ancient wants of him. Perhaps it is Escher’s blindness that makes him so impossible to read.

‘Yes, what do you see, *gue’la?*’ the ethereal echoes, its voice penetrating the glass with shocking clarity. Is it mocking him?

‘I..’ Pinned between the scrutiny of two inscrutable beings, the broken man hesitates. ‘I see the unclean,’ he says. ‘I see a xenos monstrosity.’ Though his answer is not false he knows it is inadequate and so it chokes him and there is..

Pain beyond endurance! He opens his eyes and sees that Death has sliced him open and is rummaging about inside his chest, searching for truth.

‘You are killing him,’ protests the skull-faced woman, but he cannot tell if there is concern in her rebuke.

‘A rib has punctured his lungs, lieutenant,’ whispers Death, whose face, naturally, is also a skull. ‘He will drown in his own blood if I do not work it free.’

Another shadow lingers behind them both, little more than the transient impression of a dark man whose pale face is a geometric confluence of incandescent scars. He regards the patient with something that might be pity or contempt or perhaps nothing at all. One of his eyes burns with fever, the other, a corroded augmetic, with unholy fire.

‘It’s a lie,’ the stranger tells him wordlessly.

Then something snaps inside the broken man’s chest and he screams and the wraith is gone, banished to a deeper darkness where a daemon bell tolls.

Death looks up and appraises the broken man with a single eye of liquid glass. ‘Pain is an illusion, Haniel Mordaine,’ he says.

My name? Death knows my true name, Mordaine despairs as he falls into a memory of bright azure eyes and..

The hauntingly beautiful woman he has just introduced to Inquisitor Aion Escher blossoms with blades and strikes him down, unravelling his mentor into a meaningless spiral of blood and bone. She has murdered the grand master before Mordaine has even finished introducing her as his new data specialist. Then she turns to him with a smile like silver slaughter, but

Kreeger puts her down with a bolt round before she can take a step.

‘She was an assassin,’ Mordaine says flatly. ‘I brought an assassin aboard the *Enshrouded Eye*.’

‘We have to go, duke,’ Kreeger replies as he searches Escher’s body.

‘Go...?’

‘Fast and far from here.’ The mercenary nods in satisfaction as he finds the inquisitor’s seal. ‘These are gene-coded, but it won’t hurt to have it.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Like you said, you brought an assassin on board the grand master’s ship,’ Kreeger explains as if he is talking to a child. ‘In the Inquisition’s eyes that’s going to make you a traitor or a fool.’ Somewhere an alarm begins to wail. ‘So, do you want to live?’

I can’t die, Mordaine gasps at Death, even though he knows mercy is a mystery to such a being.

‘No,’ whispers the one-eyed harbinger. ‘That would be wasteful.’

FROST

Truth is cold, yet it burns brighter than any delirium. Be wary, for it is the most pernicious of all vices.

– The Calavera

ONE DAY AFTER UNITY, THE GHOSTLANDS

The maglev train swooped through the white nothingness of the wilderness like a ghost engine haunting a phantom world, invisibly harnessed to the single track embossed into the ice. Despite its speed it moved in almost total silence, only the low-frequency hum of its propulsion drive and the soft crackle of magnetically charged particles exposing it as a contrivance of the material world. Flickering indigo fire played about the ribbed skirts of its undercarriage, illuminating the narrow gap between its grooved suspensor plates and the track. Few folk on Oblazt understood the technomancy that kept the train suspended an inch above the rail and none possessed the skill to repair it. It was old tech, dating back to the first colonisation of the planet.

Such things did not concern the Sourblood. It was the thrill of speed that had lured him out onto the hide of the machine. He crouched atop the rear carriage like a penitent gargoyle, his talons gripping the gabled hull and his arms thrown wide to embrace the screaming wind, exhorting it to scour away the filth of the hive.

The blood of the flat-faces runs thin, he rejoiced, but their machine runs with fire in its belly!

Ujurakh had already explored the length and breadth of the vehicle, travelling via the roof to evade the flat-faces as he mapped its narrow territories. There were nineteen carriages in total, trailing behind the sheared wedge of the drive cabin like a string of carved boxes. Each was linked to the next by a cantilevered platform that twisted and turned with the contortions of the track. The flat-faces would never linger at these exposed intersections and none had ventured onto the roof. They were not fools, Ujurakh had decided, but they were overly fearful of the cold. He would use that against them when the time came. And it could not come soon enough...

Twice already he'd almost surrendered to the urge to snatch a lone straggler as it passed between the carriages. Would they miss one flat-face among so many? But he already knew the answer that really mattered: his master would notice.

Wait, the Empty One had commanded, stamping the edict into Ujurakh's skull with the promise of pain. *Wait*.

TWO DAYS AFTER UNITY

Slumped in a chair beside his cabin window, Haniel Mordaine stared gloomily at the frozen tundra of the Ghostlands. It was impossible to gauge the Chain Engine's velocity against that featureless limbo. He might as well be watching an endlessly looping vid-feed, yet despite the monotony he knew the train was devouring the distance to Yakov all too quickly. Yakov Hive, where the spaceport lay. Where the conclave would be waiting for him.

I'm not ready. I need more time.

'Two days,' he whispered. 'I lost almost two days.' He hadn't mustered the courage to examine his bandaged chest yet. The pain told him all he wanted to know.

'Your wound was most grievous, inquisitor,' Lieutenant Omazet said, hovering behind him like a sullen spectre. 'Without Captain Calavera's talents you would be a dead man.'

'*Captain* Calavera?' Despite his discomfort, the appellation amused Mordaine. Although it was by no means an unlikely title for a Space

Marine, it didn't ring true for his tenebrous patron. It was too honest.

'I did not know your contact was an Astartes,' Omazet said. Was there a hint of accusation in her voice?

'An *Adeptus* Astartes,' Mordaine corrected. Abuses of High Gothic had always irked him. 'You didn't know because I chose not to tell you, lieutenant.' *And because I didn't know either, damn him!* 'How is Captain Uzochi doing?'

'He keeps to his cabin, chastising himself with shadows and solitude,' she said. 'An Iwujii officer bears a scar on his soul for every Shark he loses.' She paused, pointedly. *Reprovingly?* 'We lost many Sharks at Vyshodd, inquisitor.'

'Give me numbers, please,' he said, avoiding her gaze.

'All told, the Third Company now fields just eighty-two Sharks.'

They both knew what the numbers meant: the Third was no longer viable. If the survivors ever returned to their regiment they would be reassigned to other companies. For the Third it was the end, for its captain something more shameful.

'I regret your losses,' Mordaine said quietly. *Particularly the ones who died to satisfy my pride...* 'They were fine soldiers.' She said nothing and he pressed on swiftly. 'And this?' He said, indicating the comms report.

'Captain Calavera asked me to pass it on to you,' Omazet said. 'He communicated with the telepathica temple at Yakov privately.'

'I see. Well, I believe it's time I had words with the good captain.' Mordaine's ribs ground in protest as he rose from his chair. He grimaced as his head spun and Omazet's face divided into a pair of grinning skulls.

'Are you strong enough to walk, inquisitor?' the skulls asked. Coming from them, it sounded like an allegation.

'The Emperor's work... won't... wait on our pleasure,' he wheezed, fighting down the nausea. 'Duty is strength.' He picked up the laspistol she'd brought him. It was a poor replacement for his Argent Repeater, but needs must.

'Haniel,' she called as he turned to go.

'Yes, lieutenant,' he said.

Haniel? He froze. *How does she know my name? Damn those infernal lenses she wears! How can you read someone when you can't see their eyes?*

‘Haniel Mordaine,’ she murmured. ‘That is what Captain Calavera called you when you lay at Grandfather Death’s threshold.’

‘A man in my position acquires many names,’ he said dismissively. ‘Surely this doesn’t surprise you?’

She inclined her head. ‘As you say, inquisitor.’

‘Then don’t presume to question me again.’ As he stalked from the room he heard her tasting his name on her tongue, testing it for truth.

The Sourblood lay prone, wedged into a ventilation shaft above a softly lit chamber that occupied an entire carriage near the front of the train. His elongated head was pressed against a grille in the ceiling, twisted sideways so he could observe the space below with one baleful eye. It was a brazen hall, hung with obscene depictions of flat-face mating rituals and clotted with silk carpets and plump-cushioned chairs that begged to be shredded. It sang to him of cheap vanity and shallow hungers, conjuring up the grovelling lordling he’d gorged upon in the hive.

What thin, insignificant rhythms they entwine about themselves and think for a wonder, he sneered. *The fleeting feeder dreams of grubs!*

Intriguingly the throng of flat-faces gathered below appeared to agree, for they were treating the shameless carriage with open contempt, spitting and spilling their food with abandon as they feasted and caroused. Their leader, a short but powerfully muscled brute with a missing ear who the others called *Chee-zoba*, had named the place their ‘mess hall’ and his kindred had laughed and striven to make it so. Ujurakh had taken an instant liking to *Chee-zoba*. For a flat-face he had spirit and wit. When the time came he would make for good eating. Indeed, all the kine in this herd had a *vitality* that suggested they were not native to this flavourless waste world.

Unbidden, the hunger unwound itself in the hollows of his gut, urging him to tear aside the metal veil he lurked behind – *to tear it aside and tear into them!* A thick rope of drool slipped from his maw and splattered the shoulder pad of the flat-face directly under him. Ujurakh tensed, but neither the creature nor its comrades noticed the blunder. Furiously, he fought against the hunger, loath to abandon his spying. Curiosity was in his nature, as it should be for all his kind, for how else could a Shaper tease out the secret threads of the fleshweave and steer his people down a potent path? Already too many bloodlines had been doomed to stagnation by the apathy

of timid Shapers. No, such as he could never be *too* curious, no matter what his kindred might say.

Never too curious, but perhaps incautious, he admitted.

The Empty One had commanded that he remain in hiding, and his master had a way of picking out every little transgression. No, these creatures' antics were not worth the price of his displeasure. Reluctantly Ujurakh slithered away.

'You are filthy, Akoto!' Sergeant Thierry Chizoba snapped. Startled, the trooper who'd invited his reprimand looked up from his cards and reached for the shoulder Chizoba was pointing at. He grimaced as his fingers found the slime coating his armour. His comrades sniggered and one of them called to a skinny figure perched by a window: 'Hey, you sneeze on Akoto again, Rémi?'

The accused trooper looked round, wiping guiltily at his wet nose. 'Not me,' he muttered with a lopsided grin.

'Go back to your stargazing, Rémi,' Chizoba said gruffly. No matter where he was, 'Krazi' Rémi Ngoro could always see the stars. The shiver fever had hit him hard after their arrival on Oblazt and it had messed up his head, but he was still the best cook in the company. Not that he had much competition any more...

So many lost, Chizoba mused as he regarded the men sprawled about the saloon carriage. His brothers had delighted in making the place their own and spitting in the face of the bluebloods who'd let the hive fall to heresy. Such decadence would have been unthinkable on Iwujii Secundus, where every infant entered the meat grinder of the Childe Wars as an equal and emerged a warrior, a slave or not at all.

'It wasn't me, sergeant,' Rémi insisted, tugging at Chizoba's sleeve. 'It was the rain.' He jabbed at the ceiling. 'I saw it in the window... like a mirror.'

Chizoba nodded vaguely. He had no idea what the man was talking about, but that was often the way with Krazi Rémi. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'It was the rain.'

Mordaine hesitated at the threshold of the Imperator suite. There was a musty, dust-wreathed odour permeating the gold-panelled cabin that

unsettled him almost as much as its grim occupant. The Space Marine's bulk seemed to fill the space, though it was by no means cramped. The plush furnishings had been demolished and stacked neatly in the adjoining corridor, along with the door and much of its frame. The Koroleva oligarchs had not designed their luxury suites with giants in mind.

'You know who I am,' Mordaine said bluntly.

'I do,' answered the Calavera. He stood facing the doorway as if he had been expecting his visitor.

Which he probably was, Mordaine guessed. 'Are you a Chaplain?' he asked, indicating the giant's bronze death mask.

'I am not,' the Space Marine answered. 'Throughout the years I have served in many capacities, but never that.'

'But your mask... the skull?'

