ISOLATED FOR COUNTLESS millennia in the stygian darkness of Old Night, the inhabitants of the world designated Forty-seven Sixteen had at first rejoiced to be reunited with their long-lost brothers. For over four thousand years they had thought themselves alone in the universe, and had come to regard ancient Terra as little more than a vague, half-forgotten race-memory; an allegorical myth, a fabled genesis world invented by their ancestors. They had greeted the Word Bearers envoys with open arms, gazing upon the immense, grey-armoured Astartes warriors with awe and reverence.

‘Irrevocably corrupt worshippers of a heathen deity,’ First Captain Kor Phaeron stated damningly upon his return from the meeting.

‘Is it not the duty of the crusade to embrace all the distinct strands of humanity, even its most wayward sons?’ said Sor Talgron, Captain of Thirty-fourth Company. ‘Would not the God-Emperor wish His most devoted Legion to lead these blind children to enlightenment?’

Officially, the expanding Imperium of Man was a secular one, promoting and expounding the “truths” of science and reason over the “falsehoods” of religion and spiritualism. The XVII Legion, however, understood the truth, though it was, at times, a heavy burden to bear. Sor Talgron knew that the time was drawing near when the acknowledgement of the Emperor’s divinity would be universally embraced. Faith would become the greatest strength of the Imperium, greater than the untold billions of soldiers that constituted the Imperial Army; greater even than the might of the Legions of Astartes. Faith would be the mortar that held all the disparate elements of mankind together.

Even the most blinded of Legions, those who most vocally denied Lorgar’s holy scripture, would in time come to understand the inherent truth in the primarch’s words. And they would be forced to beg his forgiveness for having ever cast doubt upon his words.

That the Emperor denied His divine nature did little to smother the fires of devotion within the XVII Legion; only the truly divine deny their divinity, Lorgar himself had written.

‘You know the Emperor’s mind now, Talgron?’ Kor Phaeron growled. ‘If you have such insight, please enlighten us lesser mortals.’

‘I claim no such thing, First Captain,’ Sor Talgron snapped.

Sor Talgron and Kor Phaeron glared at each other with undisguised venom through the cloying incense smoke rising from dozens of hanging censers. The circular, tiered room where the war council was taking place was deep in the heart of the Fidelitas Lex, Lorgar’s flagship, and the captains of the other Grand Companies stood silently around its circumference, watching with interest from the shadows to see how this confrontation would develop. However, Erebus, the softly spoken First Chaplain of the Legion, interposed himself between Kor Phaeron and Sor Talgron, ever the mediator, moving into the centre of the sunken command pulpit and breaking their venomous glares.

‘The First Captain and I shall consult with the Urizen,’ Erebus said smoothly, ending the discussion. ‘Lorgar’s wisdom shall guide us.’

Still glowering, Sor Talgron had bowed to the First Chaplain before spinning on his heel and striding from the room along with the other dismissed captains. He waved skulking robed servants out of his path, intending to travel by Stormbird back to his own cruiser, the Dominatus Sanctus, and rejoin Thirty-fourth Company.

It had been more than a month since Sor Talgron had seen the blessed primarch of the XVII Legion, and the Urizen’s absence at the war council had been keenly felt. Tempers were fraying, and dissent was beginning to spread through the ranks; the Legion needed Lorgar to return to them.

The holy primarch had been locked within his personal shrine-chamber in self-exile for a full Terran month – ever since his audience with the Emperor of Mankind. In that time he had allowed none for Kor Phaeron and Erebus, his closest advisors and comrades, into his presence. The entire Forty-seventh Expeditionary Fleet had sat dormant while it waited for its primarch’s orders.

Sor Talgron had snatched a momentary glimpse of his primarch as the Urizen was ushered into his private quarters upon his return from his meeting with the Emperor, and had been shocked to the core of his being by what he had seen.

Always, Lorgar had radiated a palpable aura of passion and belief, an unassailable shield of faith that was at once awesome and terrifying. Whereas it was said that the Wolf s strength was his irrepressible ferocity, the Lion’s his relentless tenacity, and Guilliman’s his strategic and logistical brilliance, Lorgar’s strength was his unshakeable faith, his profound self-belief, his ruthless and unwavering devotion.

Though Erebus had sought to hide the Urizen from the gaze of the Legion, Sor Talgron’s eyes had locked with those of his primarch for the briefest of moments

before a hatch had slammed down, blocking his vision. The depth of despair he had seen in Lorgar's eyes had forced him to his knees. His eyes had filled with tears and his stomach had knotted painfully, his mind reeling. What could possibly have transpired upon the Emperor's battle-barge to have so shaken the unshakeable?

He had not even reached the embarkation deck of the Fidelitas Lex when he was contacted by Erebus, requesting his return to the war chamber: the Urizen had made his decision.

As he marched back through the labyrinthine corridors of the Fidelitas Lex, Captain Sor Talgron prayed that Lorgar himself would be present, though in this he was to be disappointed.

Still, at least a decision had been made – after a month of idleness, the XVII Legion at last had purpose.

'In his great mercy,' Erebus said, addressing the reassembled gathering of Word Bearers captains, 'the Urizen wishes that this long-lost strand of humanity be brought to compliance; that they be embraced into the fold of the Imperial Truth.'

Murmurs spread around the gathered captains, and Sor Talgron nodded his head in approval. Such was the way that the XVII Legion had operated since the start of the crusade. They had brought the glory of the Imperial Truth to every world that they had encountered thus far, and though their progress might not have been as swift as that of some of the other Legions, those worlds left behind by the XVII Legion were the most devout and loyal of all. Those who refused the word and those deemed unworthy were, of course, zealously crushed, ground to dust beneath the armoured heel of Lorgar's Astartes, but those who accepted their teachings were embraced into the Imperial truth, their loyalty assured.

Sor Talgron cast a triumphant glance towards Kor Phaeron, but the First Captain did not look displeased by the proclamation, for all that he had been braying for war earlier.

'However,' Erebus continued, 'it is with sadness and remorse that the Urizen has come to his decision. The Emperor is displeased with our Legion, brothers.'

Absolute silence descended over the chamber, every set of eyes focusing on the First Chaplain. Sor Talgron felt his blood run cold.

'The Emperor, it seems, is not satisfied with the rate of our progress. The Emperor is not content with the worlds, compliant and faithful, that we have delivered to Him. In His wisdom,' Erebus continued, his voice soft and yet with a growing edge of bitterness, 'the Emperor has rebuked our blessed primarch, His most faithful and

devoted of sons, and ordered him to hasten our crusade.'

Dark mutterings passed between the gathered captains, but Sor Talgron blocked them out, focused on the words of the First Chaplain.

'Our blessed primarch feels that, given time, the inhabitants of Forty-seven Sixteen could be taught the error of their ignorant, heathen ways; that they would make model Imperial citizens once guided towards the light of truth by our Chaplains and warrior-brothers. However, the Emperor's orders are clear, and the Urizen is a faithful son; he cannot refuse his father's order, though it causes him much lamentation.'

'And what are those orders, First Chaplain?' said Captain Argel Tal of the Seventh Company.

'That we do not have the time necessary to convert these ignorant heathens to the Imperial Truth,' Erebus said, with some reluctance. 'Their profane beliefs are deemed incompatible with the Imperium. As a result… Forty-seven Sixteen must burn.'

Sor Talgron reeled at the proclamation, shocked and horrified that an entire world that might have been brought into the Imperial Truth was condemned to death merely because of… what? The Emperor's impatience? He immediately felt ashamed, guilt swelling up within him for even thinking such blasphemy. Once this war was done, he swore that he would attempt to atone for his errant thought through hours of penance and self-flagellation.

Nevertheless, after they had recovered from the initial shock of Lorgar's orders, every captain of the XVII Legion, Sor Talgron included, threw themselves fully into preparations for the forthcoming war with a focus bordering on fanaticism. He was a warrior of Lorgar, Sor Talgron reminded himself; it was not for him to attempt to interpret the orders of his betters. He was a warrior first and foremost, and he fought where – and against whom – he was commanded.

