MIKE LEE

WOLF AT THE DOOR

DAWN WAS STILL two hours from breaking when the armoured column made its way from the still-burning city and rumbled westwards, along the great causeway that once supplied the Tyrants of Kernunnos with the plundered riches of a dozen worlds. The procession stretched for more than a kilometre, winding out along the western plains like a sinuous, steel-clad dragon. Heavy tanks of the Imperial Army took the lead, their armoured hulls still scarred and smoke-stained from the bitter fighting inside the planetary capital, followed by low-slung Chimera armoured personnel carriers containing the veteran troops of the Arcturan Dragoons. It had been the Dragoons who had spearheaded the attack on the Tyrants' capital and had fought their way first to the battered palace at the centre of the city. By virtue of blood and valour, they had earned their place in the procession and the ceremonies to follow.

The column set a slow, purposeful pace through the fire-lit darkness, following the causeway past vast landing fields now littered with the burnt-out hulls of great treasure ships. One of the landing fields was little more than a gaping crater, its insides still glowing like molten glass. A treasure ship had tried to escape the doom of Kernunnos and been caught in the opening salvoes of the orbital bombardment. The flare of its exploding reactors had engulfed the multitudes of terrified refugees fleeing along the causeway and flung smaller craft like toys into the flanks of their larger brethren, leaving a swathe of melted wreckage for kilometres in every direction.

Past the debris-strewn landing fields the terrain gave way to broad, rolling plains dominated by the sprawling agri-combines that had once provided the capital with much of its food. Now the fields of wheat, corn and salix were cratered by artillery shells and littered with the hulks of burnt-out tanks. Packs of scavengers slinked about the charred hulls, drawn by the scent of the cooked flesh within.

Here and there amid the tanks lay the broken bodies of the Tyrants' bipedal war engines, their limbs riddled by lascannon fire and their chests burst open like jagged metal flowers. Tank commanders swept the-fields with their heavy stubbers as they rode past, their auspex goggles picking out the furtive figures of refugees – men, women and children – fleeing across the ruined fields away from the column.

Thirty kilometres from the city the road began to climb into smoke-wreathed foothills that lay at the foot of a low mountain range that the locals called the Elysians. From time out of mind the region had been the playground of the Tyrants and their supporters in the Senate, but six hours of constant bombardment from orbital batteries and planetside artillery had turned the hills and the mountainsides into a

splintered, smouldering wasteland. The villas of the great and powerful had been incinerated, along with the villages that supported them and huge tracts of the surrounding forestland.

It was into these mountains that the Tyrants had fled, following word that the last of their much-vaunted battlefleet had been destroyed in a pitched battle near Kernunnos's primary moon. There was a refuge deep within the Elysians, a vault bored into the heart of one of the largest peaks that had been built during the Age of Strife, when Old Night had reared up and swallowed mankind's first interstellar civilisation. The vault had been built to protect the planetary elite from the warp-spawned horrors that had walked the land, and over the centuries its formidable construction had become legendary. It was the ultimate fastness, a citadel that could withstand the fires of Armageddon itself.

The column rumbled on through the foothills, occasionally grinding its way over fallen trees and wrecked vehicles strewn in its path.

Navigating by orbital maps, the procession passed through the ruined and deserted villages, past the splintered villas and up a series of cracked and pitted roads that led towards the fortress. The mountain had been hacked and riven by searing beams and bombardment cannons, its flanks scoured clean and split by massive blasts. Deep craters in the mountain slope contained the wreckage of orbital laser batteries that had attempted to contest the arrival of the Imperial invasion fleet.

Two-thirds of the way up the mountain the road emptied out onto a broad, artificial plateau, carved like a shelf into the side of the mountain and paved over with ferrocrete. The wreckage of more than a half-dozen military ornithopters lay scattered across the landing field, surrounded by the burnt corpses of their aircrew. On the western end of the expanse, sheltered beneath a massive brow of scorched and splintered granite, stood a towering, featureless metal door.

The armoured vehicles spread across the plateau in a carefully orchestrated routine. APCs halted and lowered their rear ramps, disgorging platoons of battle-hardened Dragoons. Sergeants barked orders and shouted streams of leathery curses, and soon the troops were dragging away the bodies of the enemy and battle tanks were carefully nosing the wrecked ornithopters to the far edges of the plateau. Within thirty minutes the field was clear, and the troops had assembled by companies into two large formations to the far left and far right of the plateau. Off to the east, the great city built by the Tyrants flickered and glowed like a bed of dying embers.

Fifteen minutes before dawn there came a brassy growl of thunder from over the horizon, a steady, building drumbeat that drew nearer and nearer through the overcast sky. The heavy, leaden clouds seemed to roil over the plateau, lit from within by a rising, blue-white glow. Finally the smoke-stained overcast was rent by the rakish

noses of a trio of Stormbird assault craft, their landing gear deployed like grasping talons as the pilots flared their engines and brought the huge craft down in a three-point tactical deployment, right in the midst of the waiting Imperial troops.

No sooner had the transports touched down than the heavy assault ramps lowered with a hiss of hydraulics. The crimson glow of battle-lanterns shone from the depths of the crouching Stormbirds, silhouetting the armoured giants waiting within.

Sergeants shouted along the ranks. The Arcturan Dragoons snapped to attention with a crash of hobnailed boots as the Emperor's Wolves set foot on the blasted earth of Kernunnos.

The assault ramps on two of the transports rang with swift footfalls as grey-armoured warriors dashed out onto the plateau, their huge boltguns held at the ready. They were Space Wolves, gene-engineered supermen of the Emperor's VI Legion and the pinnacle of the Imperium's military might, yet their appearance was a study in contrasts between the advanced and the archaic. Servos whined beneath the overlapping plates of their Mark II Crusader-pattern power armour; helmeted heads swept left and right, scanning the landing zone with augmetic optical systems that perceived wavelengths from the infrared to the ultraviolet. Yet their broad shoulders were framed with heavy cloaks of wolf or bear skin, and strange fetishes of iron, wood or bone were affixed to their scarred breastplates. Every one of the warriors carried a sword or a battle-axe at their hip, and many boasted gruesome battle-trophies, like gilt skulls or exotic weapons slung from equipment hooks at their waists. Even the hardest veteran among the Arcturan Dragoons lowered their eyes as the Emperor's Wolves went by.

The Space Wolves fanned out in a tight arc, advancing past the lead Stormbird and forming up by squads a few yards ahead of the transport's assault ramp. They continued to scan the plateau for a few moments more, then the warriors raised their weapons to port arms and a silent signal was relayed to the lead ship. At precisely the appointed time, just as dawn began to stain the overcast sky to the east, Bulveye, Wolf Lord of the Space Wolves' Thirteenth Great Company and commander of the 954th Expeditionary Fleet, descended the ramp of the lead Stormbird with his senior lieutenants and the champions of his Wolf Guard in tow.

The Wolf Lord and his chosen men were resplendent, their power armour polished to a mirror sheen and adorned with tokens of honour and courage earned in the crucible of war. Gold wolf's head medallions glittered from their grey pauldrons, each one bearing a frayed strip of parchment inscribed with war-oaths or invocations to the Allfather. Their breastplates were decorated with medals of silver or plaques of rune-etched iron, each one representing an act of valour against humanity's many foes. They wore their best cloaks of wolf or ice-bear hide, and at their belts hung their most prized battle-trophies: gilded fangs, cracked skulls or ivory finger bones taken from enemy

champions slain in single combat. Bulveye's armour was more ornate still: fashioned by the master-artificers on distant Mars, the edges of his pauldrons were chased in gold, and the curved surfaces were inscribed with ornate scenes of battle.

Trophies from scores of hard-fought campaigns hung from his cuirass and his war-belt of adamantine plates, and a circlet of hammered gold rested upon his brow. A heavy, single-bladed battle axe was clenched in the Wolf Lord's gauntleted hand; the steel haft was wrapped in strips of cured sealskin, and the casing of the power weapon's field generator was etched with runes of victory and death.

His expression grim, Bulveye strode past the waiting squads of his honour guard and approached the fortress entrance. Two warriors fell into step behind him, eyeing the massive doors warily.

'They're late,' Halvdan Bale-eye grumbled. Bulveye's chief lieutenant was a grim, brooding figure even at the best of times, more at home on the battlefield than in the mead-hall. His wiry copper hair, streaked with grey, hung in two heavy braids that draped across his breastplate, and a bristling beard covered the lower part of his face. He had a nose like an axe blade, and sharp-edged cheekbones crisscrossed with dozens of old scars. His eyes were mismatched, shining from deep-set sockets beneath a craggy brow. Halvdan's left eye socket was seamed and uneven, the bone broken by a sword stroke that had put out the eye as well. He'd survived the terrible wound and had disdained an eye-patch afterwards, using the empty socket to unnerve foes and shipmates alike during his raiding days on Fenris. Now the unblinking lens of an augmetic eye shone from its depths, its focusing elements clicking softly as the warrior surveyed the entrance and its splintered overhang. Halvdan growled deep in his throat. 'The damned fools might have changed their minds. They could be planning treachery at this very moment.'

To that, the warrior beside Halvdan let out a derisive snort. 'Can't get those big doors open, more like,' Jurgen replied. He was lean and rangy, his skin drawn taut over the bones of his face and showing the cable-like muscles cording his neck above the rim of his breastplate. His black hair, speckled with grey, was cropped short; lately he'd adopted the Terran tradition of shaving his chin, earning no small amount of jibes from his pack-mates. 'After six hours of bombardment it's a wonder they weren't all buried alive.' He gave his lord a sidelong look, his dark eyes glittering with raven-like mirth. 'Did anybody think to bring shovels?'

Bulveye gave Jurgen a look of brotherly irritation. They were all old men by the standards of the Astartes, having been reavers and sword-brothers to Leman, King of the Rus, for many years before the Allfather had come to Fenris. When the truth of Leman's heritage was finally revealed, every warrior in the king's mead-hall had drawn their iron blades and clamoured to fight at his side, as sword-brothers ought. But they were all too old, the Allfather told them; not a man among them was younger

than twenty years. The trials they would have to endure would very likely kill them, no matter how courageous and strong-willed they were. Yet the men of Leman's mead-hall were mighty warriors, each man a hero in his own right, and they would not be dissuaded by thoughts of suffering or death. Leman, the king, was moved by their devotion, and could not find it in his heart to refuse them. And so his loyal thanes undertook the Trials of the Wolf, and true to the Allfather's word, the vast majority of them died.

Out of hundreds, almost two score survived, a number that amazed even the Allfather himself. In honour of their courage, Leman – no longer king now, but Primarch of the VI Legion – formed a new company around the survivors. Ever since, the other warriors of the Legion referred to the Thirteenth as the Greybeards. The members of the company, however, called themselves the Wolf Brothers.

'If they won't come out, we'll use the Stormbirds and the battle tanks to get those doors open and go in after them,' Bulveye said grimly. 'One way or another, the campaign ends here.'

Jurgen grinned and made to reply, but the expression on the Wolf Lord's face made him think better of it. Bulveye had a square-jawed, sharp-nosed face that appeared stubborn and unyielding even in the best of times. Though of an age with Jurgen and Halvdan, his head was bald, and there was no hint of grey in his close-cropped blond beard. His eyes were pale blue, as sharp and deadly as glacial ice.

Bulveye had sworn an oath to the primarch to bring the entirety of the Lammas subsector into compliance, and his lieutenants knew that when the Wolf Lord gave his word on a thing, he was as relentless and implacable as a winter storm.

Halvdan chuckled at Jurgen's discomfort. The bare-chinned lieutenant shot the warrior a hard look, but before he could reply a deep rumble reverberated from the scarred mountainside and with a grating of metal and stone the huge doors of the fortress began to slide open.

A stir went through the Dragoons. Sergeants shouted down the murmurs spreading through the ranks. Clouds of dirt gusted through the widening gap between the doors, and a handful of men in tattered uniforms staggered out into the cool mountain air. Their jackets were stained with sweat and mud, and the scabbards of their dress sabres were dented and scarred. Several of the men fell to their knees, gasping in exhaustion, while others simply stared in shock at the Space Wolves and the men assembled behind them.

Moments later an officer appeared, his dress uniform no less filthy than the rest but his spirit still intact despite the ordeal he and his men had suffered. He barked a series of orders, and the men responded as best they could, straightening their jackets and

forming into a rough group beside their leader. More men clambered through the gap into the open air, joining the rest, until almost a full platoon of battered soldiers stood at attention facing the Wolves. From their uniforms, Bulveye could tell they were members of the Companions, the Tyrants' elite bodyguards. At the beginning of the campaign the Companions had been six thousand strong, a thousand fanatical defenders for each of the empire's overlords.

The commander of the bodyguards looked over his men one last time, then gave a curt nod. Backs straight, the soldiers marched the short distance to the waiting Space Wolves, and one by one they unbuckled their sabres and laid them at the giants' feet. When the last soldier had turned over his weapon, their commander approached the Wolf Lord and, with a hollow look in his eyes, he added his weapons to the pile. Bulveye studied the man dispassionately, taking note of the rank tabs on his uniform. 'Where is your commanding officer, subaltern?' the Wolf Lord asked.

The junior officer straightened, his arms stiff at his sides. 'With his ancestors,' the young man replied with as much dignity as he could muster. 'He shot himself this morning, shortly after the surrender terms were accepted.'

Bulveye considered this, and nodded gravely. The subaltern lowered his eyes, turned about and rejoined his men. The young man took a deep breath, snapped an order, and the surviving Companions sank to their knees, pressing their foreheads to the ferrocrete as the surrender ceremony began.

The slaves came first, clad in torn and bloodied robes and staggering beneath the burden of heavy metal chests. Their faces were dull and dirt-stained, worn down by the twin scourges of exhaustion and starvation. One after another they approached the fearsome, armoured giants, laid the chests at their feet and pulled the lids open to reveal the wealth contained within. Raw gemstones and precious metals gleamed dully in the diffuse morning light: the ransom of six Tyrants, plundered from the length and breadth of their petty empire. It piled up around the Space Wolves like a dragon's hoard, drawing avaricious murmurs from the soldiers of the Imperial Army. When their task was complete, the slaves knelt beside the vast treasure, their expressions vacant and uncaring.

Next came the daughters and wives of the Tyrants, a wailing procession clad in white robes of mourning, their coiffed hair undone and their pale faces smeared with ash. The youngest ones recoiled and cried out in fear as they saw the fearsome giants and the leering Dragoons; no doubt they had spent a sleepless night imagining the terrible abuses that awaited them. The women fell to their knees a few yards in front of the Wolves; some wept inconsolably, while others kept their faces expressionless, evidently resigned to their fate.

Last of all came the Tyrants themselves. They emerged from the fortress one at a time,

taking short steps beneath the weight of their heavy gilt robes and jewelled chains of state. The self-styled masters of the Lammas subsector were small, pale-skinned men, their faces blotched and saggy from a lifetime of debauchery and excess. Two of the men had to be helped along by a cluster of slaves.

Their eyes were glassy and unfocused; either they had chosen to face their ruin through a haze of drugs, or their spirits had simply shattered under the weight of their defeat.

A new chorus of wails rose from the women as the Tyrants approached the Space Wolves. Trembling hands grasped at the hem of their robes as the former rulers passed by their loved ones and came to stand before their foes. Slowly, haltingly, they knelt before the conquerors, and in the tradition of their people, they bared their necks and prepared to die.

