

NIGHTFALL

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Terrible things wait amongst the stars and only a terror greater still may ward against them. So the Lords have taught us and thus have They shaped and shielded us through the hungry night. But strength demands sacrifice and Sarastus must pay its dues. Know then, that every thirteenth year, upon the dawn of the Black Star, our Lords shall descend and terrible will be their wrath should our tribute prove unworthy.

— The Blind and the Bound. The Revelations of True Night

SARASTUS WAS JUST another forgotten world left to rot in the backwaters of the Imperium. The life of a hive-world was measured by its productivity and when the seams of its industry ran dry, the planet had quietly slipped off the Imperial charts. Soon after that the darkness had come.

True Night had touched Sarastus three times, each visitation miring the planet deeper in damnation. Four of the great hive cities now lay silent, their will to live smothered beneath decades of fear. Carceri, once the greatest, was now merely the last. Blighting the plains like a vast scab, it was a black ziggurat of heaped tiers, its spires clutching hopelessly at the sky. The manufactorums were still, the hab-warrens shadow-haunted mausoleums. Of its massed millions perhaps some hundred thousand remained, huddling in the lowest tiers, far from the touch of the stars. The prophets of True Night ruled them with an iron hand, but they were as fearful as their thralls, for in the balance of Sarastus the only ones who truly mattered were the sacrifices.

To the prophets who chose them, they were the blessed; to the thralls who surrendered and mourned them, they were just the ghouls. All were ragged, skeletal shadows with gaunt faces and hungry eyes. Most would kill on a whim and many wouldn't hesitate to make a meal of the dead. Cast into the uppermost tier of the hive they scavenged and murdered beneath an open sky, striving to prove themselves worthy of the darkness. When True Night fell none were older than thirteen.

JUDGEMENT BEGAN WITH a song, a drone so deep it stirred the entire hive. Throughout the day it rose in pitch and complexity, blossoming as the sun waned, charging the air with potential. As night drew near, the planet itself seemed to hold its breath, as if playing dead for the stars. But while the thralls trembled and the priests mumbled prayers, the ghouls thrilled to it. This was *their* night!

Tantalising and threatening by turns, the call drew them to the walled plaza nestling at the peak of the hive. Long ago the square had hosted the elite of Carceri, but now only these feral youths remained to pass through the crumbling majesty of the gates. They came in a trickle and then a tide, none sparing a glance for the imperious faces glowering down from the lintels; they knew nothing of the past, and cared even less. They were here for the Needle, because tonight the Needle sang.

Gazing up at the gently vibrating monolith that dominated the centre of the plaza, Zeth felt the old awe welling up again. No matter how many times he saw it, the Needle was a shocking, impossible thing. About twenty feet across, it was a vast splinter woven from twisted iron spars, every inch encrusted with black barbs. One end was embedded deep in the rockcrete of the plaza, the other ascended in angular coils to disappear amongst the clouds. It was the brand of the star gods on Sarastus and it was Zeth's only friend.

Most of the ghouls feared the monolith, but Zeth had always been drawn to it. During the first terrifying days of his ordeal he'd hidden in its shadow, finding strength in its agonised contours. Soon afterwards the visions had begun. They were just teasing flashes – *a rich darkness glittering midnight blue – a black-feathered king dying from within and without – the howl of a hunter high above...* There were never enough pieces to complete the picture, but Zeth knew the Needle had given him an *edge*. He'd glimpsed enough of the future to get ahead of the game.

Losing himself in the Needlesong, Zeth remembered the words of the scarred prophet, "Listen for the Needle. It's Their mark and your measure. Time will come when you'll hear it sing and then you'd best be ready, for the Lords will be close. Win their favour and you'll taste the stars, fail them and you'll be worse than dead..."

The weak would be culled and the strong would be taken. It was a simple promise that had become the vicious core of Zeth's soul. He was ready for

the test. He was *hungry* for it. Impatiently he watched the sun bleed into the horizon.

AS WAS THEIR way, the masters of Sarastus returned on the eve of Nightfall. Their vessel was a jagged, jaundiced predator, slicing between the stars like a serrated knife. Its hull, a blue so deep it was almost black, bore no ornamentation or marks of allegiance. It was a creature of shadows, much like its crew.

From the shrouded recesses of his command throne, Vassaago observed the world he had enslaved. Flickering holo-reports veiled his bleakly handsome features in a web of light and shadow, but his eyes were changeless black orbs. Impassively he assessed the prospects for this harvest. Another hive had died and the last was teetering on the brink of extinction.

‘Lord, I must prepare for the harrowing.’ The words were spoken in a discordant electrical hiss and Vassaago frowned, turning to the thing hovering beside him.

The sorcerer had entered his service a mere century ago and he still considered it an outsider. It claimed an Astartes heritage, but its demeanour had more in common with the extremes of the Mechanicum. The tattered swathes of its robes completely hid its physique and Vassaago had never seen so much as a hand emerge from that formless mass. Stranger still was the absence of anything recognisable as a face. Perhaps the coarse iron sheet it wore was just a mask, but if so it made no concessions to anything remotely human. *Such as eyes...* It was an uncanny creature to be sure, but Vassaago had entertained stranger allies over the millennia.

