quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

HE HAD BEEN circling for ten months. Ten months, and eighteen identities, most of them so authentic they had fooled Unified Biometric Verification. He'd faked out three blind trails to throw them off his scent, one into the Slovakian fiefs, one to Kaspia and the Nord Reaches, and the other a meandering route down through the Tirol to the Dolomite Shrines overlooking the Pit of Venezia. He'd overwintered in Boocuresd Hive, and crossed the Black Sea Basin by cargo spinner during the first week of ice-ebb. At Bilhorod, he had turned back on himself to lose an unwanted tail. He had spent three weeks hiding in a disused manufactory in Mesopotamia, preparing his next move.

Ten months; a little long for a blood game, but then he was playing it out carefully, synchronising his movements with global patterns, following trade routes, inter-provincial traffic and seasonal labour migrations. He was one hundred per cent certain they didn't have an orbital grid fix for him, and he was fairly confident they didn't even have an approximate. There'd been no one on his heels since Bilhorod.

He trekked up-country through Baluchistan, mostly on foot, sometimes stealing a lift on transports, and crossed the border into the Imperial Territory three hundred and three days after he had set out.

THE TOP OF the world had changed in ten months. An entire peak had disappeared from the blinding skyline, a gap at odds with his memories, nagging like a missing tooth. The high-altitude air smelled of pitch, molten alloys and shaved stone. Primarch Dorn's warrior-engineers were crafting their poliorcetics, armouring the highest and most robust steeples of the Earth.

The smell of pitch, alloy and stone was the smell of approaching war. Its fragmented notes hung on the bright air of the old Himalazia.

THE SCENERY WAS so white it scorched his eyes, and he was glad of his glare-goggles. A few degrees below zero, the air was like glass, and the sun like a fusion torch in the blue sky. Perfect snows coated the peaks and the ascents, painfully white, achingly empty.

He had considered the south his best option, Kath Mandau and the towering central Precinct, but as he approached he realised how much things had changed. Security,

which had never been less than rigorous, had cinched up as tight as a penitent's cilice. The coming war had trebled the guards on the gates, quadrupled the gun-nests and automated weapon blisters, and multiplied the biometric sensors a hundredfold.

Vast workcrews of migrant labourers, serving the orders of the Masonic Guilds, had gathered around the Palace: their camps, their workings, their very bodies staining the high snows green and black and red like algae growth.

Security is tighter, but there are millions more faces to watch.

He observed the labour hosts for six days, eschewing his plans for the south and turning north instead, following the high pastures and walking trails over onto the plateau, keeping the toiling hosts in view. Constant streams flowed down the snowy valleys and passes from Kunlun: columns of fresh workers, and convoys of cargo and building materials from the Xizang mines. The columns looked like rivers of slow, dark meltwater, or racing black glaciers. Where the influx streams met the worker armies, temporary cities sprouted in the shadows of the immense walls, habitent towns and canvas metropoli, accommodating the migrants, corralling their pack animals and servitors, seeing to their needs of food and water and medicine. The unloaded materials: timber, pig alloy, mule steel, ores and ballast, stacked up around the camp cities like slag heaps. Hoist cranes and magnificent derricks lifted pallets of materials up over the walls. Horns snorted and echoed around the high valleys.

Sometimes, he just sat and looked at the Palace as if it was the most wonderful thing in creation. It probably wasn't. There were undoubtedly feats of ancient, inhuman architecture on forgotten, scattered worlds that dwarfed it, or eclipsed it in stupendous scale or awe-inspiring scope. The architecture was not the point. It was the idea of the Palace that made it the most wonderful thing. It was the inner notion, the concept that it made flesh.

The Palace was vast, beautiful, the greatest mountain range on Terra refashioned into a residence and a capital, and now, belatedly, a fortress.

THE MISSING HIMALAZIAN peak had been levelled for building materials. The recognition of that feat made him smile. These days, the schemes of man were never modest.

ADOPTING RAGS AND dirty leg armour, he spent three days labouring with the genestock ogres from Nei Monggol. Nicknamed the migou, they slogged up and down the passes, carrying sheets of zurlite and huge panniers of nephrite and Egyptian pebble. They dug embankments and earthworks with massive shovels made from the blade-bones of giant grox, and formed hammer gangs to rhythmically sink the iron stakes that would support the concertinaed spools of flay-wire.

At night, in the work camps, the massive gene-stock stoked their over-muscled bodies with qash, a resin derived from the venom of a Gobi Waste nematode. The substance made their veins bulge, and their eyes roll white. It made them speak in tongues.

He watched the effects, and made estimates of dosage and systemic duration.

The genestock were prepared to work with him, but they treated him with general suspicion. He tried to be just another Caucasian broadback, keen to earn a stipend and a bonus from the Masonic Guilds. His papers were in order. When he tried to purchase a little qash, however, they turned sour, fearing him to be a genewhip sent into the camps to keep the workforce clean.

They tried to kill him.

Under the pretence of a quiet sale, three genestock migou drew him apart from the main camp, and led him to a rock pasture where fire stone and cacho-long spoil had been heaped up by porter gangs. They unwrapped a cloth roll with slices of brown resin in it to show him. Then one drew a punch-dagger and tried to insert it into his liver.

He sighed – a complication.

He took hold of the migou's wrist, folded the arm around and broke it against itself with his elbow. The joint went the wrong way, and the arm went so slack, he simply peeled the punch-dagger out of the dead fingers. The genestock uttered no expression of pain. He simply blinked in surprise.

All three of them were titanic creatures, corded and slabby with unnatural, hard-cut muscle definition. It had not occurred to any of them that the Caucasian, though extremely large and well made, would offer them a moment's problem.

One threw a punch, a blow driven with huge force but desultory effort, as if he was aggrieved that they should be put to such trouble.

The punch was designed to finish matters, to put the Caucasian down, his jaw pulped, his head slack on the column of his spine.

The blow did not connect with any part of the Caucasian. Instead, it encountered the punch-dagger, which had suddenly been angled to face it. The impact shaved flesh and muscle away from bone. This produced a pain response. The genestock howled, and tried to gather in his shredded hand and forearm. The Caucasian shut him up by jabbing the punch-dagger into his heavy forehead. It cracked in through the bone like the tip of a rock-breaker's pick.

The genestock toppled backwards, wearing the grip of the punch-dagger above his eyes like some curious tiara.

The third migou grabbed him from behind in an ursine hug. The genestock with the broken arm tried to claw at his face. It was all tiresome now. He broke free of the embrace with a shrug of his shoulders, turned and drove his right hand into the genestock's chest.

The sternum split. When the Caucasian wrenched his hand out again, it looked as if it was wearing a red glove. Most of the migou's heart was clenched in his steaming fist.

The genestock with the broken arm, now the only one of the trio left alive, murmured in fear and started to run away across the rock pasture.

He bore the wounded genestock no especial malice, but he couldn't let him go. With bloody fingers, he bent down, selected a small piece of fire stone, weighed it in his hand and launched it with a snap of his wrist.

It made a pokkl noise as it penetrated the back of the fleeing ogre's head like a bullet. He fell heavily, and his hefty corpse slithered down the litter of a spoil heap on its face.

He disposed of the three bodies in a fathomless gorge, washed his hands with snow and took the roll of qash resin.

THE CONFLUENCE OF workers gathered around the skirts of the Palace had brought, as any great body of humanity always did, lice and vermin and scavengers with it. Rad-wolves had followed the workers down off the plateau, and gathered at night, red eyes in the dark catching the flicker of the campfire rings. Thousands of war hounds patrolled the camp perimeters at night, or lingered on the escarpments before the Palace. The night was regularly interrupted by sudden gales of howling and barking, the growl and shiver of animals mauling one another as the faithful hounds drove off wolves that had become too inquisitive.

