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CALL OF THE LION

IN A STORM OF kaleidoscopic violence, reality was torn apart. From the seething warp-point burst forth a starship, slab-sided and bristling with weapon systems. Within moments of the warp rift opening, the Spear of Truth had smashed into realspace, and almost immediately its launch bays were opening, shafts of red light spilling from the yawning maws of its hangars.

The battle-barge spewed forth a swarm of unmanned probes that darted out from the warship's armoured hull in all directions, turning and weaving a complex pattern like bees around their hive, their scanners seeking any sign of immediate threat. A few minutes later, patrol craft erupted from their mechanical wombs on white-hot plasma jets. They formed up into three squadrons, one fore, one aft and the other circling the battle-barge amidships.

Thus protected, the Spear of Truth began the long process of slowing its immense speed.

On the bridge of the Spear of Truth, Chapter Commander Astelan was geared and armed ready for battle, as were the rest of his crew, heedful of the standing orders for vessels to be ready to fight immediately. Such orders were not merely dogma. Despite her guns and patrol craft, the Spear of Truth, like all starships, was most vulnerable dropping out of warp space. Just as a man requires time to orientate himself upon recovering consciousness, so too did the battle-barge and its inhabitants need to adjust to realspace.

Astelan was clad in his power armour, as were his three companions, Galedan, Astoric and Melian, each a captain of the companies carried aboard the battle-barge. Their armour was shadow-black, broken only by the red winged-sword insignia of the Legion upon their left shoulder pad and their company markings on the right. The dull grey of exposed piping and cables broke through from under the overlapping ceramite chestplates, coiling under the arms to the backpacks that supplied power to the suits.

Though painstakingly maintained, each showed small but tell-tale signs of wear and tear – spots of corrosion, repaired battle damage and makeshift replacement parts. Astelan had heard that newer versions of armour had been developed, with reinforced joints and fewer weak spots, but it had been more than four years since his Chapter had been in contact for a substantial resupply.

Around the massive figures of the four Astartes were several dozen functionaries clad

in simple robes or white coats. Most stood at workstations, while some were on hand with dataslabs to record any orders given by their commanders. The only sounds were the thrumming of logic machines, the chitter of readouts, the tread of boots on mesh decking and the murmurs of the technicians. All were well practised; there was no need for idle chatter, only clipped reports from the bridge crew.

‘Local scan negative for planetary bodies.’

At Astelan’s waist hung a power sword and his holstered bolt pistol. They had been in his possession since he was promoted to sergeant, only fourteen years ago, and they were as much a badge of office for him as the insignia inscribed upon his chest plastron.

He tapped his fingers against the hilt of the sword as he waited for the sensor screen to re-establish itself.

‘Local scan negative for artificial bodies.’

‘Wide sensor array operational.’

The seconds ticked by slowly, as the Spear of Truth metaphorically shook away its dizziness and regained its sight and hearing.

‘Tactical display coming online.’

The mood of concentration did not lighten at the news, for although the Spear of Truth was now no longer swathed in a sensorial limbo, it would take a while before the data being relayed back to the ship was collated and analysed.

‘Local comm-web established.’

A few more minutes passed until a technician spoke again.

‘Localised scanning complete,’ he said. ‘Zero threats detected.’

Though there were no obvious sighs of relief or relaxation, the tension aboard the bridge dissipated somewhat. Alertness turned to focused activity; caution to curiosity.

Astelan looked up at the huge digital display that rendered all of the incoming data into an understandable image. It was crude at the moment, little more than a wire-frame schematic of the system and its major planetary bodies, and would take several days for the picture to be completed as the surveyor probes raced through the system sending back their findings.

Over the coming hours, eighteen more vessels broke from warp at various points around the star system's outer reaches, each spawning its own small brood of escorts and augury devices. Seven more battle-barges, three fleet carriers and eight light cruiser-class warships descended upon the silent worlds orbiting the deep-red orb at the system's centre. Invisible, tight-beam laser communications criss-crossed the void seeking the whereabouts and conditions of the other fleet members.

After several hours, contact was fully re-established. The fleet correlated their courses and calculated velocity descents for rendezvous, inbound towards the core worlds.

The Dark Angels began their exploration of system DX-619 in earnest.

Astelan was patient. It would be at least seven more days before the fleet had decelerated to something approaching orbit-navigable speed, and he was determined to use that time to gather as much information as possible about this uncharted stretch of the galaxy.