‘Do not dissemble with me, Yehzod. I know it is your precious Black Sun that draws you,’ Vassaago challenged. ‘Our interests are concordant. The anomaly will facilitate a prime yield.’

‘Indeed? I believe this world has grown stale. Previously we took only six newbloods...’

‘Six that proved exceptional,’ Yehzod insisted, but Vassaago’s attention had already returned to the holo-screens and after a moment the sorcerer took the opportunity to drift away. Watching the creature from the corner of his eye, Vassaago knew it was correct. The six *had* been exceptional. Perhaps there was still meat on this carcass after all...

STEALTHILY THE SHIP stalked the hive, following it into the planet's night side. As the sun was occluded the vessel's hull rippled with scintillating flashes of energy and its primal spirit stirred into troubled awareness. Neither wholly machine nor yet daemon, the ancient predator recognised this place and shuddered uneasily.

Crouched in the assault bay amongst his armoured brethren, Zhara'shan could sense the ship's disquiet, reading its mood in every nuance of the flight: the erratic pulse of the thrusters, the lethargy of the stabilisers, even the flicker of the lights... The old devil was skittish, as it always was when they hunted here. It was a wary beast and Zhara'shan sometimes grew tired of its reticence, but he had faith in it. Certainly he trusted it over his watchful, murderous brethren.

His eyes hidden beneath his helmet, he glanced warily at Haz'thur. Inevitably, the massive warrior had positioned himself just to Zhara'shan's right, not quite challenging his authority, but visibly staking a claim. The talonmaster regarded his unwelcome shadow with distaste. Haz'thur's armour was a fibrous mass of tumours and spines that pulsed with a life of its own, its monstrosity completed by the huge bone cleavers jutting from his wrists. Typically he disdained a helmet, revelling in the horror his serpentine features evoked in his prey. Although a youth beside Zhara'shan, the giant had embraced the ravages of the warp with zeal. Some amongst the talon even whispered of daemonic possession...

Zhara'shan grimaced. Like all his kind he had tasted the touch of the warp, but his own changes were refined, precise... *controlled*. The rampant perversions sported by Haz'thur could only end in madness and dissolution. If such abominations were the future then the Long War was already lost.

Abruptly the fierce jet streams of Sarastus caught them, buffeting and rattling the craft. They were entering the atmosphere and tradition demanded the vigil. Zhara'shan's bellow drew the eyes of the talon.

'Brothers, we ride the storm and the storm rides within our hearts!' He ignored the low, mocking chuckle from Haz'thur. 'We are masters of the tempest, never slaves. Seek the eye and chain the storm!' With a snarl Zhara'shan twisted his body into a stylised stance and became rigid. Swiftly the talon followed his lead, each warrior freezing into his own unique posture. Even Haz'thur obeyed, dropping into a bestial crouch.

Striving for perfect stillness they compensated for the turbulence with minute motions. Each knew that to slip or scuffle, even to make the slightest sound would invite the scorn of his brothers. Their discipline filled Zhara'shan with fierce pride. Balance was the lynchpin of their craft, enabling them to skim the warp without being consumed.

Like a menagerie of nightmare statues, the silent raptors waited for Nightfall.

NIGHTFALL. ZETH SHIVERED at the thought of it. Not just any night, but *True Night*. Soon all the pain and the horror was going to pay off...

'This is gonna be a bloodfest. We gotta evac this zone,' chief Vivo's reedy voice broke Zeth's reverie and he scowled.

'You planning to run out on us, Vivo?' Zeth's tone dripped poison and the gangly youth blanched. He was the weakest link in Zeth's pack, but all of them were wired. He sighed theatrically. 'Listen up, it's Nightfall! Needle's where we gotta be. Just stick with the plan and I'll get you all to the stars.'

Shaking his head, Zeth scanned the plaza. Things *were* pretty wild. There were hundreds clustered around the Needle now: razers and flesheaters and darkscars all standing shoulder to shoulder, their gang rivalries on hold for Nightfall. But Zeth could already taste the violence in the air. High above, the sky rumbled.

A VIOLENT JUDDER shook the craft and Haz'thur felt himself slipping. Only an act of brutal concentration saved him and he snarled inwardly. Covertly he eyed Zhara'shan, certain that the ancient had caught his error. Doubtless the talonmaster would seek to humiliate him after the harvest, but the fool would never get the chance. The mood of the warband was changing and relics like Zhara'shan were losing favour. Already the talon was drawn to Haz'thur and when the time came none would defy him. Bristling beneath Zhara'shan's contempt, Haz'thur had long hungered to lash out, but the sorcerer had urged patience.

Thinking of the mystic, Haz'thur recalled the truths that had been revealed to him. He had seen the future! A future of slaughter unfettered by any justification save its own raw beauty, where his body would shape itself

to the whims of the moment and the Long War would become the Eternal War! Seething with tension, Haz'thur endured the vigil.