In the darkness, it was hard to tell the difference between hounds and wolves.

HE HAD RECEIVED regular physiological testing his entire life, and he had memorised all the results in forensic detail so as to best judge his limitations.

He cut the qash resin into sample measures, weighing each on a set of fine scales that he'd borrowed from a gem cutter.

The reinforcement of the Annapuma Gate was half done. Every day, the mouth of the huge gate bustled with thousands of labourers, and the towering hoist cranes swung

cradles of ceramite plating, rebar and reinforced rockcrete up over the cyclopean arch. It was too intensive a task for the sentries to scan each labourer in and out individually: the labour gangs would snarl up, and the work would run slow. Instead, the entire gate zone was covered by a biometric reader field, projected by slowly rotating vanes in the eaves of the primary arch.

At dawn, he secured himself under the tarps of one of the payloads due to be taken in over the gate by hoist crane. He huddled down between sheets of mule steel and bundles of ironwood.

He had prepared a four-gram dose of qash, an overdose by migou standards. Its efficacy was such, he would be insensible less than a minute after ingesting it.

He waited for two hours until he felt the jolt of the lift crews securing the payload's chains. He heard the steel cables of the hoist crane whining. He felt the heavy sway as the pallet he was hiding on left the ground.

He swallowed the qash.

Observation had shown him that it took the hoist crane mechanism forty-three seconds to bring a pay-load up to clearance height, and a further sixty-six seconds to traverse it in over the gate top. Twenty-four seconds into that second time period, the moving pay-load would enter the biometric reader field.

The qash did its work. He was stiff and dead twelve seconds before he entered the field. The field read nothing except a payload of inert building materials.

HE WOKE. THE pallet had set down, and some of the tarps had been pulled back. Riggers and roof-gangers were beginning to unload the mule steel.

His body ached. Most of his muscles were cramping. He focused and performed some purging exercises to throw off the vestiges of the somatic rigour that the qash had induced. Death to most mortal men, near-death to a being like him; a brief, death-like fugue to allow him to slip in through the Palace biometrics.

He slid off the pallet, sore and woozy. Enormous gunboxes and shielded fighting platforms were being constructed around the upper ramparts, and thick dura-plating and adamantium were being bonded to the walls. Workers milled around on scaffolds and gantries, some suspended like mountaineers over the edge of the wall's sheer drop. The air was filled with noises of hammering and cutting.

Powered tools shrilled. Fusion torches buzzed and flickered with arctic blue light.

Phantoms fought behind his eyes, the ghost flares of fusion cutters. There was blood in

his throat. He scooped up a box of rivets and a concussion mallet, and blended with the workforce.

HE PENETRATED THE outer levels of the Palace. This process took a further three days. He stopped being a masonic labourer and became a shadow, then a footman polishing brasswork, then a lamp-lighter with a spark-pole, and then a doorkeeper, wearing a livery he had purloined from a laundry room and a concealed displacer field to disguise his height and bulk.

He followed hallways that were dressed in diaspore and agate, and descended stairwells planed from solid pieces of onyx. He watched his reflection cross polished marble floors, and his shadow chase along walls carved from quartz and sardonyx. He waited in the ivory gloom of huge processionals while warbands passed by in marching time. He lingered in doorways while almost endless trains of servitors brought past trays of raw meats and hydroponic vegetables for the high table.

He became a footman again, then a carpet beater, then a beadle, and then a messenger man with an attaché box full of blank papers, hunching to disguise his build and height. Every once in a while, he stopped to get his bearings. The Palace was bigger than many cities. Its levels and byways took a lifetime to learn. From the rails of high balconies, he looked down into artificial ravines five hundred storeys deep, filled with lights and teeming with people. Some of the great domes in the Precinct, especially the Hegemon, were so vast, they contained their own miniature weather systems. Microclimate clouds drifted under painted vaults. Rain in the Hegemon was said to be a portent of good fortune.

As far as he knew, it had not rained in the Hegemon for three years.

THE CUSTODES WERE abroad, watching over the inner reaches of the Precinct, majestic in their ornate golden armour. Their plume crests were crimson, like sprays of arterial blood frozen in the air. The pre-Unity symbol of the lightning bolt was blazoned on their armour. They lurked in the gloomy halls and shadowed cloisters of the Palace, their Guardian spears upright, frighteningly vigilant.

They were impassive, silent, and they guarded their secrets solemnly, but in their very presence there was a truth to be unpicked.

He noted their deployment. Two custodes were watching the Southern Circuit that snaked like silver braid towards the Hegemon. Two more stood at the Jade Bailey, and another three patrolled beneath the fretted ironwork and malachite of the Congressional. A lone custodes, almost invisible, held position under the waxy emerald leaves of the Qokang Oasis, watching the outfall of the crystal-clear pleasure lake thunder down into the turbine gulf in misty cascades. Four more prowled the upper platforms of the Taxonomic Towers.

There were, however, none on the Northern Circuit, and none on the western limits of the lake, and none near the Investiary. It was so telling. They were like visible moons betraying the position of an invisible planet, bright astral bodies pushed into a certain pattern by the gravitational ministrations of an unseen star. By noting where they were, and where they weren't, he could determine the location of his prey.

The Hall of Leng seemed most likely. From the disposition of the steadfast custodes, his prey had to be somewhere in the western hemispheric portion of the Precinct, which meant the Hall of Leng, the House of Weapons, the Great Observatory, or the private apartments adjoining the latter two, but he knew the Hall of Leng was a favourite place. When he wasn't sequestered in secret toil in the deep, private crypts of the Palace, his prey was known to spend a great deal of time in the Hall, measuring the angles of space and time.

It was said that past and future co-mingled at that site, and had done so since primordial times, before the place had owned the name Leng, before his prey had been born, before a roof had been raised above it, or human eyes had seen it. The Hall of Leng, long-beamed and dark, was simply a domestication of one of the materium's anomalies, a pulled thread in the fabric of time, a scab on the skin of space.

He had never felt comfortable in the Hall. It was filled with a tangible darkness, which seemed to exhale softly, like the respiration of a slumbering god, but it was a fitting place, and it would serve.

HE APPROACHED THE Hall from the south-west, following an ouslite walkway that had been laid along an avenue of sycamore and silver birch. He no longer wore a guise of any kind, no more fake lamp-lighters or pretender carpet-beaters, no more displacer field to mask his stature. He had unfolded the cobweb-thin falsehood out of its tiny silver box and wrapped himself in it. It felt as cold and light as snowflakes on his shoulders, back and scalp. Light ignored him, as if he no longer merited notice. It bent around him, twisted away, avoided his form and, in avoiding him, robbed him of shadows and colours too.

As inconsequential as a whisper, he walked the avenue of trees, and crossed the lawns behind the Hall. He could smell oblative incense, and hear the gentle creak and moan of the Hall's unnatural harmonics.

His weapon was ready: a Nei Monggol punch-dagger, sharpened to a refined keenness of edge that no genestock knife grinder could have matched. The blade was laced in catastrophically lethal nematode venom distilled and refined from qash resin.

Enough to slay a demigod? He believed so. Enough to finish a blood game, certainly.

THERE WERE NO locks. He had memorised the traceries of the quantum alarms, and the lumin sensors simply disdained to read his falsehood. He gripped the blade in his left hand.

The light in the outer portico seemed opaque, as if stained brown by smoke. He padded forwards across black tiles that had been worn dull by centuries of visitors. Pure meltwater dripped into a stone basin beside the inner doors. Above the doorframe, in bas relief, the architrave showed the tribulations of the first pilgrims to visit Leng.

The inner doors were heavy and older than the Palace, framed panels of ancient mountain oak, half a metre thick, worn and handmade, none of the angles quite true. He lifted the black iron latch, and pushed one of the doors open. Air hushed out at him. It smelled of cold stone.