'It is my own emblem. Its significance is personal.'

'Then I'd be obliged if you'd remove it,' Mordaine said as he entered. 'I prefer to address a man face to face, especially when discussing matters of consequence.'

'I cannot.'

'Surely there's no need for secrecy between us?' Mordaine spread his hands expansively. 'You and I are allies and men of high standing in the conclave—'

'Your standing is that of a traitor and an assassin, Haniel Mordaine,' the Calavera said without rancour. 'In the conclave's eyes you are an outcast.'

'But as you are well aware, I am entirely innocent of the murder of Grand Master Escher.'

'Entirely?'

'I...'

The words arrived stillborn in Mordaine's throat. It was as if the Calavera's crystal eye could see through to his soul.

And who's to say it can't? Mordaine thought uneasily.

'Your Chapter...'

he hesitated. He could see nothing of the Space Marine's power armour beneath that ashen robe, but there was an undeniably magisterial quality about him, as though he'd been forged for judgement, not merely execution as most Space Marines were. Suddenly it all made sense. 'Are you of the Grey Knights, Calavera?'

Are you my judge?

The hatch of the saloon car swung open and a tall figure stepped inside. Its viridian greatcoat gusted in the wind as it regarded the mob of Sharks sprawled about the chamber. Warmth and sound leeches from the room as the men noticed the newcomer framed in the open doorway.

‘Lieutenant..’ Sergeant Chizoba began uncertainly, but she silenced him with a low hiss. The Sharks lowered their eyes as she approached – La Mal Kalfu, Father Terra’s pitiless handmaiden incarnate.

‘The spirits of our brothers still wail at Grandfather Death’s gates, riven and raw with sacrifice,’ Lieutenant Omazet said, passing through the men like a scythe of cold, condemning clarity, ‘yet you cavort in this chamber of iniquity.’ Her voice was little more than a whisper woven into the wind, yet every man in the carriage heard it. ‘You dance like *ghuuls* on their unquiet graves.’

They needed this! Chizoba wanted to protest. *After the carnage and the betrayal, they needed something.* But he knew such excuses were rooted in false pride and her castigation was well deserved. ‘The fault is mine,’ he declared solemnly.

The lieutenant’s bone-trimmed laspistol appeared to fly into her hand and Chizoba raised his chin, determined to die with honour, but her arm snapped out at a right angle as she fired. There was a hiss of molten glass as the las-bolt punched through a window. Without pause she swept her arm about in an arc, channelling her contempt into flashes of green fire that wove between the frozen Sharks, sometimes close enough to scald their flesh. When she was done, every window in the carriage had been punctured. Though the thick glass held, it was crazed with livid, melted craters.

‘Purge this temple of vice,’ Omazet commanded, holstering her weapon.

Without hesitation Chizoba lifted a heavy chair and hurled it through the nearest window. As the glass shattered and the snow rushed in his comrades surged to their feet, howling with righteous fury. Eager for redemption – eager to please *her* – the Sharks seized the degenerate baubles of the bluebloods and assaulted the windows as if they were the vile, corrupting eyes of the warp.

‘Your questions are irrelevant,’ the Calavera said. ‘I am not your concern.’

‘No?’ Mordaine said, trying to cover the edge in his voice. ‘Forgive me,

but I find that difficult to accept.’ He brandished the comms report Omazet had given him. ‘You’ve summoned the Damocles Conclave to Oblazt. They will be waiting for me.’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes.’ Mordaine was aghast. ‘Is that all you have to say? You’ve betrayed me! I’ve crawled through fire and ice doing your dirty work...’

‘Six days remain to you,’ the Calavera interrupted.

‘Six days to sweat blood and beg for your mercy, is that it?’

‘Six days to find your answers and redeem your honour.’

Mordaine never saw the Calavera move, but suddenly the warrior was looming over him, so close he could make out the delicate strands of verdigris veining his bronze mask. So close that he realised his power armour was deathly silent.

‘Your prisoner awaits,’ the skull breathed.

‘Prisoner...’ Mordaine echoed blankly. He wanted to back away, but that merciless eye transfixed him. The cabin felt oppressively hot and he realised he was sweating heavily. It felt pathetic in front of this austere, desiccated being.

Prisoner... The word washed indolently into focus through the murk in his head.

‘The prisoner,’ Mordaine said, more forcefully this time. ‘That wasn’t a lie? You actually have the renegade?’

‘That is for you to determine, *interrogator*.’

‘None of this adds up...’ Mordaine’s words trailed off as the nausea flooded back, spurred on by a jagged tightness in his chest. That was when he noticed the rivets along the sides of the Calavera’s mask. That grim visage was *nailed* to the giant’s own skull.

‘Who are you?’ Mordaine whispered.

‘A fellow seeker after truth,’ said the warrior. Then with unsettling, untrustworthy concern: ‘I regret that you are still weak, Haniel Mordaine. Sometimes I forget how fragile mortals are.’

That’s a lie, Mordaine sensed in a flash of insight. *You never forget how vulnerable we are beside your kind. You relish the knowledge.* Suddenly the sense of crushing age radiating from the Space Marine was intolerable. It hung about him like an ethereal stench, a malaise of the spirit that stirred something to wakefulness inside Mordaine. *Something other.* For a fleeting

moment he felt like a stranger inside his own head, hanging on to his body by a fraying cord of consciousness.

I cannot die... The thought wasn't his own.

Horrified, Mordaine turned his back on the Calavera and lurched into the corridor, clutching at the handrail running along the wall. The carriage tapered ahead of him, stretching out in a gently undulating river of windows and doors veined with throbbing gold and red velvet. He knew the train was gliding over the ice, frictionless and whisper smooth, yet he felt like a man caught in a storm-wracked sea. He retched, deep but dry, and threads of inky darkness crawled at the periphery of his vision.

'Do you require assistance?' the Calavera called after him.

'That... will not be necessary,' Mordaine rasped.

I want nothing from you. He shoved his forehead against a window, screwing his eyes shut as the frigid glass cooled his fever. *I won't give you the satisfaction.* Breathing deeply, he waited for the nausea to subside.

'I need to make preparations,' he lied, longing for the sanctuary of his cabin, where he could surrender to the darkness without shame. 'For the interrogation.'

'I understand.'

Of course you do, you smug...

'Tomorrow...' Mordaine said. 'I'll begin tomorrow.' He opened his eyes and saw a face gazing back at him through the frosted glass – an abstraction of grey flesh stretched taught over a serrated wedge of bone and deeply recessed black eyes. *And were those quills?* The phantasm was gone before he could decipher it, abandoning the glass to his own broken reflection. He stared at the gaunt relic, wondering what else was staring back at him through those shadow-crowded eyes.

'Do you see something?' the Calavera asked, and Mordaine realised the giant was standing beside him.

'Nothing,' Mordaine said. *But something sees me.*

THREE DAYS AFTER UNITY

Oblazt was a world of darkness, but its ice wastes shimmered with a dull, diffuse light, like the last flicker of a failing lumen bulb spun out eternally.

The locals claimed it was reflected starlight, but Lieutenant Omazet didn't believe it. She could taste the hunger behind that anaemic radiance and she knew the Ghostlands were well named.

It is almost as if this debased engine has carried us into the twilight realm of Grandfather Death, she thought. *Perhaps we all fell at Vyshodd and never knew it.*

She dismissed the dark notion and focused on the gloomy corridor ahead. Someone, presumably the captain, had smashed every one of the glow-globes lining the passage, leaving only the pallid haze from the windows to illuminate her path. Uzochi had claimed this carriage when they boarded, refusing both succour and guidance, demanding only solitude. He'd looked like a man drowning in a poisoned dream.

He bleeds shadows as an untended wound bleeds pus, she mused with regret. Like all the Sharks she was fiercely loyal to her commander, but she had long suspected that Uzochi was like a tautly drawn bowstring – dangerous, yet also very brittle.

But is he beyond redemption? Omazet wondered as she arrived at the locked door of his cabin.

'Captain,' she said, tapping on the door. 'Armande... We must talk.' There was no response. She knocked again, harder this time. Something creaked above her head and she looked up sharply, squinting in the gloom. The ceiling was an ambiguous blur of grey panels and dark grilles, devoid of... She frowned. *Had something moved up there?* No, that made no sense.

There was a murmur from behind the locked door and Omazet put an ear to the enamelled wood. Someone was pacing about in there like a caged animal.

'Captain!' she called, rapping on the wood. The pacing stopped. Growing impatient, Omazet switched to the insidious, damning lilt of La Mal Kalfu: 'Armande, hear my breath and heed me, for I name you wayward, wordless and shaken-hearted. Craven-haunted, you'd spit on your oath...'

So it went until she heard a chuckle from within, rancid with anguish. A moment later the bolt was drawn back and a crack of shadow appeared in the doorframe, confining a bloodshot eye.

'Captain?' she asked. The eye blinked at her without recognition. 'Armande?'

'Is he with you?' It was the hoarse rattle of a man who hadn't slept in

days.

‘Is who with me?’

‘*Grandfather Death,*’ he whispered, as if fearing to say the name aloud. ‘I know you are his disciple, woman. You paint your face in his image.’

‘I serve Father Terra and no other.’ She frowned. ‘Armande, you have invited doubt into your heart...’ As she reached for the door the eye widened in fury.

‘I’ll not parley with his lackeys!’ he hissed. ‘Tell him to come himself if he wants my soul.’

‘Armande—’

‘Tell him!’ The door slammed in her face.

Omazet growled, a primal release of tension. She realised her pistol had slipped into her hand, as if demanding that she fulfil her most sacred duty.

He is no longer fit to lead us, she judged. It would be a mercy.

And yet some indistinct, malformed intuition held her back. She turned and stalked away, eager to be gone from this shadowy carriage.

The saloon car had been eviscerated and sacrificed as a penance for the sins of its patrons, yet the Ghostlands had transformed the gaudy chamber into a vision of almost ethereal beauty. Krazi Rémi stood at the entrance, bewildered by the frost-wreathed opulence. It looked as if the carriage had been frozen in time.

Like starlight made into stuff, he thought reverently.

He roused himself with a shake of the head. Such foolishness had earned the mockery of his brothers, but he was going to prove them wrong. He’d come back here to chase the rain. His thoughts were a raggedy jumble these days, but he was pretty sure rooms weren’t meant to rain.

Nodding to himself, the scrawny Shark crept towards the place where he’d seen it happen, his boots crunching through the vitrified strands of carpeting. His breath hung about him like smoke, testifying to the cold that gripped the carriage. If he lingered here overlong he’d end up as another piece of frozen furniture.

Rémi grinned when he saw the suspect grille in the ceiling, delighted that his memory had clung on to it. Hunting about, he spied an overturned table. The ice had welded it to the fabric and there was an audible snap as he pulled it free. He froze, but nobody came so he pressed on with his quest.

Grunting with effort, he dragged the table under the grille and climbed up. The panel's screws were frozen tight and his gloved hands were clumsy, but he worked at them with his knife until the grille came loose. Sliding it aside, he poked his head cautiously into the shaft above, shining his torch first left then right. Nothing. He sniffed. There was a heady stench lingering in the space, like the spoor of a wild beast. He hesitated, wondering if this would be enough for the others. Minutes passed as he tested the possibilities. No, it wouldn't be enough, he decided unhappily. Nobody would believe him. He needed more.

With a sigh, Rémi hauled himself up into the ventilation shaft.

He chose a direction at random, working his way along the shaft until it terminated at the carriage wall. *What? Oh...* There was a hatch above him. He squirmed onto his back and shoved, gasping as it came free and he was bathed in bright light. He was staring up at the sky and it was full of stars. *Real stars*, not the glittering lies that crowded his head like beggar's diamonds. He drank them in, marvelling that the blizzard had eased off and granted him this clear sky. Even so, it was bitterly cold and he knew he had to get moving before he froze up in the shaft.

I should go back, he thought, but the stars sang to him, urging him to race them across the top of the world. No... No, it wasn't the stars... It was the wind, a glacial whispering mistral plucked from the air by the speeding train. Rémi sat up, popping his head through the hatch to watch the tundra surging past on either side like a fleeting yet perpetual memory of whiteness. His breath froze, glazing his face with frost as he tried to remember who he'd been before the shiver fever had filled his head with smoke.