LURKING AMONGST THE roiling clouds, the ship sensed the obscenity approaching. There was nothing its sensors could detect, nothing its tainted logic core could quantify, just an absolute certainty of *wrongness*. Bitterly it turned its attention to the stone-clad chamber that ached like a void in its guts.

Ensnconced within his sanctum, levitating within a circle of arcane wards, Yehzod quietly decided the fate of the talonmaster and dismissed the ship's hatred. Like Zhara'shan, the ship was another vexing element of this warband that needed addressing, but for now the impending anomaly consumed his attention. The Black Sun was returning to Sarastus and every detail had to be recorded, every nuance evaluated. Despite decades dedicated to the enigma, he had made little progress in fathoming its nature, but its *promise* captivated him. Satisfied that his wards were intact, the sorcerer reached into the void to bear witness to impossibility.

IT ARRIVED WITH a silent scream, the insane potential sound of space being defiled by *otherness*. Reality itself recoiled, waves of causality twisted into chaos by the intruder's presence. Fighting back at some fundamental level, the materium coagulated around the rift, struggling to quarantine the infected space. Reality held and the invader was contained.

Contained, but not quite isolated. Trapped in a bubble of order it manifested as a vast black star radiating poisonous light. True Night fell on Sarastus.

THE DARKNESS WAS sudden and complete, yet Zeth could see right across the plaza. Every pale face and glinting blade and grey charm, all raked the eyes with unnatural sharpness. It was all stark high-contrast detail, bleached of colour and every hint of warmth. *Ghost light...*

A voice whimpered, another answered, superstitious dread spreading through the crowd like wildfire. They wanted to flee, but the Needle's song held them. The monolith burned a bright white, like a negative image of its former self. It was alive with coruscating energy, arcs of black lightning

crackling between its thorns. Suddenly its song flared into an awful, soul-scraping whine.

Something began to fracture inside the ghouls. With a lost wail someone raced forward, arms outstretched to embrace the metal siren. Immediately the boy was caught up in the crackling eddies swirling around the monolith and drawn up into the maelstrom. Spiralling up through the forest of thorns he was shredded and charred, rendered down into a ragged ruin before coming to rest impaled on the spines high above.

A second youth leapt into the whirlwind, then a third, a fourth. Soon dozens of supplicants had joined the lethal dance, gyrating about the Needle and screaming joyfully as it mangled them, body and soul.

On Zeth and his pack the tug was gentle, almost playful. He knew the Needle wanted him to win through, wanted him to make it to the stars. He didn't really know why, and his instincts told him there would be a price to pay, but Zeth figured he'd deal with that later. After all, he was already in hell, so what did he have to lose?

ABANDONING THE CAGE of his flesh, the sorcerer cast his spirit into the plaza and hovered invisibly above the chaos. Observing the shrieking monolith, Yehzod was filled with pride, remembering the tiny daemonseed he had planted there so long ago. Nurtured by the noxious light of the Black Sun and feeding on the decay of the hive, it had germinated into a titan! Unfortunately, while it was a useful tool for the harvest, it had revealed little about the sun. He had deduced that the anomaly violated space at a metaphysical level, literally corroding the soul of a planet, but the *mechanism* completely eluded him.

He turned his attention to the test animals and assessed the carnage. Once again the pitiful creatures displayed remarkable fortitude. For every one that succumbed to the lure, three more resisted. Many had fallen to their knees, hands clasped over their ears to block out the song. Others stood rigid, eyes screwed shut, their lips mouthing prayers or obscenities, focusing on anything but the call. They confirmed his hypothesis that brutality bred resistance to the anomaly. Even so, too many were dying and Lord Vassaago would expect a live yield from this harvest. It would be imprudent to disappoint him quite yet...

Reluctantly Yehzod commanded the monolith to desist. As always, it resisted and he lashed it with his will, brutally driving it into submission. Its strength had grown exponentially since the last harvest. It was more hostile, more enigmatic, *more a creature of the Black Sun...*

GRADUALLY THE CACOPHONY died down and the Needle subsided into a dull, lifeless grey. The ghouls gawked at the slumbering monster, their faces bright with ghost light. At some point during the slaughter it had begun to rain and now the first rumbles of thunder rolled across the plaza. Still the monolith remained silent. Slowly, uncertainly, a murmur washed through the crowd, beginning as relief and daring for jubilation.

Zeth almost pitied them. They thought the test was over when it had only just begun. Ignoring the whoops and cheers he watched the seething sky.

A SONOROUS BELL reverberated through the assault bay and the hatch swung open. Instantly the chamber was transformed into a riot of wind and rain. It would have scattered ordinary men, but for the raptors it was bliss. Exploding from the rigour of the vigil they scuttled towards the hatch. Hunched beneath their baroque jump packs, clawed feet skittering along the decking, they moved in ragged, avian bursts, hungry for freedom.