Halvdan and Jurgen shared a brief look and shook their heads in disgust. Bulveye studied the Tyrants for a long moment, then stepped forwards, his axe held loosely in his right hand. He towered over the kneeling men like a vengeful god, glaring coldly at each man in turn.

‘And so we meet again,’ the Wolf Lord said, ‘just as I told you we would, seven years ago. Back then, I stood in your palace of crystal and steel and brought you glad tidings from our Allfather, the Emperor of Mankind. I bore a message of welcome, and promises of peace and order. I gave you this’ – Bulveye said, holding out his open left hand – ‘and you spat upon my palm. You scorned the gifts of my lord and sent me into the streets like a beggar, threatening to kill me if we met again.’

The Wolf Lord glowered at the Tyrants and showed them his axe. ‘Before I left, I swore to you that this day would come. Now your fleets have been broken and your armies scattered.’ Bulveye gestured eastwards. ‘Your palace of steel and crystal is no more. Your sons are dead, and your cities lie in ruins.’ His voice lowered to a throaty growl, and his lips drew back in a snarl, revealing prominent, wolf-like canines. ‘You are Tyrants no longer. You have been cast down, and I’ve seen to it that neither you nor your kind will ever rise again.’

Bulveye gestured to his lieutenants. Halvdan and Jurgen stepped forwards, their expressions grim. Groans went up from the fallen Tyrants, and their wives cried out in misery. But instead of drawing their blades, the two Space Wolves took the chains of state from the trembling men and tossed them onto the treasure-pile, then grabbed hold of their rich robes and tore them away as well.

‘Had it been left up to me, you would have never emerged from those tunnels,’ Bulveye snarled. ‘I would have turned this entire mountain into your tomb. But the Allfather in his wisdom has decided otherwise.’ The Wolf Lord gestured to the heaps of treasure.

‘This wealth belongs to the many worlds you have despoiled – planets that became battlefields thanks to your arrogance and greed. You will use this fortune to begin rebuilding what was lost, and ensure that the worlds of this subsector become prosperous and stable members of the Imperium. Each planet will soon have an Imperial governor to oversee their reconstruction, and they will send me regular reports of your efforts.’ He glared down at the naked and shivering men. ‘Do not give me reason to return here ever again.’

Slowly and deliberately, Bulveye lowered his axe. The former Tyrants and their families fell silent, unable to contemplate at first that their lives and their virtue were to be spared. The Wolf Lord turned on his heel and strode back towards the waiting Stormbird. As he picked his way through the treasure trove he gazed sternly at the kneeling slaves. ‘Get up,’ he commanded. ‘You are slaves no longer. From this day forwards, you are citizens of the Imperium, and so long as the Allfather lives, you will never bow your knee to another master.’

For the first time, a hint of life returned to the beleaguered faces of the former servants, and slowly, tentatively, they started to climb to their feet. Among the nobles, one young woman let out a hysterical cry of relief and half-crawled, half-stumbled to the side of her father, who tried to cover his nakedness with trembling hands and stared hatefully at the retreating backs of the Space Wolves.

The three warriors passed through the cordon established by their waiting battle-brothers and continued on to the Stormbird’s ramp.

Halvdan stole a look behind him at the fallen Tyrants and growled deep in his throat. ‘We should have killed every last one of them,’ he grumbled. ‘They won’t learn. You can be sure of that. In another ten or twenty years we’ll have to come back here and finish the job.’

But Jurgen shook his head. ‘The Lammas subsector will still be a shadow of its former self a hundred years from now, much less twenty,’ he replied. ‘We were very thorough, brother. Every city, every industrial centre, every starport will have to be rebuilt.’

‘A damned waste,’ the Wolf Lord murmured, surprising both men. ‘So much destruction. So many lives thrown away, all for the sake of six arrogant fools.’

Halvdan shrugged. ‘Such is the price of resistance. It’s ever been thus, my lord, even back in the old days on Fenris. How many petty kings did we lay low at the command of King Leman? How many villages burned, how many longboats smashed to kindling? It’s the way of things. Empires are built with broken bones and rivers of blood.’

‘Aye, that’s so,’ Bulveye agreed. ‘I don’t deny it. And the Allfather’s cause is a just one:

mankind must be made whole again if we're to reclaim what is rightfully ours. This galaxy belongs to us, and it's our duty to reclaim it, regardless of the cost. Otherwise, everything humanity has suffered up to this point will have been for naught.'

'And we'd be no better than all the xenos filth that came before us,' Jurgen added. He clapped Bulveye on the shoulder. 'It's been a long hard-fought campaign, my lord. You've broken the Tyrants and reclaimed the entirety of the Lammas subsector. Take pride in the knowledge that you've fulfilled your oaths to the Allfather, and be content.'

Just then, a wiry, older man wearing the dark grey tunic of a Legion bondsman descended the drop-ship's ramp and hurried to meet the oncoming Wolf Lord. He was Johann, one of Bulveye's own huscarls, and the Wolf Lord frowned at the tense expression on the bondsman's face.

'What's happened?' he asked quietly as Johann drew near.

'Two ships arrived in system a few hours ago,' the huscarl said gravely. 'One was a courier, bearing a priority message from Leman Russ himself. We're to conclude all operations immediately and rendezvous with the primarch at Telkara in five months' time.'

The Wolf Lord's eyes widened. 'The entire company?'

Johann shook his head. 'No, lord. The entire Legion. Orders have reached the primarch from the Allfather himself. We're bound for Prospero.'

'Prospero?' Halvdan interjected. 'That's madness! Where did you hear such a thing?'

'It says so in the message,' the huscarl replied. 'Though no reason is given. No doubt we will learn more when we reach Telkara.'

'Five months,' Jurgen echoed. He shook his head. 'We've got warriors and ships scattered all over the subsector, hunting down the last of the Tyrants' supporters. It could take months just to assemble everyone and see that they're supplied for the journey.'

Bulveye nodded. Telkara was far to the galactic north, more than two sectors away. Withdrawing the company from combat and preparing them for such a trip was no small task. 'Despatch couriers with orders for the company to marshal at Kernunnos at once,' he said to Johann. With much of the Imperial fleet orbiting the Tyrants' former throne world, it would be the logical place to resupply the ships of the Great Company before they made way for Telkara. The Wolf Lord paused. 'One moment. You said two ships arrived in system. What was the other one?'

‘One of the long-range scout ships, my lord,’ Johann replied. ‘You instructed Admiral Jandine to continue probing the region along the eastern edge of the subsector.’

‘I know what I instructed Admiral Jandine,’ Bulveye snapped. ‘Did they find anything?’

‘Yes, lord,’ the huscarl said. ‘The scouts report that the warp storms continue to diminish throughout the region, opening more and more of the area to safe navigation.’ He started to say more, but hesitated.

The Wolf Lord’s eyes narrowed. ‘What else?’

‘One of the ships managed to reach a star system in the region, one previously cut off by the storms,’ he said. ‘It’s listed on our older charts, though there’s no indication that a colony was ever established there.’

‘But?’

Johann took a deep breath and plunged ahead. ‘But the scout ship detected vox transmissions at standard frequencies emanating from the fourth planet in the system,’ the huscarl reported.

Bulveye’s expression darkened. Halvdan shot a sidelong glance at Jurgen and shook his head. ‘Leave it,’ he said to the Wolf Lord. ‘It’s just one world. Let the Army have a look. We’ve got new orders, haven’t we?’

‘Halvdan is right, my lord,’ Jurgen added. ‘We’ve reclaimed every settled world in this subsector. What more can we do?’

Bulveye was silent for a moment more. ‘What more? Our duty to mankind, of course,’ he said, then focused his attention on the huscarl.

‘Tell me of this world,’ the Wolf Lord commanded.

THE BATTLE-BARGE Ironwolf hung like a poised blade above the green-and-ochre surface of the battered world. Light from the system’s distant yellow sun glinted coldly on the warship’s cathedral-like superstructure and highlighted the raw battle-scars along its armoured hide. The Ironwolf had seen hard fighting in the last seven years of the Great Crusade, and the great battle-barge bore its wounds proudly. She was the flagship of the 954th Expeditionary Fleet, and her honour rolls bore testament to the battles she’d fought and the wayward worlds she’d reclaimed in the name of the Emperor of Man.

Bulveye felt the leaden weight of acceleration press his armoured form against its

restraining cradle as the Stormbird flared its engines and launched from one of the Ironwolf's cavernous launch bays. The thunder of the assault ship's massive engines deadened abruptly as the Stormbird streaked across the gleaming curve of the planet's upper stratosphere and began a gradual descent towards the surface. A hololith installed in the bulkhead in front of the Wolf Lord's acceleration cradle displayed the Stormbird's trajectory, along with status icons detailing everything from the craft's airspeed and angle of attack to its weapons' status, fuel consumption and turbine pressure.

Interfacing with the Stormbird's onboard systems via his armour's vox-unit, Bulveye called up the high-altitude reconnaissance images taken of the planet over the past twenty-four hours and began to study the picts with a steely blue-eyed stare.

The planet had no name, according to the Ironwolf's star charts; given their position, far to the galactic south, it had likely been one of the last human colonies, settled sometime in the Eighth Diaspora prior to the Age of Strife. The colonists had been very lucky, or very brave, or both, Bulveye reckoned. Few such colonies had survived the centuries of isolation that had followed; the Lammas subsector alone was strewn with the skeletal ruins of settlements that hadn't been strong enough to endure the warp storms and the horrors they spawned.

And this world had suffered greatly, the Wolf Lord saw. Much of its landmass was barren and lifeless. Thousands of kilometres of wasteland stretched all the way to the planet's polar ice caps, leaving perhaps a score of green and vibrant regions strung like a chain of emeralds around the world's equator. He could see the outlines of great lakes and inland seas that had been transformed into cracked and broken plains, and broad mountain slopes scoured down to bare, unyielding stone. According to the auspex arrays aboard the Ironwolf, much of the lifeless terrain was dangerously radioactive.

Bulveye froze the pict-feed on a single image. 'Magnify by ten,' he murmured into his vox-bead. The pict blurred as it expanded; cogitators in the base of the hololith clattered as the enhancement algorithms refined the smear of tan, ochre and dark grey into low, rounded hills surrounding a gently sloping basin some eighty kilometres across. The grey line of a dry riverbed wound like a serpent's track across the centre of the basin, its borders smudged in places by drifts of choking dust. A broad expanse of broken stone and jagged, black girders rose from the dust along one broad bend of the riverbank. A small city had thrived there once, hundreds of years past.

Metal and military-grade plas creaked loudly behind the Wolf Lord. 'Must've been quite a war,' Halvdan said admiringly, squinting at the pict over Bulveye's shoulder.

Bulveye reached down and disengaged the swivel lock on his acceleration cradle so he could turn to face the interior of the transport's forward troop compartment. A dozen

Marines of his Wolf Guard filled the cramped space, locked into their own cradles along the chamber's outer bulkheads. Their wargear had been cleaned of the grit and gore from the fighting on Kernunnos, and their armour polished to a mirror sheen. It was a small honour guard for so important a mission, but the Wolf Lord had been loath to withdraw any more warriors from vital combat duties on the Tyrants' former throne world. Time was short, and Bulveye was resolved to make do with the men he had available. The Allfather expected no less of his Legions.

The Wolf Lord considered the hololith a moment more, then shook his head dubiously. 'If it was a war, it was a damned strange one,' he replied. He indicated the lifeless plains outside the ruined city. 'No craters. No ruined vehicles. No signs of abandoned fortifications or other field positions. And the devastation extends for thousands of kilometres, into northern and southern latitudes that would have been hostile to human life under normal conditions, much less something like this.'

Halvdan's expression darkened. 'Psykers, then,' he grumbled, reaching up to finger an iron charm hung from a leather cord about his thick neck. Psykers – more commonly called warlocks by the primitive folk on Fenris – had spontaneously emerged on countless human worlds just before the Age of Strife. Their unnatural powers caused widespread chaos and destruction; the most powerful psykers could warp the very fabric of reality itself. More than once during the course of the Crusade, the Expeditionary Fleets had come upon colonies that had fallen under the sway of these nightmarish beings. The Allfather had ordered the planets burnt to ash and the coordinates of the systems stricken from the star charts.

'Perhaps,' Bulveye allowed, 'but if so, the people here must have found a way to stop them.'

Across the troop compartment, Jurgen shifted in his acceleration cradle to get a better view of the hololith. 'I've yet to see a psyker survive an atomic blast,' he muttered. 'It would explain all that radiation, and the scale of the devastation. They nuked three-quarters of their own planet to wipe them out.'

'Except that we've seen no indication of any military forces at all, much less atomic weapons,' Bulveye pointed out. 'And then there's this.'

The Wolf Lord turned back to the hololith and transmitted a command. The pict of the ruined city dissolved into a polychromatic fog.

Cogitators whirred and clicked. Moments later another image resolved from the mist.

A city appeared in the foreground, built of solid slabs of glistening white stone and fitted cunningly into the slopes of forested hills at the base of a tall, cloud-swept mountain range. Streets made from stone or some local composite connected the

terraced buildings and teemed with hundreds of people and small, dome-shaped vehicles going about their daily business. There was little in the way of detail, but something about the scene suggested frenetic – almost harried – activity.

Halvdan's augmetic eye clicked softly as he focused on the image. 'Seems pleasant enough,' he said.

'Not the city,' Bulveye said. He leaned against the restraints and jabbed a finger at a faint, dark object in the background of the image.

'I'm talking about that.'

The Wolf Lord pointed to a thin, dark line, straight as a knife-edge and rising above the hills a long way away from the city. Halvdan scowled, peering intently at the image. 'Well, it's big, whatever it is,' he said.

'Big?' Jurgen echoed. 'Judging by the scale, it must be huge.'

Bulveye nodded. The image vanished, replaced by another showing a closer look at the object. It was a spire, narrower at the tips and bulging slightly in the middle, like a dart balanced precariously on the palm of a man's hand. The surface was a matt black, so dark it seemed to swallow the light around it. Only vague irregularities in the spire's silhouette suggested that it wasn't perfectly smooth, but possessed hundreds of small ledges and narrow alcoves.

'It's more than five thousand metres high,' the Wolf Lord declared. 'No one on the Ironwolf can tell me how old it is, or what it's made of. About the only thing the Iron Priests can agree on was that no human hand could possibly have made it. And there's one like it in each of the twenty habitable zones left on the planet.'

Jurgen scowled at the strange image. 'And you're certain there aren't any psykers down there?'

'Any psyker arrogant enough to build something like that isn't the sort to hide in the shadows,' Bulveye countered. 'Our recon flights intercepted a large number of civilian vox transmissions over the last few days – news broadcasts and the like. There's no hint of psyker activity anywhere on the planet.'

'And yet,' Halvdan said, stroking the charm around his neck, 'the spires are only found in close proximity to people. That can't be a coincidence.'

'My thoughts exactly,' Bulveye agreed. 'Needless to say, I've got a number of questions for the Planetary Senate once we've finished with the important business of the day.'

‘I don’t like this at all,’ Jurgen grumbled. ‘And it’s not as though we’ve no more important work to do, my lord. The primarch has summoned us; why do we dally here?’ He waved a gauntleted hand at the hololith. ‘This is a minor world on the very fringe of human space. As best we can tell, there’re perhaps a hundred and twenty million people on the enrire planet: there were cities on Kernunnos that were larger than that! And that’s nothing compared to what awaits us at Prospero.’

Halvdan clenched his bearded jaw, but nodded as well. ‘For once, I agree with Jurgen,’ he said. ‘Our destiny lies far to the galactic north. What is to be gained here, of all places?’