I should really go back, Rémi decided as he hauled himself out onto the roof of the carriage. The metal was frost rimed and slippery, but he felt no fear because he was a Shark and his balance was sharp, even if his mind wasn't. Anyway, the carriage was wide enough for a man to walk ten good paces to either side before reaching the edge. True, it slanted sharply after just *one* pace, but he'd be fine if he kept to the central spine.

His hunt forgotten, he picked his way cautiously across the ribbed hull, delighting in the iron gargoyles perched along his path. They were turned outwards to ward off evil so he couldn't see their faces, but he could imagine them, ugly orkoid brutes with sharp eyes and sharper fangs, angry

at being stuck out here to freeze. They had a point about that because the cold was something terrible up here. He could feel it drinking his skin dry and sucking the breath right out of him, eager to carry his soul away...

He stumbled and yelped, almost slipping from the level spine of the roof. Those ten good paces to either side weren't looking so good any more. One misstep and he'd be sliding down the roof like a man caught in a waterfall. He froze up, wheezing hard and shivering uncontrollably as the Ghostlands flashed past on either side.

Got to get back inside, he realised, out of this killing cold.

He frowned, peering at the trail of carriages ahead. There was a dark shape moving at the far end and even at this distance it didn't look right. As he watched, it came rushing towards him like an insect, scuttling on all fours and leaping the gaps between the carriages in great hops, becoming more manlike with every step. And then it was close enough for Rémi to see that it was nothing like a man at all. It was a gargoyle come to life and its face was a lot worse than the ones he'd imagined.

His heart pounding like a caged animal, he remembered that he'd come out here to hunt. Whatever else he was or wasn't, Rémi Ngoro was a Shark.

Steeling himself, he reached for his laspistol. His fingers closed on empty air. Maybe the gun had slipped loose during his crawl or maybe he'd forgotten it. He hoped it was the first. It didn't really matter any more, but it was all he had left.

Closing his eyes, Krazi Rémi turned away from the horror and stepped onto the slippery, sloping surface to his right, proving he wasn't crazy at all.

'How long, Iho'nen?' the traveller, who had become a prisoner, demanded from the shadowed confines of his cell.

'Not long, but it is a fragile process,' the giant, who wore his many names like a shroud of half-truths, answered. 'I did not anticipate that his body would become so damaged. His final foray into the hive was unfortunate.'

'Is this error also within your *acceptable parameters*?' the prisoner asked.

'Not if he dies,' the Calavera admitted.

ICE

And after it has beguiled, tormented and betrayed you, Truth will reveal itself as nothing more than another lie.

– The Calavera

FOUR DAYS AFTER UNITY

It is time, the Empty One's decree bled into Ujurakh's skull.

Unbound, the Sourblood surged from his lair in an empty promethium tank and scuttled into the ventilation system. Finally freed from the hateful shackles of meekness, his mind burned with the possibilities for wreaking ruin upon the flat-faces. It would have to be done with stealth and swiftness, for they were many and the Empty One's schemes prohibited open conflict. Ujurakh did not understand this stricture, but it did not trouble him unduly for he was a tangled creature himself, drawn to the craft rather than the brutality of slaughter. The hunger soared alongside him, seeking to deny him this dignity for it cared only for the feast, but he leashed it and made it his weapon rather than his conqueror.

Oh, we'll feed deep and well, springing loose the hidden spiral seeds of their flesh, Ujurakh promised, *but we'll weave our carnage with whisper-light perfection!*

He scurried from carriage to carriage, sometimes through vents, sometimes across roofs, peering through windows or grilles at his blind prey, assessing numbers and positions, measuring movements and distances, assembling the scattered pieces of the plan he'd devised during his concealment.

And finally, he was ready.

‘A whole day!’ Mordaine bellowed as he stormed into the Emperor Suite. ‘You let me sleep through an entire day!’

‘It was necessary, Haniel Mordaine,’ the Calavera said. He was waiting at the centre of the chamber, exactly as he’d been waiting the first time. ‘Without respite your body would have shut down catastrophically.’ The Space Marine appraised him as a man might assess an insect with a broken wing. ‘Even now your metabolic insignia indicate your condition is significantly impaired.’

Mordaine faltered, his fury diminished to bluster now that he was face to face with this eldritch being again. As always, the Calavera’s logic was maddeningly irrefutable. He forced himself to stare into that cyclopean eye, wondering why he’d never challenged its nature before. Surely it couldn’t be a conventional...

‘It is an augmetic of rare and resplendent provenance,’ the Calavera answered.

‘What...?’

‘Your eyes betray your thoughts as mine cannot, Haniel Mordaine.’

They were silent for a time, while Mordaine fumbled for the courage to press the challenge. *Do I really want to know this truth now?*

‘I want to see the prisoner,’ he demanded instead.

‘As you will, interrogator.’ The giant offered the ghost of a bow.

‘You agree?’ Mordaine couldn’t conceal his surprise.

‘Yes. It is time.’

At a grand thirty-one years, André ‘Ironfingers’ Pava was far and away the oldest man in the company, but maturity had only cemented his status as an outsider. Very few Sharks expected to see twenty-five, let alone their thirties. Indeed, surviving to such a ripe old age was regarded as vaguely scandalous among the Iwujii, but there was no getting round the fact that Pava was too useful to lose, so one commander after another had kept him out of harm’s way – even Armande Uzochi, who was the craziest he’d ever served under. While this cosseting didn’t endear him to his fellows, they weren’t blind to his talents. Who else could they turn to when their guns or pict recorders played up? The Iwujii regiments had few tech-priests

attached to their ranks, so a man with a knack for machinery was a precious if unloved commodity.

Pava hummed to himself as he monitored the control panel in front of him, delighting in the tangle of levers, wheels and intricately carved dials. While the deeper secrets of the Chain Engine's workings would always elude him, he had its *shape* now. It had taken some experimentation, but he'd eventually divined the right input mantras to awaken its machine-spirit and beseech it to soar across the ice. Afterwards he'd continued to refine his stewardship through trial and error, relying on his gift to win the engine over. It was an invigorating process and he realised he'd never been so happy in his life. Up front in the drive cabin he was a world away from the dirty looks and veiled insults of his so-called comrades.

Something thudded heavily onto the cabin's roof. Perplexed, Pava peered through the slanted viewport, trying to penetrate the white noise of hail and darkness. He heard a scrabbling overhead, then a clatter as the intruder slithered onto the access platform outside. Whoever was out there, they were now between Pava and the rest of the train. It suddenly struck him how isolated he was up front in the drive cabin.

He was fumbling for his laspistol when the hatch was flung open.

Sergeant Chizoba threaded his way through the silent throng of troopers packed into the barracks carriage, vigilant for any sign of laxity as he made another headcount. Some men knelt in prayer, while others sought wisdom in the scriptures of Father Terra, reading their spiritual primers with solemn frowns. Those who'd been inducted into the disciplines of the Jade Chord sat in contorted postures, their eyes closed as they meditated upon their transgressions. After the debacle in the saloon car they'd all woken up to the dissolution stalking them since they'd boarded.

Sometimes I feel the engine itself watches us like a fell spirit, Chizoba mused darkly, testing and tempting us with a thousand glittering snares. A silver serpent...

His former negligence still mortified him, but the seeds of corruption had been insidious and fertile, from the lascivious images adorning the staterooms to the fine spirits and exotic delicacies packed into the cargo carriages. But worst of all was the dazzling, hoarded wealth! Many of the Sharks had filled their pockets with loot in the first days, weighing

themselves down like swine fattened on gilded muck, but Chizoba had put an end to it, standing watch as each thief cast his baubles overboard.

The serpent hates me for that, he decided, but it fears me too.

He'd reached the front of the carriage now, counting sixty-three Sharks in total. Taking into account the ones posted along the train there should have been sixty-four. Rémi was still missing. The fellow was probably sleeping off one of his shiver fits, but nobody recalled when they'd last seen him and Chizoba couldn't help worrying. He hesitated, unwilling to disturb his comrades' devotions.

I'll find him myself, he decided. It's past time I did the rounds anyway.

With a sigh he reached for his fur-trimmed greatcoat.

Hunched over the blood-spattered drive console, Ujurakh yanked a lever at the end of the sixth row, completing the pattern the Empty One had placed inside his head. Somewhere at the tail end of the vehicle magnetic clamps would be releasing, leaving the rearmost carriage hanging by a thread. That thread would require a personal touch to sever.

And so machines are unwoven and splayed wide open for the fools they are!

The sabotage delighted him, for the unravelling of things, be they fashioned from flesh, metal or mind, was the true calling of Sourblood. With a hoot of glee he leapt to the cabin door, lingering at the threshold to savour the sweet aroma of liberated flesh in the air. He had wrought fine work here.

'Sacred Throne!' a voice hissed behind him.

Ujurakh spun round and found himself face to flat-face with a kine beast standing on the access platform. He lunged before the patrolling sentry could reach for its weapon, his serrated beak ripping away the creature's face in a snap of crimson as his twin blades slammed into its shoulders, pinning it rigid. Ignoring its convulsive kicks, he lifted the pinioned ruin and cast it overboard with a squawk of rage.

The sentry's sudden appearance here infuriated him. He'd timed his attack to interweave *precisely* with the flat-face patrols, yet this fool – *this defiler!* – had surprised him, tarnishing the perfection of his plan! Riding the wave of his rage, the hunger heaved within him, urging him to linger and feed on the driver's carcass. Ujurakh slammed the hatch shut before the

scent wafting from the cabin overpowered him.

One master already claims my shame. I'll be bound by no more!

He leapt for the roof of the next carriage, straight into the teeth of the gale. His anger had made him careless and the blizzard snatched him as he landed, spinning him towards the edge of the speeding train. His talons scrabbled for purchase on the icy hull as the maelstrom howled and tore at his quills. Desperate, he crouched and sprang forwards, crashing down at the centre of the carriage and hugging the roof like a spiny limpet.

Blood-blind fool! Ujurakh cursed himself. Then he was moving again, scurrying on all fours towards the rear of the train.

'I'm going to do the rounds,' Chizoba told the sentry standing beside the exit of the barracks car. 'I may be gone a while.' He swung the hatch open and the squall rushed in, dusting the interior with snow. A few hours ago the night had been quiet, but the blizzard had returned with a vengeance. The sergeant scowled, barely able to see the carriage ahead through the churning snow. Suddenly leaving this sanctuary seemed like the worst idea he'd ever had. But what if Rémi had hurt himself?

Reluctantly Chizoba stepped out onto the connecting gangway and slammed the hatch shut behind him, cutting himself off from the living. Alone in a swirling white void, he looked down and saw more whiteness rushing between the slats of the platform under his feet. The sense of unreality was oppressive. Though the Chain Engine was a goliath it sped through the maelstrom in almost total silence. Chizoba knew some kind of technomancy kept it floating above the track, but it didn't *feel* right. The engines he'd ridden back home were rickety contraptions, wedded to their tracks like a cranky old couple, but this one felt like a ghost train.

An infernal engine forged to ferry an army of the damned into the warp...

He yanked down on the lever of the door ahead. It didn't move.

A silver-clad snare for the wicked and the unwary...

Fear caressed his spine, feather-light and frigid. He imagined himself trapped between carriages, unable to go forwards or backwards as his blood froze and his flesh crystallised into a glass sculpture. Would his men laugh at his folly? He tugged again.

The sentry standing outside the prisoner's cell was obviously terrified. He

was the youngest Shark Mordaine had seen, surely no more than sixteen. How long had he been alone in the holding carriage? Alone with the xenos behind that iron-shod door...

‘Has the prisoner caused any trouble?’ Mordaine asked him. The youth shook his head, unable to get a word out.

Is it me he’s frightened of? Mordaine wondered. *Or is it the grey giant standing beside me?*

‘The xenos is secure,’ said the Space Marine. ‘Fortunately the Koroleva equipped their transport with admirable incarceration facilities. One might say they had *foresight*.’ There was a trace of humour in that deathly voice, but it only enhanced its inhumanity. In that moment Mordaine knew that he truly hated this ancient being.