Thrusting aside an insolent brother Zhara'shan claimed the spearhead. As talonmaster the first jump was his by right! Instinctively he rounded on Haz'thur, the flensing claws springing free from his gauntlets, but the abomination was hanging back in the shadows. Surprised, Zhara'shan growled low in his throat. His instincts had been honed through the pitiless millennia and he knew something was wrong here...

Abruptly he realised his brothers were watching him expectantly. *Did they think he feared the jump?* The thought seared him with horror, swiftly followed by an overpowering need to kill. Already he could see the bay transformed into a blood-drenched charnel house. Savagely fighting down the fury, he swung around and plunged into the tempest.

Haz'thur stalked forward, noting with satisfaction that the others were giving him precedence. Already they understood the new shape the talon was taking. Contemptuously he appraised the stunted, almost uniform extent of their mutations. Yes, a new shape was undeniably called for. *Several in fact!* With a guttural chuckle he leapt after the talonmaster.

FREEFALLING THROUGH THE maelstrom, Zhara'shan urged the wind to flay him of doubt. He thrust his arms wide, recklessly obstructing his streamlined form and inviting the full wrath of the wind. It answered with a vengeance, raking the gnarled flesh of his armour and making him howl with release. At one with the storm, he tasted the only peace he recognised.

As he fell, Haz'thur fixed his eyes on the dark speck of the talonmaster far below and grinned savagely. He had received the command during the vigil, the sorcerer's words a silken whisper in his mind: *the talonmaster was not to return from the harrowing.*

Spying the tip of the monolith jabbing through the clouds, Zhara'shan reluctantly ignited his jetpack to veer away. The thing was a spawn of the Black Sun and not to be trusted. *Much like the faceless bastard who had led them on this trail...* With a clarity born of the storm, Zhara'shan suddenly knew he would kill the sorcerer. Lord Vassaago's schemes be damned, once this harvest was done he would tear out the cancer devouring his warband. With a satisfied snarl the talonmaster flipped into a knifing dive, streaking towards the distant spires.

CAUTIOUSLY ZETH APPROACHED the silent monolith. The pack kept their distance, but Zeth told himself he had nothing to fear. Tentatively he reached out towards a long, dagger-like thorn, hesitating at the thought of the remnants sizzling in the branches above.

'You want me for something...' Something other than charred meat. 'And I want...' To break them all and unmake them all and bring them all down screaming and drowning in their own lies. The words erupted unbidden from somewhere dark and hungry deep within Zeth's soul. They were shockingly alien, yet achingly familiar. True words.

Stunned, Zeth staggered back, the thorn snapping free in his grasp. He stared at it in confusion. When had he actually touched the thing? He'd reached out, but then he'd hesitated...

The thought was sliced apart by an ululating cry. Rippling down from the clouds, it was a bestial sound that froze the ghouls as surely as the Needle's lure. Zeth recognised it in a heartbeat.

A tall darkscar, his face a patchwork of ritual wounds, seized the moment, 'Hear the Midnight Fathers and open your hearts to True Night!'

His voice was deep and rich, belying his youth. ‘We have endured the Sacrament of Divine Shredding and now the Lords are come amongst us!’

Zeth could see he had them. In a crazy way he was even right. That cry from above had sealed the deal. All his visions had been real. The Lords were here!

‘The things you’ve seen up here in the Spires, they’re nothing! Up there...’ The darkscar jabbed at the sky, ‘Up there it’s all pain and death! The only thing you’ve got to ask is this: am I a hunter... or am I just meat?’

And then something streaked out of the sky and the preacher was gone.

SOARING BACK INTO the clouds, his prey hooked delicately between the shoulder blades, Haz’thur whooped with delight. He lived for these moments of elegant slaughter, his perfect offerings to the chaos swirling at the heart of everything. But this time the true joy lay in cheating the talonmaster of the first kill!

Twisting into the wind he saw Zhara’shan watching him. They regarded each other from a hovering standstill as the others circled them. This affront had crossed the line between insolence and open challenge. A reckoning was inevitable. All that remained was a question of when. Haz’thur waited, ropes of drool dripping from his maw in anticipation of the clash. His claws flashing free, Zhara’shan ignited his thrusters... and dived towards the plaza.

Haz’thur laughed, knowing it wasn’t fear that had driven away his rival. Despite his long millennia in the darkness, the talonmaster was still driven by *duty*. In his heart, the ancient monster was still a Space Marine.

ZETH CAUGHT THE momentary blur of shadows as a second ghoul was snatched from the bewildered crowd. It happened in an eye-blink, the work of a master. The third was slower and Zeth spied something manlike and impossibly huge.

Night Lord. The name slipped into his mind, redolent with promise. He didn’t know if it was another gift from the Needle or a revelation from something deeper, but his heart sang to it. Recognising their game, recognising *them*, Zeth sank into a crouch beside the monolith and watched. The strikes weren’t random. They were only taking the real crazies: berserk

razers, fanatical darkscars, gibbering flesheaters... and anyone that ran for the gate. *Culling the weak.*

Glancing at his pack, Zeth winced. They were bunched together, just staring at the clouds! He needed to get them into cover, but he wasn't going to risk shouting for the sky-struck fools. This wasn't the time to get noticed, or distracted. Unwillingly, his eyes were drawn back to the Night Lords' game. *It was beautiful...*

AS HE HOOKED another kill onto his shoulder spikes, Zhara'shan considered Haz'thur's challenge. It had been inevitable, yet it had surprised him. Had his talon forgotten that the mission always came first? *Had they fallen so far?* The Night Lords had entered the Long War bound by an oath to tear down the lie that was the Imperium, but watching his rapacious, shrieking brethren he wondered what bound them now.