The Wolf Lord’s eyebrows rose at the question. ‘What is there to be gained? A hundred and twenty million lost souls to begin with,’ he replied. ‘Not to mention the honour of our company! The primarch sent us here to bring the worlds of the subsector into compliance – all of them – and that’s exactly what I mean to do. It will take another eight weeks at least to marshal the rest of the company at Kernunnos; in the meantime, we have a job to perform.’

Jurgen did not reply at once. Instead, he studied his lord for several long moments. ‘My lord, you and I have fought together for almost three hundred years now,’ he said. ‘I know you better than most men know their own brothers, and I can’t help but wonder if there’s more to this little expedition than simply fulfilling your duty.’

Bulveye gave his lieutenant a hard look, which Jurgen bore without remark. Finally the Wolf Lord sighed and turned back to the hololith. ‘Since when was our duty ever simple?’ he growled underneath his breath.

THE STORMBIRD ENTERED the planet’s atmosphere on a plume of fire and descended in a long arc over the world’s equator. Within an hour the drop-ship was swooping low over cloud-wreathed mountains and green, forested hills as they approached the sprawling city of Oneiros. The low, white structures clustered against the hills like colonies of toadstools, surrounding a concentrated metropolitan area more in keeping with a modern Imperial city. Bulveye reckoned that the tall buildings and stately amphitheatres were made for public use, given that Oneiros was also the seat of the planetary government. The Wolf Lord also noted terraced vineyards skirting a number of the smaller hills, and other lands set aside for growing crops or grazing livestock. Bulveye could see that most of the herds were small and relatively young, and that the fields were swarming with farmhands hurriedly taking in the harvest.

They had to circle the city twice to find any traces of the former starport. The huge landing fields that once serviced massive cargo shuttles or smaller tramp freighters were now grassy meadows, their precise, man-made edges still visible from the air. A

white flock of beasts that could have been goats or sheep bolted for a nearby stand of trees as the huge ship passed overhead and came in for a vertical landing on the sward. The heat from the transport's thrusters set alight broad swathes of the field's greenish-blue grass as it touched down.

By the time the drop-ship's assault ramp had lowered to the smouldering ground there were close to a score of the dome-shaped local vehicles approaching the Stormbird from the edge of the landing field. They stopped at a discreet distance and a number of men and women climbed out just as the first of Bulveye's Wolf Guard rushed out into the sunlight and established a security cordon around the ship.

Bulveye reached the bottom of the ramp in enough time to witness the reaction of the locals at the sight of the towering Astartes. Fear and surprise were etched clearly on their youthful faces; the young men goggled at the size and power of the Astartes, while the women stared worriedly at the massive boltguns in the warriors' hands.

The Wolf Lord surveyed the broad field slowly, somewhat bemused at the lack of spectators. Even on Kernunnos, a world that thought itself superior to ancient Terra and hostile to the servants of the Imperium, the starport and the roads leading to the palace had been jammed with people, all eager to see the "barbarians" from beyond the stars. Had their visit to Oneiros been kept secret from the populace?

'Stand down, brothers,' he subvocalised over his vox-bead, and his bodyguards lowered their weapons at once. With Jurgen and Halvdan in tow, he approached the welcoming party and quickly took their measure. Not one of them had to be older than twenty-one, he thought. They dressed expensively, favouring gold ornaments on their leather doublets and jewelled beading on their flared trousers. None of them bore a weapon, but they carried themselves with confidence and a kind of supple grace that came from physical conditioning and hard training.

Without thinking, Bulveye sized them up from a predator's standpoint, identifying who led the pack and who followed. Like all Space Wolves, Bulveye's senses were superhumanly keen. He could smell the fear emanating from each person in the group, but also the acrid tang of challenge as well. The Wolf Lord turned to a young man in the forefront of the group and nodded his head respectfully. 'I am Bulveye, Lord of the Thirteenth Great Company and sword-brother to Leman Russ, Primarch of the VI Legion.'

The young man was startled at being addressed so directly. He was tall and lithe for a normal human, with dark hair and a sombre, bearded face. 'I am Andras Santanno. My father, Javren, is the Speaker of the Planetary Senate.' Santanno's leather doublet creaked as he sketched a deep bow. 'Welcome to Antimon, lord.'

Bulveye studied the young man carefully. 'Your voice is familiar,' he said. 'Were you

the person I spoke to when we tried to contact your Senate?'

This time Andras attempted to conceal his surprise. 'I— yes, that's correct,' he stammered. 'My father – that is, the Speaker of the Senate – has been informed of your arrival. Fortunately, they're currently in session, discussing —' he paused, suddenly wary, 'important business. They've agreed to see you, though,' the young man added quickly. 'I relayed to them everything that you told me, and they would like to hear more. I've come to take you to the Senate chambers.'

Bulveye nodded as if he expected no less, though his mind was working furiously, considering the implications of everything Andras had told him. 'Let us go then,' he said carefully. 'I have a great deal to discuss with your father and his colleagues, and I fear that time is short.'

Andras frowned slightly at Bulveye's answer, but quickly regained his composure. He turned, gesturing towards the waiting vehicles.

'Follow me,' he said.

Bulveye was dubious that the flimsy-looking Antimonan vehicles could hold a fully armoured Astartes, much less carry one at any decent speed, but the ground cars' interiors could be almost entirely rearranged to suit any occasion, and were made of sterner stuff than they appeared. Soon the Wolf Lord and his men were being transported along a bewildering array of narrow, curving roads that wound among the city's tall hills. They passed dozens of low-slung, rounded stone buildings; up close, Bulveye could not help but notice the thickness of the walls and the sturdiness of their construction; in many ways they were more like bunkers than homes.

People were coming and going from each house in a steady procession, carrying in bags of supplies and leaving empty-handed. The Antimonans paid little attention to the ground cars as they sped quietly past; when they did notice, it was with furtive, almost forbidding stares.

Andras sat in the car's front compartment, alongside the driver; Bulveye expected a stream of questions from the Antimonans, but they sat quietly for nearly the entire trip. When they spoke at all it was to one another, in a dialect of accented High Gothic that the Wolf Lord found difficult to follow.

Bulveye did not mistake the tense sound of their voices, however, or the hunched, apprehensive set of their shoulders. As they rode deeper into the city, the Wolf Lord kept himself composed and outwardly calm, but his sense of unease steadily grew.

The Antimonans were preparing for something dire. That much was clear. Had the Ironwolf's arrival in orbit caused this? Until he knew more, Bulveye resolved to keep

his observations to himself. He knew that his men were doubtless forming their own impressions of the city and its inhabitants. Later, when the opportunity arose, he would take his lieutenants aside and see if their thoughts matched his. For the first time, he began to doubt the wisdom of this journey. Jurgen was right: he'd been too impetuous, haring off to an unknown world in the hope of a joyful welcome and a triumphal end to years of brutal, merciless warfare. He had been too eager to scrub the cruelties of the Lammas Campaign from his soul.

It took more than an hour for the long line of vehicles to reach the city centre, and the transition from the low structures in the hills to the towers of the city proper was jarring. Though made from the same white stone, the style of the tall structures was entirely different, built more for aesthetics and function than security. Bulveye had little doubt that the towers dated back to the earliest days of the colony.

The Senate building was a curious, spiral-like affair, with a wide, conical base and grand terraces connected by spiral ramps that climbed the outside of the structure. There were few people about, and those that were seemed to be busy with official duties; Bulveye noted that a number of the bureaucrats carried hololith slates and portable vox-units that were smaller and more sophisticated than anything available in the Imperium, which he knew would interest the Iron Priests aboard the Ironwolf. It appeared that Antimon had managed to retain at least some of the technological capabilities that existed prior to the Age of Strife. Like Andras and his fellows, the bureaucrats were startled by the size and demeanour of the Astartes – in one case, an older man took one look at Halvdan and went white as a sheet before quickly turning about and dashing into the building from where he came. The bearded lieutenant seemed not to notice, but the Wolf Lord knew better. From the surreptitious looks passing between the members of the Wolf Guard, it was clear that everyone was well aware of the strange reception and the mood of the Antimonans in general.

Andras alone led the Wolf Lord and his men inside the Senate building, through a wide, open entranceway and into an echoing foyer decorated in elegant green marble. Niches surrounding the circular chamber contained hand-chiselled statuary of remarkable quality: the first example of art or culture he'd seen anywhere in the city, Bulveye realised. The pieces were ancient, possibly made during the Age of Strife or even earlier. The figures were clothed in archaic styles of dress similar to what Andras and his fellows wore, and seemed to depict Antimonans from many walks of life: artists, scholars, scientists, statesmen and entertainers. Two figures near the entrance were particularly noteworthy: one was clearly a spacer, clad in a shipboard utility suit. The other caught the Wolf Lord's eye because of the long-sleeved hauberk he wore, and the long, slim sword held at his side. Two sleek, almost frail-looking pistols were tucked in the warrior's wide belt, and the man's face was concealed by a veil-like covering made of fine mail.

Jurgen took a few steps towards the statue of the swordsman and studied it for a long

moment. ‘It would appear you Antimonans knew a thing or two about warfare, once upon a time,’ he said lightly. ‘How fortunate you were able to leave such barbaric pursuits behind.’

An edge in the Space Wolf’s tone made the offhand comment sound like an accusation. Andras, who had been about to lead the delegation through the ornate doors at the opposite end of the foyer, froze in mid-step. After a moment, he replied in a cold voice. ‘The armigers were the young sons and daughters of Antimon’s noble houses, an honourable tradition that kept our planet safe for millennia. Were it not for the will of the Senate, those customs would still be practised today.’

‘Ah, I see,’ the lieutenant said, as casually as before. ‘Forgive me then, if I spoke out of turn. I didn’t realise you were a member of Antimon’s noble class.’

Andras glanced back over his shoulder at Jurgen and nodded stiffly. ‘No apologies are necessary,’ he replied. ‘The law—’ Suddenly, the young man paused, clamping his mouth shut against the rest of his response. ‘Please, come with me,’ he said quietly, and continued across the room. When the young Antimonan’s back was turned, Bulveye glanced over at Jurgen and caught the speculative look in the warrior’s dark eyes.

The young noble paused a moment before the entrance to regain his composure, then placed his hands against the ornate wooden doors and pushed them open. At once, a flood of raucous noise washed over Bulveye and his men. Judging by the sound, the entire Senate was engaged in a furious debate.

Halvdan stepped close to his lord. ‘Should I have the men ready their weapons?’ he said quietly. The warrior’s tone was half-jesting, half-hopeful. Bulveye shook his head, squared his shoulders and followed Andras into the chamber.

The interior of the Senate building was breathtaking – an immense, open space that rose for twelve storeys on graceful, vaulted arches of super-tensile steel. Glowing shafts of sunlight penetrated the lofty space through the spiral of terraces that wound around the outside of the building, allowing those on the ground floor to observe a series of historical murals laser-etched into the curved ceiling.

The great space was humbling even to the Astartes in its cathedral-like grandeur. The effect was marred only by the shouted curses echoing back and forth just above their heads.

The Senate conducted its business from a semicircular balcony suspended half a storey above the floor of the chamber, accessed by a central staircase that climbed to the feet of the Speaker’s tall, wooden chair. Each senator had his own throne-like chair, carved from a rich, honey-coloured wood, but at the moment the men and

women were on their feet, shaking their fists and shouting over one another as they tried to bully their opposition into surrender. Their High Gothic was even more accented and technical than what Bulveye had heard previously: he caught the words “lottery” and “quota”, but little else before the Speaker noticed the arrival of the delegation and began shouting for silence. As soon as the senators were aware of the armoured figures in their midst, the chamber fell silent at once. Many of the older statesmen sank back into their chairs with shocked expressions and faint murmurs of surprise. Others eyed the Astartes with an equal mix of shock, distrust and outright hostility.

Bulveye had seen such expressions before, back on Kernunnos. A feeling of dread settled into his gut. Javren Santanno, Speaker of the Senate, directed his hostile stares more towards his own peers than the wary Astartes. He was a tall, bent-shouldered man well into old age, with a beak-like nose and loose, wattle-like flesh around his scrawny neck. Like the other senators, he wore a green velvet robe over his richly appointed doublet, and a wide chain of gold links dimpled the thick fabric over his chest. A soft felt hat slouched over his bald head, emphasising the Speaker’s large, hairy ears. With a final, warning scowl aimed at his peers, the Speaker glared down at Bulveye and his warriors.

‘Let me begin this farce by stating for the record that my son, Andras, is a fool,’ Javren said in a querulous voice. ‘He’s barely twenty years and five, and despite all that he has seen of beasts such as yourselves, he is still stubbornly ignorant of the ways of the universe.’

The Speaker levelled a gnarled finger at Andras. ‘He had no authority to respond to your broadcasts, much less invite you to meet with us in this august chamber.’

Javren scanned the assembled Marines coldly, his lip curling in distaste as he took in their fur cloaks, and the gilded skulls hanging from their belts. ‘The only reason I agreed to this meeting was to make it absolutely clear that while this child may be credulous, we are most certainly not.’ The Speaker addressed Bulveye directly. ‘Judging by the weight of the baubles hanging from your chest, I assume you’re the leader of this pack of wolves. Who are you, then?’

The contempt in Javren’s voice left Bulveye speechless. For a moment the Wolf Lord was left struggling to maintain his composure.

On Fenris, such sneering talk would have led to spilled wine and bared blades at the very least. Clans had fought bloody feuds for generations over lesser slights. Bulveye could sense the tension rising in his warriors as the silence stretched, and he knew that if he didn’t speak soon, Jurgen or Halvdan would take matters into their own hands.

Forcing himself to relax, Bulveye inclined his head respectfully. ‘I am Bulveye, Lord of the Thirteenth Great Company of the Imperium’s Sixth Legion—’

Javren cut the Wolf Lord off with a wave of his hand. ‘We do not need a recitation of your petty titles,’ he said. ‘Make your demands, Bulveye, and then get out.’

‘Now listen,’ Halvdan growled, taking a step towards the Speaker. The warrior’s hand drifted towards the sword at his hip.

‘If there is a misapprehension here, I believe it is on your part, honoured Speaker, not ours,’ Bulveye said quickly. There was an iron tone of command in his voice that brought Halvdan up short. The bearded lieutenant glanced back at his lord, and the look on Bulveye’s face brought the man back to the Wolf Lord’s side.

‘We are not here to make demands of you or your people,’ Bulveye said calmly. ‘Nor are we the beasts you imagine us to be. We are Astartes, servants of the Allfather, Lord of Terra and Emperor of Mankind.’ At the mention of the Allfather, Bulveye felt his resolve surging like the tide, and he raised his head and addressed the Senate as a whole. ‘We have journeyed across the stars to bring you glad tidings: the storms that divided us have subsided at last, and Terra reaches out once more to embrace all her lost children. That which was broken will soon be re-forged, and a new civilisation will arise to reclaim our rightful place as masters of the galaxy.’

Bulveye was no skald, but his voice was clear and strong, and the words were as familiar to him as the weapons at his side.

Consternation warred with mistrust on the faces of the assembled senators, while Andras’s face was lit with joy. As though in battle, Bulveye sensed the tide against him start to shift; he pressed ahead without pause.

‘No doubt your oldest legends speak of the days when our people crossed the stars and found new homes upon foreign stars,’ the Wolf Lord said. ‘Much has changed since those days; I’m no storyteller, but let me share the news of all that has passed since Antimon was lost to us.’