The immense Hall was starlight-dark and midnight-silent. Every now and then, a sound breathed through the black space, a sound that was almost the gust of a Himalazian wind and almost the crush of breakers on an ocean coast, but not in fact either of those things.

Small orange sparks danced under the high roof, like fireflies, like ignis fatui.

He watched them, adapting his eyes to darkness. He began to pick up the silver outlines of objects in the hall: columns, ancient statuary, and the assayers and binding apparatus set up by antiquarians of previous epochs and never removed. The devices stood like giant metal insects in the gloom, probe arms raised like mantis limbs, metal wingcases marked with arcane, abstruse symbols for settings and degrees. They were gathering dust.

He slipped between them. Somewhere ahead of him, somewhere close by, a presence lingered. It was distracted, its mind detained by other things. It had not noticed him. It had not even felt him.

He moved around a column, its cold flutes against his back, and set eyes on his prey.

In the centre of the Hall’s broad, open floor, his prey was kneeling, engrossed, turning the pages of a massive leather-bound codex.

The codex was open on the stone floor like a spread-eagled bird, its spine a metre and a half long. Beautiful hands slowly turned the pages. They were sculptor’s hands, artisan’s hands.

His prey had his back to him. His prey was wearing a hooded white cloak. It would show the blood.

A common assassin might creep forwards, to steal up on his target stealthily from behind, but this prey was far too dangerous and aware for such timid techniques. Now he was in striking distance, he had no option but to pounce. After ten months, one chance was all he was going to get.

He surged forwards, his arm rising.

Halfway there, with the up of his punch-dagger just a moment away from the centre of his prey's broad back, a shadow came the other way to meet him.

Fluid darkness intercepted his blade. The punch-dagger was wrenched aside, and his strike was shorn of its momentum. He turned.

He could barely see his assailant. Another falsehood was defying the light. The attacker drove in at him, a shadow against a shadow.

He glimpsed the long, straight blade of a spatha.

He deflected one sword-blow over-hand, and another under-hand, swinging the punch-dagger around. Each impact rang out with a sharp clang of metal on metal. Sparks flew. He backed hastily across the black tiles as the falsehooded swordsman moved against him.

Their blades clashed again. The punch-dagger afforded him no reach. The advantage was entirely with the swordsman. The clatter of metal against metal seemed atrociously sharp in the breathy silence of the Hall.

Despite the nuance of his grip, the spatha flicked the punch-dagger clean out of his hand. It embedded itself, quivering, in a nearby stone column. He went in with his bare hands, banging aside the rising sword blade with the back of his right hand and locking his fingers around the wrist of his attacker's sword arm. He hooked his foot out to sweep the swordsman's legs out from under him, but the swordsman leapt the sweeping calf and tried to snatch his wrist free.

He smashed his left hand in, and caught the false-hooded swordsman across the side of the head. There was enough weight in the punch to stagger the man backwards. He blundered into one of the old assaying machines, scraping its metal feet across the stone tiles and buckling one of its insectile legs.

The swordsman recovered his balance, and discovered he was no longer a swordsman. The spatha had been ripped from his hand.

The Caucasian weighed the captured sword in his right hand. He snapped it around,

and put the flat of it across his adversary's cranium, knocking him down.

The Caucasian turned from his fallen foe, the spatha in a low, defensive grip. Two more falsehooded opponents were oozing out of the Hall's shadows to confront him.

He blocked both their blades at once, and rallied against them in a series of dazzling, turning cuts and thrusts. The percussive clash of swords rang through the gloom. More sparks shot out, bright and brief, as if the three sword blades were made of flint.

He wrong-footed one of his opponents, and clubbed him down to his knees with a blow of his spatha's pommel. The other swordsman came at him, thrusting his blade, but he turned it aside deftly so that the stroke ran out harmlessly under his arm, and drove the heel of his left hand into the man's face, cracking him backwards onto the floor.

He started to run as the pair of them struggled to rise again. The game was done. Escape was the only acceptable conclusion remaining to him. He ran for the doors, threw them open and sprinted through the thick gloom of the portico towards the lawns outside the Hall.

They were waiting for him. Five custodes, fully armoured, their faces hidden by their golden, hawked visors, stood in a semicircle around the mouth of the portico. They had their Guardian spears, those great, gilded hybrids of halberd and firearm, aimed at his chest.

'Yield!' one of them ordered.

He raised his stolen sword for the last time.

HE WAS NOT the first occupant of the cell, and he would not be the last. The stone walls, floor and ceiling of the cell had been painted in a bluish-white gloss, like the skin of a glacier. Fingernails and other sharp edges had scored away the paint over the years, inscribing the walls with scraped frescoes of men and eagles, of armoured giants and lightning bolts, of ancient victories and long shadows. They were simple, elemental marks that reminded him of primordial cave paintings showing hunters and bison. He added his own.

After a night and a day, the cell door rumbled open. Constantin entered. The master of the custodes wore a simple monastic robe of dark brown wool over a black bodyglove. He leaned his huge back against the cell wall, folded his mighty arms and regarded the prisoner on the cot.

'Trust you, Amon,' he said. 'Trust you to get closer than anyone else.'

"AMON" WAS THE start of his name, the earliest part of it. The second part was

“Tauromachian” and, together, these two words served most circumstances in which his name was used or spoken. He was Amon Tauromachian, custodes, first circle.

Violent obliteration notwithstanding, custodes lived long lives, far longer than mortal men, and they accumulated long names in those lifetimes. Following “Tauromachian”, which was not a family name but at least one that described the occupation of the bloodline that had provided his gene-source, there came “Xigaze”, the site of his organic birth, then “Lepron”, the house of his formative study, and then “Cairn Hedrossa”, the place where he was first tutored in weapon use. “Pyrope”, seventeen words into his nomenclature sequence, remembered his first live combat, deployed on an orbital of that name. So on, and so on, each new piece of his name honouring an action or a life landmark. Each was awarded him formally, by the masters of the first circle. “Leng” would now become part of his name, the latest ultimate part, recognising his feat in the blood game.

A custodes’s name was engraved inside the chest plate of his gold armour. The name began at the collar, on the right side, just the first element exposed, and then wound like a tight, secret snake around the inside of the plate. For some custodes like Constantin, the oldest veterans, accumulated names had filled up the linings of their torso plates, and the tails of their snakes now ran out around the bellies of the plates, looping like incised belts through the abdominal decorations. Constantin Valdor’s name was nineteen hundred and thirty-two elements long.

Amon’s custodes armour and armaments had been stored in the House of Weapons during his absence. As he walked along the Southern Circuit with Constantin to reclaim them, he asked about the progress of other blood games.

‘Zerin?’

‘Apprehended before he had even crossed into the Imperial Territories. He brushed a gene-sniffer in Irkutsk.’

‘Haedo?’

‘Detected by sweeps in the Papuan Deserts four months ago. He made it as far as Cebu City by dust yacht, but we had a scoop team waiting for him.’

Amon nodded. ‘Brokur?’

Constantin smiled. ‘He got into the Hegemon in the guise of a Panpacific delegate before he was spotted. An impressive feat, one that we did not expect to be bettered.’

Amon shrugged. Blood games were a fundamental element of Palace security and a duty of the custodes. It was a matter of honour for them to play blood games out to the

very best of their abilities. Using their ingenuity and comprehensive inside knowledge of the Palace and, indeed, Terra itself, the custodes volunteered to test and probe Imperial security, to expose any weakness or chink in Terran defences. They would play wolf to test the hounds. At any given time, at least half a dozen custodes were loose, operating secretly and autonomously, devising and executing methods of penetrating the great Palace.