Troubled, Zhara'shan's preternatural gaze wandered back to the youth he had spied hiding beside the monolith. It was a scrawny thing, its face bone white against lank black hair, but its stillness had caught his eye. Twice already he had spared it, convinced it wasn't hiding out of cowardice. No, there was no fear there, yet it was free of the rage or faith that so often blinded the fearless... A brother whipped past him, hissing reproachfully. The talon was growing weary of the shadow play and their insolence incensed him. If Haz'thur took the lead now would they follow him? Surely their loyalty, no, their fear of the talonmaster hadn't waned so far? Bitterly he added Haz'thur's name to the personal harvest he would reap after this mission. Howling a command, he dropped from the cloud cover.

THE CROWD FELL silent as they spied the jagged black shapes emerging from the clouds. Spiralling above the plaza in swift arcs, their paths interweaving with arrogant precision, the flyers were inscribing something across the sky. Zeth watched it form and fade, over and again. It was just a phantom incarnated in the contrails of their jets, but the eightfold star was still potent. Zeth recoiled, torn between loathing and longing, struggling to ground himself. Time was running out and his pack was frozen in the killing ground...

Suddenly Zeth was running out into the open, shouting, 'Plan is on!' That got their attention, along with all the crazies and probably the Night Lords

too... ‘You want to live, go for the Needle!’

Unquestioning, Brox and Kert dashed towards him, but then Vivo sneered, ‘You’re crazy chief, Needle’s a trap! We’re going to the stars with the angels!’ He was a rat but he had easy answers and the pack was frayed enough to listen. The hackles on the back of Zeth’s neck were tingling in anticipation of rending claws. *He didn’t have time for this...*

On impulse Zeth glared into Vivo’s eyes, opening the shutters to the terrible dark country so recently revealed by the Needle. Vivo only caught a glimpse of the truth, but it shredded his mind in an instant. By the time he hit the ground he’d already died a thousand times.

FLOATING ABOVE THE plaza, Yehzod reeled as a spike of blacklight energy ricocheted through him. It was just an echo, but its lingering malice almost shattered his astral projection. Coldly subsuming confusion to curiosity, the sorcerer scanned the plaza. He had glimpsed a mind behind the attack, but the scene below was an impenetrable quagmire of psychic torment. Gauging the screaming, scrabbling animals, Yehzod felt the first stirrings of unease. Could there truly be such a mind amongst these wretches? *A mind that could focus the Black Star?*

ZETH STARED AT Vivo’s corpse, confusion vying with horror vying with... joy? How had he done that? And why did he care when it had felt so good? *And why could he taste blood?*

Hearing the sudden murmur in the crowd, Zeth realised they were all tasting it. *The blood was in the rain.* Looking up, he saw the black rivulets pouring down from high above. Urgently he pulled Brox and Kert down into the shadow of the Needle, already knowing it was too late for the others.

Without warning the downpour exploded into a storm from hell. Glistening viscera, ragged limbs and unrecognisable raw fragments hailed down on the frantic mob as the hunters butchered their catch. With a chorus of hoots and harsh chirps they swept back and forth, showering the mob with gore as they spiralled ever lower. The ghouls were in turmoil, desperately ducking and diving to avoid the flyers, many slipping in the blood and tripping their neighbours.

Zeth saw a Night Lord glide low over the crowd, his clawed feet just skimming their heads. His helmet was carved into the visage of a snarling wolf, its lupine ears flaring into stylised bat wings, the eyes lambent with cold fire. As he swept over them he whispered, his harsh rasp somehow cutting through the chaos, *'We are the darkness between the stars... Die for us... We are the promise of murder in your hearts... Kill for us... We are the truth behind the lies... Kill or die...'*

It was like a trigger to some deep-rooted switch in their souls. First the razers went berserk, lashing out with crude clubs and cleavers, then the darkscars fell on unbelievers with their bone knives and the sane creeds fought back, shados and nailz and statiks all turning on each other in the name of True Night. And all the while the Night Lords circled above, taunting and tormenting, but only killing those who fled.

Watching his pack die, Zeth felt nothing.

ARMS OUTSTRETCHED, HAZ'THUR streaked between a pair of fleeing ghouls, neatly bisecting both at the waist, turning two into four. He spun, wondering how far their legs would run unburdened, but they just flopped over. This was poor sport and his blood sang to the tune of the rabid mob. Hearing the talonmaster finish his vainglorious speech Haz'thur knew it was time. Slavering with anticipation he jetted back into the clouds.