AND SO HE began to tell the tale, of the rise of Old Night and the collapse of galactic civilisation, of the wrack and ruin of worlds. He told the story as best he could, begging his audience’s forgiveness when the tale grew muddled and confused; so much time had passed, so much knowledge lost or distorted, that no man would ever know the truth of all that had transpired over the last few millennia.

None of the listeners chose to interrupt Bulveye, much less gainsay his story. Long was the telling of it: the Wolf Lord spoke nearly without ceasing as the afternoon progressed to evening, and one by one the shafts of light arcing above the Senate

chamber went from yellow to mellow gold, from gold to dusky orange, and then went out altogether. Globes of pale light winked into being from metal sconces that ringed the senators' balcony, plunging the statesmen into shadow.

Finally, Bulveye told the tale of the Allfather's conquest of Terra, and the creation of the first Astartes to fill the ranks of his armies.

From there he recounted the beginnings of the Great Crusade, and the reunion of the Allfather with his children, the primarchs.

Bulveye concluded his epic with the first meeting between Leman Russ and the Allfather on Fenris, a tale he knew very well.

'And so we have served him faithfully ever since, reclaiming lost worlds in the Allfather's name,' Bulveye said. 'That is what brings us here today, honoured Speaker. Your people's isolation is at an end.'

The Wolf Lord strode forwards, climbing partway up the stair towards the Speaker's throne. The senators looked on, their expressions rapt, as Bulveye held out his left hand. 'I greet you in the name of the Allfather,' he said. 'Take my hand, and be at peace. The Imperium welcomes you.'

Like the rest of the statesmen, the Speaker of the Senate had retreated to his throne over the course of Bulveye's tale, but his rheumy stare had never wavered as the long hours passed. He did not reply to the Wolf Lord at first, and much of his face was hidden in shadow. Slowly, awkwardly, he rose from his seat and set his feet upon the stair. One step at a time he descended towards Bulveye, until perhaps a third of the staircase was all that remained between them.

Javren Santanno leaned forwards, staring down at the Wolf Lord's open hand.

'Lies,' he hissed. 'Damned lies, every word of it.'

Bulveye rocked back as though struck. Halvdan let out an outraged shout and Jurgen joined in. The senators sprang to their feet, shaking their fists and shouting, though it was unclear whom exactly they were shouting at.

Black rage gripped the Wolf Lord. No man, however exalted, called a Space Wolf a liar and lived to tell of it. Bulveye fought to maintain his self-control; better to endure a fool's slander and hope for reason to prevail than to draw steel and bring ruin to another human world. He opened his mouth to shout for silence – when suddenly the bedlam was drowned out by the sharp crackle of thunder.

No, not thunder. After two hundred years of campaigning, Bulveye knew that sound all

too well.

The senators had heard it, too. They froze, their jaws agape, and then, out in the city, came the low, mournful wail of sirens. One of the senators, an older woman, pressed her hands to her face and screamed. ‘They’re here!’ she cried. ‘Blessed Ishtar, they’ve come early! We’re not ready!’

‘Who is here?’ Jurgen snapped. He knew as well as Bulveye that the sound they heard wasn’t thunder; it was high-yield ordnance being deployed in the upper atmosphere. ‘What’s going on?’

Snarling, Bulveye keyed his vox-bead. ‘Ironwolf, this is Fenris. Do you read me?’ There was a squeal of static, and the Wolf Lord thought he heard a faint voice trying to reply, but it was too garbled to make out.

The senators were racing for the stairs, their robes flapping like the wings of panicked birds. Javren’s face was a mask of rage as he swept down the stairs towards Bulveye. ‘I see your plan now!’ he yelled. ‘You meant to distract us – maybe lure us out into the open while your soulless cronies swept down on us! I knew you couldn’t be trusted! I knew it! Get back to your damned ship and never return, barbarian! We want no part of your Imperium, or your so-called Allfather!’

Bulveye wanted to grab the Speaker and shake the insolence out of him, but now was not the time. As the statesmen fled from the building, he turned to his men. ‘Condition Sigma,’ he snapped, and weapons sprang into the Wolf Guards’ hands. ‘We need to get to high ground and try to reestablish contact with the Ironwolf,’ he said to Halvdan and Jurgen. ‘Contact the drop-ship and tell the pilot to prep for launch. If we have to, we’ll hold here until they can extract us.’

The two lieutenants nodded curtly, and Jurgen began speaking into his vox-bead. A crowd of Antimonans rushed into the room from outside; the Wolf Guard brought up their boltguns, but Bulveye recognised them as Andras’s friends. The young men and women stopped short at the sight of the levelled weapons, their faces white with fear. Bulveye quickly scanned the room and saw Andras nearby, still right where he’d been when they had first entered the chamber.

‘What’s happening?’ Bulveye demanded of the young noble.

Andras had a stricken expression on his face, a look of shattered innocence that the Wolf Lord had seen all too often on the battlefields of Fenris. The nobleman turned to Bulveye as though in the depths of a nightmare.

‘It’s the Harrowers,’ he said fearfully. ‘They’ve returned.’

THE BATTLE IN orbit lit the night sky with stuttering flashes of light and the thin, almost metallic crackle of thunder. Lines of ruby and sapphire light criss-crossed through the darkness, leaving razor-edged afterimages dancing in Bulveye's vision. There was no way to be certain who was shooting at whom, but it was clear to the Astartes that a large number of ships were involved and that the Ironwolf was in the thick of it.

The Space Wolves ascended the spiral ramps ringing the Senate building at a full run, climbing as high as they could to improve their vox transmissions amid the surrounding hills. Jurgen, charging along beside Bulveye, let out an angry curse. 'I can't raise the Stormbird,' he reported. 'It could be atmospheric ionisation from the battle overhead or some kind of wide-spectrum jamming.'

Bulveye nodded and keyed his own vox-bead once more, hoping that the battle barge's more powerful communications systems would be able to punch through the interference. 'Ironwolf, this is Fenris, come in! What is your status?'

A howl of static clawed at Bulveye's ears – and then a voice, faint but audible, replied: 'Fenris, this is Ironwolf – we are heavily engaged by xenos warships! At least twenty, possibly thirty cruiser-sized vessels and dozens of escorts! They caught us completely by surprise – some kind of cloaking field that defeats long-range auspex sweeps—' The transmission dissolved into another wail of static, then resolved again, '—reports engine damage, and we have enemy boarders on the hangar deck!'

The Wolf Lord bared his teeth as he envisioned the tactical situation unfolding high above the planet. Against such odds, there was only one feasible course of action. 'Ironwolf, this is Fenris – break orbit and disengage at once! Repeat, break orbit and disengage—'

He was cut off by another discordant howl of static. A voice – possibly the officer on the battle-barge, but it was too faint to tell – shouted something, then the frequency broke up in jagged bursts of atonal noise.

'Morkai's black teeth!' Bulveye cursed. 'We're definitely being jammed now.' He skidded to a halt on the smooth ramp, and his Wolf Guard formed up around him.

'How bad is it?' Halvdan asked. The calm, businesslike tone of his voice belied the fierce expression on the warrior's face.

Bulveye stared up at the battle raging overhead, his expression grim. 'As it stands, the Ironwolf doesn't have a chance,' he said. 'If they can escape orbit and get some manoeuvring room, perhaps they can break contact with the enemy and disengage—'

For a brief instant a red flash lit the night sky, throwing long shadows against the

walls of the Senate building. The sight stunned the Space Marines into silence; somewhere out in the city, Bulveye heard a woman's terrified scream. Seconds later came the rumble of the explosion, a heavy, bass drumbeat that sent tremors through the stone beneath the Wolf Lord's feet.

The warriors looked skywards as the flare diminished. A shower of long, glittering streaks etched their way across the sky like shooting stars as debris from the explosion burnt up in Antimon's upper atmosphere. 'Plasma drive overload,' Jurgen said, his expression bleak.

'Could have been one of theirs,' Halvdan said, peering into the darkness. 'The Ironwolf's a tough one. She can handle herself against a bunch of filthy aliens.'

Bulveye wanted to agree, but as he watched, the signs of weapons fire diminished swiftly in the wake of the explosion. The battle appeared to be over. He checked his vox-bead once more, just in case, but every frequency he tried was still being jammed.

The Wolf Lord took a deep breath, then turned to face his men. 'At this point, we have to assume that the Ironwolf has been destroyed,' he said curtly. Glancing past the warriors, he caught sight of Andras, leaning against the wall and breathing heavily after their swift climb. Bulveye hadn't even realised the young noble had accompanied them.

'Andras!' Bulveye called, shouldering his way through the cordon of Wolves to stand at the young man's side. 'Who are these Harrowers? What do they want?'

The Antimonan's expression was bleak. 'We don't know who they are. Every seven years their ships fill the skies and they…' He took a deep, wracking breath. 'They used to hunt us like animals. Men, women, children – the children especially. They… they seem to like the sound of children's screams the best. They would take people by the hundreds and… and torture them. I've heard stories from my father, about the times before the quota, when the Harrowers would descend on the cities and take whomever they could find.'

'When we arrived, the senators were arguing about the quota,' Bulveye said, 'and something about a lottery.'

Andras nodded, unable to meet the Wolf Lord's eyes. 'During my great-grandfather's time, the Senate thought that an offering might appease the Harrowers and spare the bulk of our population. We gave them our criminals and outcasts, penned up like sheep for the slaughter, while the rest of our people took refuge in fortified shelters built into the hills.' He shrugged. 'It worked well enough. The Harrowers never stayed for more than a year, and by the time they'd exhausted their appetites on the people we gave them, they hadn't the time or energy to root out many others.'

It was all Bulveye could do not to recoil in disgust from the young man. The idea of sacrificing human beings to such monsters disgusted and appalled him. ‘Why in the Allfather’s name didn’t you fight back?’ he said through clenched teeth.

‘We did fight them!’ Andras cried. ‘At first, the armigers fought back with every weapon they had. There was a great battle at one point – the armigers ambushed a large force of raiders and killed a score of them, including their leader,’ the young man said. ‘And in return the Harrowers returned to their star-ships and rained death on Antimon for seven days and seven nights. Most of the world was laid waste, and hundreds of millions died. After that, the Senate disbanded the armigers and forbade anyone to raise a hand against the raiders.’

Bulveye clenched his fists. ‘Then the Senate betrayed you one and all,’ he snarled. ‘A life not worth fighting for is no life at all.’ With an effort, he fought down the urge to berate Andras. He couldn’t be held to account for the decisions of his ancestors. ‘How long have the Harrowers plagued your world?’

Andras raised a hand and wiped angry tears from his eyes. ‘Two hundred years, or so the histories say. No one knows where they came from, or why they leave. No one taken by the Harrowers is ever seen alive again.’

Bulveye nodded thoughtfully. Pieces of the puzzle were falling into place. The Harrowers had found Antimon shortly after the galaxy-wide warp storms began to subside. Evidently, this part of space remained somewhat turbulent – the Imperium had encountered a number of regions across the galaxy that still experienced cycles of warp storm activity, followed by brief periods of calm. The aliens plagued the world as long as they could and then left before the storms could rise up and trap them in the system, likely moving on to terrorise yet another planet.

‘The devils built the black spires after the bombardment, I suppose,’ Bulveye said, thinking aloud.

Andras nodded. ‘Their technology borders on sorcery,’ he said with a trace of awe in his voice. ‘They land their sky-ships on terraces built into the sides of the great spires, and venture out to hunt across the zone when the mood takes them.’

Bulveye nodded thoughtfully. He was starting to build a profile of the aliens in his head, analysing their actions and inferring what he could from them. High overhead, longer and brighter streaks of fire began to arc across the night sky, falling towards Antimon’s surface like a sheaf of burning darts. ‘What happens next?’ the Wolf Lord asked.

Andras took a deep breath. ‘The Harrowers will descend upon the spires and take up

residence,' he said. 'They'll wait for perhaps a day, then send out their tribute parties the following night to take our offering.' The young nobleman shook his head bitterly. 'But we're not ready. They've arrived early this time. We haven't finished stocking our shelters, and we don't have enough people to fill out the quota.'

Bulveye remembered something he'd heard earlier. 'Does that have anything to do with the lottery that the senators were debating earlier?'

Andras stared guiltily up at the Wolf Lord and nodded. 'Every seven years, the incidence of crime drops sharply,' he said with bleak humour. 'Our prisons don't have nearly enough criminals to satisfy the aliens, so there will have to be a lottery to decide who else must become part of the tribute.' His gaze fell to the stone surface of the ramp. 'It's happened before, or so my father tells me. Prominent families are already trying to offer rich bribes to buy an exemption for their children.' He shook his head. 'I don't know what's going to happen now. The Senate will empty the prisons, of course, but that may be all they can manage at this point. I doubt any of the families have more than a few months' food stocked away. When they come out of their shelters to search for more, the Harrowers will be waiting for them.'

The Wolf Lord looked skywards and watched the descent of the raiders. 'I reckon they arrived when they did on purpose,' he said.

'They've become tired of your offerings, Andras, so they've arranged things to provide them some more sport.' It wasn't so difficult to imagine; he had heard of bloodthirsty reavers who'd done much the same thing during his own raiding days on Fenris.

Bulveye tried to imagine offering up Fenrisian villagers to the vile appetites of a band of ruthless xenos marauders, and his stomach roiled at the thought. He looked down at Andras and fought back a surge of deadly rage. It wasn't the boy's fault, he told himself. If anyone was to blame it was his elders. The Wolf Lord now regretted not grabbing Javren by the throat when he'd had the chance.

'Is there a particular place where you bring your tribute to the aliens?' Bulveye asked the young man.

Andras wiped more tears from his cheeks and nodded. 'There is a pavilion,' he replied, 'about ten kilometres east of Oneiros.' He glanced up at the Astartes, and was shaken by the look on Bulveye's face. 'What are you going to do?'

The Wolf Lord met the young man's gaze. 'These xenos think they can prey upon mankind like sheep,' he said calmly. 'I intend on showing them the error of their ways.'

IT WAS EARLY afternoon on the following day when the procession of bulbous Antimonan cargo haulers appeared on the road heading west from Oneiros and made

their way down the length of the broad meadow towards the tribute site. The pavilion itself was square and largely featureless, little more than a chessboard of stone paving tiles more than fifty yards on each side and situated at the feet of a semicircle of large, wooded hills. Only the heavy iron rings fixed at intervals along the paving stones hinted at the site's awful purpose. Further to the west, the tall, knife-like xenos spire rose ominously into the clouds, its base wreathed in tatters of curling mist.

Bulveye and his lieutenants watched from the shadows of a hillside thicket as the cargo haulers left the white-paved utility road and rumbled across the pavilion. The Antimonans wasted little time, orientating themselves across the stone expanse according to a well-drilled plan. When the last vehicle was in place, the passenger doors on the haulers popped open and large men in padded coveralls hopped out. Each one carried a kind of power stave or shock maul, which they swung about with authority once the back gates of the haulers banged open and the shackled prisoners began stumbling out. The men and women wore shapeless, faded brown tunics and breeches, and dark inmate tattoos had been branded along the sides of their necks. Each file of stunned, shambling convicts was herded to a line of iron rings and shackled there as a group. Once they were locked in, the prisoners sank down onto the stones and waited. Some stared up at the blue sky overhead, while others seemed to fold in on themselves and look at nothing at all.

Halvdan shook his head despairingly. 'How can they just sit there, like sheep for the slaughter?' he whispered, despite the fact that the pavilion was nearly a kilometre distant. 'If I were down there, they'd have to beat me senseless before they hooked me to one of those rings.'