‘Then you may leave us,’ he said curtly. He expected some argument, but the Calavera merely inclined his head and strode away. With a momentary howl of wind and a slam of metal he was gone from the carriage.

He wants me to do this, Mordaine realised. *That’s what he’s wanted all along.* He glanced at the Iwujii youth, seeking a last moment of human camaraderie. ‘What’s your name, boy?’ he asked.

‘Mifune, sir.’ The guard wouldn’t meet his gaze.

It is me he’s terrified of, he realised. *Haniel Mordaine, the dread inquisitor!* Absurdly the boy’s fear lent him courage.

‘See that I am not disturbed, Trooper Mifune.’

Mordaine unlocked the cell door.

With an angry screech the stubborn lever gave way and Chizoba staggered into the next carriage. As he hauled the hatch shut behind him he heard something clatter across the roof above, as if in sympathy. He held his breath, listening with his back against the door, straining against the muted wail of the wind.

‘I’ll not let the unquiet spirits of this engine unman me,’ Chizoba said, challenging the gloom. Maybe it was crazy, but sometimes a man needed to hear a human voice, even if it was only his own. ‘There’s nothing here that faith can’t rout. In fact there’s nothing here at all!’

Ashamed of the dread that had almost overwhelmed him, he advanced into the narrow aisle ahead. It passed through a warren of sealed storage vaults that bore the silver crown icon of the Koroleva. The bluebloods had situated

this cargo carriage further upfront than the barracks, valuing their chattel over their troops. They wouldn't travel without an army of thugs to back them up, but they liked to keep them out of sight. Unfortunately this had obliged Chizoba's brothers to occupy the tail end of the train. He didn't know why that sat so badly with him, but...

There was a metallic groan behind him. He spun round, drawing his pistol in the same moment. The hatch he'd come through had swung open and snow was billowing into the carriage in languid, spiralling flurries. Chizoba crouched, levelling his weapon at the door, watching it rock back and forth in the wind like a beckoning hand. He waited, his hackles rising at its incessant creaking.

Nothing. It's nothing.

'Thierry, you're raising ghosts from the shadows!' he chastised himself. Once again the sound of his voice was like a flash of good sense in the darkness. Obviously he'd not shut the damned hatch properly.

'You a man or a boy?' he chanted. 'Predator or prey?' It was the first mantra of the Childe Wars and it spurred him into action. Holstering his pistol he marched back to the door and reached for the handle. 'Blade or blood?'

The wind lashed out and snatched away his hand. He stared at the gushing stump, frozen by superstitious terror. Then the wind surged into the carriage and he saw it was a predator.

As the Calavera had promised, the prisoner was secure. The tau sat rigidly on the floor, its back a few centimetres from the windowless outer wall of the padded cell. A bulky robe obscured the alien's form, but Mordaine could tell that its legs were knotted into a lotus position that would have defied human physiognomy. The alien's hands – only three fingers and a thumb to each – were clasped in its lap, bound by heavy manacles. A chain tethered these to a ring in the wall, restricting the captive's freedom to half a metre. It was a crudely effective device, yet Mordaine was not reassured. This was one of the most dangerous aliens known to the Imperium.

And I'm the one who'll bring him before the Emperor's justice, he thought. Surely it will be enough to exonerate me. If this is really him...

Mordaine lingered in the doorway, studying the xenos. It was quite unlike the ethereal his mentor had captured all those years ago. While that being

had possessed an empyrean grace, this one was muscular and broad shouldered, with a warrior's bearing. However, the most striking differences were in the face. Whereas the ethereal's had been long and delicate, this creature's was square-jawed and severe, with cobalt skin tones that darkened to charcoal at its vertical nostril slit. A stylised white circle inscribed the right side of its face, framing its eye with geometric precision. He couldn't begin to guess at the alien's age, but he sensed it was in the prime of its life.

Can this really be the Scourge of Damocles? Surely he would be older...

Then the prisoner opened its eyes and Mordaine was no longer so certain.

'You may enter,' it said.

Crouched between carriages, Ujurakh wrenched on the lever controlling the last of the couplings securing the barracks car. With a hiss of servos the massive pin retracted, cutting the rear carriage loose from the train. Crowing with satisfaction, the Sourblood sat back on his haunches and watched as the snowstorm swallowed the receding box. The amputated car's forward momentum might carry it along the track for hours, perhaps even days before friction sapped its impetus. It was a waste of good meat, but it was necessary. Ujurakh wondered whether the stranded flat-faces inside would devour each other before the end came.

'You are the inquisitor,' said the xenos, playing the opening Escher had always favoured, making a statement out of a question and claiming the initiative.

Beginning the game without hesitation.

'I would stand to face you,' the prisoner continued, 'but it is impractical.' It lifted its manacles pointedly as Mordaine closed the cell door. 'You understand these hold me only because I tolerate it.'

The xenos spoke Gothic with patient, almost pained precision, as if constraining its thoughts to accommodate an inferior shape, but the authority in its voice was undeniable. It was an alloy of contradictions, alight with passion, yet aloof with calculation: the voice of a master player.

'I don't have time for games,' Mordaine said brusquely, trying to regain ground. 'You will answer my questions or you will suffer.'

'I am a warrior. Suffering runs in my blood like fire. I welcome it.' The

prisoner was regarding him intently. *Sizing up the mettle of its opponent.* ‘Do you not share such a bond with pain, gue’la?’ *Are you not a warrior?*

‘So you believe that pain is a virtue, xenos?’

‘I believe the *conquest* of pain brings strength.’

‘And I believe I have walked into the wrong cell,’ Mordaine mocked. ‘I expected to meet a fire warrior, not an ethereal.’ It was a sly strike, but the prisoner didn’t rise to it so he pressed on. ‘I thought your craft was war, not philosophy.’

‘If you believe the disciplines are distinct then you are ignorant,’ the xenos said evenly. ‘Or incompetent.’

I would certainly be a fool to think you a common warmonger, Mordaine conceded. To his disgust he was already tiring, as if the alien’s mere presence was draining him. *I’m not ready for a drawn-out duel...*

‘Come closer, inquisitor,’ the xenos said. ‘I offer you no imminent peril.’ *The infernal thing is baiting me!* ‘Let us talk as equals.’

Uncertain whether accepting the challenge would register as strength or weakness, Mordaine stepped forward... then hesitated. *Which is certainly weakness, damn it!* Angry, he forced himself to move, stopping a few paces from the prisoner. He should have appeared masterful, but his tension diminished him while the alien’s tranquil repose elevated it. Wise to the power game, it didn’t even raise its eyes, staring instead through his midriff.

‘We are not equals,’ Mordaine said without conviction. ‘I am a servant of the God-Emperor of Mankind, cast in the mould of His... divine... aspect...’ His hands were trembling uncontrollably so he clasped them behind his back – tightly – as if he were hanging on to himself. ‘You are a xenos heretic, enslaved by the deliriums of a debased technology that will betray you. You are nothing.’

‘Then why are you afraid of me, gue’la?’

The statement was so ripe with truth that it took Mordaine off-guard. As he floundered for a riposte he felt enervating tendrils unfurling inside his skull. The secret *other* buried inside him was stirring again.

No, Mordaine railed at the indifferent abyss. *Not here... not now.*

‘I..’ he breathed as breath failed him. The cell walls unfurled and swam away, as if seeking a more captivating configuration. His legs felt like hot wires sheathed in wax. Any moment now that inconstant flesh would melt, leaving his bones unable to bear their burden alone. Now the xenos *was*

looking up at him, its black eyes drinking in his weakness dispassionately.
'I...' Mordaine gasped as his legs buckled.

The Sourblood tore another crimson strip from the carcass of the flat-face called *Chee-zoba* and crammed it into his beak, savouring the pungent flavour. After the poor fare this planet had served up, such flesh was intoxicating! Worlds shaped the taste of their meat and this creature had been spawned on a vibrant, full-blooded planet – one not unlike Ujurakh's own home world. As he chewed on the meat it rendered up fleeting impressions of wet green heat and red fury. He hadn't tasted the like for many seasons! There had been a time when he had always fed well, travelling from one battleground to another with his kindred, trading their might for pay and flesh, but then the Empty One had come with false bargains and forbidden meat...

Warp-kissed flesh, tender, terrible and irresistible with promised displeasure!

Ujurakh shuddered at the memory of fragrant coral flesh and delicate, deadly pincers. *Possessed*, the Empty One had called the twisted, drooling captive he'd offered the Shaper. The sacrifice had shrieked in ecstasy when Ujurakh carved it open, then moaned in dissonant harmony while he gluttled himself on its willing meat, enslaved by a hunger beyond anything he'd known before. Its essence had flooded his palate with myriad rival passions as he fought to unwind its truths and thread them into his own weave, but it was like trying to catch the lightning with his talons or extinguish the sun with his breath!

Too many possibilities entwined within infinite impossible tangles...

The Empty One had waited until Ujurakh collapsed, overwhelmed by the cacophony of sensations. Then he had summoned the kroot's kindred and denounced their Shaper as a Sourblood, a degenerate who would taint their bloodline to sate his base cravings. They had called for his life then, but the Empty One had bought it from them and taken Ujurakh as his slave, burying his voice deep inside the Shaper's skull and binding him to an invisible purpose that had carried them across countless worlds. Now, for the first time in so very long, Ujurakh could taste the joys of his old life.

Lost in his feasting, the Shaper didn't see the skull-faced female enter the dark cargo carriage. It was only when her torch beam lashed him that he

awoke to the threat, but by then she was already firing. He sprang backwards and the las-bolt intended for his head took him in the abdomen, scalding him to the bone. Screeching in agony he retreated, flitting frantically from side to side in the narrow aisle as she stalked after him with her pistol levelled. A bolt caught him in the right shoulder... another in the left leg... a third burned away the quills of his crest. He hurled himself at the gaping doorway behind, flailing out to catch the guardrail of the gangway beyond, but his scorched arm was without strength. He yelped as his grip failed and he toppled over into nothingness.

Lieutenant Omazet approached the open hatch cautiously, keeping her pistol levelled, but the avian horror was gone.

So was the barracks carriage.

Hissing through her teeth, she stared at the void where sixty men had been. *We have been betrayed*, she thought bitterly. *I don't know how or by whom, but I don't doubt it for a moment.*

Biting down her rage, she approached the shredded wreck that had been Thierry Chizoba. The beast had dragged him to the centre of the carriage so it could feast away from the cold, leaving the hatch open for a quick flight if it was disturbed.

But its unholy appetite was its undoing, she realised as she knelt beside the sergeant. His face was contorted in a rictus of agony, eyes wide and staring with shock. His right hand was missing, along with most of his chest.

'We were already so few,' Omazet murmured as she closed Chizoba's eyes and traced the sacred aquila across his forehead. *Now we are nothing at all.*

But it wasn't true. There were at least a dozen troopers further along the train, along with Old Man Pava and the boy Mifune. And of course there was still Armande, if he could be roused from his madness. They weren't many, but they were still Sharks and together they would take vengeance. Determined, Omazet rose and hurried towards the next carriage. As she reached for the handle the hatch swung open and a vast shape was silhouetted against the snowstorm.

'Captain Calavera,' she said as the Space Marine entered the carriage, hunching to pass through the doorway. She backed away instinctively, not lowering her gun, though it was a stunted weapon against the armoured giant.

Why do I feel I might need it? Omazet wondered uneasily as the newcomer rose to fill the narrow space. *And why is his arrival so timely?*

‘We have been betrayed,’ she told him. ‘We must reverse this engine without delay. If we are swift we may yet deliver my brothers from the winter’s embrace.’

The Space Marine regarded her silently. His crystal eye was very bright in the gloom, yet it cast no light of its own. Omazet saw that it was a many-faceted orb, inset like a jewel in the dark recess of his visor. Beside his dread aspect, her own contrivance of tattoos and lenses seemed like cheap chicanery. How she envied him that face! Such a visage would make her one with Mother Kalfu herself...

Mesmerised, she stood rigid as the Calavera took a step towards her.

Mordaine’s world melted back into focus, as sticky and seeping as the pool of blood congealing around his head. A drum was pounding between his ears, beating furiously against the wet gash in his forehead as if trying to hammer a way out.