Watching his rival soar skyward, Zhara'shan felt his instincts prickle uneasily, but the newbloods demanded his attention. They fought with impressive ferocity but few promised any true depth to their darkness. Once again his thoughts turned to that strange, quiet ghoul. There had been something of the raptor vigil in its stillness and he wondered if it still lived. Intrigued, he flew towards the monolith.

ZETH SAW THE malevolent eight-pointed star reappear in the sky, blazing with fulfilment, gluttoned on the blood sacrifice of the ghouls. Recognising the moment, he chewed his lip, suddenly uncertain.

'We going to be okay, chief?' Brox asked, his eyes wide. The big ghoul had never been the sharpest player in the pack, but he'd always been loyal.

'Just stick with the plan.' Zeth said. 'Go. Both of you.' Nervously Brox and Kert ducked into the recesses of the Needle... and disappeared. Zeth

knew this was the turning point. He could just slip away now and the Night Lords would never know. Come dawn he'd be King of the Spires.

But then the moment passed. It would never have been enough anyway. Zeth looked up and the wolf-helmed Nightlord was there.

THE GHOUL WAS looking straight at him. As Zhara'shan had soared towards the Needle its eyes had met his unerringly. *As if it had been waiting for him.* The strangeness had brought him to a standstill and now they took each other's measure, the mayhem around them forgotten. Warily, Zhara'shan wondered what its connection was with the monolith. *Was it another spawn of the Black Sun?* Suddenly the ghoul's eyes flicked upwards, its warning coming a heartbeat before Zhara'shan heard the thrusters. He spun with a snarl and Haz'thur's clawed feet struck him squarely in the chest. The abomination's blistering dive tore the talonmaster from the sky, pounding him into the plaza with savage force. Three ghouls burst into bloody ruins beneath him and the rockcrete surface cracked wide open. Instinctively Zhara'shan rolled aside as Haz'thur's talons ripped towards him and the abomination crashed down onto the rockcrete.

His balance perfect, Haz'thur landed on his feet and spun after his rival, swinging down with those monstrous bone cleavers. Unable to recover, Zhara'shan could only roll and roll again, the shattered bones of his composite ribs tearing his chest like broken glass. A fraction too slow, he took a glancing blow to one of his shoulder pauldrons. The armour held, but it was enough to break the rhythm of his escape and Haz'thur was on him in an instant, a foot stamping down onto his chest and pinning him to the ground.

'Your Long War is a lie...' The abomination's voice was hoarse with pleasure, his drool spattering over the talon-master's armour. 'And you were always blind to True Night!'

As the bone cleavers slashed down Zhara'shan ignited his jump pack. The explosive force tore him away from his rival, blasting him through the legs of the screaming throng. He gritted his teeth against the agony as he flashed along the rockcrete in a shower of sparks, the abused jump pack bucking and roaring under him like a living thing. Suddenly the exhaust jets spewed fire, scorching his armoured legs and leaving a wake of flame in his passing. Desperately he tried to cut the power, but the tortured machine-

spirit was beyond tethering. Even as he fumbled for the locking clamps he knew it was too late.

Zhara'shan's bold manoeuvre had sent Haz'thur crashing to the ground, his legs swept from under him. As he leapt to his feet a crunching boom echoed across the plaza, followed a moment later by the vivid bloom of flames against the sky. His eyes glittering, Haz'thur threw back his head and bellowed his victory to the stars.

His joy was lanced by a stabbing agony in his thigh and he whirled around, but his attacker was already springing away, its black dagger glistening with Haz'thur's blood. Unbelievably it was just another ghoul, thinner than most and sickly pale. Glancing back, it flashed him a cold grin before ducking into the seething crowd.

With a bestial roar Haz'thur launched himself after his attacker, tearing into the throng like a primal tide of destruction, slicing and biting and crushing his way through the ghouls. Some tried to flee, others turned on him with their pitiful weapons, but all were reduced to shreds of meat and bone in his wake. And then he was through and his quarry was waiting for him.

It was less than twenty paces away, lurking beside the monolith, its eyes cold and calculating. Briefly a fading, rational part of Haz'thur's mind surged up through the rage, cautious and questioning. What was this creature? How could its feeble blade even scratch his armour, let alone pierce it? He was a god beside this worm, so how had it drawn blood?

As if sensing Haz'thur's doubt, the ghoul pointed at him, then slowly, deliberately ran a finger across its throat. And then it ducked into the shadow of the monolith and vanished. Gone in an eye blink.

Not a ghoul, but a ghost...

Hissing, Haz'thur leapt to the spot the creature had occupied only moments before, furiously sniffing for a scent, searching the dark whorls of the Needle for a huddled shape. *What trickery was this?*

And then he saw them, those cold grey eyes, peering at him through the iron web. *Inside the Needle!* Lightning fast, Haz'thur punched through the crevice, but the ghost was already gone, ducking away into the darkness. A gleam of admiration flashed through the rage as Haz'thur scanned the weave of the monolith. Yes, there were ragged gaps aplenty for a worm to crawl through, but what kind of fool would hide inside that killing

machine? The answer surged back on the crest of his rage: *the kind that would taunt a raptor!*

Suddenly he was savaging the Needle. The iron was hard but brittle and it buckled rapidly beneath his bone cleavers.