Less than twenty-four hours later more than a hundred and ninety million people were dead – over ninety-eight per cent of the doomed world's population.

The cruisers and battleships assigned to the Forty-seventh Expeditionary Fleet anchored at high orbit, and for twelve hours unleashed their payload upon the condemned, storm-wracked planet. Cyclonic torpedoes and concentrated hellfire broadsides pierced the storm clouds spanning the planet. Entire continents had disappeared in flames.

One city survived the carnage. This was the seat of the planet's governance and the centre of its blasphemous worship. Protected within a bubble of coruscating energy was the profane palace-temple of the enemy, a structure as large as a city in itself.

Unwilling to allow even a single heathen blasphemer to remain alive, for that would have been against their lord's orders, five full companies of the XVII Legion were mobilised, striking down towards the planet's surface to finish the job.

Sor Talgron led Thirty-fourth Company down towards Forty-seven Sixteen, the Stormbirds carrying his loyal Astartes warrior-brothers descending into the storm-wracked atmosphere. Despite the weight of the preliminary bombardment that had preempted the ground assault, it soon became apparent that the enemy defences were not completely neutralised; blinding arcs of energy screamed up from below, smashing several of the Stormbirds out of the air even as they entered the planet's atmosphere, the lives of almost a hundred precious warrior-brothers lost in the blink of an eye.

Sor Talgron ordered the Stormbirds to pull off their current trajectory, and sent swift warnings to his brother captains of Fourth, Seventh, Ninth and Seventeenth Companies following in his wake, advising them to come at the dome from a different angle. Even as the vox transmissions were sent, Talgron's Stormbird was hit, sheering away one of its wings and shorting out its controls, sending it into a fatal, spiralling dive towards the ground. Assault hatches were blown, and at nineteen and a half thousand metres Sor Talgron leapt from his granite-grey Stormbird, leading his Space Marines screaming down towards the ruined city below as their jump packs roared into life.

The ruined enemy city was spread out below as Sor Talgron's Assault squads broke through the storm clouds, the speed of their descent enhanced by the powerful engines of their jump packs. From their altitude the curvature of the world could be seen clearly, and the shattered remains of a city pummelled into the ground by ordnance was spread out as far as the eye could see in every direction. At the centre of the shattered city was the flickering dome, a blister of energy in the fire-blackened flesh of the enemy land.

That dome was easily twenty kilometres in diameter, and rose almost a quarter of that distance above the ground. As he descended towards the city, arcs of lightning stabbing down from the clouds around him and up from the ground below, the captain of Thirty-fourth Company calmly identified a landing zone and transmitted the coordinates to his men.

They landed five kilometres from the flickering dome. The enemy city was a single grand superstructure hundreds of levels high, its grand valley-like boulevards criss-crossed with thousands of arched walkways and lined with balconies and terraces. Much of it had been blasted into oblivion, but more had survived than Sor Talgron had expected – the glassy material that everything on this world was constructed from was apparently more resilient than it appeared. Before the bombardment had begun, the city must have looked stunning, though Sor Talgron

found such opulence deeply suspicious. Beauty, he felt, was to be mistrusted.

Nothing living had survived the brutal bombardment outside the shimmering dome. Those inhabitants of Forty-seven Sixteen that had been exposed to the full brunt of the barrage had been obliterated, flesh, muscle and bone instantly consumed in roaring flames, leaving only circles of ash where they had stood as evidence to their ever having existed at all. Charred bodies in their millions, those who were inside when the bombardment commenced, were strewn throughout the glass buildings of Forty-seven Sixteen. Tens of thousands of them were discovered in the profane temple-shrines dotted all over the city, their flesh melted together into obscene, congealed, fleshy lumps that were almost unrecognisable as having ever been human.

The scale of the slaughter was nothing if not impressive.

Drop-pods streamed like a deadly shower of meteors down from the battle-barges in the upper atmosphere. Scores were destroyed as they dropped through the storm, their occupants instantly slain.

At first it appeared that they faced no ground resistance. Then the first of the robotic, three-legged war constructs marched unscathed through the flickering shield-dome to meet them, lightning spitting from their blade-arms, and battle was met.

THE STORM-WRACKED world was in its final death throes. Lightning ripped across the bruised skyline. The flashing of electricity was constant, a blinding strobe that threw the battle-scarred ruins of the alien superstructure into stark relief.

Sor Talgron’s primary heart was pounding, pumping over-oxygenated blood through his veins. Hyper-stimulated adrenal glands fired, fuelling his aggression and sending fresh energy shooting through his nervous system. The stink of ozone and discharging electricity was strong in his nostrils.

He pressed himself hard up against a shattered, glass-smooth spire, taking cover as another of the enemy war constructs fired a blast of harnessed lightning towards him. The crackling arc of energy slammed against the spire half a metre away, sending flickering sparks of energy dancing across its smooth surface. Mouthing a curse, Sor Talgron slammed a fresh sickle clip into his bolt pistol. Thunder rumbled deafeningly overhead, an unrelenting churning roar that made the Space Marine captain’s insides reverberate.

Another blast struck, this time catching one of his warriors, Brother Khadmon, full in the chest as he broke from cover. The Astartes warrior was hurled backwards by the force of the blast, smashing him into another spire with bone-crushing force. He slid to the ground, his armour blackened and bubbling, and Sor Talgron knew that he was dead. Khadmon continued to twitch for several minutes, as flickers of electricity

danced across his corpse. His flesh had been cooked within his power armour, his innards and blood boiling; the heat generated by the lightning-weapons of the enemy was easily a match for the lascannons borne by the Devastator-Havoc squads.

Sor Talgron swore. Too many of his company brothers had already died this day, and he felt his anger and resentment building. Apothecary Uhrlon was already moving towards the fallen warrior, risking himself as he leapt towards the dead Astartes to drag the corpse into cover.

‘Be quick, Apothecary,’ Sor Talgron shouted. ‘We can’t stay here. We have to take down those spires!’

Not for the first time, Sor Talgron prayed that this plan of Kol Badar’s was going to work. If the spires were brought down, would that cause a rent in the seemingly impenetrable shield-dome as the favoured sergeant predicted? He believed that it would, but if Kol Badar was wrong, then even more of his brothers would die before the day was out.

For a moment he watched as the Apothecary carried out the grisly duty of extracting Brother Khadmon’s precious gene-seed. The drill screeched as it penetrated Khadmon’s ceramite armour and flesh, splattering his armour with blood.

More forks of lightning struck around him. No more of his warriors were caught in the killing blasts, but it was only a matter of time before the enemy flanked their position, repositioning themselves to draw a direct bead on them. The robotic war constructs of the enemy were formidable foes. Far from unthinking, predictable automatons, they had proven to be wily and dangerous enemies, constantly adapting and refining their tactics and strategies to best defeat the invaders.

Artificial intelligence.

Such a thing was an abomination.

The Emperor Himself had decreed such research forbidden, part of the compact agreed between Terra and Mars, and to go against the word of the Emperor was heresy of the highest order. That the inhabitants of Forty-seven Sixteen could not possibly know this was of little consequence.

‘Squadron Tertius, do you read?’ said Sor Talgron, broadcasting across the vox-net.

‘Yes, captain,’ came the prompt reply, the voice muffled and devoid of emotion. ‘Orders?’

‘I need you here. We’re pinned down. The enemy are positioned upon fortified balcony

positions. Distance is…' He turned towards the Astartes sergeant nearby, Brother Arshaq.

'One hundred and forty-two metres, elevation eighty-two degrees,' said Sergeant Arshaq, risking a glance around the spire to get a lock on the enemy. He ducked back as several blasts of lighting stabbed towards him, striking the glassy spire with shocking force.

'You get that, Tertius?' said Sor Talgron across the vox. 'Affirmative,' confirmed Squadron Tertius. 'On our way.'