There would be scrupulous debriefings and extensive interviews, examining Amon's strategies and dismantling his techniques. Every scrap of information, every morsel of advantage, had to be extracted from the blood game. He had penetrated the Palace. He had got further than anyone else. He had come within striking distance.

'I wonder if I have caused offence?' he mentioned to Constantin. 'I raised my hand against him.'

Constantin shook his head. He was a giant of a man, bigger even than Amon, like one of the over-scaled statues in the Investiary brought to life. 'He forgives you. Besides, you would not have hurt him.'

'My blow was blocked.'

'Even if it hadn't been, he would have stopped you.'

'He knew I was there.'

Constantin scratched at his chin. 'He won't tell me how long he knew. He wanted to see how long it would take the rest of us to notice you.'

Amon paused before replying. 'In the past, he has not seen much sense in blood games. He considered them worthless.'

'That was the past,' Constantin replied. 'Things have changed since you were last among us, Amon.'

IN THE HOUSE of Weapons, he and Constantin armoured themselves. Amon felt the old familiarity of the handmade plate sections, the buckles and clasps and the magnetised seams. The weight settled on him reassuringly.

In arming chambers on the lower levels of the House of Weapons, servitors and slaves were ritually plating a squad of proud Astartes of the Imperial Fists, anointing them with oils and whispers as they locked each piece of armour in place. The squad was preparing for a long patrol shift on the southern ramparts.

Such was the custom of most Astartes: the ritual, the gloving, the blessing. They were

beings wrought for war, their mindsets particular. Ritual aided their singularity of focus. It refined their purpose.

They were not like custodes at all. Like cousins, perhaps, like kin from the same bloodline, the custodes and the Astartes were similar but distinct. The custodes were the product of an older, formative process, a process, some said, that had been refined and simplified to produce the Astartes en masse. Generally, custodes were larger and more powerful than Astartes, but the differences were only noticeably significant in a few specific cases. No one would be foolish enough to predict the outcome of a contest between an Astartes and a custodes.

The greatest differences lay in the mind. Though custodes shared a familial bond through the circles of their order, it was nothing like the keen brotherhood that cemented the Legions of the Astartes. Custodes were far more solitary beings: sentinels, watchmen, destined to stand forever, alone.

Custodes did not surround themselves with slaves and servitors, aides and handservants. They armoured themselves, alone, pragmatically, without ceremony.

‘Dorn armours the Palace for war,’ Amon said, as more of an observation than a question. Only a custodes of the first circle would refer to a primarch so bluntly.

‘War is expected.’

‘Now it is expected,’ said Amon. ‘Before, it was not expected, never, not from ourselves.’

Constantin did not reply.

‘How did this happen?’ Amon asked.

‘It is not possible to say,’ replied the master of the custodes. ‘As one who knew the Warmaster well, I cannot believe it is overweening pride or ambition that has inspired this infamy, nor resentment. I believe—’

‘What?’ asked Amon, buckling his abdominal plates tight.

‘I believe Horus Lupercal is unsound,’ said Constantin. ‘Unsound of mind or of humour. Something has unseated his rational thought, and the good council of those around him.’

‘Are you suggesting Horus Lupercal is mad?’ asked Amon.

‘Perhaps. Mad, or sick, or both. Something has happened to him that cannot be

explained by the scheme of the galaxy as we have come to understand it.' Constantin looked out through the high windows of the House of Weapons, and studied the line of the Western Ramparts, newly reinforced and obese with additional shield plating and gun platforms. 'We must prepare for the unthinkable. War will come to us, war from within. Sides are drawn, choices made.'

'You make it sound matter-of-fact,' Amon said.

'It is,' replied Constantin. 'The Emperor is threatened. We are his protectors. We will stand against the threat. There is nothing else for us to speculate upon, not even the madness of those we once loved.'

Amon nodded. 'The Palace is becoming a fortress. I approve. Dorn has done superlative work.'

'It was ever his skill, and the skill of his Astartes. Defence and protection. At this, the Imperial Fists excel.'

'But we remain the last line,' said Amon. 'We do.'

'This will require more than strong walls and battlements.'

WITH THEIR CRESTED helmets held under their arms, they walked across the inner courts of the Palace from the House of Weapons to a tower of the Hegemon where the custodes kept their office of watch. Custodes had gathered to greet Amon at the entrance of the tower. Heads bowed, they struck the shafts of their Guardian spears against the flagstones, a clattering murmur of welcome and approval.

HAEDO STEPPED FORWARDS, his features hidden by the shadows of his visor. 'Amon Tauromachian, good that you return,' he said, clasping Amon's right hand.

'You have cut deeper than any of us,' Emankon said.

They entered the tower through high-arched rooms where the murals were so old and faded they looked like the pencil sketches and cartoons the artist had made in preparation for his work. Information streams from the vast data looms in the sub-levels of the Palace pulsed in the conduits under their feet. Cyber-drones floated under the high vaults, clusters of them moving like shoals of fish, dragged and gusted as if by the wafts of deep marine currents.

The Watchroom was bathed in violet light from the vast overhead hololithic emitters. Data freckled and danced across this smoky dome of light. The comparison/contrast programs running in the central cogitation consoles speared beams of gold and red up into the violet gloom, and roped divergent data elements in lassos of light. The global

data sea and the Unified Biometric Verification System were being trawled and panned by the Watchroom's codifier assembly, and disparate elements were being grouped together, connections made, traces followed. An anti-Unity cell in Baktria had been betrayed by some restricted treatise they had tried to access from a library in Delta Nilus. Pro-Panpacific terrorists had been eradicated in Archangelus, traced by a weapons-buy they had tried to pull off in some backwater Nordafrik shanty. Every day, a billion clues and a million secrets were analysed and examined by the custodes watch, sifted with acute, painstaking precision through the ever-shifting, fluid levels of Terra's information sphere.

'What is the chief matter of the hour?' Constantin asked.

Every sixty minutes, the Watchroom prioritised a dozen of the most sensitive findings for special attention.

'Lord Sichar,' replied the custodian of the watch.

HE HAD NOT hefted a Guardian spear in ten months. He went to the practice chambers in the subterranean levels beneath the tower, and cued up a dozen blade-limbed servitors to oppose him. The spear swung and looped in his hands, his muscles remembering the old skills and training. When the exercise ended, and the servitors were broken and dismembered on the mat around him, he called up fresh units for a second round.

How much of our lives are spent in rehearsal, he considered. The blood games, the training, all of it just pantomime coaching in preparation for the real thing.

Amon hated himself for the tiny thrill of exhilaration that he felt. The real thing was coming. No matter the infamy and outrage of it, the custodes would at last be called from rehearsal to perform the duty they had been created to perform.

To relish the imminent war was unseemly. As he closed out the second round of practice, Amon focused his mind instead on the case of Lord Sichar.

'The matter is already under inspection, Amon,' Constantin had told him.

'I have been out ten months,' Amon had replied, 'I am rusty and idle, and eager for a proper puzzle to divert me. I ask your favour.'

Constantin had nodded. The matter of Lord Sichar had been passed to Amon Tauromachian for review.

LORD PHEROM SICHAR had always been a person of interest to the custodes. Hereditary lord of Hy Brasil, the most powerful of all the Sud Merican cantons, Sichar

had often been vocal in his criticism of Imperial policies. His dynastic links, through bloodline and marriage, to the Navis Nobilite provided him with a considerable trade empire off Terra. Sichar was reckoned to be one of the fifty most powerful feudal lords of the colonies. Only the most careful political gamesmanship by Malcador the Sigillite had prevented Sichar's elevation to the Council of Terra. Of greater concern was the fact that Sichar was a direct descendant of Dalmoth Kyn, one of the last tyrants to hold out against the Emperor's forces in the dying days of the Unification Wars. It was understood that the Emperor tolerated Sichar's rule of Hy Brasil – and his barracking and sniping in the Hegemon – in order to heal the old wounds left by the Wars of Unification and encourage ethnic settlement. Sichar was a powerful man, and an articulate, outspoken statesman. He often spoke tolerable sense, in Amon's opinion, and his policies were pragmatic and robust.