THE CORE OF the Needle was a hollow vertical shaft. Zeth guessed it ran the whole length of the hive and maybe even beyond, but he'd only ever gone a few tiers deep. Scrambling down its gnarled guts, he heard the hunter ripping its way inside. Iron fragments tumbled past, rapidly lost in the abyss below and he shuddered, wondering whether a fall into that darkness would ever end. *But he wasn't going to fall.*

He'd made this climb countless times over the years, finding gaps in the weave that led to other tiers of the hive. Of course they were all abandoned, but there'd been plenty to scavenge and he'd prepared well for this night.

With a final screech of tortured metal the Night Lord broke through and Zeth abandoned caution, speeding down the shaft. He glimpsed the others waiting below, crouched in a chamber on the other side of the web. He was almost there...

Suddenly something vast and dark plummeted past, the ferocity of its wake almost dislodging him. It struck the side of the shaft below with a violent clang and ricocheted away into the darkness. Glancing down, he saw a flare of light bloom in the depths. A heartbeat later the shaft reverberated with the roar of an engine and the light came streaking up.

LEAPING RECKLESSLY INTO the Needle, Haz'thur had dropped like a stone into the abyss beyond. *That warp-cursed ghost had tricked him!* Rocketing furiously back up the shaft he swiped at his quarry, missing by a hair's breadth as it slipped through another crawl hole. Furious, he jetted backwards and coiled into a huddled ball of spikes. Thrusters burning, he launched himself at the iron barrier.

THE CRASH OF the raptor's entry shook the rockcrete corridor, but the sprinting ghouls didn't look back. The shimmering glow-globes weren't the only things they'd planted along this stretch of tunnels. Over the years they'd turned the place into a death trap and one misstep would kill them as surely as their hunter's claws.

Leaping an almost invisible wire Zeth felt the panic rising in him. He'd planned for a better lead, but the raptor's sheer physical power had surprised him. Suddenly all the years of scheming and scavenging seemed pitiful, but he held onto the Needle's promise. *He would taste the stars...*

HAZ'THUR'S WILD CANNONBALL dive ripped through the web and carried him careening into the wall only thirty paces beyond. The impact pulverized the rockcrete and shook the whole chamber. Bellowing, he exploded from the ragged crater in a shower of debris, crashing down into a feral crouch. His head flicked about in rapid, avian jerks as he assessed the territory. Low ceiling, drab rockcrete walls threaded with pipes, passages branching off on all sides... Not a true tier then, just a service layer for the clockwork of the hive. It would be a maze of tight tunnels and cluttered chambers that would favour his prey and fight his bulk. *Clever little ghost.*

But he had their scent. There were three and they were close. Unable to jump, let alone fly in the confined warren, he skittered towards the exit... and the ground collapsed beneath his feet. Inhuman reflexes kicking in, he snagged the lip of the pit and leapt out, impelled by a jab of thrust. Peering back down he snarled at the nest of spikes jutting from the gloom. *A trap?* His ceramite armour would have crushed the pitiful spines like matchsticks, but the sheer arrogance of it affronted him. *Did the prey presume to hunt him?*

The traps came thick and fast after that, Haz'thur's furious pursuit triggering a new attack at every twist and turn of the tunnels. Mostly they were variants on the same themes; crude pitfalls, collapsing ceilings and tripwires that released spring-loaded spikes or swinging girders. Occasionally there was something unique, a shower of acid or a rigged laspistol, but all were the clumsy toys of a child playing at war. At first Haz'thur's instincts had compelled him to avoid the traps, but soon he was tripping them with scornful abandon, laughing as spikes shattered against his armour and dodging whirling debris with bravado.

By the time the prey came in sight his mood had grown almost sanguine and he was tempted to prolong the hunt. At thirty paces he teased them with a keening wail, enticing one of the three to glance back. Moments later the fool had impaled itself on a bed of nails. As he whipped past, Haz'thur beheaded the screaming wretch with a flick of the wrist. Predictably it

hadn't been the ghost. No, the ghost was sly, but even so its life hung by a thread only twenty paces long...

DRENCHED IN SWEAT, his heart hammering wildly, Zeth knew they couldn't last much longer. Even Kert's slip-up hadn't slowed the hunter. When the fool had got himself spiked the dark thing inside Zeth had cheered, desperate for anything to delay those claws, but it hadn't made a damned bit of difference. Even so, that shadow was now eyeing Brox hungrily, looking for an angle to make him count...

The placid ghoul's breathing was steady beside Zeth's ragged gasps. Dim but strong, that was Brox. And so very loyal. The idiot could have pulled ahead long ago, but there he was, sticking shoulder to shoulder with Zeth despite the devil breathing down their backs. *Sacrifice the fool! Freeze him!*

The thoughts lashed across Zeth's mind with a brutal logic that shocked him. The worst thing was he knew he could do it. All he had to do was reach out with his mind and *twist*. It would be so easy and it made such sense! But Brox was the last of his pack... They swept round a corner and Zeth saw their destination looming just ahead. This was the endgame! They were so close, but so was the hunter...