Jurgen pointed towards the far end of the pavilion. 'Looks like those lambs agree with you, brother,' he said grimly.

The men in the last set of haulers were struggling with a smaller group of manacled victims, who thrashed and kicked and bit at their handlers. These men and women wore a variety of clothing styles, and were obviously taken from streets and homes all over Oneiros.

They struggled against their fate with an energy born of stark terror, but the lash of the handlers' shock-sticks kept matters from spiralling out of control. Twenty minutes later the last of the weeping, pleading victims were chained to the pavilion stones, and the handlers returned to their vehicles without so much as a backwards glance.

Bulveye raised his eye from the scope of a boltgun and handed the weapon back to Jurgen. There were eight of his warriors surrounding him in the thicket, including his two lieutenants. Gone were the battle-trophies and tokens of honour they'd worn the day before; they'd stripped their armour bare and smudged the gleaming surfaces with dirt and soot to minimise any telltale glint that could give their position away.

Over the course of the previous night they had put aside any pretence of civility and made themselves ready for war.

As the Harrowers had begun to descend on Antimon in their multitudes, Bulveye had left Andras and the city behind, loping through the darkness to the landing field where their Stormbird waited. The pilot of the drop-ship was ready, the craft's thrusters charged and idling as the Space Wolves clambered aboard and began arming themselves from the Stormbird's large weapons lockers. The Wolf Lord had ordered the drop-ship to head west, flying at treetop level to mask its movement from alien auspex arrays, and find a place to settle down within ten or twelve kilometres of the tribute site. The pilot had found a lightly wooded hollow just big enough to put the assault ship down in, and the warriors had spent the rest of the night camouflaging it with netting and scraps of broken branches shorn off by the landing. By dawn, the Wolf Lord had led his small warband to the hills around the pavilion and begun planning his ambush. With so few men and so little in the way of equipment, his options were somewhat limited.

The Wolf Lord pointed to the western end of the field beyond the pavilion. 'Between the paving stones of the tithe site and the woods at the base of the surrounding hills, there was plenty of room to land an entire squadron of Stormbirds. They'll likely bring their ships in over there,' he said. 'That's our kill box.'

Jurgen folded his arms and nodded grudgingly. The warrior cast a sidelong glance at Halvdan, then addressed Bulveye. 'What's our objective here, my lord?'

Bulveye frowned thoughtfully. 'I'd think it was obvious,' he replied. 'We inflict as many casualties among the enemy as possible and put them on the back foot. We want them to start worrying about the possibility of an ambush every time they leave the spire.'

'That's not what I mean, my lord,' Jurgen said. 'You saw all those ships landing last night; there must be more than a hundred at this spire alone. This isn't a little raiding party: it's some kind of nomadic clan or tribe.'

The Wolf Lord gave Jurgen a hard look. 'Are you saying we're not equal to the task?'

'I'm saying it's not our fight,' the lieutenant replied. 'These people aren't Imperial citizens; in fact, their leader called you a liar and said that he wanted nothing to do with us. If the xenos hadn't shown up yesterday you'd be on the Ironwolf right now, planning a campaign to conquer the planet and force it into compliance.'

Bulveye's gaze narrowed angrily at the lieutenant's bold declaration, but finally he nodded. 'What you say is true, brother,' he admitted. 'But it changes nothing. We're warriors of the Emperor and protectors of mankind. All mankind. If we don't live up to that ideal, then all the blood we've shed during the Crusade has been for naught, and

I’ll be damned before I let that happen.’ Before Jurgen could respond, he turned away from his lieutenant and waved at the assembled men. ‘We’ve only got a few hours left before nightfall. Let’s begin preparing our positions.’

The Astartes made their way down out of the hollow and moved quickly through the dense forests around the base of the hills. They took their time sizing up the killing field, drawing not only on the years of intensive training and hypno-instruction provided by the Allfather, but also from years of ambushing foes in the wild terrain of their home-world. When they were content with their positions, the four remaining warriors were summoned from their temporary camp up in the hills to bring down the heavy weapons they’d secured from the Stormbird. While the last elements of the ambush were set in place, the Stormbird’s pilot was situated in a camouflaged position high on one of the nearby hills to warn of the aliens’ approach.

They didn’t have long to wait. An hour after sunset, with a glinting field of stars overhead and deep shadows filling the meadow about the pavilion, Bulveye’s vox-unit came to life. ‘Fenris, this is Aesir,’ the lookout called. ‘Multiple contacts approaching from the west at low altitude. Many heat traces: nearly a dozen large craft and a score of smaller ones.’

At the edge of the woods, Bulveye cocked an ear westwards. Sure enough, he could hear what sounded like gravitic engines, faint but growing stronger. They had an unearthly pitch, like a chorus of wailing souls. But the sound held no dread for him; instead, it set his blood boiling at the prospect of battle. He keyed his vox-bead. ‘Fenris copies. Relocate to point Alpha and prepare for extraction.’

‘Copy,’ the lookout answered. His job done, the pilot would retreat down the hill and head for the Stormbird, prepping the engines and making ready for a quick escape.

Bulveye checked his weapons one last time and turned to his lieutenants. Despite the near-total darkness beneath the canopy, the Wolves’ enhanced senses allowed him to see his battle-brothers clearly. ‘For Russ and the Allfather, Wolf Brothers,’ he said quietly, then led them out into the meadow.

Halvdan and Jurgen followed Bulveye across the wide field west of the tribute site. Wild grass and meadow flowers swished against their armoured legs. The two lieutenants held their boltguns in one hand and their bared blades in the other. Bulveye’s weapons were still sheathed at the moment, and he continued to stare expectantly towards the western horizon.

They crossed the kill box and approached the tribute site, making no effort to conceal their movements. It wasn’t long before the shackled victims spotted the striding giants and began to moan in fear, thinking their doom had come at last. The Space Wolves ignored the rising panic of the prisoners, however. When they were ten yards from the

western edge of the pavilion they stopped and turned about, placing the tribute site at their backs.

Halvdan tested his grip on his weapons. His bale-eye glowed like an ember in the darkness. ‘I don’t see why we have to be the bait,’ he grumbled.

Jurgen grinned cruelly. ‘Obviously, Bulveye wanted the most impressive warriors he had available, to strike fear into the hearts of the enemy. Or, in your case, the ugliest.’

Before the exchange could escalate, a cluster of pale green lights appeared along the hilltops to the west, approaching swiftly. A faint chorus of cries grew louder with each passing moment, riding on the faint breeze. The Harrowers had arrived.

The Space Wolves watched as a dozen glowing lights descended upon them like a salvo of terrain-hugging missiles. Their keen night vision picked out details of the oncoming craft while they were still some distance away: they were small, sleek and rakish, with curved, blade-like stabilisers and rows of wicked barbs protruding from their undersides. Each craft carried a single rider, who appeared lithe and human-like despite the strange, articulated armour they wore. The alien jetbikes howled past the Wolves like a flock of hissing, wailing birds, sweeping by to either side of the three warriors and bearing down on the pavilion behind them. As the bikes went past, Bulveye caught a glimpse of a pale, sharply angular face etched with strange tattoos and glinting with metal implants.

The rider’s eyes were black and depthless as the void itself.

Behind the swarm of jetbikes came eleven larger craft, gliding with lethal grace over the hills and sinking towards the edge of the western field. These ships were the big cousins of the strange jetbikes, with sharply raked prows, spiked hulls and razor-edged stabiliser fins. Crews of pale-skinned, armoured figures swarmed around the decks of eight of the transports; they crowded at the bow, having apparently been told of the three warriors awaiting them on the plain.

Fearless and haughty in their numbers, the large craft settled easily onto the grassy field, and their crews disembarked with contemptuous grace. From a hundred yards away, Bulveye watched the aliens congregate in loose-knit mobs; most of the raiders’ faces were concealed by tall, conical black helmets, and they held long-barrelled rifles in their gloved hands. Their leaders sported tall horsetail-like plumes of hair from their helmets, and their harnesses were decorated with glittering, web-like meshes that held trophies of bleached bone.

They advanced towards the waiting Space Wolves in a rough crescent, their rifles held across their chests, whispering to one another in a sibilant tongue that sounded like the rustle of dry snakeskin. The raiders were wary, studying the huge Astartes with

disquieting intensity, but it was clear from their unhurried advance that they didn't consider the three Wolves a serious threat.

At the centre of the advancing mob came a hunched, pale-skinned figure cased in bizarre, ornate armour, surrounded by a cadre of stitched-together creatures that paced about the leader's heels like a pack of hounds. The hunched figure – evidently the leader of the raiding band, as near as Bulveye could tell – had half of his long, white hair shaved away, exposing a fragile scalp etched with complex scar-tattoos. The exposed ear, long and pointed like a dog's, had been expertly flensed and perforated, until it lay against the side of the alien's head like a kind of grisly lace. More scars lined the figure's angular cheeks and throat; bits of metal glittered from the thin bands of scar tissue, creating a web-work that seemed to form a kind of complex symbol or pictograph that ran from temple to collarbone. The alien's eyes were large and deep-set, and his frayed lips twitched over white teeth that had been filed to jagged points.

The fingers of his left gauntlet were little more than a set of cruel blades that hung almost to his knees; they clattered and scraped against one another as the monster approached. Even from thirty yards away, Bulveye could smell the alien's acrid scent, tainted by strange elixirs and bio-modifications. The scent prickled his skin and brought the taste of bile to his mouth.

He looked upon these monsters and felt no fear; instead, there was only a terrible eagerness – a hunger to bare his blade and dive in amongst his foes, hacking and slashing with wild abandon. It was the wolf inside him – the wild gift of Leman Russ himself, and it stirred in his breast like a living thing.

Not yet, he told the beast. Not yet.

The aliens drew closer, still whispering in their serpentine tongue. Still more strange scents washed over Bulveye and his men, making his veins shiver plucked chords. The raiders were surrounded by a miasma of pheromones, adrenal vapours and narcotic musk; it was all his enhanced physiology could do to filter the poisons before they rendered him insensate. As it was, his head swam and his knees felt weak. He heard Halvdan curse under his breath, and knew his men were struggling as well.

Bulveye turned his head away from the aliens and looked back at the huddled victims chained to the stones of the pavilion. Many were weeping; others had their heads bent in prayer. A handful were looking at him, their eyes wide and pleading.

The Wolf Lord turned back to the advancing raiders, his hands falling to his sides. He eyed the twisted creature at the centre of the mob. 'Hear me, alien,' he called out in a clear voice. 'You've preyed on these people for centuries, so I suspect by now your people understand our tongue. I am Bulveye, axe man of the Rus and sworn brother to

Leman, Primarch of the Sixth Legion. The people of this world are under my protection, monster. You tread here at your peril.'

Bulveye watched the alien leader's dark eyes widen in amusement. His lithe form trembled with deranged mirth until his lips peeled back from his jagged teeth and he cackled with feverish glee. His grotesque bodyguards gibbered and howled along with their master, raking their talons along their scarred cheekbones and tearing at their scabrous lips.

The alien grinned at Bulveye like a sea-pike, showing his needle-pointed teeth, and spoke in a gurgling voice that bubbled up from pheromone-soaked lungs. 'You will make a fine gift for my master,' the xenos said in passable Low Gothic. He flexed his clashing finger-blades. 'How he will laugh to hear your bold words as he unspools the flesh from your bones.' A shudder of pleasure gripped the alien's tortured frame. 'Your suffering shall be exquisite.'

Bulveye's icy gaze narrowed on the monster. 'So you are not the master of this vile horde?'

The xenos gave a bark of phlegmatic laughter. 'I am but a lowly servant of Darragh Shakkar, Archon of the Kabal of the Shrieking Heart. It is he who holds this world of beasts in his taloned hands.'

The Wolf Lord nodded slowly. When he spoke again, his voice was cold as polished iron. 'Then you and I have nothing more to discuss.' Bulveye's right hand was a blur of motion as he drew the plasma pistol from his hip and shot the alien between the eyes.

The alien leader's headless body had not yet hit the ground before the rest of the Space Wolves opened fire, unleashing a stream of bolter rounds from the surrounding woods into the mass of the assembled raiders. The xenos mob was so tightly packed that every round found a target; the mass-reactive slugs punched through the aliens' light body armour and exploded within, ripping their limbs and bodies apart. With a crackling hiss, a pair of krak missiles streaked from the tree line and struck the sides of two of the larger transports, blowing them apart in a deadly shower of fire and red-hot shrapnel. The aliens spun about, shrieking with rage, and fired their rifles blindly into the darkness. Their weapons made a high-pitched buzzing as they fired, spitting streams of hypervelocity splinters into the trees.

Behind Bulveye, Jurgen and Halvdan raised their boltguns and added to the carnage, pumping streams of shells into the surprised raiders. The alien warriors twitched and fell in sprays of bitter blood.

Through the hail of fire came the bodyguards of the fallen alien leader, their hideous faces twisted into masks of drug-fuelled hatred as they hurled themselves at the Wolf

Lord. Dozens of the xenos warriors took inspiration from the bodyguards' wild charge, and they joined in as well.

Streams of splinter fire hissed past Bulveye or spattered against his Mechanicum-blessed armour as the aliens bore down upon him.

Overhead, a flight of xenos jetbikes hissed past, raking the northern tree-line with splinter fire. In response, a frag missile streaked skywards on a plume of flame and detonated in their midst, riddling three of the bikes with shrapnel and sending them plunging to the ground.

The Wolf Lord held his ground and pulled his power axe from his belt. Triggering its energy field, he leaped forwards to meet the xenos charge with an ancient war-song on his lips. The bodyguards surrounded him on all sides, raking at him with their claws or lunging forwards to snap at him with their fangs, but each time Bulveye answered them with a fearsome sweep of his axe. He severed arms and split trunks, spilled entrails and severed heads, until the bodies began to pile up about him. The wolf surged within his breast, demanding release, but Bulveye focused on his axe-work and held the beast at bay.

Within moments Jurgen and Halvdan joined the melee, carving into the enemy mob with sweeps of their crackling power swords. Behind the aliens, more of their transport craft exploded under the missiles and concentrated bolter fire of the remaining Wolf Guard.

The surviving jetbikes continued to strafe the woods, seeking revenge against the ambushers, but the darkness and the close-set trees shielded the Astartes from much of the enemy fire.

A saw-edged bayonet glanced off Bulveye's breastplate; another jabbed at his right leg and scored a bright line across his greave. A third weapon jabbed in from the left and a little behind the Wolf Lord, stabbing into the hollow under his arm and tangling in the cables that ran there. He swung his axe in a backhanded stroke that struck the head off one raider and buried itself in the torso of the attacker who'd stabbed him from behind. To his right, he levelled his plasma pistol and fired twice, point-blank, into the press. Aliens burst apart, vaporised by intense blasts of ionised gases or set alight by secondary thermal effects.

Then, suddenly, the xenos raiders retreated from the Wolf Lord like an outgoing tide, flowing away swiftly on all sides. More splinters crashed against his chest and arms, but they were wild bursts fired by the retreating aliens. The surviving warriors were in full flight, racing back to their remaining transports under the covering fire of the remaining jetbikes.