His opposition to Imperial directives was not so fierce it required him to be placed under house arrest, like Lady Kalhoon of Lanark, or be removed from office entirely and charged with treason to the Imperial state, like Hans Gargetton, chancellor of the Atlantic Platforms, but Sichar was always to be handled with caution.

AFTER HIS TRAINING session, Amon changed into a simple robe and bodyglove, and went to one of the consultation suites on the floor above the Watchroom, where a strategically stationed Sister of Silence maintained an aura of absolute discretion. He laid out all the key intelligence on the screens of a stochastic processor, and began to assess them using the noetic and retrocognitive techniques taught to all custodes.

Sichar, already under permanent surveillance by the custodes Watchroom, had become a security priority thanks to particular scrutiny of his communication patterns.

His off-world holdings were considerable. His greatest possession was Cajetan in 61 Isthmus, a colonial world rich in resources that provided him with a gateway to the lucrative mineral zones of Albedo Cruris. Sichar's trade worth was so considerable, junior houses and minor grandees of the Sud Merican aristocracy were flocking to him, and strengthening his support base. If a seat fell open on the Council of Terra, it would be hard to deny it to Lord Sichar.

The threads of connection were vague, but their lines could be traced. Sichar was in direct and regular communication, via astropathic link, with the Governor of Cajetan, and the viceroys of Albedo Cruris II and Sempion Magnix. His correspondence with them, all of the clients he had effectively installed, was conducted in a private cipher that the custodes had not yet broken. It appeared to be a variation of Ansprak Tripattern, one of the few wartime codes used by the anti-unionists that had never been unravelled.

Further threads of connection could be traced, via diplomatic back-channels, to elements of the 1102nd and 45th Imperial Expedition Fleets, and through them to

minor colonial holdings, and two service and supply fleets operating out of the Chirog Nebula. Intel suggested that the service fleets, amongst other duties, supplied materiel to the Imperial Army deployed forces on the Butan Group.

There lay the question mark. Five months previously, several sections of the Imperial Army in the Butan Group were rumoured to have declared for the Warmaster. There was a distinct possibility that Lord Sichar, through a lengthy and deliberately complex chain of correspondence, was in communication with the heretics.

Lord Sichar of Hy Brasil, in all likelihood, was trafficking intelligence between Terra and Horus Lupercal.

AS IT TURNED, the craft caught the sun across its silver fuselage and shone like a brief star in the mauve reaches of the upper atmosphere. A civilian-pattern Hawkwing, registered to Fancile et Cie, operating out of the Zeon-Ind orbital, it was just another transport coming in along the signal pulse of the Planalto Central traffic beacon.

The flying machine, an orbit-capable bird, wore a burnished metallic skin, and was a wide, elegant shape, like a giant ray or a skate, with broad, triangular wings and a slender dart of a tail. As it skimmed in towards the four high towers of the Planalto Central landing spire, its retarding burners lit with hot jets of green-yellow flame in the lazy evening light, and trailing edge spoilers lifted along the wings like bent feathers. The great towers, dust-brown against the indigo heavens, blinked out powerful white lights from their masts.

Two kilometres below, the vast sprawl of urbanised Hy Brasil stretched out, a trillion lights in the dark.

As the Hawkwing adjusted for its final approach, its transponders broadcast its identity packets at the request of Planalto Administratum.

The packets informed Planalto Administratum that the craft was carrying Elod Gait, a senior negotiator for Fancile et Cie, who was visiting Hy Brasil to conduct exploratory talks with representatives of several Albedo mining congloms.

According to Unified Biometric Verification, Elod Gait’s idents were entirely in order.

NOT A BLOOD game this time, the real thing.

He would have preferred to work alone, at least to begin with, but there was a role to play. To seem the part, he needed servitors, an astropath and, most likely, a pilot and a lifeguard too. Haedo, in a simple grey bodyglove and slave-mask, doubled in the last two roles. His biometric declared him to be Zuhba, no family name, a genestock migou bought on the Gangetic bodymarket.

As Elod Gait, Amon was obliged to wear sheensilk robes that appeared wet and iridescent, like oil on water, as well as a wolf-pelt mantle, a formless hat with too many brims, and an ornamental sabre of considerable size that was nothing more than an ostentatious, theatrical prop and would be precisely useless in an actual combat situation. Most aggravating of all, he was obliged to wear another displacer field to visibly diminish and disguise his build.

His six attending servitors – one for voxcasting, one for medical duties and food tasting, one for environmental surveying, one for translation, one for recording and rubrication, and one for general service – were fine creations of polished blue steel and were, apparently, exactly the sort of suite of service units that would be expected to accompany a senior industrial negotiator.

A scallop-shell platform carried the Hawkwing down into the landing spire, down a vast flue lit by tracking lights of red and blue that lit in series. Other platforms were raising and lowering aircraft to and from the landing berths. Arriving at the designated berth-level, the platform shivered, halted and then swung sideways, delivering the cooling Hawkwing into the waiting embrace of the berth's landing cradle. The cradle closed its digits and clamps around the craft like a carnivorous plant grasping an insect, and withdrew it into the steamy alcove of the berth, where grubby servitors, cargo shamblers and deck crewmen were waiting with hoists and blocks, and fuel umbilicals.

Haedo glanced at Amon as the internal cabin lights changed from cold white to a muted yellow standby. 'Shall we begin?' he asked.

Amon nodded. He looked over at the vox servitor. 'Anything from control?' he asked.

The servitor dipped its head and issued an apologetic tone.

'Inform me as soon as they connect,' Amon said.

He put on his hat. Haedo fixed his slave-mask – a screaming cockerel, for some reason of custom and protocol – to his face, and buckled on his sidearm. Interlocks clattered as the craft's hatches linked to the berth's air gate, and then the boarding hatch opened.

AS HE TOOK the pre-arranged meetings with the agents of the mineral congloms, he thought of decomposition, of worms boring into a bloated carcass. His own worms were at work. False cowlings behind the Hawkwing's afterburners had folded back during berthing, and the sterile compartments within had released sacks of vermicular probes. Sixteen thousand in all, each one an autonomous rope of articulated chrome no bigger than a chopstick. With every passing minute, they were crawling deeper into

the fabric of Hy Brasil, spreading wider, chewing their way into data ducts and system trunking, gnawing their way into memory vaults, record banks and datastacks. Some would be found, some flushed by automated security systems, some would follow dead leads and abort when their power cells failed, but some would feast, and transmit their diet back to him.

He sat in a stateroom panelled with Kirgizian fret-screens, and feigned interest in the boasts of gross tonnage and silicate purity made by the agents of the mineral congloms. He thought about the risks. With Constantin's permission, they had deployed into Hy Brasil to conduct covert inspection, but they still awaited authority to move, in any open way, against Lord Sichar. If they were discovered, they could claim reasonable cause, but the worms were a breach of their legal parameters. If the burgraves of Hy Brasil discovered that the custodes had entered their canton without a warrant and riddled their systems with a swarm of probe worms, there would be uproar. It was an egregious violation of Hy Brasilean sovereignty. Even now, unity was a fragile thing, like a sculpture made of glass or ice: beautiful, precise, solid, but so very easy to break. In the shadow of Horus Lupercal's great and spreading treason, the last thing the Palace needed was a continental uprising on Terra.

'It is a great risk,' Haedo had said in transit from the orbital.

'It is,' Amon had agreed, 'but if Pherom Sichar is what we think he is, waiting to act is a far greater risk.'