They were positioned on one of the high flyover walkways that criss-crossed the immense, man-made valleys separating the different sections of the city's superstructure, pinned in place by the weight of incoming fire.

Glancing down, Sor Talgron could make out thousands of granite-grey armoured battle-brothers, accompanied by scores of the Legion's tanks, fighting hard for every inch of ground as they closed in on the shimmering shield-dome from all directions. The flash of muzzle flare from thousands of bolters was like so many flickering candles at this distance, and the roar of the weapons was drowned out by the relentless booming thunder overhead. Missiles left lingering coils of smoke in their wake as they spiralled towards the enemy, a deadly robotic army that knew nothing of fear or mercy, and gouts of retina-searing, white-hot plasma spat from overheating weapons.

The deceptively delicate-looking war constructs of the enemy stalked through the mayhem all but unscathed. Slender insectoid legs carrying them inexorably forwards, they stepped steadily through the hail of bolter fire, each of them protected by a sphere of lightning that flashed and sparked as they absorbed the incoming fire. Their return fire exacted a horrifying toll, lightning weapons slaughtering Astartes and sending Predator and Land Raider tanks flipping end over end.

Concentrated lascannon fire struck again and again at the constructs' shields, finally overloading several of them and blasting the robotic machines apart, but the sheer weight of fire required to neutralise even a single machine was staggering.

With the practicalities of war and the difficulties of his mission occupying his mind, Sor Talgron had pushed aside any moral qualms he had regarding the validity of the war. That the humans of Forty-seven Sixteen were divergent was undeniable. Their unrepentant and wilful manufacture of thinking machines alone was enough to condemn them.

Yet for all this, the captain of Thirty-fourth Company could not help but feel pity for those whom his Legion had been sent to slaughter. A stab of resentment lanced through him, shocking him with the strength of the emotion.

Why had the Emperor not allowed the XVII Legion to even attempt to bring Forty-seven Sixteen to enlightenment?

Since landing, Sor Talgron had not seen a single living human – all they had faced so far had been their war constructs, though the gory, dismembered and obliterated remains of people were everywhere.

‘Here they come,’ said Sergeant Arshaq, drawing Sor Talgron out of his reverie.

Squadron Tertius came streaking up from below, three boxy grey shapes moving at great speed. These were new innovations from the forges of Mars, and the land speeder pilots threw their anti-grav attack vehicles from side to side, jinking to avoid incoming fire that speared towards them. They screamed underneath the flyover on which Sor Talgron and his veteran squad were taking cover, engines roaring as they zeroed in on the location that Sergeant Arshaq had provided, and as they rose in altitude and began their attack run, their weapons began to belch.

Heavy bolters spat hundreds of high-velocity explosive rounds towards the enemy constructs above, and multi-meltas screamed as they fired, sending superheated blasts into the foe, overriding their shields and rendering the robotic war machines molten.

‘Targets neutralized,’ came the word from the land speeder squadron, barrelling underneath a bridge spanning the man-made valley of glass buildings, before performing a tight loop around it and screaming overhead.

‘Good work, Tertius,’ said Sor Talgron, stepping out into the open once more.

Glowing green targeting matrices flashed before his eyes. Information feeds streamed across his irises as he focused on the target location for his next jump. Two hundred and seventy-four metres, his head-up display informed him.

In a clipped voice, he conveyed the coordinates of the leap to his warrior-brothers. Confirmations of his orders flooded in, and without ceremony, Sor Talgron broke into a run towards the low balustrade of the flyover. Placing one foot upon the railing, he launched himself out into open space.

Before the force of gravity began to drag him to the ground, his jump pack roared into life. Powerful vectored engines screamed, and he accelerated sharply into the air, flames and dirty black smoke spewing out behind him.

Warrior-brothers of Thirty-fourth Company leapt into the air behind their captain, flames roaring in their wake. Sor Talgron could see more of his Assault squads in the distance, streaking towards their targets like fireflies, trailing fire as they ascended

vertical precipices and criss-crossed gaping expanses between glass structures in bounding leaps, attempting to avoid the heavy weight of incoming fire.

Targeting crosshairs appeared in the corners of his vision, drawing his attention, and he turned his head to see another group of enemy war constructs a hundred metres to his side, stepping smoothly out onto a terrace built into the side of a cliff-like section of the city's superstructure. They lifted their lightning-rod arms in the direction of Sor Talgron and his veteran squad, and he saw the sparking build-up of power along those silver lengths.

Barking a warning, Sor Talgron threw himself into a barrelling spin, taking him off his current trajectory. A fraction of a second later, a trio of blinding streaks of lightning speared by him. Deafening, supersonic cracks of thunder accompanied these blasts, though the damping systems of his helmet made the sound bearable.

Two warriors of Talgron's veteran Assault squad were hit, struck out of the air by forks of energy. Electricity leapt from their bodies to those nearby, shorting out life-systems and sending targeting arrays haywire.

'Take them,' Sor Talgron said, turning in the air towards the enemy even as those warrior-brothers that had been hit fell, smoking, down into the maelstrom of battle far below. Gunning the engines of his jump pack, anger filling him at the thought of his fallen brethren, the captain of Thirty-fourth Company angled his flight to take him down amongst the enemy machines.

There were three of the constructs, and he lifted his bolt pistol and began firing as he descended towards them, each pull of the trigger sending a mass-reactive bolt screaming towards its target. Lightning-shields flashed into existence around the enemy robots, his rounds merely stitching flashing impacts across their surface.

Blasts of lightning tore up towards the descending Word Bearers, making the air crackle and reverberate with power, and Sor Talgron saw the information feed from another of his warriors go dead.

Angry, and eager to unleash this anger on these unliving foes, Sor Talgron came in to land fast, his rapid descent bringing the glass terrace racing up towards him. The vectored engines of his jump pack swivelled towards the ground as he swung his legs out in front of him, and a fiery blast slowed his descent.

His boots skidded on the surface of the smooth terrace as he touched down, and his heavy power mace was in his hand instantly, coruscating energy wreathing its flanged head with a press of its activation stud. While the lightning fields that protected the constructs could effortlessly shrug off a direct hit from a bolt gun, Sor Talgron had learnt that they afforded less protection against blows landed in hand-to-hand combat,

or shots fired at point-blank range. Closing the distance quickly was imperative.

The sight of the enemy constructs up close filled him with loathing. Abominations.

They were synthetic mockeries of humans, their very existence an offence. Perhaps he had been wrong in thinking this war unjustified, Sor Talgron pondered as gazed upon their blasphemous forms. They stood almost as tall as a Dreadnought, though they were far less bulky than the deadly war machines of the Astartes Legions.

Each of them had a human-like torso made of the same semi-transparent glassy material that formed the entire city – manufactured perhaps for its non-conductive properties – and featureless heads filled with circuitry sat upon their shoulders. In place of humanoid legs, each of the constructs was borne upon three slender multi-jointed insectoid limbs – each perhaps three metres long if extended straight. These legs gave the machines a disturbing, arachnid feel, like some twisted amalgamation of man and spider, though there was nothing organic about them.

The arms of the constructs were like those of men, except that their forearms ended in long, tapering spikes of silver instead of hands.

Electricity sparked between these arms as they were brought close together.

Veins of silver ran through the bodies of the abominations, all leading to their “hearts”, the battery-centres of harnessed storm energy in the centre of their torsos. Electrical pulses flickered along these metallic threads, seemingly powering all of its functions: movement, thought, weapons and the lightning-fields that made them all but invulnerable to ranged fire.

The constructs moved with the jerky precision of long-legged hunting birds as they reacted to the Word Bearers’ attack. Dirty flames belched from Astartes jump packs as more of Sor Talgron’s brethren touched down around them. Bolt pistols roared, and flamers belched, bathing the robotic machines in gouts of super-heated promethium, though the worst of these attacks were, of course, deflected by the protective domes of lightning that flared around each of the constructs.