Do it now!

And then they were bursting into the old generatorium storeroom, weaving through the heaped metal barrels, straining for the open hatchway on the far side. But then Zeth's heart sank in despair. They'd never get the blast door closed in time! From outside the storeroom they'd have to turn and *pull* it shut. It would take precious seconds they'd never have... but if someone just *pushed* it from the inside...

Zeth glanced at Brox and the cold thing inside him reared up.

Do it!

EXPLODING INTO THE storeroom Haz'thur saw the bigger animal suddenly turn on the ghost, thrusting it into the tunnel beyond. Excited by their conflict he stormed forward, the reek of promethium assaulting his finely tuned sense of smell. *Promethium?* He felt the tripwire break.

STAGGERING FROM THE storeroom Zeth glanced back and caught a glimpse of Brox's face. The big ghoul's expression was tranquil, empty.

And then the hatch slammed shut and the concussion followed an instant later. It buckled the solid metal hatch and tore the ground from under Zeth's feet. Huddled in a ragged heap, he lay in the darkness long after the tremor had passed. Two thoughts hounded each other through his mind, vying for his soul: *I didn't... I did...*

HAZ'THUR AWOKE TO a world of raw pain. Every breath tore through his chest like a gust of broken glass and his nostrils twitched to the stench of his own charred flesh. His remaining eye had fixed on the maze of fissures in the ceiling above. There was significance to be found in that twisting conjunction of empty spaces. Besides, he couldn't move his neck, or anything else for that matter. Only the claws of his left foot still offered the ghost of a twitch. *The ghost...* The ghost had killed him. The same ghost that was looking down at him now with those cold, grey eyes. As it knelt over him something dark slithered behind the grey and suddenly he was gazing up into twin black suns. For the briefest instant he knew fear, and then the black thorn came down.

WHEN ZETH EMERGED from the Needle the sky was streaked with red and the plaza swam with it. The bodies were everywhere, razers and flesheaters and darkscars all alike in the unravelled simplicity of death. The survivors were gathered in a bewildered huddle, almost as ragged and bloody as the dead, their faces slack with the shock of just being alive.

The raptors were there too, but now they were still and silent. It was as if the sun's rays had petrified them where they stood, transforming them into dark statues. Their wolf-helmed leader crouched amongst them. His armour was a scorched wreck and his hunched posture spoke of barely contained agony, but he was alive. That was good, Zeth thought. He would need allies amongst them.

His eyes found the ones who would decide his fate. A faceless creature was skimming silently over the dead, the seething swathe of its robes never quite touching the ground. It was like a spectral carrion bird, seeking some arcane logic in the weave of the carnage. An armoured giant stalked silently by its side, the tapers of his sable cloak wet with the blood of trampled corpses. *Sorcerer and lord.* Once again the words just slipped into Zeth's mind, along with an understanding that these ancient nightmares were not to be approached boldly. They would come to him in their own time. So

Zeth waited, eyes fixed on the gore-spattered ground. And finally they came.

‘Have we bled this world so dry?’ The lord’s voice was a desiccated whisper. ‘So dry... that such a stunted creature can endure the harrowing?’

The sorcerer made no reply, but Zeth suddenly felt the barbed tendrils of its mind reaching out...

Digging into his soul... Tearing through the walls like paper... Seeing through to his edge...

Desperately Zeth brandished his sacrifice, ‘A kill... a kill for True Night!’ Hanging from his hand was the bloody rag of Haz’thur’s flayed face.

With a smooth gesture the lord silenced the psychic assault and leant forward. His handsome, bloodless features might have been carved from white marble, but they were pooled with shadows and his eyes were a lustreless black.

‘You claim to have killed a raptor?’ No anger in that voice, just an ancient bitterness that was somehow worse. To answer with anything less than excellence would be fatal.

‘He was... weak, lord.’ Zeth breathed, waiting for death. The moments stretched into a dark eternity beneath that withering gaze. And then the ancient nodded.

‘Yes, he was. And weakness is the only sin this galaxy truly despises.’ The lord turned to the sorcerer. ‘We will take this one.’ ‘It is dangerous.’ The words were a hissing, electrical buzz.

‘I would hope so, sorcerer.’ There was the faintest trace of amusement in that bleak voice.

‘Lord Vassaago, its essence has been tainted by... an element I am unable to quantify.’

Zeth fought down a wave of hatred for the faceless bastard. It had tasted the touch of the Needle on him and it was afraid, afraid of the power he would become...

‘We are all tainted, Yehzod.’ Zeth almost flinched at the acid in Vassaago’s voice. ‘It is the reason we must endure.’ ‘Lord, it is unpredictable.’ Yehzod urged. ‘We shall see...’ Vassaago answered, turning his back on them.

Yes, you will, the Needle promised.