A radio signature, faint or perhaps even nonexistent, had brought the Dark Angels here; the merest chattering murmur against the background radiation of the universe. It would most likely be nothing, a cosmic anomaly caused by an irregularity in the star's emissions or a millennia-old echo of a civilisation long since turned to dust by the passing of an age. Such had been the case for ninety-five per cent of the systems the task force had investigated over the last five years. Almost all were deserted, for even at the height of mankind's spread across the stars they were scattered thinly, pockets of humanity amongst the impossible vastness of interstellar space.

In the early years the forces of the Great Crusade had met with huge success, bringing the Imperial Truth to hundreds of worlds in the relatively densely populated systems around Terra. Here, in the yawning chasm between spiral arms, such colonies had always been sparse, and through the isolation of the Age of Strife it was possible that none at all had survived.

With every warp jump, Astelan always readied himself for action, for unexpected discovery, but with every jump he also hardened his expectations with the overwhelming probabilities involved in finding these far-flung outposts of humanity.

It was thus understandable that Astelan watched the data monitors in a less-than-expectant mood. As the fleet gradually converged, he subconsciously processed the scan results scrolling across dozens of screens that filled the walls of the bridge. Technicians fussed over control dials and comm-units, cursing as connections were lost, grinning to their colleagues when unexpected feedback results were received.

Astelan ignored them all, focusing entirely on one part of the main screen – the radio

signature intercept relay. It was on that small wavering graph line that Astelan heaped his thoughts. It was a dull white line against the black of the screen, barely moving, showing nothing more than the static background hum of the universe's birth.

Four days, he told himself. Four days for a positive contact. Four days before he ordered the fleet to turn around and head outsystem for another jump. It would be a waste of time to decelerate for longer, with the attendant need to accelerate again ready for warp jump, and so he gave his hopes four days to manifest.

Already resigned to disappointment by recent experience, Astelan tore his eyes away from the radio relay and gave a nod to his second-in-command, Galedan. The captain accepted control of the bridge with a nod of his own and took the Chapter commander's place as Astelan turned and left.

'COMMANDER REQUESTED ON the bridge.'

Galedan's voice sounded metallic through the comm-grille of Astelan's quarters, and its flat, precise tone gave no sense of the captain's mood. Astelan was sat at his small desk, garbed in an open-fronted robe, poring over weapons manifests. There was no need to respond. Galedan would have been more specific if the Chapter commander's presence was urgently needed, and the lack of a general alarm reassured Astelan that this was probably nothing more than some routine logging or scan result requiring his authorisation.

He placed the manifests neatly into the desk's drawer and stood. A glance out of the small port showed the DX-619 star, much closer now. The dark shape of a planet could be clearly seen intruding upon the edge of the orb. That was nothing new, either. They had been closing on the world for three days now and they would reach it in two more. It was just a small shadow at the moment, like any other ball of rock they had encountered.

With a resigned weariness, Astelan made his way along the metal and plascrete innards of the ship to the bridge.

As the heavy double doors hissed open, Astelan was confronted by a scene of intense activity. The technicians were gathered in small clusters of fours and fives around certain instruments, and seemed to be checking each other's calculations and findings.

Galedan turned, and Astelan saw a glimmer in his companion's eyes and an expectant look. Unlike the Chapter commander, Galedan was in his armour, as befitted the bridge commander. Servos creaked as the captain gestured towards the main panel.

Astelan's eyes immediately fixed on the radio relay as he strode into the room. He stopped in his tracks only three paces in. There was a spike on the small line. It was

not particularly tall, but it was a definite abnormality. Regaining his composure, Astelan stepped up beside Galedan. The captain turned an inquiring look at one of the chief technicians and received a wordless nod in reply. ‘Report,’ said Astelan.

‘Confirmed artificial radio signature, commander,’ Galedan replied, unable to keep the hint of a smile from his lips.

Astelan turned his attention to the chief technician, a lanky man with thinning hair and grey stubble.

‘Automated? Location?’ said Astelan. A couple of times before they had come across old beacons or communications satellites miraculously still functioning centuries after those that had launched them had perished.

‘Fourth planet, definitely fluctuating very likely to be non-automated,’ the technician reassured him.

‘Sound general alarm,’ ordered Astelan. It was a wise precaution, but Astelan did it as much to alert the crew that something was happening as he did out of military prudence. ‘Signal the rest of the fleet with our findings. Rendezvous adjustment to point sigma-absolute. Please convey an invitation to Chapter Commander Belath to join me as soon as possible.’