I must have fallen on my face, he thought blurrily. *It’s a miracle I didn’t break my nose.* He hauled himself to his knees, groaning with the strain.

‘I feared you dead, gue’la,’ a voice said beside him. He turned and saw the xenos prisoner watching him. Angel’s Tears, he’d fallen right by the creature!

Unable to suppress a moan of revulsion, Mordaine crawled away, feeling foolish – impossibly, unforgivably foolish – and collapsed with his back against the cell door, breathing hard. He reached for his holster, already knowing the weapon would be gone and – no, it was still there!

Why? Closing his eyes, he slowed his breathing, grasping for answers. *The xenos could have reached out and throttled me while I was senseless. Why am I still alive?*

Growling low in her throat, Omazet tore her gaze from the Calavera’s siren eye. The giant halted and she heard something that might have been a sigh. The sound was like a sirocco fluting through a time-riven ruin. In that breath she knew he had come to her as Grandfather Death.

‘Why?’ she asked. She doubted her candour would surprise him, but it might earn her a measure of respect. ‘Why turn on us?’

He stood motionless, contemplating her request.

‘We are both warriors,’ she urged. ‘If I am to die here then grant me the dignity of truth. *Why?*’

‘Because you would interfere, lieutenant.’

‘In what?’

‘In a matter that has been engineered with absolute rigour,’ he said, betraying a hint of pride. ‘Your company has served its purpose.’ He made to advance.

‘Wait!’ she said quickly, hunting for something, *anything* to delay him. ‘Do you truly see through that orb?’

‘Not *through* it,’ he said softly. ‘The Aphelion is not a lens.’

‘But you see with it?’

‘More than you can possibly conceive.’ Suddenly the pride was gone, leaving only an ineffable weariness. ‘I have no surcease of sight, Adeola Omazet.’

‘It is a curse then?’

‘It is what it is. As am I.’ He took a step forwards. Omazet took one back.

‘What you *are* is a heretic,’ she challenged.

‘From a narrow viewpoint.’ Another step forwards.

‘You have turned your back on Father Terra’s light!’ Another step back.

‘Light blinds, absolute light blinds absolutely.’ Forwards.

‘Is that how you lost your eyes?’ Back.

‘It is how I came to see.’

‘How long was I out?’ Mordaine asked hoarsely.

‘Not long.’ It was a vague answer yet an honest one, he sensed.

‘Why didn’t you kill me when you had the chance, xenos?’

‘It would have served no purpose.’

‘Vengeance doesn’t interest you?’

‘Against you?’ The alien’s nostril slit dilated with wintry humour. ‘Enmity must be earned, gue’la. My people do not hate blindly, as yours do.’

‘Your people?’ Mordaine taunted, scrabbling for an attack. ‘Who exactly are you speaking for? You’re an outcast.’

‘You presume much and understand nothing.’

‘Then enlighten me,’ Mordaine offered. ‘Haven’t you turned your back on the ethereals and built your own little empire in the Damocles Gulf?’

‘In dark times empires arise around warriors of substance,’ the xenos said without obvious pride. ‘Fire purges the old and forges anew. So it goes.’

‘And what exactly are you forging?’

‘Such knowledge will not save you, *Haniel Mordaine*.’

The blood drained from Mordaine’s face. Did everyone know his damned name? *How...? The Calavera? But why would he tell this xenos renegade anything? Where do the lies begin or end?*

‘Name your Chapter,’ Omazet said as she backed away from the giant, ‘so I might curse its memory.’

‘I have no Chapter,’ answered the Calavera, advancing, ‘for I am Legion.’

And so it went, their words slicing back and forth as their steps carried them inexorably towards the emptiness waiting at the other end of the carriage.

‘What do you fight for?’ Omazet asked finally, stepping out onto the connecting gangway that no longer connected to anything.

‘Some might call it the Greater Good.’

‘You have betrayed your blood to serve a xenos heresy?’ Omazet had to shout over the wind, yet the Calavera’s whispers slipped through it like serpents.

‘Oh, a Greater Good than theirs...’ The notion appeared to amuse him. ‘Call it the *greater* Greater Good, if you will.’ He raised a cautioning hand as her finger tightened on the trigger of her pistol. ‘Do not imagine you can put my eye out as if I were some absurd monster of legend. The balance of the Aphelion exists outside the material sphere. You cannot touch it.’

‘I can try.’

‘Make the attempt and I will kill you.’

‘And if I don’t, you will spare me?’ she challenged.

‘I will offer you a choice. Die here... or take a leap of faith.’ He swept an arm towards the white void behind her.

‘We are both outcasts, gue’la,’ the xenos said, ‘but I have *chosen* my path. I know myself. What do you know?’

Nothing, Mordaine confessed. *I don’t know why Escher elevated me to become his acolyte or why he was murdered or even what I want from you, xenos. And worst of all, I don’t know what’s happening to me.*

‘You are an enemy of the Imperium of Man,’ he declared, striking for safe ground, ‘but to your own people you are immeasurably more repellent.’ *I have to go on the attack!* ‘Shas’O Vior’la Shovah Kais Mont’yr,’ he said, pronouncing each meticulously memorised component like a curse, ‘I name you traitor.’

‘Make your choice, lieutenant,’ said the Calavera.

‘You offer me death either way!’ Omazet snarled.

‘Perhaps, yet my vassal beast endures.’ The Calavera tilted his head attentively. ‘I hear it still, failing and faint, but too hungry for life to accept death.’ That cold jewel of an eye fixed on her again, weighing her up. ‘Are you weaker than a xenos savage, Adeola Omazet?’

‘Why take the chance that I might survive?’ she demanded.

‘Perhaps because you have impressed me,’ the Calavera said, ‘or perhaps because the improbability of it intrigues me.’

Omazet didn’t believe either explanation for a moment. This monster had sloughed off such sentiments long ago. All of it – the pride, the dry humour, even the weariness – were merely after-echoes of emotion. Inside that bronze skull only austere purpose remained. A purpose he believed she would serve equally well through life or death.

‘I will live, traitor,’ she promised. ‘And I will prove you wrong.’

Then she spat in his eye and jumped.

‘Do you deny it?’ Mordaine pressed. ‘Or is the name too shameful for you to acknowledge?’

The prisoner made no answer. Its expression was unreadable.

‘*Confess.*’ Mordaine lashed out, trying not to let desperation seep into his voice. ‘You are O’Shovah.’

You have to be, or this is all for nothing.

‘You are—’

‘I am,’ the xenos said.

Mordaine closed his eyes and let the void take him once more.

VOID

Gaze into the Void and you will see yourself glaring back.

– The Calavera

There were voices in the darkness, prowling the silence like wolves, hounding Mordaine towards wakefulness though he sensed this was not their intent.

‘... and what of the remaining gue’la troops?’ one was asking.

‘I have accounted for them all save their captain,’ answered a resonant whisper. ‘He was gone from his quarters when I purged the vessel.’

‘Your plan bleeds errors as the aun breed lies, Iho’nen,’ the first voice said.

‘It is the nature of things,’ the whisperer called Iho’nen replied. ‘The Primordial Annihilator taints all endeavours with escalating imperfection, hence foresight is a potent but inconstant craft, traveller.’

‘Yet it is your chosen craft, is it not?’ the traveller observed dryly.

‘As it is yours, but one must adapt to the changing tides of the maelstrom.’

‘I am a hunter. To my mind a beast that cannot be mastered is best slain.’

‘That has always been the way of warriors,’ Iho’nen acknowledged, ‘but you must become more than a warrior if you aspire to master fate.’

‘Fate is an excuse for weakness,’ declared the traveller. ‘The strong forge their own paths.’

‘Your path may yet forge a monster, *Mont’shasaar*.’

‘That is not my name,’ the other said coldly.

‘Not yet and perhaps never,’ Iho’nen conceded, ‘but you acquired its shadow on Arthas Moloch when you took the Dawn Blade.’

‘The Dawn Blade is a weapon like any other.’

‘Like *no* other,’ Iho’nen said intently.

‘Then you advise me to discard the blade?’ the traveller challenged.

‘No, that time has passed and you must reap the storm you have sown.’

‘As it should be, Space Marine.’

Space Marine? Mordaine thought hazily. *That whisper? Calavera...* As he tumbled back towards darkness he sensed one of the presences approach. His eyes opened fleetingly and he saw the xenos prisoner appraising him.

‘I think you are wrong about this one, Iho’nen,’ it said. ‘He is broken.’

The ventilation shafts reeked of a sour animal stench but they were the safest paths through the narrow warzone of the train, so Armande Uzochi had claimed them without hesitation, just as another predator had done before him. The crawlspaces had kept him hidden and mobile even when Grandfather Death was dangerously close, as he was now.

Lying supinely above the prison carriage, Uzochi held his breath as the one-eyed Space Marine carried the inquisitor from the alien’s cell. Slumped senseless in the giant’s arms, Mordaine looked like a dead man and Uzochi wondered what torments he had endured in Father Terra’s service. His eyes widened in horror as he saw the xenos captive emerge from the cell a moment later, stretching its limbs as if to shake out the indignity of confinement.

Horror turned to outrage as Uzochi remembered how these abominations had destroyed his company piece by piece, first in the hive through the uprising they had engineered and finally in the confines of this bedevilled machine, hunting down his men one by one. He had watched from above as Grandfather Death killed young Mifune, snapping the terror-stricken boy’s neck with the indifference Uzochi would have shown a rat. Instinct alone had saved the captain, compelling him to hide before the cull had begun.

How did our La Mal Kalfu meet her fate? Uzochi wondered guiltily, remembering how he had rebuked her. *I was weak...*

The giant carried Mordaine into a cell further along the carriage, but the xenos lingered at a window. Fleetingly Uzochi considered slipping down behind it. With fortune and faith he might take the creature unawares then make his escape before its ally returned.

No, he decided, weighing up the alien with a shrewd hunter’s eye. *There*

will be no surprising that one.

He'd have just one chance at vengeance so he'd best make it count. This wasn't the moment. Besides, patience was a hunter's truest virtue and virtue would be his penance for failing Adeola Omazet. Uzochi let the tension slip from his muscles and waited.

... DAYS AFTER UNITY

Mordaine drifted towards wakefulness like a drowning man washed ashore, unsure whether the ocean had expelled him too late. Though the torment in his chest had subsided to a dull ache, his head was bloated with furtive, insistent voices. They whispered from a deep shadow stratum of memory, urging him to embrace an annihilating, irrefutable truth, like buzzing flies drawn to carrion dreams.

What's happening to me? Mordaine pleaded with them.

'Focus your thoughts, interrogator,' another, harsher whisper answered, silencing the shadow babble. 'Your prisoner awaits.'

Mordaine opened his eyes and saw the Calavera standing over him like a graven statue. *Has he been there all night?* The thought repelled him, but revulsion turned to confusion as his surroundings registered. *Why am I in a cell?*

'I have relocated you to the penal carriage for your own safety, interrogator,' the Calavera explained. 'Our enemies have infiltrated this transport.'

'The Iwujii...?' Mordaine asked through parched lips.

'Regrettably they have fallen,' the Space Marine said.

Fallen to invisible enemies on a speeding train in the middle of nowhere? Mordaine thought listlessly as he hauled himself from the bunk. *You don't even care if I believe you or not.*

'I will stand watch,' the Calavera said. 'You must attend to your duty, interrogator.'

Yes, I must, Mordaine agreed, *otherwise the voices in my head will begin to shout. And I don't want to hear what they have to say.*

As he shrugged on his jacket he noticed his laspistol was gone.

The young sentry was also gone and there was no replacement outside the prisoner's door. Mordaine didn't question it, but he knew he was alone with his enemies now.

'You grow weaker, Haniel Mordaine,' the alien said as he entered. 'Ask your questions before you expire.'

'And will you answer honestly, xenos?' *After all, what do you have to lose?*

The prisoner considered the question. 'I will.'

He's admitted the name, Mordaine thought, but that means nothing. I have to be certain it's him.

'Farsight,' he murmured, testing the name as Lieutenant Omazet might have done. 'What's in a name, xenos?'

'To a tau, everything,' the alien replied. 'Bloodline and sept, caste and rank and conquest.'

'Conquest? Surely that's solely a matter for the fire caste?'