Sor Talgron leapt towards the nearest of the abominations with a roar.

The sentient stepped away from him and brought its silver lightning-rod arms together with a clap of thunder. A jagged spear of light flashed towards the captain of Thirty-fourth Company, but he had preempted the strike, and threw himself to the side. The crackling arc scythed by him, making the oath-papers affixed to the rim of his shoulder pad burst into flame.

He closed the distance quickly, recognising that the abomination needed time for its

lightning weapon to recharge. With a sweep of his crackling mace he struck the construct's shield, the stink of ozone rising as the two power sources came together with a deafening crack. The sphere of energy was torn apart by the blow, sparks and energy wreathing Sor Talgron's weapon as the shield dissipated.

Stepping in close and grunting with the effort, Sor Talgron smashed his power maul into one of the construct's insectoid legs. Though fragile looking, the slender limb was as hard as tempered plasteel, and while thousands of tiny cracks spread up and down the glassy limb, it did not shatter.

A pained, whistling sound, something akin to the musical trill of a song-bird, erupted from the war machine. It tried to back away from him, but its damaged limb buckled as soon as it placed weight upon it, and it crumpled to the floor.

Sor Talgron closed in on the fallen construct, even as it struggled frantically to right itself. Its two intact legs skittered off the smooth, glassy terrace floor, and again it emitted its pained bird-song like whistle. It flailed with its pair of lightning-rod arms, discharging electricity wildly, narrowly missing him. Sor Talgron pressed his heavy boot down upon the chest of the construct and smashed his power maul into its domed head, shattering it. Sparks spat from its ruptured cranium, and the power core located in its chest faded, the silver veins running through its transparent body turning dark and lifeless.

The shield of another of the constructs was brought down, and a melta-blast turned the torso of the machine molten, super-heated glass running like lava, dripping down its legs and onto the floor with a hiss. Spinning, Sor Talgron fired his bolt pistol at the last of the war machines, but the lightning-field sprang up before him, absorbing the power of the bolts.

Its arms came together with a deafening crack and another of Sor Talgron's veterans was killed, lifted from his feet and hurled out into open space, his body swathed in electricity.

Brother Sergeant Arshaq launched himself at the construct from its side. He punched with his immense power fist, the blow dispelling the construct's shield with a powerful explosion of energy.

Bolt pistols bucking in their hands, Sor Talgron and his veterans stepped towards the now unshielded construct. It reeled beneath the blows, emitting pained bird-cries, and spider-web cracks appeared upon its torso and head. Sergeant Arshaq planted another bolt into its artificial cranium as it staggered. The high explosive round found a crack and detonated within the constructs head, spraying shards of glass in all directions.

However, even in death it was a deadly foe. It floundered, staggering drunkenly,

electricity leaping from the stump of its neck. Its arms flailed, and as it turned towards Sor Talgron those silver limbs came together, and a lethal fork of energy shot towards him, accompanied by a deafening crack.

He saw it coming, and managed to twist his body so that it did not strike him with the full brunt of its power, yet it still lifted him off his feet and sent him flying through the air. His vision instantly turned black as the photochromaric lenses of his helmet were melted by the intense heat. The acrid stink of liquefying wires and cables filled his helmet. He was slammed hard into a wall, cracking its glass surface with the force the impact. Spinning off the angled surface of the wall, Sor Talgron was thrown over the edge of the terrace.

He was freefalling then, arms and legs flailing wildly. Still blind, he spun in the air, groping for a handhold. His ceramite encased fingers merely scratched against glass, screeching loudly.

Abruptly his fall came to an end as he landed on a lower terrace with bone-jarring force, cracking its surface. The thirty-metre fall would likely have killed a lesser man, but Sor Talgron pushed himself unsteadily to his knees, his bones bruised but unbroken. Smoke rose from his blistering power armour and lingering sparks of electricity flickered across his body. Sor Talgron tore his damaged helmet from his head. Seeing that it had been rendered useless by the electrical blast, he hurled it away from him, his face flushed and angry.

The stink of burning flesh – his own – was strong in his nostrils, and he blinked as he was momentarily blinded by the lightning tearing apart the heavens.

While many warrior-brothers of the XVII Legion had the noble countenance of their primarch, Sor Talgron had the face of one born to fight, with broad, thick features and a nose that had been broken so many times it was nothing more than a fleshy lump smeared across his face. He scowled darkly and swore as he pushed himself unsteadily to his feet, his muscles protesting.

Sergeant Arshaq, flames spewing from his jump pack, landed alongside him, followed closely by the other members of Veteran Squad Helikon.

‘Are you all right, captain?’ asked the sergeant.

Sor Talgron nodded his head.

‘The construct?’ he said.

‘Destroyed,’ confirmed Arshaq, reaching a hand out to his captain. ‘The path to the shield-dome is clear.’

Sor Talgron accepted Arshaq's outstretched hand, allowing the veteran sergeant to help him back to his feet. The last vestiges of the electricity that had engulfed him flickered over his gauntlets and up Arshaq's arm. Nodding his thanks, Sor Talgron turned towards the flickering shield-dome, shielding his eyes against its glare.

They were only five hundred metres from the lightning-shield now, and the air crackled with intensity, making his short-cropped black hair stand on end.

The weight of fire being directed against the immense lightning-dome from the ground was awesome. Hundreds of tanks were bombarding the flickering, curved sides of the shield at a scale that would have long ago felled city blocks. A demi-legion of Titans, immense machines of destruction crafted by the adepts of Mars that stood as tall as buildings, unleashed the full power of their weapons against the shield, yet even these, amongst the most potent weapons the Imperium of Man was able to construct, appeared to have little effect.

From within the shield-dome, more of the blasphemous enemy war constructs were marching, passing through the shield unscathed, protected within their bubbles of energy. They stalked out to meet the Word Bearers in the streets below, moving forwards in staggered lines, lightning forking from their silver arms as they brought them together. How many more of them did the enemy have, Sor Talgron wondered?

Sor Talgron was almost blinded as another searing orbital strike split the sky, lancing down through the upper atmosphere to smash against the top of the shield. Still it held, an impenetrable barrier that it seemed would not be breached, no matter the amount of ordnance thrown against it.

'I really hope this plan of Kol Badar's is going to work,' said Sergeant Arshaq.

'You and me both, my friend,' said Sor Talgron.

His eyes settled on the immense tower-spires encased in silver that ringed the shield-dome. Each was struck time and again by lightning spearing down from the tumultuous storm clouds, and an intense humming of power reverberated from these giant rods as the power built within them. Several times a minute this harnessed energy was expelled from one of the spires in great lightning arcs that stabbed down into the streets below, striking at tanks and squads of Astartes with deafening thunderclaps, killing dozens with every strike.

Even as Sor Talgron and Squad Helikon looked on, electricity leapt from one of the silver spires in a jagged line, striking at one of the giant Warlord-class Titans blasting at the shield-dome from afar. The cataclysmic sound of the discharge hit them a fraction of a second later, the sound threatening to rupture Sor Talgron's unprotected

eardrums. The Titan's void shields were stripped away by the force of the strike and it rocked backwards as if in pain. Another immense blast of energy forked from the silver spires, striking the Titan in its head even as it attempted to step back away from the danger, and the forty-metre-high colossus toppled, smashing down on top of a pair of Land Raider battle tanks, crushing them like paper.

Interspersed between these towering spires were smaller ones, and while those too were frequently struck by the fury of the storm, when they discharged their power, it was not towards the Astartes but rather towards the shield-dome itself. Sor Talgron had studied these spires from afar, and he believed that Kol Badar was correct in suggesting that these were what was keeping the shield intact.

The lightning they absorbed forked from their silver lengths into the shield, strengthening it and keeping it solid. These were Sor Talgron's targets, for he believed that if they were destroyed, then the shield would fall.

Located high up on the superstructure, they were hard to target from the ground, and the defensive spires surrounding them would strike down any aircraft approaching to drop its payload upon the shield-spires. It fell to his Assault squad to launch the strike.