Bulveye and his lieutenants rushed forwards with bloodied weapons held high, singing songs of vengeance and death. A splinter struck the Wolf Lord just above the knee, causing him to stumble with a spasm of sudden pain, but his advance scarcely faltered. Two of the transports rose into the air with a whine of gravitic impellers; immediately they were targeted by a pair of krak missiles. One transport was struck on the flank, showering the troop deck with flame. The vehicle rocked beneath the blow, spilling burning bodies over the starboard rail, but it managed to lurch ahead with a shriek of thrusters and come about in a long turn to the west. The second craft blew apart in a spectacular explosion, showering the field with blazing debris. Some of the burning pieces fell among the rest of the rising transports, sowing more death and destruction across their troop compartments, but the damage wasn't enough to incapacitate them. The rakish craft swung around and disappeared swiftly into the distance, fleeing for the safety of the distant spire.

Moments later, Bulveye and his men were alone, surrounded by flaming wreckage and the bodies of the dead.

The Wolf Lord summoned his men from their ambush positions. 'Jurgen, check on the men and give me a report,' he told his lieutenant, then turned and headed for the pavilion.

They cowered at his approach – a massive, armoured giant, silhouetted in flame and bearing a glowing, crackling power axe in one gauntleted hand. The Antimonans, prisoners and innocent victims alike, looked upon Bulveye with an equal mix of awe and pure, atavistic terror. He looked over the huddled mass of men and women and spoke in a clear, commanding voice.

'Hear me, people of Antimon,' the Wolf Lord said. 'From this night forwards, you will live in fear no longer. Return to your city and tell everyone you meet of what happened tonight. Tell them that the Allfather has sent his warriors to fight on your behalf, and that we will not rest until the aliens are driven from your world forever.'

He swept his axe down in a hissing arc and sliced through the chains of the first set of prisoners. They leaped back with a shout, then held up the severed links with looks of shock and uncomprehending wonder. By the time the Wolf Lord had reached the second set of prisoners, the first men were already running eastwards as fast as their feet would take them.

Halvdan joined Bulveye in freeing the Antimonans. His power sword crackled as it split the iron rings asunder. When the last of the people had been freed and sent fleeing back to Oneiros, the lieutenant gave Bulveye a sidelong glance, his augmetic eye flat and unreadable. 'Not a bad beginning,' he said. 'But we were lucky. The damned aliens have had the run of this planet for so long that they'd become complacent. And I reckon they'll be back here in no time, looking to even the score.

What do we do now?’

The Wolf Lord straightened and looked to the west. ‘We call in the Stormbird and head south, drawing any pursuit after us so the Oneirans have a good chance of getting back to their home city,’ he said. ‘Then we find a good spot in the wastelands to set up a base and wait to see just how badly these people want their planet back.’

THERE WAS A storm building out among the ruins. Bulveye could feel the static charge building in the air like a faint caress against the exposed skin of his face and hands. A breath of hot, dry wind hissed over the broken stones of the fallen city, followed by a brassy roll of thunder far off to the east that stirred the Wolf Lord from the depths of his restorative trance. Reflexively he began the series of auto-hypnotic rotes that would bring him, layer by mental layer, back to full consciousness. Within a few moments he opened his eyes and took a deep breath to fully activate his pulmonary systems. His armour’s bio-support systems finished their purification routines, leeching away the toxins excreted via the modified sweat glands along his skin and injecting metabolic stabilisers into his bloodstream. By his own estimation he’d been resting for less than an hour. It wasn’t enough, based on the amount of radiation he had been exposed to, but it would have to do. He would need to inspect the warband’s makeshift camp and ensure that everything was under cover and secured before the storm and its howling winds roared over them.

Their latest encampment was a hundred kilometres south of Oneiros’s habitable zone, in the wreckage of a small city that still bore a high level of background radiation from the xenos holocaust of two centuries before. Over the last three months they had shifted position dozens of times, never staying in one place for more than a week and keeping to radioactive regions in the hope of confounding enemy hunter-killer patrols. It was only Bulveye’s long experience as a raider himself plus the mobility afforded by their Stormbird drop-ship that allowed the Wolves to continue their hit-and-run raids against the Harrowers and evade the furious pursuits that followed.

They struck everywhere and anywhere, operating as three-man teams in nearly every one of the planet’s habitable zones. With hundreds of years of combat experience and a lifetime stalking through the woods of their native Fenris, the Astartes sprang lightning-quick ambushes against isolated xenos raiding parties, or used missile launchers to attack low-flying transports moving between the alien spires and the Antimonan cities. They would strike fast, inflict as many casualties as possible, then fade just as quickly into the countryside, avoiding detection until the opportunity arose to strike again. Bulveye meant to draw off as many of the Harrowers as he could and disrupt their raids against the Antimonans, and judging by the intensity of the xenos response, the strategy appeared to be succeeding. The aliens now kept constant patrols searching the wastelands, some venturing as far north and south as the planetary poles, and in the last few weeks had even resorted to unleashing random orbital bombardments against some of the larger ruins in the hope of flushing out their

prey.

The Astartes succeeded for no other reason than they were willing – and able – to suffer far more privation and hardship than their foes. The small store of emergency rations aboard the Stormbird had been exhausted within a month of careful rationing but the warriors' enhanced metabolic functions allowed them to draw nutrients from plants, animals and even inorganic materials that would kill a normal human. They camped in wild, desolate places that left them at the mercy of the worst weather that the planet could produce, and exposed themselves to levels of background radiation that would have killed a normal human within hours. More than once, an enemy hunter-killer team had caught the Wolves' trail, but were ultimately forced to abandon their pursuit when the land became too deadly for them to travel through.

For all that, the Wolves paid a steep price for their success. The constant exposure to radiation had suppressed their natural healing abilities, and coupled with the aliens' predilection to poison their weapons, it meant that many of the warriors were wounded to a greater or lesser degree. Of the twelve Astartes under the Wolf Lord's command, three had succumbed to their wounds and lapsed into the Red Dream, a deep coma that freed the warrior's body to try and cope with the gravest of injuries. Currently, Bulveye had two teams of three on extended deployments around the planet at all times, with a third team providing security for their fallen brothers while they regained their strength for another patrol.

The going had been difficult, but there were encouraging signs that they were having an impact on the balance of power across Antimon. The Harrowers still attacked the local cities, sometimes with a savagery that bordered on the bestial, but the fierce, uncoordinated attacks rarely produced significant results. More importantly, there were signs that Bulveye's message had somehow managed to circulate among the Antimonans across the entire world. The tribute fields had fallen into disuse after the events of that first, fateful night – or at least, they were no longer used for the purpose they'd been intended. Instead, the Wolves would sometimes pass near the pavilions and find offerings of food or medicines wrapped in parcels of waterproof cloth, or simply wreaths of local flowers or bottles of wine. Sometimes the parcels would contain notes written in the local dialect, and the warriors would puzzle for hours over the strange script, trying to divine their contents. To Bulveye, the message was clear enough: the people of the battered world knew what his warband was doing on their behalf, and they were grateful.

The Wolf Lord caught sight of movement at the bottom of the low hill where he sat. Moments later, Halvdan emerged from the ruins of a small dwelling and began limping haltingly up the slope towards him. The burly warrior had been hit in the thigh by an envenomed dagger wielded by a white-haired xenos female, and the wound so far showed no signs of healing. How he continued to walk, let alone fight, in the face of such terrible pain was a wonder to Bulveye.

‘Stormbird’s on the way back,’ the lieutenant said hoarsely as he reached the top of the hill. Bulveye beckoned for the warrior to sit, and Halvdan sank to the ground with a grateful nod. The skin around his eyes was pale and lined with strain as he pulled a water flask from his belt and took a deep draught of the contents.

Bulveye nodded. ‘Both teams recovered?’

‘Aye, thank the Allfather,’ Halvdan replied. ‘Jurgen said he had casualties, though.’ The bearded warrior looked off to the east, towards the distant brown smudge of the approaching storm. He took another swallow from the flask. ‘I’ve finished taking stock of our supplies, as you requested.’

The Wolf Lord arched an eyebrow. ‘That was fast.’

Halvdan let out a grunt. ‘There wasn’t much to count,’ he said. ‘We’re down to forty rounds of bolt-gun ammo per man, eight grenades, twelve melta charges and two krak missiles, plus whatever else the two patrols manage to bring back with them. We don’t have a single complete medicae kit left, and armour damage varies anywhere from ten per cent to eighteen per cent per warrior. In short, we’re close to the end of our rope. We can manage another set of patrols, or perhaps one major engagement, and that will be that.’ He sighed, fixing the Wolf Lord with his baleful red eye. ‘We’re four weeks overdue at Kernunnos at this point. They’re bound to send someone to look for us. A battle group could arrive at any time.’

The Wolf Lord regarded his sword-brother. ‘What are you getting at?’ he said.

Halvdan took another drink. From the smell, it was clearly filled with Antimonan wine. The warrior shrugged his massive shoulders. ‘I don’t like these damned aliens any more than you do, lord, but I think we’ve done all we can at this point. Leman himself couldn’t have asked our brothers to fight any harder. You know that. When the Stormbird gets back, why don’t we go to ground somewhere a little more liveable and lay low until relief arrives?’

The suggestion took Bulveye aback. ‘We can’t stop now. Especially now. The tide is turning in our favour. If we don’t keep up the pressure we’ll be relinquishing the initiative to the enemy, and I guarantee they will do all they can to capitalise on it.’

‘Yes, but…’ Halvdan paused, searching for a tactful way to say what was on his mind. After a moment, he gave up and simply ploughed ahead. ‘My lord, we owe these people nothing. They rejected you out of hand. You know what that means.’

The Wolf Lord’s eyes narrowed angrily. ‘I know full well,’ he growled. ‘And if it comes down to that, I’ll do my duty, like any other servant of the Allfather. You can’t look at

the wreck I've made of this subsector and imagine otherwise.'

Halvdan raised a placating hand. 'Look, I'm not saying you've gone soft-hearted—'

'I know exactly what you're saying, brother,' Bulveye said. 'You wonder why I'm going to such effort to fight for people we will just have to turn around and conquer later.'

The Wolf Lord rose to his feet. Dust spilled from the joints of his armour and billowed away in the rising breeze. 'We are crusaders, Halvdan. The Allfather sent us forth to save the lost worlds of humanity and bring them back into the fold. If there is a chance, however slim, that we can convince these people of our intentions and avoid repeating what we did to Kernunnos, then I'll do whatever I must. I'll fight to my last breath if that is what it takes.'

Halvdan stared up at Bulveye, his expression hard, but after a moment he simply shook his head and sighed. With an effort, he forced himself back onto his feet and clapped his hand on the Wolf Lord's shoulder.

'The drop-ship should be back at any moment,' he said. 'We'd best go meet it and see if Jurgen's brought us back any presents.'

Together, the two Astartes made their way down the hill and out into the dusty plain west of the ruined town. No sooner had they arrived than a black shape appeared on the horizon, streaking in low to mask its flight path from orbital surveyors. At once, the two Wolves could see that the drop-ship was in trouble: smoke was streaming from one of its engines, and its flight path was erratic. It was clear that the pilot was struggling desperately to keep the Stormbird straight and level at such a dangerous altitude.

Within minutes the assault craft was flaring its jets over the landing field and settling down hard on the dusty ground. Moments later the ramp opened and four Wolves – including the pilot – exited quickly with portable fire suppressors in their hands. They raced aft and doused the smoking engine. Jurgen, meanwhile, appeared at the top of the ramp and approached Bulveye and Halvdan, who were still standing a few yards distant.

'You missed quite a trip,' Jurgen said as he stepped up to his lord. 'A brace of alien fighters picked us up as we were transiting the Oneiran habitable zone. They gave us quite a run before we managed to knock them down.'

'How bad is it?' Bulveye asked.

Jurgen's expression turned grim. 'You'll have to ask the pilot about the drop-ship. Two more of our brothers have gone into the Red Dream. One of them is likely going to lose

both his legs, if he survives at all.'

The Wolf Lord accepted the news with a curt nod. 'Were the patrols successful?'

'Yes,' Jurgen said without hesitation. 'Perhaps more so than we might have expected.'

'Oh? How's that?'

The lieutenant folded his arms. 'Well, as we were flying back, the pilot picked up a lot of aerial activity around Oneiros. It appeared that the Harrowers were conducting a major series of raids on the city, so I decided to try and get a closer look. We infiltrated the zone and set down near the tribute field. That's where our patrol found something interesting.'

Bulveye frowned at the news. 'Another package?'

'No,' Jurgen said. 'A message.' He reached into a pouch at his belt and drew out a scrap of paper. 'It was wrapped around the hilt of a dagger that was driven into a gap between the paving stones of the pavilion.'

The Wolf Lord examined the paper. To his surprise, it was written in archaic Low Gothic – less like the local dialect and more like the parent tongue that nearly every human world understood. The note contained a vox frequency, a time and a name. Andras.

Jurgen studied Bulveye's reaction to the message. 'What do you think it means?' he asked.

Bulveye queried his armour's chrono. The time mentioned on the note was just a few hours away. 'It means that the Antimonans are ready to take the next step.'

THEY ARRIVED FOUR hours before the scheduled rendezvous time, after moving overland through the wastes and then slipping through the wooded hills until they were in position to observe the tribute field. Bulveye had no doubt that it was Andras whom he spoke to over the vox, but that didn't mean an ambush was out of the question.

Xenos aircraft flew overhead at constant intervals while the Wolves sat and waited: transports and fighters, most bound in the direction of Oneiros. As Jurgen had reported, it appeared that the Harrowers had committed a great deal of their local strength to pillaging the city, no matter the cost. Bulveye watched the flights pass overhead and added the data to his evolving plan.

At precisely the appointed time, a trio of cloaked figures slipped from the woods

bordering the road to the east of the pavilion and headed for the tribute site. The Wolves were impressed; no one had caught wind of the Antimonans until they'd broken cover. Bulveye watched them approach and crouch down at the rendezvous point, and made his decision.

'I'm going down,' he told his lieutenants. 'Hold position here until I say otherwise.' Then he rose from the shadows and made his way out onto the plain where they'd first ambushed the Harrowers some twelve weeks before.

The Antimonans saw him coming from a long way off. They watched him intently from the depths of their hoods, but made no move until he was just a few yards away. One of the figures rose smoothly and moved to join Bulveye. He could tell from the way the man moved that it was Andras.

'Well met,' Bulveye said quietly, extending his hand. Andras took it, clasping the Wolf Lord's wrist in a warrior's grip.

'We've been waiting for two weeks, hoping you'd find the message,' the young nobleman replied. 'We're glad you came. How are you faring?'

'Well enough,' Bulveye said carefully. 'We're grateful for the gifts your people have left for us. Has the Senate had a change of heart?'

'The Senate is no more,' Andras replied. 'The raiders killed them last month.'

The news surprised Bulveye. 'What happened?'

'Our food stores are swiftly running out,' Andras explained. 'It's the same all over Antimon. My father and the other senators decided to open negotiations with the leader of the Harrowers and try to organise some kind of settlement before our situation became untenable.' The nobleman's body stiffened. 'The alien leader agreed on a meeting at the Senate building but he did not come to talk. Instead, he and his warriors seized the senators and spent an entire week torturing them to death. Since then, the raiders have gone wild in Oneiros, filling the streets and tearing into the hill shelters with every tool and weapon at their disposal.'

'What became of the alien leader?' Bulveye inquired.

'He personally took part in torturing the senators, but returned to the spire afterwards.'

The Wolf Lord nodded thoughtfully. 'And what do you wish of us, Andras, son of Javren?'

Andras reached up and drew back his hood. A fresh scar marked the left side of his face, and livid bruises coloured his brow. ‘We want to join you,’ he replied. ‘There were always those of us in the aristocracy who secretly kept the ways of the armigers alive. When you fought the raiders here on that first night, it inspired us to take action ourselves. Lately we’ve been making attacks against the raiders inside the city and enjoyed some success, but we would be a hundred times more effective if we could fight with you and your warriors beside us!’