'You misunderstand *conquest*, gue'la. A diplomat of the water caste might earn the name Softsword for the gentle blade of her flattery, an artisan of the earth caste—'

'I understand the principle,' Mordaine said curtly, 'but I'd wager you don't hold all conquests in equal esteem.'

'Those of the fire caste have primacy,' the xenos agreed, 'for without our strength all others would be dust in the wind.'

'And what conquest does *Farsight* honour?'

'It exemplifies the first and finest precept of the Shas'va.' The alien's black eyes shone with icy pride. 'I know my enemy as I know myself, indeed *better*, for my foe is but a shallow shadow of myself. I see as he sees, think as he thinks – and act upon his actions before he knows them himself.'

'Is that what you're doing now?'

'You would be a fool to think otherwise, interrogator.'

'Then tell me, xenos, what action will I take now?' *Because I'm damned if I have any idea myself...*

'You will know when you find me waiting for you there, gue'la.'

So it began.

Inevitably they talked of the Arkunasha War, where Farsight's shrewd harrowing of the orks – *be'gel* he called them – had earned him his epithet.

Mordaine expected more pride, but instead the xenos grew sombre as it recalled the campaign.

‘It was a long and bitter conflict,’ the alien said. ‘Many fire warriors were lost in the rifts of that blighted world, yet I cannot deny the beauty of it.’

‘Beauty?’ Mordaine asked. ‘In a world of rust and killer sandstorms?’

‘Not in the *world*, gue’la – in the war.’ The alien’s eyes dimmed with remembrance. ‘The be’gel live for war, embracing it without question or justification. They fight for the joy of fighting alone.’

‘And you admire them for this?’ Despite himself, Mordaine was intrigued.

‘No. They are beasts, but I respect their purity of purpose,’ the prisoner said. ‘After Arkunasha the water caste painted the be’gel as mindless primitives, diminishing them with words to salve the Empire’s anxieties, yet this was only a half-truth. I have waged war against the be’gel many times, but even in that first war I recognised they were neither foolish nor predictable. They adapt and prosper by instinct alone, becoming stronger with every loss they suffer. On Arkunasha we exterminated generations in a handful of years, yet they spawned faster than we could cull them, each wave adapting more swiftly to the battlefield than the last.’

‘The Imperium is eminently familiar with the orkoid threat—’ Mordaine began, but the xenos ignored him, caught up in the tide of its memories.

‘The veterans were the most dangerous,’ it continued. ‘Those who endured across many seasons borrowed Arkunasha’s strength, growing skin of hardened oxide that shielded them from the rust devils and razor storms that scoured the deserts. We called them *be’kalsu*, the iron beasts. They stalked us from the heart of the storms, hidden from the sharpest eye or scanner, turning the hazards of the land against us. Many were torn apart as they rode the tempest, but this only made the survivors more reckless, more lethal.’

The xenos paused, steepling its fingers in contemplation.

‘I remember watching from the sheltering ridge of Mak’lar when a monster cyclone spat out an army of spinning, flailing bodies, hurling them to the ground like the rocks the be’gel use to travel the stars. Most were killed instantly, but those that lived were still laughing when we finished them, broken yet unbroken. If the be’gel were capable of loving anything other than war, I believe it was Arkunasha.’

‘And you?’ Mordaine asked on impulse. ‘Did you also love Arkunasha?’

‘It was an honest war,’ the xenos answered obliquely, ‘until the end.’

‘Surely the end was a great victory?’

‘It was a *stolen* victory.’

‘I don’t understand. The Tau Empire defeated the orks decisively.’

‘I was not there, gue’la.’ For the first time Mordaine sensed the rage so tightly leashed within this glacial being. ‘Towards the end there were... difficulties. We walked on a knife edge, but I could *see* the shape of victory, so close I could almost grasp it.’ The xenos clasped its manacled hands, as if in supplication. ‘With reinforcements I knew I could crush the be’gel within another season so I requested a fresh hunter cadre.’ The prisoner’s knuckles cracked with tension. ‘The Empire sent an assassin.’

‘They attempted to kill you?’ Mordaine was stunned.

‘They attempted to kill my *authority*,’ the alien hissed. ‘They believed I had grown arrogant and wilful, straying from my prescribed place in the Greater Good. Aun’Shi himself came to Arkunasha to censure me, though I was too trusting to recognise this at the time. He commanded me to withdraw before I won the war.’

‘And then the Empire returned and won without you,’ Mordaine guessed, beginning to understand. ‘You were cheated?’

‘I was *punished!*’ The xenos lowered its hands, breathing deeply as it reasserted its iron discipline. ‘The aun will not tolerate the ascension of another caste. They feared I would become a beacon of dissent for the fire caste.’

‘Was that your intent?’

‘It was not.’ There was unmistakable pain in the alien’s voice now. ‘I believed in the aun. *Completely*. Every sacrifice I demanded of my cadre on Arkunasha, every drop of blood swallowed by the red sand and every death scream stolen by the red wind... It was all done for the Greater Good.’

This is the heart of his story, Mordaine sensed, suddenly eager. *I’ll end the speculation and the theories. The Imperium will know the truth of this renegade from his own lips...*

‘But surely the ethereals – the *aun* – they must have recognised your loyalty,’ Mordaine speculated, sifting through the few facts known to the Inquisition. ‘After the Damocles War they elevated you, made you first among the fireblades...’

‘They fashioned me into a masterful slave,’ the xenos hissed, ‘a pliable

figurehead to bind and blind the fire caste with fool's glory.'

'But you were the supreme commander of the tau military engine.'

'My authority extended no further than the will of the aun! I was a puppet saviour, my every word and gesture scrutinised and filtered by the water caste, my past rewritten and my future decided by committee!' The alien's expression contorted, becoming an abstraction of rage. 'But I was the fortunate one, gue'la. They caged my dying mentor's mind in a machine and cast my shadow sister and brother into stasis so their talents would never be lost to the Greater Good.' It lowered its head, as if drained – or shamed – by its fury. 'All of them obeyed without question, even Shaserra, who was the fiercest of us all.'

The Imperium has demanded such sacrifices of its servants for millennia, Mordaine reflected, yet this xenos butcher is outraged by the notion. Does that make him naïve or magnificent?

'Was that the turning point?' Mordaine pressed. 'The event that soured you to the Empire?'

'Among the tau loyalty is not so readily broken,' the alien said softly. 'There are no *turning points*, only fissures that multiply and swell until nothing remains of what was. I accepted my comrades' doom as I accepted my own, but in my heart I began to *question*.' The alien's eyes locked on Mordaine's own, unsettling in their intensity. 'And true questions invite annihilating, irrefutable truths.'

An annihilating, irrefutable truth...

Mordaine stared at the alien. Its words had echoed the whispering carrion choir that haunted his memories.

'Truth is a betrayer, is it not, Haniel Mordaine?' O'Shovah said.

Yes, Mordaine agreed, uncertain why.

'It is time,' the Calavera decreed.

Mordaine crawled from his bunk and spooned down the thin gruel his keeper had prepared, knowing it wouldn't begin to sate him.

'Our supplies were lost with the Guardsmen,' the Space Marine had explained. 'I can offer you nothing else.'

It was a lie, Mordaine knew. Another manipulation. The bastard wanted him half-starved and pliable, yet strong enough to continue the game.

But what are the rules? What's winning and what's losing here?

‘I believe it’s him,’ he said listlessly. ‘I believe it’s O’Shovah.’

‘With belief comes clarity and clarity forges purpose,’ the Calavera instructed.

Perhaps that’s so, Mordaine agreed uncertainly. The pandemonium of whispers haranguing him had certainly diminished. No... no, that wasn’t quite right... They hadn’t so much diminished as *contracted*, coalescing towards a single persistent voice that was at once utterly unknown, yet achingly familiar.

‘Your prisoner awaits, interrogator,’ the Calavera said.

Mordaine paced the confines of O’Shovah’s cell, trying to quell his hunger with motion. It was the fourth day of the interrogation and he was intimately familiar with the hateful space now. He didn’t have much time left. He had to raise the stakes.

‘Tell me about the Dawn Blade, O’Shovah,’ he said, almost casually. *The Imperium knows nothing of his notorious sword, yet it has come to symbolise our darkest fears about this renegade.*

‘The Dawn Blade is a potent weapon,’ O’Shovah said evenly.

‘But a sword is a strange weapon of choice for a tau, is it not?’

‘The be’gel taught me otherwise on Arkunasha.’ The alien’s lips curled sharply. The expression might have been a smile or something else entirely. ‘I killed their leader in single combat with a blade.’

‘So you embrace new tactics... new ideas...’ Mordaine suggested reasonably. ‘The gifts of the Ruinous Powers, perhaps?’

‘I am not a fool, gue’la.’

‘Chaos can make fools of the wisest men, O’Shovah.’

‘I am *tau*,’ the other said with dignity. ‘I have gazed into the abyss of Vash’aun’an, which you call the warp, and faced its poisonous spawn. It holds no sway over me.’

‘Are you quite certain of that, Mont’shasaar?’ Mordaine goaded. He nodded at the alien’s twisted expression, feeling a brief, blessed flicker of dominance. How splendid it was to be on the other side of a revelation for once.

‘You talk in ignorance,’ O’Shovah said, his nostril slit flaring with anger.

‘And perhaps you choose your confidantes without caution,’ Mordaine said. ‘*He* told me the name, you understand... the Calavera.’ He turned his

back as the alien searched his face, keeping the lie close to his chest. ‘Mont’shasaar... I know the name, but not the meaning.’

The prisoner made no reply.

I’ve hit a nerve as raw as the sword, Mordaine sensed. *Perhaps more so...* ‘Why are you so afraid of a name, xenos?’

‘I fear nothing,’ O’Shovah said frostily, ‘but I have told you already – to the tau a name is everything. To be *misnamed* is a grievous insult.’

‘Then tell me about Arthas Moloch instead,’ Mordaine offered. ‘That’s where you stole your warp-tainted blade, isn’t it?’

‘The blade was *chosen*,’ the xenos said, closing its eyes with finality. ‘And I will not talk of that world.’

They spoke again the next day and the day after that, until day and night coiled into a single tangle of barbed debate and dreams of debate.

I fence with O’Shovah in waking and sleep, Mordaine thought or dreamt, *so perhaps it’s all one and the same.*

Dimly he recalled the Calavera telling him he had only six days to find his answers, yet surely six days had passed long ago. The windows of the penal carriage were opaque with frost and he had seen nothing of the outside world since his trial began. Was the ghost engine even moving or had it stalled in limbo?

Are we damned to repeat this shadow play eternally? Mordaine mused, too weary for fear any more. Besides, the wise whisper seeping from his memories – *leeching his memories* – promised him this wasn’t so.

Look a little deeper into the darkness and you will see the light...

And so I step onto the game board once again and I see that the alien’s manacles are gone. He has grown indifferent to the ruse, as have I, for only our duel matters now, though why that should be I still don’t understand.

‘This Shas’va you keep alluding to...’ Mordaine faltered, rubbing at his raw eyes. ‘The Inquisition has no record of it. At least none that I’ve seen.’

‘The Shas’va is the Path of Fire,’ O’Shovah said. ‘It is my own path.’

‘You’ve invented your own philosophy?’ Mordaine asked, intrigued despite his exhaustion.

‘I have invented nothing. I seek truth and codify it as I find it.’ O’Shovah paused, judging his next words carefully. ‘My cadre is strong and my

enclave is secure in the hands of my fireblades, so I have chosen to enter vash'yatol, the long walk between the spheres.'

'Walk to where?'

'I *travel*, Haniel Mordaine,' the xenos said passionately, 'between worlds and stars and stranger realms that I cannot yet name, passing among the hopes and fears of a thousand cultures like a shadow of smoke, gathering fragments of truth and meaning.'

'And the Calavera is your guide?'

'One cannot be *guided* on the vash'yatol,' the xenos said stiffly. 'Iho'nen is a fellow seeker of truth.'

'So he told me,' Mordaine said. Then on impulse: '*Iho'nen*... Why do you call him that?'

'It is the name he chose,' the alien said, then anticipating Mordaine's next question answered: 'It is without meaning.'