However, less than a quarter of his jump pack-equipped warriors had made it this far – the strength of the enemy's resistance had not been foreseen. He had only enough Assault squads remaining to take down three of the spires, and he had no idea if that would be enough to have any real effect on the shield.

Still, he was not going to back off now.

He could see grey armoured figures in the distance, fire and smoke trailing behind them, leaping towards the spires he had allocated as targets. The time to test Kol Badar's theory had come, and again he prayed that this was going to work.

'It has to work,' Sor Talgron said grimly to himself. He took a deep breath, then opened up a vox-channel to his Assault squads.

'Report,' he said.

'First wave, target secured,' growled the voice of Kol Badar, his most trusted veteran sergeant, and the one who had suggested this course of action. Tactically astute and fearless in battle, Sor Talgron knew he would go far.

'Awaiting your mark,' said the sergeant.

'Second target secured, captain,' said Sergeant Bachari, in command of the second wave. 'Melta charges locked in position.'

From his position, Sor Talgron could see the warriors of Bachari's second wave in the distance surrounding the slender silver spire that had been designated as their target, less than fifty metres from the flickering veil. Kol Badar's first wave would be surrounding a similar spire, fifty metres higher up the structure.

'Sergeant Paeblen? Does Squad Lementas control the third target?' said Sor Talgron.

'Engaging the enemy, captain,' came Paeblen's voice. The sound of roaring chainswords, Astartes shouting and weapons discharging echoed in the background. There was a loud explosion, and the line abruptly descended into static white noise. A moment later, a new voice crackled across the vox.

'Brother Aecton here, captain,' said the voice.

'Go ahead, brother,' said Sor Talgron.

'Sergeant Paeblen is down, captain,' said Brother Aecton. 'I am taking temporary command of the third wave.'

Aecton was an experienced member of Squad Lementas, a battle-scarred veteran that Sor Talgron knew could be relied upon to keep his wits in the most nightmarish situations. As the longest-serving member of Lementas, it fell to him to take command if anything happened to his sergeant. A moment later the vox crackled, and Aecton's voice came through once more.

'Target secured, captain. Melta charges are in place.'

'Good work, Brother Aecton,' said Sor Talgron.

'All squads: blow your charges on my mark,' said Sor Talgron. Turning to Sergeant Arshaq, he nodded solemnly.

'Moment of truth,' remarked the sergeant. Sor Talgron smiled grimly. 'Do it,' he said.

THE MELTA BOMB clusters placed around the base of the three silver spires detonated simultaneously. For a moment, Sor Talgron saw no real effect, and he felt certain that the ploy had failed. Then he saw one of the three targeted spires begin to shudder. As the melta charges turned its base to a superheated morass of bubbling liquid and hissing gas, the spire began to sag. With a metallic groan, accompanied by wildly discharging electricity, the kilometre-high spire collapsed and fell inwards, straight towards the shield-dome.

Even as that one spire began to fall slowly towards the lightning-dome, so too did the

other two shudder and collapse, falling slowly at first and then with increasing velocity.

If the fall of the spires had any effect at all, created any breach in the shield whatsoever, then Sor Talgron felt certain that it would only be a momentary gap.

‘Now!’ roared Sor Talgron, leaping into the air, the flames of his jump pack carrying him straight towards the dome. He accelerated fast, the engines of his jump pack straining against the forces of gravity.

He could feel the power of the shield-dome intensify as he drew nearer, making his skin tingle and his eardrums reverberate painfully.

He was no more than fifty metres from the veil when the first spire struck. An explosion of light and electricity erupted, far more intense than any he had yet seen.

A moment later, the other two spires hit, creating a blinding discharge of electricity. Bolts of power leapt madly between the three silver spires, and a rent was momentarily ripped open between them, a hole sheared in the fabric of the dome.

Without pause, Sor Talgron angled towards the temporary gap, pushing the engines of his jump pack to their limits, burning rapidly through the last reserves of fuel.

Jagged arcs of lightning criss-crossed back and forth across the tear in the shield-dome as the veil began to reform its impenetrable mesh. With a shout, Sor Talgron pushed on, knowing that he was committed now; there was no turning back.

He roared through the ever-diminishing hole, and his entire body was jolted as a barbed fork of lightning passed through him, using his flesh as a conduit.

His jump pack shorted out completely, sparking and smoking, though the force of his momentum carried him through the rapidly diminishing rent in the veil. His vision was fading in and out, and he dropped like a stone, a smoking, charred body, landing heavily on a palatial balcony within the flickering dome.

Sor Talgron twitched involuntarily for a moment as the last vestiges of electricity left him, dissipating across the smooth glassy floor.

Pushing himself up to one knee, smoke rising from the burnt, stinking flesh of his face, he unclipped the release clamps upon his breastplate, and his now useless, smoking jump pack dropped to the ground with heavy clunk.

‘That was… unpleasant,’ said Arshaq, pushing himself to his feet nearby. The veteran sergeant’s cream-coloured tabard was hanging off him in fire-blackened strips. Some

parts of the robe were still on fire, and Arshaq casually ripped the remnants of the fabric away from him.

Only the warriors of Squad Helikon had made it through the gap. The other three of the surviving Assault squads were stuck outside the shield-dome. Sor Talgron swore.

It had taken all of the squads' melta bombs to create even that momentary crack in the enemy's defence – it would not be a move that his Assault squads would be able to replicate, nor was he able to contact his brother Space Marines beyond to advise them of a new course of action – evidently, the shield-dome blocked vox traffic as easily as incoming lance strikes. The all-encompassing lightning-dome they were now ensconced within obscured everything beyond.

Sor Talgron's scorched face was stinging, but he ignored the pain, his eyes fixed in the distance.

The city within the dome had been untouched by war, and it was an awe-inspiring sight. Pristine crystal domes, glass spires and interconnected walkways that gleamed like spider-webs dipped in quicksilver sprawled before them.

But Sor Talgron paid none of these structures any mind; he was completely focused upon the looming glass structure in the distance – and upon the giant statue that towered above it.

His eyes narrowed as he glared up at the titanic statue. It stood more than a kilometre tall, a titanic silver and glass colossus in the form of a man, standing with arms raised. Lightning from the shield-dome struck the statue's outstretched hands every few seconds, bathing it in flashes of flickering energy that coiled around its arms and torso.

Sor Talgron felt loathing rise up within him.

This was no statue of a heroic founder or local legend; this was an effigy of the god of the people of Forty-seven Sixteen.

'So it is true, then,' said Arshaq, disgust in his voice. 'These people are heathen idolators.'

'Lorgar, give me strength,' Sor Talgron murmured.

'Captain,' said Sergeant Arshaq, consulting his auspex. 'We have multiple contacts, moving on our position. What are your orders?'

'We go there,' said Sor Talgron, pointing towards the statue. 'And we kill everything

we find. Those are our orders.’

STRANGELY, THEY HAD encountered little resistance since passing through the dome.

After the brutal battle towards the centre of the enemy superstructure, the utter absence of the enemy here was eerie.

They traversed over expansive arched walkways of delicate glass, moving warily towards the immense central spire, covering all the angles and scanning for movement.

The battle outside the sphere of lightning had been bloody in the extreme – the artificial war constructs were deadly foes, utilising weaponry unlike anything that any of the crusade fleets had encountered, as far as he understood. Yet here, within the sheltered, impenetrable dome of energy, it was peaceful – almost serene.

Through vaulted hallways and soaring cathedral-like passages they moved, footsteps echoing loudly upon the smooth glass.

‘It’s like a tomb,’ remarked Arshaq.

Sor Talgron was forced to agree. He almost wished for an enemy to appear, just to break the tension. Almost.

The Word Bearers moved warily along a wide bridge spanning two glittering crystal spires, closing steadily on the central temple structure that rose up before them like an exotic crystal flower, atop which stood the colossal statue of the enemy’s false god. Sor Talgron could not look upon the vile storm-god statue without feeling his gorge rise.