Servitors brought them refreshments. The fashion in Hy Brasil seemed to be for mannequins finished in varnished dark wood with brass articulation. They looked like naked nursery dolls: dolls with porcelain faces and hands rendered to seem utterly lifelike, yet whose bodies, beneath their clothes, were crude wood with no effort of realism at all. The servitors whirred around the stateroom, offering infusions of mint and green tea.

The stateroom, high in a tower in the Sao Paol division of the Planalto, overlooked the vast and luminous landscape of the Winter Fields. Hy Brasil drew its power from a series of vast reactors buried in the heart of the main conurbation. The reactors required monumental heat-exchange processes to keep them running within safety tolerances, and as a consequence, the surface levels of the reactor district were caked in thick sheet-ice all year round, forming a gigantic frost park thirty kilometres square in the centre of the Planalto that the hive populations used for recreation. From his vantage point, Amon could see the tiny shapes of skaters near the frozen shore, and children on the banks and ice walks with kites and slithering mechanical toys. Further out, in the yellow haze of the open fields, ice yachts skimmed silently under coloured sails, and powered rakers raced one another around the lighted masts of the speed circuit, spraying up wakes of ice spume.

Negotiations resumed. Amon checked his data-slate, which was discreetly monitoring all infeed to his vox servitor. Authority had still not been sent through from the Palace.

THE NEXT MEETING took place in a monolithic tower on the far side of the Winter Fields. For amusement's sake, proud of their frozen landscape, the agents of the congloms conveyed Elod Gait to the meeting aboard an ice yacht. Amon tried to look impressed.

Their host was waiting for them on the quay below the tower, a tall man dressed in furs.

'I am Sichar,' he announced, bowing to Gait.

Ptolem Sichar was the fourth brother of Lord Sichar, but used the name unqualified for effect. Lord Sichar had installed Ptolem as the chief executive officer of Cajetan Imports, the trade consortium and shipping line he had founded to service his immense mineral resources.

Ptolem Sichar had dark green eyes that suggested to Amon an overuse of sabenweed. Though a large man, with duelling scars proudly displayed on his cheek, he was no threat. His body was soft, and out of the habit of regular exercise. His mind was soft too. A few minutes' conversation with him assured Amon that Ptolem Sichar was a superficial dolt.

His retinue was otherwise. He was flanked by the usual servitors, and a quartet of houseguards in scaled green armour. They were warriors of Hy Brasil's military wing, a body known as the Dracos, competent and efficient soldiers. Amon was certain that the Dracos detailed to guard the ruler's brother would be members of the specialist veteran squads.

Another figure accompanied the brother, a figure in a coal-black velvet coat and jet body plate. Ptolem introduced him as Ibn Norn, and he was one of the infamous and almost extinct Lucifer Blacks. Such was Lord Sichar's power and wealth, he had provided every member of his blood family with a bodyguard from the ancient and elite Ischian brigade of Lucifers.

Trailed by Haedo in his cockerel mask, and his string of blue-metal servitors, Amon walked with Ptolem Sichar up the quay and into the tower. They spoke of ice sports, of the coming war, of the effect on trade. Amon was aware that the Lucifer Black was studying him closely.

As they stepped onto a grav platform to be lifted up into the upper decks of the tower, Amon realised, with absolute certainty, that Ibn Norn knew he was wearing a displacer field. He had no idea what subtle thing had given it away. The Lucifer Blacks

were as famous for their perception and their razor-sharp minds as for their fighting prowess. Ibn Norn knew that Elod Gait was, at the very least, disguising something or, at the very worst, concealing a dangerous lie.

IT WAS TOO late to disengage. Waiting and hoping for a confirmation from control, Amon began his meeting with Ptolem Sichar. They sat at a mahogany table on a radial platform high in the tower's skylight levels. Sichar was easily distracted, and Amon encouraged this foible to buy time, leading the man off on discursive ruminations of such random topics as orbital viticulture, gerontological breakthroughs, genethliacal provenances and the wisdom of studying extinct religions to extract viable ethical value systems.

All the while, Amon thought of the probes, squirming through the dark recesses and cybernetic cavities of the Planalto like mealworms. He thought of the views that he and Haedo had seen en route to Hy Brasil: hive cities closing their meteoritic shields; conurbations reigniting field bulwarks and auto defences left over from the last Terran conflicts; oceanic platforms rigging for submarine function and slowly submerging into the protective bosom of the waters. The homeworld was bracing itself for the traitors' onslaught, an event that would be, perhaps, the single greatest holocaust mankind would ever have to endure. There was too much at stake to disengage.

At a break in the meeting, Amon checked the infeed of his communication servitor. Nothing had been received from control. Using the data-slate, he also ascertained that nothing of any consequence had so far been received from the probes. In particular, no progress had been made elucidating the version of Ansprak Tripattern used in the questionable transmissions.

A bell rang, and Amon assumed it was supposed to signal them back to the table for the next round of discussions. The atmosphere had changed, however. Ptolem Sichar and his staff hung back, in quiet and solemn discussion. Certain data displays on the radial platform had been masked.

Be ready, Amon signalled to Haedo.

'My lord Gait,' said one of the Dracos, striding over to attend them. 'I'm afraid there's been an incident. We must suspend talks for the day while it is dealt with. My master expressly apologises for the delay.'

'What manner of incident?' Amon asked.

'A breach of data confidence,' the Draco replied indirectly.

'How so?'

‘An outrage. An act that impugns this canton’s—’ The Draco cut himself short. ‘Forgive me, I’m not at liberty to discuss it. It is a sovereign matter.’

‘It sounds grave indeed,’ said Elod Gait with apparently genuine concern. ‘Should I arrange to return to my orbital?’

‘No, sir.’

They turned. Ibn Norn, the Lucifer Black, had joined them. ‘Security issues are under review across the Planalto. Transit would be an unnecessary complication, and you would be greatly inconvenienced by delays and searches. We have arranged a suite in this tower where you can relax in comfort until the present circumstances are over.’

Where you can watch us, Amon thought. Elod Gait nodded graciously.

THE SUITE LAY on the sixtieth level. Once the escort had departed, Haedo swept the rooms for surveillance devices using scanners concealed in the torso of the food-tasting servitor.

‘I would ask you to respect our integrity measures and refrain from using your vox servitor,’ Ibn Norn had remarked cordially before leaving them. The servitor’s function displays showed that vox channels were being jammed anyway.

Haedo opened the back of the rubrication servitor and initialised the compact cogito-analyser hidden behind the ribs. Using invasive programs so acutely coded that no Hy Brasilean systems would even notice them, Haedo linked the unit to the Planalto’s data-sphere.

‘The probes have been discovered in the memory cores of the Planalto Administratum,’ he reported. ‘There is…’ He scanned the data rapidly. ‘There is a palpable sense of outrage. Security across the Planalto has been raised to level amber six. The canton parliament is calling an emergency session to discuss the incident. There is furious debate in the intelligence communities as to whether the data invasion is the work of a foreign power or industrial espionage.’

‘If Sichar is guilty as charged,’ said Amon, ‘he’ll know the probable cause and the probable origin. How long will it take them to analyse and trace the vermicular probes?’

‘They were sterile and trace-free until they were launched,’ said Haedo, ‘but they would collect specific particulates during transit. A decent forensic examiner should be able to trace them back to our craft in a few hours.’

‘We are already suspected,’ Amon said.

‘Already?’

‘That Lucifer Black knows we’re not what we seem to be. I believe they are just looking for evidential confirmation before they confront us.’

‘And we still have no authority,’ said Haedo.

Amon nodded, slowly.

‘But they don’t know that,’ he said.

Haedo didn’t respond. He was studying the cogito-analyser intently.

‘What is it?’ Amon asked.