'How can that be? You claimed meaning was everything in a tau name.'

'He is not tau. The name has no referent.'

'I'll take a literal translation then.' Mordaine gave a sickly grin. 'Humour me.'

'There is no levity in it,' O'Shovah said, puzzled by the colloquialism. '*Iho* is simply *one who eats*, but *nen*...' It closed its eyes, considering. '*Nen* is the wound that scars both the body and the mind. A betrayal of oneself or a fall from one's path.'

'*Eater of Sins*?' Mordaine ventured, convinced by the taste of it. 'Not a name I'd put my faith in.'

'It is empty wordplay.'

'You don't believe that,' Mordaine said fervently. 'The Calavera does *nothing* spuriously. We both know it.' Impelled by an ambiguous fellowship he leant forwards. 'How did you meet him?'

The alien cocked its head, regarding him thoughtfully. 'I cannot deny that I was troubled by Arthas Moloch, interrogator.' O'Shovah paused, as if expecting a zealous attack, but Mordaine was silent. Satisfied, the xenos continued. 'Though I looked upon the abyss as an outsider, unmoved by its allures, the knowledge of its existence alone cast a hungry shadow. Old truths leave deep scars when they are revealed as lies,' he extended his hands, palms upwards, 'and the path to new truths is riven with deeper lies. I sought silence and solitude to rediscover my clarity of purpose.'

Sometimes I can hear the Calavera speaking right through you, O'Shovah, Mordaine realised. 'And you found a fellow traveller,' he prompted.

'Iho'nen came to me in the wilderness,' the xenos answered, 'and showed me that the wilderness was an entire galaxy.'

We're all puppets to that ancient monster, Mordaine despaired, *but who's pulling his strings?*

'Tell me, O'Shovah, what truths has he promised you?'

'Those that unite hearts and minds and worlds,' the xenos declared with dignified passion. 'I will not go to ground while the galaxy burns, Haniel Mordaine.'

'So you *united* Vyshodd Hive,' Mordaine scorned, letting the fleeting fellowship slip away. 'How noble of you, great Farsight!'

'It was the tyranny of your Imperium that seeded this world's revolution and made it such fertile ground for the aun. I merely quickened the seed.'

'So you could watch a city die?'

'So I could *know* its fall,' O'Shovah corrected, 'and to vex the intrigues of the aun. Despite their posturing they fear open war with your Imperium. They believe they are not ready. I know they will *never* be ready.'

'And you are?' Mordaine mocked.

'I am not. That is why I walk the vash'yatol.'

'So you can figure out how to win your great war?'

O'Shovah's expression clouded with an emotion the human couldn't decipher. 'Mont'shasaar,' the xenos said softly, 'it means the Terror That Burns Dark.'

'I don't follow you.'

'I do not walk the vash'yatol to learn how to win, Haniel Mordaine,' O'Shovah said. 'I walk to decide what I will do after I have won.'

'Your prisoner awaits,' intoned the Calavera.

And again... And...

'Inquisitor,' someone whispered in the darkness.

Drifting on the shallowest currents of sleep, Mordaine tried to make sense of this strangeness. His existence had narrowed to two voices and a whisper, yet this intruder was neither of these.

'Inquisitor, you must rouse yourself!' the anomaly insisted.

Mordaine opened his eyes and saw a vague shape in the gloom.

‘Grandfather Death watches over you like a raptor,’ the stranger said. ‘I could not reach you before, but he converses with the xenos tonight.’

‘Uzochi...?’ Mordaine wheezed, dredging the name up from somewhere impossibly distant. ‘Armande... Uzochi.’

‘Rouse yourself, my brother,’ the man said urgently, glancing at the door. ‘We cannot linger here.’

‘I thought he killed you all.’ Mordaine clutched Uzochi’s arm, testing his reality. ‘I thought I was the last.’

‘The last but one,’ Uzochi confirmed, ‘and our betrayer has stalled this daemon engine in the Ghostlands to finish his work.’

‘I suspected as much.’ *Six days trailing into forever...*

‘Inquisitor, I have hungered to move against the heretics,’ Uzochi said fervently, ‘but I have nothing to touch Grandfather Death.’

‘Nothing...’ The presence of another soul in this nightmare, even a madman like Uzochi, energised Mordaine. It was proof that his enemy was not omniscient.

There must be a means of confounding him, he thought feverishly. *Escher would see it and Escher chose me to be his heir.* And with that realisation came sudden clarity.

‘Captain Uzochi,’ he said, ‘I think there’s a way...’

‘Your prisoner awaits.’

Mordaine avoided the Calavera’s gaze as he rose, taking care to keep Uzochi’s laspistol hidden under his jacket. The weapon would be useless against the Space Marine, but it was an anchor to reality and he clung to it.

I’ve been fighting on his terms, but today I’ll break the rules of the game.

‘How long have we been travelling?’ he asked on impulse.

‘We are almost at journey’s end, interrogator,’ the Calavera said.

Yes, I believe we are, Mordaine agreed.

Peering round the doorway of an adjoining cabin, Armande Uzochi watched Grandfather Death lead Mordaine towards the alien’s cell. Over the weeks Uzochi had mastered the constricted territory of the train, learning its secret paths and rhythms with deadly care, for his life had depended upon it. Sometimes the grey giant would come looking for him, passing through the

carriages one by one and scouring the shadows with his all-seeing eye, but each time Uzochi had slipped away and clung to the outer skin of the engine, shivering in the churning cold until the hunt was over.

But today I am the hunter, he thought.

The Space Marine reached for the cell door.

‘Wait,’ Mordaine said. ‘I must gather my thoughts first.’

The Calavera turned and the interrogator took an involuntary step back.

Not backwards, you fool! Mordaine chastised himself. *He needs to be looking the other way.* He walked past the giant, feigning deep contemplation.

‘Your prisoner awaits,’ the Calavera called to his back.

‘Then let him wait a little longer,’ Mordaine said lightly. Denying that dismal, eternal phrase made his heart soar. ‘After all, he’s only a prisoner.’

‘A prisoner of singular importance.’

‘Then why is he wasting time with me?’ Mordaine swung round with Uzochi’s laspistol in his hand. Doubtless Escher would have abhorred such melodrama, but Mordaine was drunk on defiance. As he expected, the Calavera was unperturbed.

You’re so sure of yourself, aren’t you? Mordaine thought with mounting anger. *How long have you been haunting the galaxy, spinning lies and pulling strings to bring down great men like Aion Escher?*

‘Your weapon is ineffectual,’ the Space Marine observed.

‘Is it?’ Mordaine asked, pressing the barrel against his own temple. ‘I’m neither blind nor stupid.’ *Though I’ve been both too many times before!* ‘You want me alive or I’d be long dead.’

Over the giant’s shoulder he saw Uzochi steal into the corridor.

Predator or prey? The exultant Iwujii mantra spun through Uzochi’s head, cycling over and over as he crept towards Grandfather Death. *Blade or blood?* The weapon in his hands was heavy, abundant with sacred fury. *Man or boy?*

The inquisitor’s advice had proven sound. Trawling through the nobles’ storage berths, Uzochi had found real treasures among the empty relics of wealth – a cache of antique armaments that had probably seen little use in their masters’ hands. Casting aside exquisite blades and pistols, he had

finally stumbled upon a bulky object wrapped in velvet. His breath had caught when he tore aside the cloth and saw the meltagun. The weapon had been inscribed with gold filigree, but such frippery wouldn't diminish its wrath. Even an elder nightmare like Grandfather Death would succumb to its purifying fire.

Predator or prey...

'You used me to get to the grand master,' Mordaine accused, keeping his eyes locked on the Calavera – holding *his* gaze for once. 'I know Kreeger was your creature, along with the assassin that killed Escher, but I was the lynchpin, wasn't I?'

A sigh bled from the bronze skull, low and liquid. To Mordaine it sounded perversely like satisfaction.

'The assassin was not mine,' the ancient whispered. 'The grand master was mine.'

Mordaine stared at him, trying to make sense of the answer. 'That's a lie,' he denied. *It has to be, otherwise there's nothing left.*

'We infiltrated the Damocles Conclave almost two decades ago,' the ancient continued. 'Its remit is of interest to us.'

'We...?' Mordaine was still reeling. 'No... No, the grand master was an honourable man. He was nobody's pawn.'

'Indeed not,' the Calavera agreed. 'Aion Escher was a significant and valued piece. A cardinal at the very least.'

'You expect me to believe...?' Mordaine faltered as he saw Uzochi halt a few paces behind the Calavera and level a massive-barrelled gun. 'Wait!' Mordaine cried urgently, hoping to stall them both while he rallied his thoughts.

The Shark hesitated, his gaunt face twitching as he glared at his ally.

By Sanguinius, the man has found a meltagun, Mordaine realised. It surpassed his best hopes. *He can send this devil's soul to the warp! But if he does I'll never know the truth...*

'Wait,' he repeated. 'If not you, then who? Who commanded Escher's murder?'

'The grand master acquired many enemies during his tenure,' the Calavera said. 'Perhaps agents of the Tau Empire or a rival faction within the Inquisition... Or perhaps someone opposed to his true loyalties.' His

implacable eye seemed to fix directly upon Mordaine's soul. 'His loss would be regrettable.'

'Would...? Escher is dead. I saw him die myself.'

'Yet a mind may outlive its vessel if the eventuality has been prepared for,' the Calavera said, 'and if a psychically resonant host has been nurtured to fill the void.'

'What host?' Mordaine demanded. 'There was no...'

No!

'Tell me, Haniel Mordaine, did you ever wonder why the grand master chose a dilettante like yourself as his interrogator?' the Calavera asked. 'A man of modest talents compromised by many vices.'

Because he believed in me! Mordaine wanted to shout, teetering between hope and terror. *Because he recognised the honour beneath my shame!*

'Did you ever question why he kept you close above all others?' that insidious whisper slithered on, cultivating doubts that had always been there, waiting to be unearthed. 'Why he shared so many mysteries and revelations with an acolyte who lacked the wit to comprehend them?'

Because he saw greatness where others saw only mediocrity!

'Why he still haunts your thoughts like the imminent shadow of your true self? An annihilating, irrefutable truth,' the Calavera said, driving the blade home.

All the tests and the rituals and that ceaseless, soul-wracking assessment...

Uzochi was going to shoot! Mordaine saw it in the madman's glassy, hate-ravaged eyes. He fired first, his pistol surging up as if of its own accord. The Calavera made no move as the bolt seared past him and punched through Uzochi's forehead. The Shark's mouth gaped open, spilling smoke as his gun crashed to the ground. He stared at Mordaine, but his eyes were empty. There was nothing behind them any more. That vacant condemnation transfixed Mordaine long after the corpse had toppled, for it signified what he'd always been himself: a vessel devoid of substance.

But no longer... The pistol slipped from his grasp and hope followed it.

LIGHT

All roads end in ruin, yet not all ruination is equal. The fall may reap the Void or it may see the Light.

– The Calavera

‘Will I die?’ Mordaine asked some time later. He hadn’t moved. Uzochi’s sightless eyes still held him in thrall.

‘You are not possessed,’ the Calavera answered. ‘Your mind has been imprinted with the template of another, but Aion Escher’s spirit is gone. You will experience changes as the new pattern asserts itself, but your *self* will remain.’

‘But will it still be me?’

‘I cannot answer that, Haniel Mordaine.’

‘I don’t even know if it was me that shot Uzochi,’ Mordaine said bleakly. ‘Why would I do such a thing?’

‘Because you want to live.’

Do I? Mordaine wondered. *Or is that the other?*

‘All of this...’ He gestured vaguely at everything and nothing. ‘My exile with Kreeger, the fall of Vyshodd and that infernal interrogation... You engineered it all to awaken the sleeper inside me?’

‘It was one of many synchronous, intertwined objectives,’ the Calavera said. ‘Each facilitated the other. As the revolution galvanised your quickening, so your presence sparked the revolution and both served to enlighten another significant piece. Farsight.’

‘No.’ Mordaine shook his head, appalled at the immensity of the ancient’s

conceit. 'I won't accept it. You couldn't possibly contrive such a thing. There are too many variables, too much scope for chance to play havoc.'