On more than one occasion they glimpsed enemy constructs stalking along bridges and walkways far below, moving towards the shield-dome and the battle raging outside, but they appeared unaware – or unconcerned – with the Astartes already within the shield.

It seemed that the entire superstructure of the enemy continent-city revolved around this strangely alien building, and all the walkways, ramparts and flyways within the veil led towards it. Undoubtedly, it was a structure of great importance, and Sor Talgron felt strongly that the last vestiges of humanity on this doomed world were hidden within.

They covered the ten kilometres to the heart of the city swiftly, moving at a fast pace that they could have maintained for days on end.

At last they drew near the central temple-building. The storm-god statue loomed above them, its arms bathed in lightning. They were just stepping out from beneath a towering archway of crystal splinters, stalking warily towards this central structure, when Sergeant Arshaq spoke.

‘Life readings,’ he warned, consulting the squad’s auspex. They were the first life signs that the device had registered since their arrival on Forty-seven Sixteen.

Sor Talgron barked an order and Squad Helikon formed a defensive perimeter around their captain. They continued to advance, drawing ever closer to the huge, cylindrical temple that rose up before them.

Gaping, triangular portals were cut into the sides of the temple. The interior was filled with blinding light – nothing within its brilliance could be discerned.

Warily, the Word Bearers advanced towards the nearest portal. Sor Talgron shielded his eyes against the bright light. There was a delicate shimmering sound emanating from within, and with a nod he ordered Squad Helikon in.

Stepping inside was like being transported to a completely different location. Sor Talgron felt the change in the air against his burnt skin. The air here was cool and vaguely fragrant, where outside it was hot and filled with the acrid stink of electricity. His gaze was immediately drawn upwards. The immense structure was formed around a vast cylindrical shaft, which disappeared into the distance overhead. This lofty expanse was filled with shimmering light that descended from above like an ethereal waterfall falling in slow motion. A strange, lilting sound accompanied this fey light, something akin to the sound of glass chimes, overlaid with the hum of energy. Hundreds of arcing balconies and gantries ringed this central shaft, and walkways criss-crossed the expanse. So focused on these disturbing wonders was Sor Talgron that he barely registered the panes of glass silently sealing the portal behind them.

Standing atop a fluted pillar of glass was an exact replica of the colossus half a kilometre overhead, though this statue was a “mere” fifty metres tall. Its head was thrown back rapturously, its arms held skywards in what might have been praise or glory.

Shimmering light bathed this statue in radiant brilliance.

The floor sunk away below them in a steep series of tiers – hundreds of them. And upon each tier crowded the kneeling figures of men, women and children. These were the first people that the Word Bearers had encountered since their arrival on Forty-seven Sixteen – the last of the world’s population.

All had their heads bowed to the floor in prayer, facing towards the glass idol of their profane storm-lord. Sor Talgron guessed there must have been some forty thousand people packed into the stadium-like temple, all of them murmuring in low voices and rocking from side to side, as if lost in a trance. None seemed to have noticed the appearance of Sor Talgron and Squad Helikon.

Upon a dais at the bottom of the circular tiers, a diminutive old man stood leaning upon a staff of glass and silver. He raised his head, staring up at Sor Talgron and his brethren. He did not appear surprised or shocked at their appearance; rather, he wore a mournful expression on his cracked parchment face.

‘Stay with me,’ said Sor Talgron. ‘Hold your fire, and follow my lead.’

His eyes were locked on the one who could only be the religious leader of the enemy civilisation. This was the one that Kor Phaeron had met with less than two days earlier. Flanked by the warrior-brothers of Squad Helikon, he began marching down the steep stairs towards the enemy leader.

At some unspoken command, the entire congregation of men, women and children stood, turning to face the intruders into their realm.

The Word Bearers tensed, levelling weapons towards the crowd. Sor Talgron expected to see the flush of anger and resentment in their faces, but they stared at the towering Astartes forlornly and, perhaps, with a little disappointment.

‘Nobody engage,’ warned Sor Talgron.

For all that the enemy appeared to pose little threat, he knew from experience that it took but a single individual to turn the mood of a mob murderous – indeed, the Chaplains of the Legion were skilful at inciting just such emotion. Were the crowd to turn on them, the resulting massacre would be terrible. He and his brothers would reap a bloody toll, taking down hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these people, but there were only half a dozen, facing more than forty thousand. Even Astartes would eventually be dragged down by such numbers.

The warriors of XVII Legion descended the steep tiers, eyeing the crowd that parted before them warily. The people regarding them stood in absolute silence, which was, Sor Talgron thought, perhaps more disconcerting than had they been braying for blood; at least that he would have understood.

The old man regarded their approach solemnly.

‘What are we doing?’ hissed Sergeant Arshaq, using a closed vox channel so none of his squad could hear.

‘I want to see how divergent these people really are,’ said Sor Talgron, replying on the same closed channel.

He had known Arshaq for decades, both having been raised in the same temple on their grim home world of Colchis, and the captain overlooked such breaches in protocol from the sergeant, valuing his opinion. The sergeant’s silence to his answer was enough to tell him that Arshaq did not approve, but he knew him well enough to know that the sergeant would back him up, no matter what.

They descended to the bottom of the tiers, and started up the steps of the dais towards the old priest. Sor Talgron levelled his bolt pistol at the elderly man’s head.

‘Squad Helikon,’ said Sor Talgron in a low voice. ‘Establish a perimeter.’

‘Yes, captain,’ said the sergeant of Squad Helikon, nodding. With clipped commands, Arshaq directed his squad members into position.

They spread apart, facing outwards, scanning the crowd for potential threats.

Talgron stepped onto the final level of the dais and came to a halt before the old priest. The elderly man came up barely to his midsection, and though he was clearly ancient, his eyes were bright and alert. Something in his gaze made Sor Talgron vaguely uneasy.

Was he a sorcerer? He dismissed the notion immediately. The old man was unnerving but he felt no threat from him. He lowered his pistol.

‘I am Sor Talgron, Captain of Thirty-fourth Company, XVII Legion,’ he said, his voice ringing out loudly, breaking the silence.

‘Why do you bring death to my world, warmonger?’ said the old man, speaking a corrupted, archaic form of Low Gothic.

‘You will order the complete surrender of your armed forces, effective immediately, and relinquish control of the world designated Forty-seven Sixteen,’ said Sor Talgron, ignoring the old priest’s words. ‘Understand?’

‘Why do you bring death to my world?’ said the priest again, but again Sor Talgron refused to acknowledge his words.

‘You will lower the lightning-shield protecting this structure,’ he said firmly. ‘You will order your people and your infernal thinking machines to cease all hostilities. Do I make myself clear?’

The old priest sighed, and nodded his head vaguely. With a gesture, he drew Sor Talgron's attention towards a dark glass cube that was rising smoothly from the floor. Was it some form of weapon? His pistol was in his hand instantly.

There was something forming within the solid mass of the prism, and sensing no immediate danger, Sor Talgron stepped cautiously towards it. The perfect glass cube would have come up to the chest of a regular human, but Sor Talgron was forced to bend forwards to peer at the image taking shape within.

At first the object forming within was hazy and transparent, like a ghost-image, but within several heartbeats it solidified. It was somewhat like the three-dimensional representations that he had seen produced by advanced pict-devices, but those images were always poor representations of reality. This image looked real, a solid artefact, encased in the glass cube.

It was an open book, he saw, painstakingly illuminated with ink and gold leaf. The borders were replete with impossibly intricate, coiling designs and interweaving patterns. Sor Talgron saw that stylised figures and creatures were worked into these borders, hidden amidst the twisting patterns and coiling spirals. Each of the pages was covered in dense lines of script written in a firm, austere and vaguely familiar hand.