‘Parliament has initiated a system-wide purge to flush out and destroy the probes,’ Haedo replied. ‘The order was countersigned by Pherom Sichar, presiding over the parliament. But that’s not it… I’m getting feedback from the probes. Seven of them have penetrated the Planalto’s communication archive, and one has sourced Lord Sichar’s archive log for the last seven months.’

‘Translations?’

Haedo shook his head. ‘No, the code is still a wall to us. But the sender and receiver header codes on each message form are not encrypted. They’re stored in binaric. I’m running the entire list against comparative data. Wait… wait…’

Tight lines of script began to flow up the small screen of the compact device.

‘Four confirmed matches,’ Haedo whispered. ‘Four, you see? Each one is quite clearly the operative reception code for the Vengeful Spirit.’

The Lupercal’s flagship. Amon nodded. ‘That’s just cause. That’s all we need. We move.’

Strike teams summoned from the Palace could be in the heart of the Planalto in less than twenty-five minutes, but Amon judged that course to be counterproductive. An open shooting war would just make matters worse. He and Haedo had to secure the person of Sichar immediately, and then let a systematic investigation pick Sichar’s network of conspirators apart.

He took a trigger unit from the pocket of his robes and pressed it.

‘Brace for apport,’ he said. There was a loud, double-bang of over-stressed air pressure as the site-to-site teleport delivered two heavy, metal caskets into the suite directly from the Hawkwing. They appeared, fuming with vapour, in the centre of the carpet. The overpressure cracked two of the suite’s windows. Alarms, set off by the violent apport and its energy signature, started to pulse.

Haedo and Amon threw open the metal caskets. Inside each one, carefully packed, lay their golden custodes armour and the disengaged segments of their Guardian spears.

DRILL TEAMS OF the Draco elite, led by Ibn Norn, burst into the holding suite less than four minutes later. The chambers were empty.

A fierce wind blew in through a section of reinforced window that had been entirely cut out.

Ibn Norn glanced at the open, empty apport caskets, and the discarded clothes on the floor beside them. He saw the cockerel mask, the decorative sabre, and the wires of a displacer field hastily torn off.

He crossed to the window, and looked down into the streaming wind. The towers and street scheme of the Planalto spread out below him, far away. In the middle distance, on the shore overlooking the wide and gleaming edges of the Winter Fields, he saw Parliament House.

Ibn Norn activated his grav arrestor and leapt through the window.

PARLIAMENT HOUSE WAS a splendid structure built from filaments of silvered steel and pylons of a pale stone that looked like buffed ivory. Bells were ringing, urgently advising the delegates, burgraves and grandees to shelter or seek the protection of their bodyguards. Thousands of Dracos were gathering around the building’s various entrances, especially the broad main steps that led in a magnificent sweep up from the state quays of the Winter Fields.

Haedo and Amon landed on the roof of the largest quay house, disturbing ice powder that had been driven in off the fields. They killed their jump packs and surveyed the scene ahead.

‘We’ve roused them like a colony of angry ants,’ Haedo murmured.

Amon touched his arm and nodded.

A black figure flew in out of the winter sky, rebounded with agile grace off the spire of the gatehouse and landed in the midst of the milling Draco troops on the main steps.

‘Scanners!’ they heard Ibn Norn order. ‘They’re right here! Secure this precinct and find them!’

Haedo and Amon leapt down off the quay house roof and walked towards the steps side by side.

Dracos bustled around them, checking handheld monitors or breaking heavier scanning equipment out of carry boxes. Voices were chattering urgently. Gun crews were setting up tripod weapons along the shore to watch the ice fields. Packs of gunships purred low overhead.

The two custodes calmly walked up the steps through the anxious soldiers. They came within three metres of the Lucifer Black. Norn was barking commands, and trying to organise a perimeter.

They entered Parliament House unopposed. The echoey main chamber was emptying. The grandees of Hy Brasil were filing off the banked seating and flowing towards the exits, under the dutiful watch of armed Dracos.

Lord Sichar was still in his seat, a canopied throne of dark wood that presided over the upper and lower houses. He was a noble-looking man in red and green robes, a little younger than Amon had imagined. Sichar’s own Lucifer Black was waiting to hurry his lord to a place of safety, but Sichar was busy signing some last documents brought to him by delegates and scribes, and conferring urgently with the master of parliamentary protocol.

‘Try not to harm his person,’ Amon instructed Haedo. ‘We need him viable for interview.’

‘We’ll probably have to kill his Lucifer,’ Haedo replied.

‘Agreed, but only if he resists. One clean shot. I don’t want a fight in here.’

Thirty metres from the canopied throne, they threw aside their falsehoods.

‘Sichar of Hy Brasil,’ Amon announced. ‘You are sanctioned by the Adeptus Custodes as an enemy of Terra. Do not attempt to resist us.’

Sichar, the delegates, the scribes and the master of protocol turned and gazed at them in astonishment. One of the scribes broke and ran for the exit in terror. The twin golden giants in their crested armour exuded nothing but ferocious menace.

The Lucifer Black seemed to reach for his weapon.

‘One excuse,’ Haedo snarled, aiming his spear in the direction of the Lucifer.

Sichar rose to his feet, retaining more composure than the underlings around him. He gazed down from his podium at the two gleaming custodes.

‘This is inexcusable,’ he began. Despite his defiance, he could not keep a tremor of fear out of his voice. No one faced the might of the custodes without faltering. ‘This is utterly inexcusable. This dishonours the sovereignty of Hy Brasil. I will demand a full apology from your master when—’

‘He’s your master too,’ declared Amon.

Sichar blinked. ‘I… What?’

‘He’s supposed to be your master too,’ Amon repeated. ‘You will accompany us now and answer to a list of issues that brand you a traitor. Step down from the podium.’

A bright flash of light burst across the main chamber, swiftly followed by another and another. For a second, Amon thought grenades had been detonated, but he revised that idea quickly. The light blooms were teleport flares.

There were suddenly seven figures standing between the custodes and their target. Six of them were Adeptus Astartes in full battle armour, instantly recognisable as huscarls of the Imperial Fists. As the teleport flares dissipated, the six Astartes took one step forwards in perfect unison and aimed their bolt-guns at the custodes with a clatter.

The seventh figure stood in their midst, tall and mantled in a cloak of gold thread and red velvet. His hair was white and cropped short, and his noble face seemed weathered and tired.

‘My lord,’ said Amon, bowing his head to the primarch.

‘This must stop,’ said Rogal Dorn.

DORN STEPPED FORWARDS, through the ranks of his Astartes.

‘Put up your weapons,’ he said gently.

The Imperial Fists smartly raised the boltguns to their shoulders.

‘I meant everyone,’ added Dorn, looking at the custodes.

Amon and Haedo kept their spears aimed at the canopied throne.

‘My lord, Pherom Sichar is a traitor and spy,’ replied Amon carefully. ‘He is using the networks of his extensive mercantile empire to communicate with the Warmaster and his benighted rebels. We have just cause and evidence enough to hold him and interrogate him. He will come with us.’

‘Or?’ asked Dorn with a soft, almost amused smile.

‘He will come with us, my lord,’ Amon insisted.

Dorn nodded.

‘An object lesson in determination and loyalty, eh, Archamus?’ he said.

‘Indeed, my lord,’ replied the commander of the huscarls.

‘They would fight six Astartes and a primarch in order to accomplish their duty,’ Dorn said.

‘My lord,’ Amon said, ‘please stand aside.’

‘I’m half-tempted to let you attempt to go through me,’ said Dorn. ‘I would, of course, hurt you both.’

‘You would try,’ replied Haedo. ‘My lord,’ he added.

‘Enough,’ said Dorn. ‘Archamus?’

The retinue commander stepped forwards.

‘Lord Sichar of Hy Brasil is a spy,’ he announced, quite matter-of-factly. ‘Lord Sichar of Hy Brasil has been in regular communication with Horus Lupercal, and has exchanged with the traitor a great deal of intelligence.’