FURTHER SCANNING REVEALED that the planet’s inhabitants had the capability to communicate by radio, and technicians soon confirmed that the inhabitants were human and spoke a dialect of the Terran language. The news that the fleet had indeed discovered an isolated human world brought Belath to the Spear of Truth for a meeting between the two Chapter commanders.

With the fleet at general quarters once more, Astelan stood in one of the Spear of Truth’s docking bays clad in his armour, awaiting the arrival of Belath. Accompanying Astelan were his three on-board company commanders and an honour guard from the First Company.

Around them the hangar was full of drop-pods, the immense shapes of Castellan-class bombers and Harbinger assault craft, as well as the hawk-like forms of five Deathbird interceptors. Racks of bombs and missiles, crates of ammunition and stacks of power packs filled much of the remaining space.

A dull clang above the Chapter commander signalled the arrival of Belath’s transport. In the ceiling, gears ground into action and a breeze wafted upwards as the inner lock doors opened and the air inside the hangar was drawn up into the void above. Hydraulics wheezing, the heavy lift brought down the sleek, eagle-prowed craft, lights strobing an orange warning to those below and throwing dancing shadows around the

assembled Space Marines.

As the lift descended, Astelan considered how little he knew of his visitor. This was the first opportunity that he had been granted to meet his fellow Chapter commander face-to-face. He had exchanged comm contacts with Belath but only on a very formal basis.

Belath's fleet and Chapter had joined Astelan's only two weeks earlier in the Calcabrina system. Astelan had been informed by Belath that the Dark Angels' primarch, the Lion, had sent Belath to add his forces to the expedition.

Astelan knew nothing of Belath, but these days that was not surprising. The massive influx of warriors into the Legion following the rediscovery of Caliban meant that there were many commanders who had never met each other, tossed together on task forces and in warzones all across the galaxy.

That one such Chapter commander had been despatched to assist Astelan was curious for the simple fact that there had been little enough for Astelan's Chapter to do and additional forces were unlikely to change that.

'The Lion probably wants Belath to gain some experience alongside the veterans before sending him off on his own,' said Galedan, guessing his commander's thoughts by way of their long history together.

Astelan merely grunted a non-committal reply and kept his gaze upon the shuttle as the lift thudded to the hangar floor. With a hiss, the beak-like prow of the ship opened up to form a boarding ramp, and a lone power-armoured figure strode down.

To Astelan, Belath looked incredibly young, perhaps only thirty or thirty-five years old. Given that the Legion's strength had increased by almost twenty thousand in the last few years, it was no shock to see that relatively junior Astartes were occupying command positions. After contact with Caliban many company officers had been promoted to Chapter commanders over the new recruits, and it was this that had seen Astelan's own rapid rise to prominence. It had since been decided not to split the existing Terran veterans too much across the new Calibanite Chapters and so it was inevitable that some of the more recent additions would be commanded by all but untested warriors.

Belath had the pale skin and dark hair that was common to many Calibanites, though his eyes were a deep blue rather than the usual brown or grey. His hair was cropped exceptionally short, in stark contrast to Astelan's long braids, and Belath's expression was of tight-lipped solemnity.

The arrival stopped in front of Astelan and held a fist to his chest in salute. As Astelan

nodded in greeting, he noticed something that caught his eye.

‘What’s that?’ Astelan asked, pointing to a heraldic symbol on Belath’s right shoulder plate, where normally a Space Marine’s organisational and rank markings would be painted. It was decorated with a quartered shield, white and blue, emblazoned with a sword held in the grip of a taloned foot.

‘That is the symbol of my order,’ replied Belath, somewhat taken aback. ‘The Order of the Raven’s Wing.’

Astelan turned an inquiring look to Galedan.

‘One of the knightly orders,’ the captain said. ‘A Calibanite rank badge.’

‘And that?’ said Astelan, redirecting his accusing finger to Belath’s other shoulder pad, which was painted a dark green beneath the Dark Angels symbol.

‘The glorious Lion El’Jonson has decreed that Calibanite warriors are to wear the green of our home world’s forests,’ said Belath with no small hint of defiance. ‘It is to act as a remembrance of the battles fought to tame Caliban under the leadership of the Lion.’

Astelan merely nodded without comment. The two Chapter commanders stood gauging each other in silence for several heartbeats before Astelan spoke again.

‘Welcome aboard the Spear of Truth,’ he said, extending a hand. ‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance.’

Belath hesitated, and then broke into a disarming smile and shook Astelan’s hand.