'Your prisoner awaits,' the Calavera declared. 'Is that not so?'

Hesitantly Mordaine opened the cell door. The room beyond was empty.

'The threads of fate will twist, fray and sometimes snap in the winds of Chaos,' the ancient warrior said. 'You are correct that nothing is certain, but much is *likely* for one who can see.'

'You knew...' Mordaine was aghast. 'You knew I would defy you today.'

'I knew nothing, but suspected much.'

And seeing changes what is seen, Mordaine thought, though he doubted the intuition was his own.

Later still, Mordaine asked about the xenos.

'He continues his journey,' the Calavera answered.

The interrogator didn't question how or where the alien had gone. The answer would prove a mundane revelation alongside the others. Instead he asked the question that really mattered: 'Was he truly O'Shovah?'

'Would you trust my answer?' the Calavera asked in turn.

'What would you gain by lying?'

'What would *you* gain by a truth you cannot recognise yourself?' the ancient countered.

Mordaine closed his eyes, seeking to sever himself from the cat-and-mouse ritual that bound him. He found refuge in pragmatism: 'What happens now?'

'The mechanisms of this transport are rudimentary,' the Calavera said with merciful directness. 'You will master them without difficulty.'

'To what purpose?' Mordaine asked, aloof and sightless.

'You will continue your journey to Yakov Hive, where the conclave's retribution force awaits your command, interrogator.'

'My command?' No emotion. No investment. 'I was under the impression the conclave had condemned me...' Mordaine stopped, quelling a flicker of anger. 'That was another lie, wasn't it? I was never implicated in the grand master's murder.'

'Indeed not. You were operating covertly to draw out his enemies.'

'You've been covering my tracks from the start,' Mordaine said levelly. 'There was no hunt.'

‘Only *your* hunt,’ the Calavera corrected. ‘A hunt which has exposed a xenos conspiracy that extends to the heart of the Tau Empire. It was fine work. I envisage you will be elevated to the rank of inquisitor within two years.’

‘And you’ll have your cardinal back on the board.’ Mordaine opened his eyes and confronted the warrior with detached hostility. ‘What if I change sides, Calavera?’

‘You will not. Once you recall the reasoning behind your allegiance you will make the same choice again.’

‘You expect me to believe your intentions are benevolent?’

‘I expect you to recognise that I offer the least of all probable evils.’ The giant inclined his head. Perhaps there was genuine respect there. Then he turned and stalked towards the carriage door.

‘Where are you going?’ Mordaine called after him, feeling a stab of perverse terror at the prospect of his tormentor’s departure.

Tormentor or mentor?

‘I continue the war, Haniel Mordaine.’ The Space Marine yanked the hatch open, awakening the storm outside. ‘Do not linger alone in the Ghostlands,’ he warned. ‘There is danger here.’

The giant stepped into the bleached fury outside, becoming a shadow and then nothing at all.

All roads lead to ruin, but at the end of a very few there may be Light.

It was another stray intuition from the restive sediments of intellect embedded in Mordaine’s mind, but the next impulse was entirely his own.

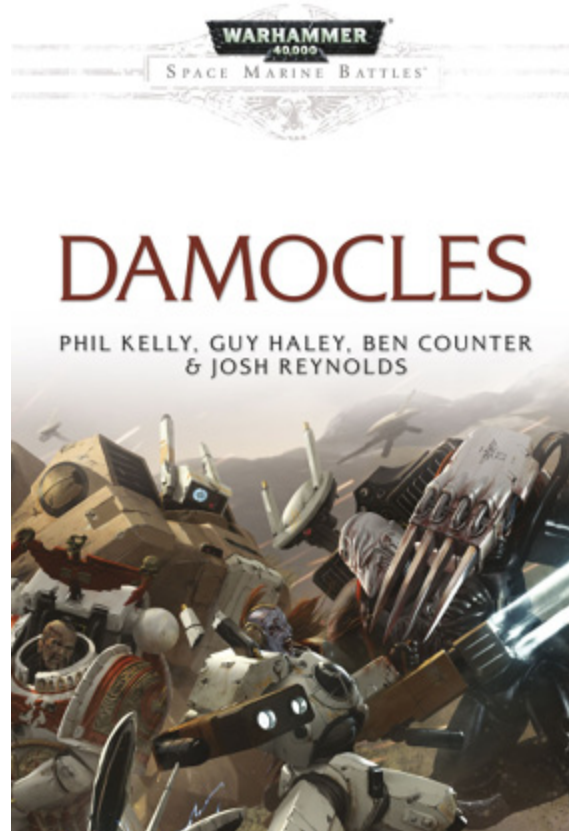
‘O’Shovah,’ he called into the wind and white darkness, ‘wherever you are, xenos, may the God-Emperor watch over you.’

Smiling bleakly at his heresy, Haniel Mordaine turned his back on the void and went in search of his own annihilating, irrefutable light.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Fehervari is the author of the novel *Fire Caste*, featuring the Astra Militarum and Tau Empire, and the Tau-themed Quick Reads ‘Out Caste’ and ‘A Sanctuary of Wyrms’, the latter of which appeared in the anthology *Deathwatch: Xenos Hunters*. He also wrote the Space Marines Quick Reads ‘Nightfall’, which was in the *Heroes of the Space Marines* anthology, and ‘The Crown of Thorns’. He lives and works in London.

An extract from 'Blood Oath' by Phil Kelly, taken from '[Damocles](#)'



A thousand decapitated heads. One for every battle-brother in the Chapter.

By the time they had left Tarotian IV, the Third Company's kill count had been closer to a million. He had killed over a hundred rebels himself. It was often the case. But like all White Scars, Kor'sarro knew the value of symbolism, and a round thousand was enough to make the point.

He wanted to be there to see them. An ending, of a sort, a cauterising of the wounds the Chapter had sustained on Tarotian IV.

Kor'sarro Khan stared out into the heat haze of Plain Zhou. From his vantage point within the highest eyrie in the fortress-monastery, it felt like he could see to the edges of the world. His topknot of greasy black hair flew erratically in the thermals, its thick strands mimicking the victory pennants waving high above.

Though the khan's narrowed eyes flicked from scrub to bunker to a herd of stallions galloping in the distance, his hands had their attention elsewhere. Calloused fingers worked mechanically but precisely at the balcony's edge, always in motion. The tip of the khan's curved dagger scratched like an awl, carving the Khorchin word for 'seeking' onto the side of a dormant bolt shell.

Forty-nine more of the deadly little cylinders shone in the evening sun, ranged along the balcony neat as dominoes. Those to the khan's left were finished, and those to his right were bare. Three full crates hid in the shadow of the buttress arch, the tiny golden curls of swarf around their bases rolled back and forth by a playful wind.

The thud-stride-thud of Sudabeh crossing the eyrie yurut's rugs in full battleplate made the khan's cheek twitch. He placed the last of the unfinished shells to one side.

‘Sunning yourself between hunts, my khan?’ said the newcomer.

‘Stormseer. Your... gifts.’ Kor’sarro looked at the sky for a second. ‘They are wasted here.’

‘Anyone with half a nostril could tell that you’ve been standing in the sun. If you ever run out of promethium, you could scrape your skin and use the run-off to feed Moondrakkan’s engine instead.’

‘Ha!’ shouted the khan, grinning and clenching his fist in triumph as if Sudabeh had helped him solve a difficult problem. He would not take the Stormseer’s bait today, he was in too good a mood for it.

Like all White Scars, Kor’sarro loved to feel the play of the elements first hand. For the last three hours he had been meditating in the boiling heat of Quan Zhou, clad in little more than loose white fatigues. His olive leather-like skin practically glowed, shining with oily sweat.

The khan raised a thick bare arm covered in zigzag scars, revealing a tuft of armpit hair that protruded from the sutured edge of his torsal glove. ‘Have a proper sniff then, naysmith.’

‘I respectfully decline your generous proposal,’ said Sudabeh, using the formal Chogorian dialect. Both men chuckled, two sets of white teeth sparkling in the sun. They had been Space Marines long enough to know that moments of humanity were to be treasured, no matter how simple. In fact the simpler they came, the better.

The khan pulled a cube of meat the size of his fist from one of the ammunition crates, picking off the largest bits of swarf before taking a massive bite. He turned to face his old friend, stale blood running down his long black moustache as he chewed loudly. Eyebrows knitted in mock concern, he motioned the Stormseer forward, his frown fading to a wet red grin.

Shaking his head in resignation, Sudabeh joined his captain on the balcony. He looked up at his distorted reflection in the silvered, eyeless skulls that were spitted on pikes along the balcony’s edge. Most of the trophies were human-sized, but the largest was the size of a Land Speeder.

To the south, a large gunmetal lander was lowering its bulk towards the perimeter of Third Bronze Yurut. The squat ship’s backblast sent waves of plains-dust outwards in concentric circles before its striped underskeleton finally touched down.

‘Cargo?’ asked Sudabeh, squinting through the dust.

‘Trophies,’ the khan replied around a mouthful of raw meat.

The bulk lander’s front jaw lowered with a distant hiss of hydraulics. One at first, then a dozen, then hundreds upon hundreds of human heads poured down the ramp towards the yurut wall. Though the first to emerge bounced and rolled as if freshly taken from the neck, those spilling over the rear part of the lander’s jaw slopped over in a state of advanced decomposition. Their smell was unpleasant on the wind, but the khan’s stomach growled in appreciation nonetheless.

‘Heretics,’ said the khan, savouring the word. ‘Tarotian IV.’

Sudabeh nodded thoughtfully. He watched the servitor work teams retrieve the disembodied heads by the armful and dump them onto the vector carriages parked along the bronze yurut’s walls. Inside each carriage, wizened eyethieves rode the cupolas upwards towards the lances that jutted up from the wall’s crest. As they went, they took it in turns to stoke the carriage’s braziers and burn each trophy’s sockets clean with a length of red-hot iron.

Out past the dropsite, steed-beasts broke from distant herds. They galloped in to fall upon those heads left unattended, gnawing strips of meat from faces and scalps before the low blast of the lander’s horns drove them away. Part of Kor’sarro longed to be back in the saddle at the head of his tribe, hurling his spear into the flank of some doe-eyed zellion or marauding felid with a taste for human flesh.

‘Spit it out, then,’ said Kor’sarro.

‘My khan?’

‘You didn’t hide your scars under battleplate just to come out here and bait me, Stormseer. My temper’s not that tight.’

‘Of course,’ said Sudabeh, his tone suddenly formal. ‘The astropathic choir has a message for you, my khan. The Third Company is needed on Agrellan immediately. We are to eradicate a tau infestation, as loudly and as memorably as possible.’

‘Out of the question,’ replied Kor’sarro, but there was doubt under his tone. ‘You told me yourself, the Tarot indicates that Blackheart’s renegades draw closer with every passing hour. We are needed here, to defend our home world.’

‘Our elders have decided that our duty lies elsewhere, my khan,’ said Sudabeh. ‘Many other companies are ready to repel the Red Corsairs.’

Chogoris will endure without us, I can feel it. Quan Zhou will stand.'

A wordless pause stretched out, both men staring upwards as if Huron Blackheart's fleet would glimmer into being at any moment.

'Tau,' sighed the khan. 'So we face their cursed weapon-magicks again.'

'Indeed,' said Sudabeh. 'I believe they seek to use the planet Agrellan as a staging post in order to seize the mineral-rich tithe worlds on the cusp of the Damocles Gulf.'

'Agrellan,' the khan continued, fingering his long moustache. 'Dovar System, yes?'

'Correct again.'

'Ha. Terrain?'

'Unremarkable, for the most part. Technically a hive world, but mostly scorched deserts and open plains.'

The khan's grisly smile reappeared, bits of meat bleeding between his teeth.

'Anything else?'

'It's haunted,' said Sudabeh, matter-of-factly. 'The place was subject to Exterminatus centuries ago. The Malleus alone know why.'

'No doubt they do. The stain of Chaos is not easily erased.'

'As you say. Reading between the lines of the data-slate, it seems the virus bombs left a highly toxic legacy. The planet still bears the marks of its former death, both physically and spiritually.'

'Ghosts, then,' said the khan, shrugging. 'Common enough.'

'Not these ones,' the Stormseer replied.

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