‘You admit it?’ asked Amon.

‘He’s our spy,’ said Dorn. The primarch came up to Amon face to face. They were the tallest beings in the room.

‘I am fortifying Terra as best I can for the coming war,’ said Dorn. ‘That means more than walls and shields and gun platforms. That means information. Viable, solid data. Proper intelligence. Lord Sichar is as loyal as you or I, but his reputation as an opponent of Imperial policy made him a credible defector to the traitor’s camp. Horus thinks he has friends on Terra, friends and allies, who will rise up and turn to fight

with him when his host arrives.'

'I see,' said Amon.

'Sadly,' said Dorn, 'this great fuss may have compromised him. I may have to develop other spies now.'

'My lord,' said Amon, 'we are custodes. We guard Terra and the Emperor as surely as you. Would it not have made sense to tell us of Lord Sichar's involvement?'

Dorn exhaled and did not reply.

'Do you know what a blood game is, my lord?' asked Haedo.

'Of course,' replied Dorn. 'You hounds play wolves and test the Emperor's defences for the slightest flaw or vulnerability. I have reviewed many of your reports, and accommodated their findings into my reinforcements.'

'Then perhaps,' suggested Amon, 'we could consider this a blood game? The weakness revealed being that all those who seek to serve and protect the Emperor must work with unified purpose and shared information.'

THE RAKER SPED away from the landing quay in a blizzard of ice crystals. It was a powerful, two-seater recreational model, painted cobalt-blue, with an upturned nose and hefty ice-blade. Aft of its stabiliser vanes, its ion engines burned with green fury. It lit off across the Winter Fields, making a sound like a knife being dragged across glass.

Cheth, or whatever his real name was, hadn't even bothered to unslip the mooring lines. He'd gunned down the two wharfmen on the quay who had come to see what the commotion was about, and then leapt into the raker's cockpit and slammed the sliding canopy.

Amon crashed down onto the quay just as the raker pulled away. The impact of his huge, armoured bulk cracked several flagstones.

The mooring lines, dragged tight, were snapping with pistol-shot cracks. Amon managed to seize one of the lines before it parted, and held on as it broke. Dragged by the line, he was whipped off the edge of the quay and hit the ice on his belly, slithering and ripping along like an unseated rider pulled behind his steed. Ice chips blinded him. The vibration and friction was almost too much to bear. As the raker increased its velocity, Amon felt his armour dent and buckle. He was rolling and bouncing, spinning from side to side on the end of the trailing line. His grip was failing.

Amon let go, and slid clear in a long, wide arc across the ice. He dug in his heavy boots to try and arrest his slide, and as he slowed to a halt, he began to rise.

The raker was accelerating away across the fields. Skaters and ice yachts veered in panic to get out of its headlong path. It ploughed through the flag-lines of a speed-skate course.

Behind him, Amon heard another explosion. Another gout of flame and smoke bellied into the sky from Parliament House.

‘Amon! Amon!’ Haedo’s voice yelled over the vox.

‘Go.’

‘Where are you?’

‘In pursuit. The assassin is heading out across the ice lake. Is the primarch safe?’

‘I have confirmation from the Imperial Fists,’ Haedo replied. ‘Primarch Dorn had left Parliament House before the first bomb.’

‘Lord Sichar?’

‘Dead, along with eight members of the legislature. Amon, stand by. I’m securing a ‘thopter. I’ll be en route to you in—’

‘No time,’ Amon replied. He rose and triggered his jump pack. The launch impact threw him high into the air. Climbing he saw the raker turning ahead of him, below. It was swinging west over the Winter Fields, cutting through a yacht formation.

Lord Sichar had been murdered by his own Lucifer Black, his bodyguard, a man called Gen Cheth. Ibn Norn had introduced him to Amon. Whoever had been wearing the black armoured suit when Amon had nodded to him, his name hadn’t been Gen Cheth. Or, a darker possibility, Gen Cheth hadn’t ever been the man his closest comrades thought he was.

It seemed that the Lupercal had spies of his own. Hounds were wolves and wolves were hounds. Primarch Dorn had been obliged to compromise Lord Sichar’s position as a double-agent for Amon’s benefit. The Lucifer Black had been right there. Horus’s man had been right there. Lord Sichar’s secret had been revealed. Lord Sichar was suddenly a vulnerability to be expunged and an enemy to be punished.

The concussion bomb had seen to that. It had vaporised the centre of the Parliament chamber, and brought down the roof. Haedo and Amon had been thrown backwards

through wooden partitions into the consular voting room. Amon had been first on his feet.

The assassin had run. Leaving at least one more bomb behind him, he had fled for the fields. Amon wondered why. Assassins were focused beings. Execution or suicide was the usual conclusion of their efforts. Did this man think he could escape? Surely not. Then what was he trying to accomplish?

Amon swooped down at the racing craft. Arms across his face, he struck it like a lightning bolt, shearing the canopy clean away. Glass splinters and pieces of window strut billowed away in the rushing wind. Amon tried to hold on. The black-armoured figure struggled to maintain control of the raker one-handed while he fumbled for his weapon. The craft bucked. Amon slid, and ended up clinging to the raker's upturned nose.

He dug his fingers into the metal skin of the fuselage, making his own handholds, and dragged himself forwards. The assassin had found his weapon. He fired at Amon over the dashboard hump, and a bolt round shrieked past the custodes's ear. The raker began to approach maximum velocity. Amon clawed on and reached the torn-open cockpit. The assassin fired again, blasting up at the custodes looming over him. The bolt punched through Amon's left shoulder and blood sprayed into the slipstream.

Amon punched down with his right fist. The blow crushed the black metal helmet and pulped the head inside it.

The raker veered wildly as the assassin's corpse lolled sideways from the controls. Clinging on, Amon tried to reach in to cut the engines.

He saw what was in the pillion seat behind the driver.

Another bomb, the largest and most destructive of all. Now Amon understood. The assassin had been planning suicide all along. He had been planning to finish his work by riding the raker out into the middle of the Winter Fields and detonating the device. The bomb would take out Hy Brasil's vast reactors, buried under the fields. The reactors would annihilate the Planalto. Terra would understand, with a sick jolt, the wrath and influence of Horus Lupercal.

Almost shaken off by the savage vibration of the uncontrolled raker, Amon could see a light-beat countdown. There was no way of telling how much longer was left on the timer.

In sheer desperation, Amon tore out his trigger unit. There was no time for complex readjustment or re-calibration, no time to punch in an alternate set of coordinates. Amon simply managed to reset the altitude, adding two kilometres. Then he hit the

actuator stud and hurled the unit into the cockpit.

He leapt clear. The site-to-site teleport vanished most of the speeding raker before Amon had even hit the ice. He landed with a bone-jarring crunch, and tumbled for thirty or forty metres in a flurry of ice. A stabiliser vane and part of the raker's tail assembly, severed by the teleport beam's tight focus, clattered and cartwheeled past him, shedding debris, the cut edges glowing and molten.

On his back, half-conscious, Amon slid in circles and slowly, slowly, came to a halt. He looked up into the mauve Sud Merican sky.

Two kilometres above him, there was a bright flash, followed by a blinding, surging, expanding blossom of white light. Then the noise and the shockwave hit him and stamped him down into the ice.

BY THE WALLS of the Palace, in the Himalazian dusk, the loyal hound rose from the ice and shook itself. It was hurt, but most of the blood on its snout and flanks belonged to the wolf it had just driven, braying, into the dark with its throat torn open.

It plodded back towards the gates, limping, and leaving spots of blood on the snow behind it. Its breath steamed in the cold evening air.

Behind it, out in the blackness, more wolves were gathering and coming ever closer.