Every warrior-brother of the XVII Legion spent several hours every day engaged in solitary illumination, but never had he seen a work such as this. The penmanship and artistry was phenomenal, far beyond anything that Sor Talgron or any warrior-brother could ever hope to achieve. It was a work of undeniable genius – something that surely no mortal hand could ever hope to match. Indeed, the only illuminated works that he had ever seen that were even vaguely comparable was those penned by the Urizen himself, and he had only been allowed fragmentary glimpses of those great works…

He leaned in closer, eyes widening. The text was written in the variation of High Gothic utilised only by the religious elite of his homeworld, Colchis.

'What is this?' said Sor Talgron in shock, his mind whirling.

He threw a glance towards the priest, standing nearby, but it was impossible to read the expression in the old man's eyes. He turned back towards the book seemingly trapped within the black cube.

'…and in faith shall the universe be united…' he said, reading aloud a line that leapt out from the dense script. His voice faltered. He knew these words. Indeed, he had memorised this work in its entirety. He swallowed heavily.

'…united behind the… the God-Emperor of all mankind,' he said in a hoarse whisper,

completing the hallowed line.

He looked back at the old priest in confusion and shock.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

‘We are the Scions of the Storm,’ said the old man, gesturing with both arms to encapsulate all the people standing around the temple dais.

‘What in Lorgar’s name is that supposed to mean?’ growled Sor Talgron.

The old priest snorted, and shuffled past Sor Talgron. He leant forwards and brushed his fingertips across the smooth surface of the cube. The pages of the book within the glass prism turned in response, flicking rapidly. Each was intricately illuminated and covered in dense script. Sliding his fingertips more slowly across the surface of the cube, the old priest made the pages turn slower, flicking slowly until he came to the densely illuminated frontispiece of the holy text.

He flashed Sor Talgron a sad smile, pointing at the page.

The captain of Thirty-fourth Company stared wide-eyed at the full-page illumination. It showed a radiant figure bedecked in wondrously detailed armour, detailed in gold leaf. The divine figure’s head was thrown back, and surrounded by a golden halo.

The God-Emperor of Mankind.

Sor Talgron’s eye was drawn to the golden armour worn by the God-Emperor, to His ornate and ancient breastplate, the breastplate He was said to have worn while leading the ancient armies of unification across the ravaged surface of old Terra… the breastplate that bore the ancient symbols of His rulership, symbols that were recognised and rightfully feared before even the commencement of Old Night, the symbols mirrored on the golden armour of the Legio Custodes, the Emperor’s personal guard.

These symbols rose in bas-relief from the Emperor’s armour; they represented the Emperor’s wrath – thunder bolts.

Understanding dawned.

The inhabitants of Forty-seven Sixteen were worshipping the Emperor…

SOR TALGRON SWALLOWED thickly, still staring at the image of the Emperor.

Scions of the Storm, the old man had called his people; sons of the storm. They were

worshipping the Emperor as a god, the personification of the storms that wracked their world.

‘Now you understand,’ said the priest. He tapped a finger onto the smooth surface of the cube, and the three-dimensional image of the holy work disappeared.

‘This war should never have been sanctioned,’ said Sor Talgron. ‘Your people are not heretics.’

‘No,’ said the old priest. ‘We wished to join your Imperium – long had we thought ourselves alone in the darkness.’

‘We can stop this,’ said Sor Talgron. ‘You must lower your shield – I cannot contact my commander while it is intact.’

How many people had already died here? And for what? Sor Talgron felt hollow inside. They had committed genocide because of a misunderstanding.

The Scion smiled sadly, and stepped towards Sor Talgron. He placed a wrinkled hand upon the captain’s chest plate, over his heart.

‘Give me your word that the last of my people will live, and the shield shall be lowered,’ the old man said.

‘I swear it,’ said Sor Talgron.

The shield-dome encasing the temple-palace of the Scions flickered and disappeared, and Sor Talgron hastily patched in to the Fidelitas Lex, speaking of what he had learnt.

‘Understood, Talgron,’ came Kor Phaeron’s muffled reply. ‘The Urizen has been informed. Hold position.’

The long-range vox-channel was cut off, and for long minutes Sor Talgron and Squad Helikon stood by uneasily, waiting for fresh orders. The squad still kept their weapons upon the crowd, and Sor Talgron stared up at the statue of the Emperor above.

Long minutes passed. Now that the shield-dome was down, vox-reports began to flood in – it appeared that all fighting across Forty-seven Sixteen had ceased.

‘Teleport signature,’ reported Arshaq finally.

‘This will all be over soon, old one,’ Sor Talgron said in a respectful tone. ‘The Urizen will be pleased to have learnt that you are believers.’

A moment later, scores of coalescing shapes began to appear around the circumference of the tiered prayer-levels above, teleporting in from the Fidelitas Lex in low orbit overhead. They appeared at first as little more than vague shimmers of light, then as more solid forms as realisation was completed.

One after another, a hundred Terminator-armoured Astartes materialised, weapons trained on the human worshippers of Forty-seven Sixteen. Sor Talgron raised an eyebrow.

‘A little dramatic, brother,’ he commented, under his breath. He raised a hand in greeting to his brother-captain. The distant figure of Kor Phaeron nodded curtly in response, though he made no move to descend the tiers.

Two more shapes began to coalesce, this time on the dais alongside Sor Talgron. His eyes widened as he saw who it was that was teleporting in, and he dropped to one knee, his head bowed and his heart hammering in his chest as the teleportation was completed.

A warm hand was placed upon the crown of his head, its pressure firm, yet nurturing.

‘Rise, my son,’ said a voice spoken with quiet, understated authority that nevertheless made a shudder of unaccountable panic ripple through Sor Talgron. It was not an experience common for an Astartes.

Pushing himself to his feet, Sor Talgron lifted his gaze and looked upon the shadowed face of a demigod.

LORGAR WAS AS magnificent and terrible to behold as ever. His scalp was completely hairless, and every inch of exposed flesh was caked in gold leaf, so that he gleamed like a statue of living metal. The sockets of his soulful, impossibly intense eyes were blackened with kohl, and Sor Talgron was, as ever, unable to hold the Urizen’s gaze for more than a fraction of second.

There was such vitality, such depth of pain, such intensity and yes, such suppressed violence in Lorgar’s eyes that surely only another primarch could hope to stare into them without breaking down weeping before this living god.

He stood a head taller than Sor Talgron, and his slender physique was encased within a magnificent suit of armour. Each overlapping plate was the colour of granite and inscribed with the intricate cuneiform of Colchis. Over this he wore an opulent robe the exact shade of congealed blood, the fabric heavy with gold stitching.

The Urizen, the Golden One, the Anointed; the primarch of the XVII Legion had many

names. To those whom he deemed heretic, he was death incarnate; to his faithful, he was everything.

‘We are pleased with your success, brother-captain,’ said a smooth voice. Almost gratefully, Sor Talgron turned his gaze towards the figure that accompanied the primarch. Erebus. Who else would dare answer for the primarch?

‘Thank you, First Chaplain,’ said Sor Talgron, bowing his head respectfully.

‘This is the one?’ said Lorgar, his intense gaze fixing upon the figure of the old priest, who stood transfixed at Sor Talgron’s side. The captain of Thirty-fourth Company had all but forgotten about him. The elderly hierarch leant heavily on his staff, his eyes wide with horror. He was shaking his head slightly from side to side, moaning wordlessly.

‘This is he, my lord,’ replied Sor Talgron. ‘This is the one I believe to be the leader of this world’s cult of Emperor-worship.’

Erebus smiled, though the smile did not reach his eyes. Sor Talgron knew that look well, and his blood turned to ice.

‘I gave my word that no further harm would befall his people,’ insisted Sor Talgron. ‘Don’t make a liar of me, Erebus.’

‘You’re going soft, brother,’ said Erebus.