To Andras’s evident surprise, Bulveye shook his head. ‘Fighting aliens inside Oneiros will accomplish very little at this point.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Andras hissed. ‘How is that any different from what you have been doing these last three months?’

‘Because everything I’ve done so far has been with one objective in mind,’ Bulveye said. ‘And that is to divide the raiders and ultimately turn them against one another.’

Andras scowled at the Wolf Lord and shook his head in frustration. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

‘That’s because you were never a raider yourself,’ Bulveye replied. ‘I was, a very long time ago, and everything I’ve seen about the Harrowers so far tells me they aren’t much different from the reavers I dealt with back on Fenris.’

‘What does that mean?’ Andras replied.

‘It means that they’re a greedy lot, and greed makes a person treacherous,’ Bulveye explained. ‘A raiding band is only as strong as its leader, who holds the group together by dint of being harder, meaner and cleverer than the rest. He takes the best of the plunder for himself, but so long as everyone manages to get a cut, the gang stays more or less content. When the loot dries up, though, watch out. That’s when things get dangerous.’

Andras thought about that for a moment. ‘And you’ve been making it hard for the Harrowers to take many slaves.’

‘And killing as many of them as I can in the bargain,’ Bulveye said. ‘Every time a raiding party is ambushed, or a transport is shot down, the Harrowers’ leader is made to appear weak. And I guarantee that some of his lieutenants are feeling tempted to try and take control of the band themselves.’

‘So if the current leader dies, the rest will turn on each other to see who gets to be next in charge.’ Andras said.

‘Exactly,’ Bulveye agreed. ‘And now, while the majority of the Harrowers are in Oneiros, we’ve got our best chance of killing him and setting the bloody contest in motion.’

‘How do you plan on doing that?’ the nobleman asked. ‘I told you, he’s back at the spire now.’

‘All I need is a Harrower transport,’ Bulveye said. ‘The aliens think they’re safe in their floating citadels. I’m going to show them otherwise.’

Andras stared up at the Wolf Lord. ‘I can get you a transport,’ he told Bulveye. ‘But only if you let us help you attack the spire.’

Bulveye held up a hand. ‘I appreciate your courage, but we don’t need the help.’

‘Really? Do you know how to fly one of those transports?’

‘Not at the moment,’ the Wolf Lord replied. ‘Do you?’

‘Not… at the moment,’ Andras grudgingly admitted, ‘but over the last couple of centuries my people have gleaned quite a bit about the aliens’ tongue.’ The young nobleman drew himself up to his full height, which still left him at roughly chest-height next to the huge Astartes. ‘We can deliver a transport into your hands and tell you how to read its controls. All we ask is that you allow us to accompany you when you attack the spire.’

Bulveye could not help but admire the young man’s courage. ‘How fast could you accomplish this?’

‘We can strike tonight if you wish,’ Andras said confidently. ‘Is that so? All right. Tell me of your plan.’

ONCE ANDRAS AND Bulveye had agreed upon the plan, the Wolf Lord gathered his battle-brothers and the Antimonans led them back to Oneiros on foot. At the outskirts of the city the Wolf Lord saw firsthand the devastation wrought by the xenos occupiers. The sky above the city was orange with flames from burning buildings at the city centre, and Bulveye could see signs of activity on the hills surrounding Oneiros as the aliens besieged a great many of the white stone hill-shelters. Fliers buzzed back and forth through the night air, but Andras and his companions led the Astartes on a circuitous route down the winding streets towards a large square just a few kilometres from the Senate building. In the square sat four of the alien transports and close to forty of the raiders in an improvised field base.

Andras led the Wolves into the burnt-out shell of a municipal building and left them

there while he and his compatriots went to set his plan in motion. Andras returned with eight others a short while later, this time wearing the curious scaled armour and weapons of Antimon's warrior caste. The hexagonal links of the armour were polished to a mirror-bright sheen, and carried a faint scent of ozone that wrinkled Bulveye's nose.

'It's done,' the young nobleman said. 'We'd been planning this for some time, but for a different purpose. The diversion had been intended to draw the Harrowers away so that other groups could leave their shelters and forage for food.' Andras's expression turned grim. 'Hopefully, if our plan works, there won't be a need for such desperate measures.'

Bulveye nodded. 'How long?'

Andras glanced at his chrono. 'Another twenty minutes, give or take.'

The warriors settled down to wait, checking their weapons and observing the activity in the plaza. Bulveye settled down beside Andras. 'You asked me a number of questions before,' he said. 'Now I'd like to ask one of you.'

Andras looked up from the partially disassembled pistol in his lap. 'All right,' he said evenly. 'What do you want to know?'

'When we first arrived over Antimon, no one answered our hails – except for you,' the Wolf Lord said. 'Why did you disobey the Senate and answer our call?'

Andras didn't reply at first. His lips compressed into a tight line and his eyes grew haunted. 'The Harrowers took my mother and my sister when I was only four,' he said. 'They broke into our shelter. My father had barely enough time to hide me, but the raiders found everyone else. They spared him because he was a member of the Senate, but they… they took the others away, and he didn't even try to stop them. My sister was only two at the time.' The young man reached up and pinched the corners of his eyes. 'When I was ten I crept into the attic and started practising with my great-grandfather's blades. I swore to myself that if I ever had the chance, I was going to make the Harrowers pay for what they'd done. When your ship arrived in orbit, I thought that chance had finally come.'

Bulveye laid a hand on Andras's shoulder. 'It has, Andras. You have my oath on it.'

Off in the distance came the faint but unmistakeable sound of an explosion, followed by the rattle and pop of gunfire. The sounds of fighting intensified within moments, until it sounded like a full-fledged battle was underway.

Andras straightened. 'That would be the diversion,' he said. 'Now we wait and see

what the Harrowers will do.'

Out in the plaza, the aliens had sprung into action. Within minutes, three of the transports were lifting off and rushing over the hilltops in the direction of the fighting.

Andras smiled as the transports faded from sight. 'They always leave one back in reserve,' he said, nodding towards the grounded craft. 'Now all we need to do is take care of the ten warriors that are left.'

Bulveye nodded. 'Leave that to us.'

The building they were concealed in was down a side street just off the square, about a hundred yards from the transport and its complement of raiders. Bulveye summoned his eight warriors with a curt command, and the Astartes readied their weapons. 'Be swift, brothers,' he told the Astartes. 'This is not the time for stealth. Kill the bastards as quick as you can, and let's be away.'

Without waiting for a reply, the Wolf Lord led the way into the street and set off towards the Harrowers at a dead run.

He'd barely covered fifty metres when the aliens spotted him. His enhanced hearing picked up a stream of hissed orders from the enemy officer, and the warriors quickly took cover and opened fire. Splinters hissed through the air all around Bulveye or rang off the plates of his armour. In reply, he raised his plasma pistol and let off two shots: the first struck the xenos officer as he ran from one position of concealment to another, cutting the alien nearly in two. The second blast struck a raider just as he rose from cover to take shot with his rifle, vaporising the alien's head and shoulders.

Bolter fire rang out all around the Wolf Lord, and howls of battle-fury split the night. Once again, Bulveye felt the beast inside him stir at the sound, but still he held it back. Not yet, he thought to himself. Not yet, but soon.

Firing on the move, the Space Wolves felled one alien after another, until the last three lost their nerve and fled down a side street on the opposite side of the plaza. Wasting no time, Bulveye reached the transport and leaped aboard, his axe held ready. He landed just in time to see the transport's pilot dive over the opposite side of the craft and flee as well.

Within a few moments the rest of Bulveye's war-band and Andras's warriors had climbed aboard the alien craft. Right away, the Wolves' pilot, an Astartes named Ranulf, and two Antimonans whom Andras claimed were conversant with the alien's strange language, clustered by the transport's controls and began to puzzle them out. A minute later Ranulf keyed a number of controls, and the craft's powerplant activated with a rising whine. Then the pilot took hold of what looked like a control yoke and

slowly, carefully, the transport rose into the air. It swung its nose ponderously to the west and began gliding gracelessly forwards.

‘Faster!’ Bulveye urged. ‘The aliens will be on us at any moment! If we don’t get to the spire before they raise the alarm we’re all done for!’

‘Aye, lord,’ Ranulf answered. ‘Everyone hang on to something!’ he said, and pulled a lever. At once, the craft surged forwards, gathering speed until the city and the twilit countryside blurred away beneath them.

As the transport sped like an arrow towards the xenos spire, Andras worked his way forwards to stand beside Bulveye. ‘Are you sure this is going to work?’ he asked.

Bulveye considered his answer. ‘If we can reach the reactor chamber, then I’m sure we can bring down the spire,’ he said. ‘As to the rest…’ He shrugged. ‘It’s in the hands of the Fates now.’

‘But how can you be certain we’ll find their leader?’ the nobleman asked.

The Wolf Lord answered with a savage smile. ‘Once he realises what we intend to do, don’t worry. He’ll come to us.’

Ten minutes later they saw the alien spire. The massive structure was silhouetted against the night sky, limned in a faint blue glow cast by the citadel’s gravitic suspensors. Pale green lights flashed at intervals along the surface of the spire, and here and there a craft rose from a landing spot on the side of the structure and sped away into the night.

Suddenly, Ranulf called out from the control room. ‘My lord! The vox in here’s started hissing! I think we’re being challenged!’

Bulveye bent at the knees, placing as much of his body behind the armoured railing of the transport as he could. The rest of the Wolves followed suit. The Wolf Lord looked over at Andras. ‘I’d get down were I you,’ he said. ‘Here’s where things get interesting.’

All at once the night sky lit up with beams of energy and stitching streams of fire as the spire’s defensive batteries went into action.

Energy blasts struck the prow of the transport, blasting holes through the armour plate and showering the passengers with molten shrapnel. Bulveye turned back to the control room. ‘Aim for the centre of the spire!’ he told Ranulf. ‘There have to be landing pads there for maintenance and supply!’

The transport plunged onwards through the hail of fire. Its high speed and the surprise of the spire's gunners made it a difficult target, and it crossed the distance to the citadel in a matter of seconds. Ranulf caught sight of a suitable landing pad at the spire's midpoint and raced towards it. Only at the last minute did he try to flare the engines back and come in for a landing.

They touched down with a bone-jarring crunch and a long, rending sound of tearing metal. Everyone was thrown forwards, piling up in the craft's mutilated bow as the transport skidded wildly down the landing pad in a shower of sparks. Finally, friction asserted itself and the transport slowed, skidding to a stop less than a dozen metres from the far edge of the pad.

It took several moments for the warriors to extricate themselves from the bow of the transport. Jurgen and Halvdan led the way, leaping over the rail onto the landing pad with weapons at the ready. The rest of the Wolves and Andras's warriors quickly followed, their faces concealed by armoured veils. Bulveye yelled to Ranulf as he reached the rail. 'Make sure this bucket is ready to fly by the time we get back,' he said, 'otherwise it's going to be a long walk back to Oneiros!'

The Wolf Lord leaped over the rail and landed with a clang onto the pad. Five yards away, a long, low hatchway led into the spire.

Bulveye waved his battle-brothers towards the hatch. As they advanced, Andras came up beside him, closely trailed by his warriors.

'What now?' he asked.

Bulveye nodded at the hatch. 'This has to be a loading hatch for carrying parts and supplies into the citadel,' he said. 'The passageway beyond will take us to the reactor chamber sooner or later.' He nodded to Halvdan. 'Melta charge! Make us a hole!'

The lieutenant nodded and fitted one of their six anti-armour charges to the hatch. Moments later there was a whoomp of superheated air, and a large, molten hole had been blown through the door's thick plating. Without hesitation, Jurgen and two of the Space Wolves dived inside, and boltguns echoed in the space beyond. The staging area beyond was littered with wreckage from the blast; smashed containers spilled half-melted debris across the black floor and smouldering, armoured corpses attested to the force of the melta charge's focused blast.

The Wolf Lord and the rest of the assault team charged through the breach as Halvdan pulled a small auspex unit from his belt. The Astartes keyed in a series of commands, and the unit lit up immediately. 'I'm getting a strong energy source at about seven hundred metres,' he said, gesturing towards the centre of the spire. 'That's got to be the reactor.'

‘Take point,’ Bulveye said with a curt nod. ‘Find us the shortest route to the core and stop for nothing.’

For the next twenty minutes the assault team drove their way deeper into the spire, navigating by the energy traces on Halvdan’s auspex unit. Bulveye and his Wolves moved swiftly and lethally through the access corridors of the alien citadel, orchestrating a well-rehearsed dance of death that tore through everything the Harrowers put in their path. The huge passageways were teardrop-shaped and oddly faceted, as though the entire citadel had been carved from a strange kind of crystal, and the walls hummed with stored energies. Every surface was suffused with a purplish light, picking out strange, graceful carvings on the crystalline walls but leaving much else in shadow.

The xenos defenders sealed all the hatches leading into the spire and organised hasty defences behind each of them, but each time the Wolves would use a melta charge to create a breach and then dive through firing while the defenders were still recovering from the effects of the blast. It was a time-honoured technique that the Astartes had mastered in boarding actions over the course of decades, and so long as they kept up their momentum the warriors were difficult to stop.

Bulveye knew they were getting close when they blasted their way into a large room lined with strange, pulsing controls and filled with almost fifty xenos warriors. The Wolves made their breach and broke through into a storm of hissing splinter fire. Jurgen and the two warriors who went in first were struck dozens of times, but the armour succeeded in deflecting most of the deadly needles.

Without hesitating they rushed at the mass of aliens, their power swords and chainaxes held high, and in moments were locked in a savage melee.

The Wolf Lord was next through the breach, and found himself attacked from three sides by armoured raiders brandishing rifles and jagged knives. He drove back the assailants on his left with a shot from his plasma pistol, then slashed furiously at the rest with his power axe. The keen blade split rifle barrels and armoured torsos with equal ease, and the aliens fell back in disarray. Bulveye charged after them, allowing room for Halvdan and the rest to make their way into the chamber behind him.

Splinters howled through the air, and the crackle of Antimonan pistols replied in kind. Andras came up on Bulveye’s left, slashing at the aliens with his sword. Splinters raked him, but the projectiles sparked and deflected away from the noble – evidently the armiger harness incorporated a defensive force-field of some kind. The rest of the Antimonans joined in with ferocious zeal, shooting and stabbing at every Harrower they could see.

The aliens fought to the last, emptying their weapons and then using their bayonet-tipped rifles as pole-arms until they were finally cut down. One of Andras's men lay dead among them, and every one of Bulveye's warriors had sustained a number of minor wounds.

'Press on,' the Wolf Lord commanded, indicating the open archway at the far end of the chamber.

They emerged into a vast room whose ceiling rose to a peak far above their heads. Control consoles lined the walls of the octagonal chamber, and three other archways led off in different directions from the room. At the centre of the chamber, suspended in a complex network of struts and field induction matrices, rested an enormous, spindle-shaped crystal. The feeling of ambient power was thick inside the chamber; each pulse shivered along the Wolf Lord's bones. 'This is it,' he said. 'Halvdan, set the remaining charges. The rest of you cover the other entrances.'

'Two had best be enough,' the lieutenant said, limping forwards and scrutinising the crystal to determine where his charges would do the most damage.

The rest of the warriors raced forwards, fanning out around the huge reactor room to block access via the other three entrances to give time for Halvdan to do his work. Bulveye was only a few steps behind them, crossing to the opposite side of the chamber, when the Harrowers launched their counter-attack.

They struck from all three sides at once, pouring splinter fire through the openings that ricocheted dangerously around the room. The fire was so intense that the defenders had to duck away and take cover, which gave the xenos troops the opening they needed to launch their charge. Armoured warriors burst into the chamber from left and right, driving back the Antimonans and coming to grips with the warriors of Bulveye's Wolf Guard.

Across the chamber, Bulveye saw one of Andras's warriors lean into the third archway and open fire with both pistols. Splinter fire sparkled across his shields – then a pair of indigo energy beams struck the warrior full in the chest, collapsing the energy field and blasting the man apart. Right on the heels of the energy bolts charged a force of black-armoured warriors wielding long, powerful glaives that crackled with blue arcs of electricity. Within moments another of the armigers was dead, cut in two by the blow of one of those deadly weapons, and the two Wolves guarding the entrance had been driven back, hard-pressed by the fearsome attackers.

Into the space created by the sudden charge came a tall, lithe figure, clad in intricate, arcane armour and wreathed in a corona of swirling, indigo-hued energy. A long, curved black blade hung loosely in his right hand, and a long-barrelled pistol was ready in his left. His hair was long and black, hanging unbound past his shoulders, and

his face… The sight of his face caused Bulveye's blood to run cold.

The xenos chieftain had no face – or rather, he had a multitude of them. Ghostly, agonised human faces flickered and wailed in the place where the alien's face ought to be. Men, women, children – each face twisted in a mask of unutterable terror and pain. From across the room, Bulveye could feel the horror radiating from the terrible holo-mask, as palpable as a knife drawn against his cheek.

The wolf inside him rose up, baring its fangs. Its rage and bloodlust filled him. Now? It seemed to ask.

Now, Bulveye answered, and he let the rage of the Wulfen fill him. The Wolf Lord raised his glowing axe and howled, a primal sound born in the primeval forests of ancient Terra itself, and then charged at his foe.

Two of the chieftain's bodyguards leaped into the Wolf Lord's path, their glaives held ready. He shot them both with blasts of his plasma pistol, dropping them with glowing craters blasted in their chests. A third bodyguard leaped forwards, stabbing with his glaive.

The motion was almost too swift for the eye to follow, but the battle-madness had taken hold of Bulveye, and his body moved almost without conscious thought. He swept the blade aside with the flat of his axe, then brought the weapon around in a back-handed blow that sheared through the warrior's neck. Bulveye shouldered the headless corpse aside and charged on, howling as he went.

The xenos chieftain was waiting for him, his blade still held almost casually to one side. Heedless, berserk, the Wolf Lord swung a blow that would have split a normal man in two, but the power weapon struck the dark field surrounding the alien and slowed as though cutting through wet sand. When the edge struck the chieftain it scarcely marked his intricate armour.

Bulveye might have died then if it had not been for one of his warriors. One of the Wolf Guard covering the portal, a fearsome warrior named Lars, had despatched his foe and now hurled himself at the alien chieftain as well. His axe struck the alien's force-field and glanced harmlessly off the chieftain's helm. In return the xenos leader lashed out with his curved blade and struck off Lars's head.

Furious, Bulveye pressed his attack, aiming a series of swift blows at the chieftain's arms and torso, but the chieftain became a whirling blur of deadly motion, dodging the Wolf Lord's every stroke or parrying effortlessly with his flickering blade. The alien's black blade struck again, and Bulveye dimly felt the point sink deep into his side. The chieftain drew his sword free and leaped lightly backwards, hissing with pleasure. The Wolf Lord let out a roar of thwarted rage and shot the nimble figure with his plasma

pistol, but the bolt dissipated harmlessly against the alien's force-field.

Before he could pursue further, a black-armoured figure crashed against Bulveye from the right. The bodyguard knocked the Wolf Lord off his feet, and the two went down in a tangle of limbs and weapons. Both struggled to pull their blades free quick enough to deal the killing blow. Out of the corner of his vision, Bulveye saw the xenos chieftain drawing nearer, his sword ready. Then suddenly he heard the sound of an Antimonan pistol at close range and a bullet punched through the bodyguard's helm.

Bulveye hurled the alien's body away as Andras raced past with two of his armigers to challenge the alien leader. Their pistols blazed in their hands, but the bullets seemed to vanish in the swirling void surrounding the Harrower. The chieftain's blade flashed, but the armigers' force-fields succeeded in deflecting the alien's attacks. Antimonan swords sliced and thrust at the alien, but the chieftain avoided the attacks with contemptuous ease. Still, the momentary distraction was enough to allow Bulveye to recover.

The Wolf Lord leaped to his feet amid the raging melee, and found himself in a slowly tightening circle as the alien attackers drove his warriors back towards the centre of the room. Many of the Wolf Guard had surrendered themselves to the Wulfen as well, and they wrought a hellish slaughter among the enemy, but for every warrior they slew it seemed that two more took his place. In another few minutes it seemed that they would be overwhelmed.

A shout carried across the chamber from behind Bulveye. He turned to see Halvdan standing by the towering crystal, and the sliver of reason that remained to him told the Wolf Lord that the charges for the reactor had been set.

Bulveye turned back to the xenos chieftain and realised what he had to do. He lunged forwards, gathering speed as he charged towards the alien.

By this time, both of Andras's warriors were dead, and the young nobleman was fighting the chieftain on his own. He wielded his blade with superlative skill, but the alien was far swifter and more experienced; only the Antimonan's energy shield had saved him from certain death. Each blow against Andras's shield sent arcs of energy crackling along the surface of his scale armour, and it was clear that it was close to failing.

The chieftain was so intent on killing Andras that he didn't notice Bulveye's charge until it was nearly too late. He shifted position in a blur of motion, swinging his weapon in a decapitating stroke, but the Wolf Lord surprised him by dropping his plasma pistol and seizing the alien's sword arm at the wrist. The field's energy sank through Bulveye's armour like ice water, a cold so sharp it sank like a knife into his bones, but he gritted his teeth and held on nonetheless.

Surprised, the alien spat a stream of curses and tried to pull away, but Bulveye let go of his axe and clamped his right hand around the chieftain's neck. With a roar of pure, animal fury, he picked the lithe alien off the deck, turned and hurled his body at the power crystal a few metres away. When the chieftain's energy field struck the crystal there was an aclinic flash and a concussion that knocked nearly everyone from their feet. The chieftain's body was vaporised instantly by the blast; pieces of his shattered, smouldering armour ricocheted around the room like shrapnel from a grenade.

The next thing Bulveye heard was a strident, atonal sound that seemed to reverberate through the structure of the spire itself. Shocked from his battle-madness by the blast, he saw the last of the Harrowers fleeing from the chamber as fast as they could.

Andras stood close to the Wolf Lord, still reeling from the shock of the battle. 'What's happening?' he yelled.

Bulveye grabbed his weapons off the deck. 'That sounds like an alarm of some kind,' he shouted. 'The reactor must have been damaged by that energy field. We need to get back to the transport right now!'

Five of Andras's men and two of Bulveye's Wolf Guard lay dead, surrounded by heaps of alien bodies. Jurgen and Halvdan were already helping the survivors to grab the bodies of the fallen and carry them out as well. Together they raced back the way they'd come, ready to kill anyone who got in their way, but the alarm had sent every Harrower on the spire scrambling for their own means of escape. By the time they staggered out onto the landing pad, the skies were starting to fill with Harrower transports hastily lifting off from the doomed citadel. Alien bodies – some armoured, some not – were piled in heaps before the damaged transport, their bodies torn apart by boltgun shells or ravaged by the whirring teeth of Ranulf's chainsword. The pilot stood with his feet planted on the landing pad before the transport's gangway, his armour spattered with alien gore. Bulveye raised his axe in salute to Ranulf's dogged defence, and ordered everyone onto the xenos craft.

'How long until your charges blow?' Bulveye asked Halvdan as they clambered aboard.

'Another fifteen seconds, give or take,' the lieutenant replied.

'Morkai's teeth!' Bulveye cursed. 'Ranulf, get us the hell out of here!'

With a whine of tortured impellers and a ragged scraping of metal, the crippled transport shuddered into the air and yawed dangerously to port. The craft didn't so much take off as fall off the side of the landing pad, taking its passengers on a stomach-churning drop as the vehicle's motors struggled to repel the force of gravity.

Ten seconds later the spire was lit from within by a series of explosions that rippled outwards from the centre of the structure. Arcs of lightning a thousand yards long whipsawed across the spire's surface, cutting away landing pads and carving furrows in the crystal surface. Then, slowly, like a toppling tree, the massive spire began to settle towards the planet's surface. Its tip hit the rocky ground and shattered, scattering debris in a billowing cloud of dirt that stretched for kilometres in every direction, then the spire fell onto its side and vanished in massive detonations.

The shockwave of the blast spun the transport around like a top and sent it corkscrewing through the air. For several vertiginous moments, Bulveye was certain they were going to crash, but Ranulf managed to ride out the wave and get the craft stabilised a scant hundred metres off the ground. Behind them, a rising pillar of dirt and smoke was highlighted by the first, pink rays of dawn.

'What now?' Andras said, leaning ashen-faced against the craft's dented rail.

Bulveye scanned the skies, watching as dozens of Harrower ships boosted their thrusters and climbed into the sky, heading for orbit.

'We return to Oneiros,' he said, 'and wait to see what the survivors do. Either they'll start fighting amongst themselves to see who will be their next leader—'

'Or?'

The Wolf Lord shrugged. 'Or we'll be having visitors in a very short amount of time.'

THROUGHOUT THE MORNING the sky was full of vapour trails from Harrower ships boosting into the upper stratosphere. As the first of Oneiros's citizens crept tentatively out from their shelters and gaped at the towering column of dirt and smoke staining the sky to the west, Bulveye and Andras led their warriors to the Senate building and awaited Antimon's fate.

For the first few hours they dressed their wounds, shared out ammunition and fortified the structure as best they could. Then, as the day wore on and sounds of jubilation rose from the surrounding hills, Andras sent an armiger into the city in search of food and wine.

By late afternoon a procession of joyous Oneirans began arriving with the last scrapings from their larder: preserved meats, shrivelled vegetables and sweet, cloying wine. To Bulveye's warriors, it was a feast worthy of a primarch.

As the sun set, the warriors drank and ate and enjoyed the fellowship of battle-brothers who had faced death side by side. Bulveye observed the gathering with no small amount of pride. The Antimonans had acquitted themselves well. In centuries

to come, he was sure the planet would provide the Imperium with fine soldiers for the Army, or perhaps even young aspirants to the Allfather's Legions.

Night fell, and sharp-eyed lookouts manned the terraces outside the Senate building and searched the sky for signs of attack. Not a single flash of light was spotted, nor could the Astartes detect the faint specks of ships orbiting the planet. Bulveye took this to be a bad sign, and he and Andras spent a sleepless night preparing to make a final stand inside the Senate building.

It was just before dawn when an Astartes lookout saw the first tell-tale streaks of light in the sky. Bulveye and Andras were sitting together at the foot of the steps that led to the Speaker's chair when the Wolf Lord's vox bead activated.

'Fenris, this is Stormblade. Fenris, this is Stormblade. Are you receiving, over?'

The voice sent a jolt through Bulveye. He clambered to his feet, looking skywards as though he might suddenly glimpse the Space Wolf cruiser hovering up near the ceiling. 'Stormblade, this is Fenris! I hear you! What's your status?'

'Our battle group arrived in-system twenty hours ago and made a stealthy approach to the planet,' the officer on the Stormblade answered. 'When we were still about eight hours away, we were engaged by a large fleet of xenos vessels, but we inflicted heavy losses and forced them to disengage an hour later. The survivors have fled towards jump points near the edge of the system.'

By this point, the rest of the Wolf Lord's warband were on their feet, as well as Andras and his warriors. Every one had a questioning look on his face. Bulveye regarded them all with a triumphant look and cried, 'A battle group has arrived from Kernunnos and defeated the Harrowers! Antimon is free!'

Armiger and Astartes alike broke out into cheers at the news. Andras stepped forwards and clapped Bulveye on the shoulder. 'We owe you more than we will ever be able to repay, my friend,' he said to the towering warrior. 'From this day forwards we will remember today as the day of Antimon's deliverance.'

The Wolf Lord only shook his head. 'There is no debt between us, brother,' he replied. 'Just serve the Allfather faithfully in the years to come and give your due to the Imperium, and that will be thanks enough.'

The young nobleman's smile faltered. 'I don't understand,' he said.

Bulveye laughed and waved his hand dismissively. 'That's nothing to worry about at the moment,' he said. 'It will be months before the Imperium can send representatives to begin integrating your world with the rest of the worlds in this subsector. For now, I

expect you'll be want to restore the Senate, which is a good first step. The Imperial governor, when he arrives, will need their support to ensure full certification of the planet. And then the real work will begin!'

Andras's hand fell away from the Wolf Lord. He took a step back. 'There's been a misunderstanding,' he said. 'We have no desire to be part of your Imperium – especially now, when we've only just regained our freedom!'

Bulveye felt his heart turn to lead. Jurgen and Halvdan sensed the change in their lord's demeanour and stepped close. Andras's trio of armigers did the same, their expressions tense.

The Wolf Lord paused, desperate for the right words to change what he feared was about to happen. 'Andras,' he began. 'Listen to me. I came here because the Imperium needs this world. It needs every human world to come together and rebuild what was lost before. Believe me, the galaxy is a dangerous place. There are alien races out there that would like nothing more to see our extinction – or worse. You and your people know this better than anyone.'

He took a step closer to the young nobleman. His armigers laid their hands on the hilts of their swords. 'We must be united in a common cause, Andras. We must. The Allfather has commanded it, and I'm honour-bound to obey. Antimon is going to be part of the Imperium, brother. One way or another.' He held out his left hand. 'An age of glory awaits you. All you have to do is take my hand.'

A look of anguish crossed Andras's face. 'How can you say this to me, after all we've been through? Weren't you the one who said that a life not worth fighting for is no life at all?' The young man's voice trembled with anger. 'Antimon is free, and will stay that way. Her armigers will protect her!'

Bulveye shook his head sadly. 'The Imperium will not be denied, Andras. So I ask you one last time: will you join us?' The young warrior's expression turned hard and cold. Slowly, he shook his head. 'I will fight you if I must.'

Bulveye's empty hand sank to his side. His heart felt cold as lead. 'Very well, brother,' he said heavily. 'So be it.'

The axe was an icy blur between the two warriors. Andras never saw the blow that ended his life. A half-second later boltguns roared, and the two shocked armigers fell dead as well.

Bulveye stared at the bodies of the young men for a long time, watching their blood spread in a widening stain upon the floor.

Abruptly, his vox-bead crackled. ‘Fenris, this is Stormblade. The battle group is in orbit and awaiting your instructions. We have assault troops mustered and ready, and surveyors have identified targets for preliminary bombardment. What are your orders?’

The Wolf Lord tore his gaze away from the dead men at his feet. When he spoke again, his voice was like iron. ‘Stormblade, this is Fenris,’ he said. ‘This world has refused compliance. Execute crusade plan epsilon and commence combat operations at once.’

With a heavy tread, the Wolf Lord stepped over the bodies of Andras and his men, leaving bloody footprints on the steps as he climbed his way to the Speaker’s chair. The wood creaked under his weight as he sat himself upon it and rested his bloody axe across his knees. Outside, the people of Antimon were still cheering their deliverance when the first bombs began to fall.