‘It is my belief,’ Sor Talgron said, looking towards Lorgar, ‘that a race memory of the God-Emperor lingers in the subconscious of the inhabitants of Forty-seven Sixteen. They are devout, and worship Him faithfully, albeit as a crude, elemental force. It would be an easy thing to direct them towards the Imperial Truth, my lord. I feel that had such knowledge been known beforehand, the war on Forty-seven Sixteen would have been deemed unnecessary and inappropriate.’

Erebus craned his neck to look up at the statue of the storm-god above them. He raised an eyebrow and exchanged an amused glance with his primarch before looking Sor Talgron in the eye once more.

‘You’ve done your duty, captain,’ said Erebus, stalking around behind the old priest like a wolf circling its prey. ‘And you’ve saved the lives of many of our brothers. For that, you are to be commended.’

‘There is more,’ insisted Sor Talgron. ‘I believe that they have been… picking up our signals, my lord. I saw a copy of…’

His voice faltered as the Urizen turned his gaze towards him once more, and he felt a shudder of unease beneath the power of the primarch's gaze.

'A copy of what, captain?'

'The Lectitio Divinitatus, lord,' said Sor Talgron.

'Really?' said Lorgar, clearly surprised.

'Yes, my lord,' said Sor Talgron.

'Walk with me,' said Lorgar. Sor Talgron found himself responding instantly. Such was the power and control in the primarch's voice that he would not have been able to resist had he any wish to.

'Bring him,' the Urizen said over his shoulder, and Erebus guided the old priest, gently but firmly, in their wake. Squad Helikon fell in behind them at a nod from the First Chaplain, leaving the dais empty.

The primarch stepped off the dais and strode towards the steep, tiered stairway that would take them up to the ring of Kor Phaeron's First Company, standing motionless around the circumference of the arena above. Sor Talgron had to hurry to keep pace. Abruptly, the primarch came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs, turning to face the captain of Thirty-fourth Company, a rare, sardonic smile curling the corners of his lips.

'It was a lifetime ago when I wrote the Lectitio Divinitatus,' said Lorgar.

'It is the greatest literary work ever to have been conceived,' said Sor Talgron. 'It is your masterpiece.'

Erebus laughed lightly at that, and Sor Talgron felt his choler rise. Lorgar broke into motion once more, taking the stairs four at a time, and he struggled to keep up. Of the thousands of people who stared open-mouthed at this golden, living god walking among them, the Urizen paid no notice.

'Much has happened these past months,' the primarch said. 'My eyes have been opened.'

'My lord?' said Sor Talgron.

'The Lectitio Divinitatus is nothing,' said the primarch. There was a quiet but forceful vehemence to his voice. 'Nothing.'

Sor Talgron could not comprehend what he was hearing, and he furrowed his brow.

Was this some test of his faith and devotion?

‘I am composing a new work,’ declared Lorgar, favouring Sor Talgron with a conspiratorial glance. They were almost at the top of the tiered steps. ‘It is almost complete. It is to be my opus, Talgron, something with true meaning. It will make you forget the Lectitio Divinitatus.’

‘What is it, lord?’ said Sor Talgron, though he immediately feared he had overstepped his mark.

‘Something special,’ said the Urizen, tantalisingly.

They reached the top of the tiered amphitheatre, where they were greeted by Kor Phaeron, who dropped to one knee before his lord primarch. When he stood, his eyes were burning hot with the flames of fanaticism. He licked his lips as he stared at the old priest, who was being helped up the final stairs by an attentive and gentle Erebus.

‘My lord,’ said Sor Talgron, his mouth dry. He felt the gaze of the priest upon him, but avoided it. ‘Are we to condemn these people for… for merely being cut off from Terra?’

Stony silence greeted Sor Talgron’s words, broken finally by Kor Phaeron.

‘Ignorance is no excuse for blasphemy, brother,’ he said.

Lorgar glared at his First Captain, who backed away, dropping his gaze and visibly paling.

Then the primarch put his arm around Sor Talgron’s shoulder, and drew him away from the others. At such close proximity, he smelt of rich oils and incense. The scent was intoxicating.

‘Sometimes,’ said Lorgar, his tone one of regret, ‘sacrifices must be made.’

He turned Sor Talgron around. The priest was still looking at him, eyes filled with dread. Out of the corner of his vision, Sor Talgron saw the primarch’s almost imperceptible nod.

A knife, its blade curved like the body of a serpent, was suddenly in Erebus’s hand. Sor Talgron cried out, but Lorgar’s grip around his shoulders was crushing, and he could do nothing as the blade was plunged into the old priest’s neck.

Holding the old man upright with one hand, Erebus ripped his knife free and a fountain of blood spurted from the fatal wound. Hot arterial blood splashed across the plates of Erebus’s blessed armour, staining it dark red.

Dipping a finger into the geyser of blood, Erebus swiftly drew an eight-pointed star upon the dying man's forehead, though the meaning of the symbol was lost on Sor Talgron. Then, the First Chaplain hurled the old man away from him, sending him crashing down the stairs that he had just helped the old man climb. The priest's body tumbled and flopped end over end. It came to rest halfway at the foot of the stairs, a broken, lifeless marionette, blood pooling beneath it, arms and legs bent unnaturally.

Before the shocked worshippers of Forty-seven Sixteen could react, the entirety of the First Company began firing. The sound was deafening, blotting out the screams. Bolters and autocannons were swung methodically from left and right, mowing down unarmoured men, women and children indiscriminately. Heavy flamers spewed their volatile liquid fire down into the packed masses.

Ammunition was expended, and the First Company Terminators calmly reloaded, slamming fresh magazines into place, replacing drums of high-calibre rounds, threading fresh belts through arming chambers and replacing empty canisters of promethium with fresh ones. Then they simply continued firing.

'Do you trust me, Sor Talgron?' said Lorgar, his breath hot against the captain's face. Shocked and horrified by the scale of the brutal massacre, Sor Talgron was unable to answer.

'Do you trust me?' the Urizen said, more fiercely, his voice quivering with such intensity of feeling that Sol Talgron felt that his legs would surely have given way beneath him had he not been supported.

The captain of Thirty-fourth Company turned his face towards the impassioned, golden face of his primarch, lord and mentor. He nodded his head slightly.

'Then believe me when I say that this is necessary,' said Lorgar, his voice full of righteous fury.

'The Emperor, in His wisdom, has driven us to this point,' said Lorgar. 'This is His will. This is His mercy. The blood of these innocents is on His hands.'

The deafening roar of the slaughter slowly died. At a barked order from Kor Phaeron, the Terminators of First Company began descending the tiers, inspecting the kills and executing those who had, miraculously, survived their concentrated fire.

'I need to know who I can trust,' said Lorgar, his voice filled with such intensity that Sor Talgron knew fear – real fear – such that an Astartes should never know. 'I need to know that my sons would follow me where I must go. Can I trust you, Word Bearer?'

‘Yes,’ said Sor Talgron, his throat cracked and dry.

‘Would you walk into hell itself alongside me if I asked it?’ asked Lorgar.

Sor Talgron made no immediate response. Slowly, he nodded his head.

Lorgar stared at him intently, and he felt his soul shrivel beneath the penetrating gaze. In that moment Sor Talgron felt certain that Lorgar was going to kill him then and there.

‘Please, my lord,’ gasped Sor Talgron. ‘I would follow you. I swear it. No matter what.’

The intensity suddenly left Lorgar’s face, washed away as if it had never been. How could he ever have thought the Urizen meant him harm, he thought? He almost laughed out loud, the notion was so ludicrous.

‘You asked me before what the great work I am scribing was,’ said Lorgar, his tone casual and light. ‘For now, I am calling it the Book of Lorgar.’

The primarch of the Word Bearers released his grip on Sor Talgron. Lorgar’s golden lips turned into a smile, and despite everything, Sor Talgron could not help but feel his heart lift.

Lorgar laughed softly to himself.

‘Such hubris, I know,’ he said. ‘I’d like you to read it.’

Lorgar looked him directly, his eyes flashing. ‘What do you remember of the old beliefs of Colchis, Sor Talgron?’