‘It is my honour and privilege,’ the young Chapter commander said.

Followed by his entourage, Astelan led Belath from the docking bay into the dorsal concourse that ran the length of the Spear of Truth. As they headed towards a nearby conveyor, they passed open archways through which Astelan’s Space Marines could be seen readying for battle. Squad upon squad of power-armoured warriors ran through weapons or maintenance drills under the stern eyes of their sergeants. Banners were carefully taken down from their honoured positions on the walls of the chambers, paint carefully applied to dents and scratches on armour and solemn oaths renewed before the symbols of the Legion.

‘My Chapter is also ready to fight,’ assured Belath as the group stopped before the mesh door of the conveyor.

One of the honour guards stepped forwards and pushed a broad plate on the wall. The conveyor door slid aside for the pair to enter.

Astelan dismissed the escort as he stepped inside. The conveyor was a cube some ten feet by every dimension, lined with thick plascrete walls. Astelan turned two dials as Galedan, Astoric and Melian followed the two Chapter commanders.

‘Are they ready not to fight?’ asked Astelan as the door slammed shut.

The conveyor jolted into action, rapidly rising up through the decks of the battle-barge.

‘I do not understand,’ said Belath, raising his voice so that it could be heard over the clatter of chains and gears.

With a shudder the conveyor halted for a moment and then continued, now heading horizontally towards the prow of the battle-barge.

Astelan considered his reply for a moment before speaking.

‘We exist to bring the Emperor’s peace to the galaxy,’ said Astelan finally. ‘Though we may bring war to millions, we should not crave it.’

‘We were created to fight,’ countered Belath.

‘Yes, and we are also charged with the responsibility of choosing who we fight against,’ said Astelan. ‘When we go to war, we must do so in the sure and utter knowledge that it is right. From this comes our wholehearted dedication to victory. We must be a terrible foe, and must do terrible things, in order that others will learn from our enemies’ follies. Once unleashed, out anger cannot, and should not, be stayed. Relentless on the attack, intractable in defence, these are the hallmarks of the Astartes. Yet, it is perhaps all too easy to stir ourselves to angry war for small reason. You must remember that a world crushed beneath our heel may be resentful, and requires garrisons and resources to guard it. A world that comes freely to accept the wisdom of the Emperor must be embraced as a brother for they will add strength and not detract it.’

‘We are perfected in body and mind to be the sword of the Lion,’ said Belath. ‘Where he directs, our blade falls. It is not our part to judge the punished, merely to administer the punishment. Let diplomats and bureaucrats argue the reasons and let us be dedicated to the annihilation of our enemies.’

As if to punctuate the young Chapter commander’s remarks, the conveyor suddenly halted and a bell rang somewhere above it.

Galedan opened the door and the three captains stepped out into the corridor beyond. Belath made to take a pace but Astelan laid a hand upon his arm and held him back, turning Belath to face him.

‘You command more than a thousand of the finest warriors in the galaxy, as do I,’ said Astelan. ‘The Emperor has placed in me that power, but with it must come the judgement to wield it wisely. I do not know what you learnt about war in the Order of the Raven’s Wing, but it is bloody and costly and only a fool desires it.’

‘The Lion has chosen me to lead this Chapter,’ said Belath, gently but insistently prising his arm from Astelan’s grip. ‘I have my orders from the primarch and I will not hesitate to carry them out.’

Without offering a reply Astelan strode from the conveyor and turned left along the corridor. A great double door of carved wood stood out incongruously from the plascrete walls and metal decking. The carvings were of an angular, abstract design. Astelan ran his gauntleted fingers over the lines and curves, tracing them.

‘I fashioned these doors myself,’ the Chapter commander said, looking at Belath. ‘For many hours I laboured, copying designs from memory seen on the long halls I grew up in upon the Sibran Steppes of Terra. There is a tale in these patterns, for those who know how to read it.’

‘What tale?’ said Belath, his anger replaced by intrigue.

‘Later,’ replied Astelan reluctantly as he opened the doors. ‘We have a campaign to plan.’

‘Later then,’ said Belath, stepping past Astelan into the room beyond.

Inside was the operations room of the Spear of Truth. The walls were filled with banks of blank screens and comm-units, faced by long benches as yet vacant. The thrum of latent power filled the air, waiting to turn the quiet chamber into the epicentre of a military action that could conquer worlds.

Belath gave the equipment no second glance, having similar facilides upon his own vessel, and instead strode to a huge glass-topped oval tablet at the centre of the chamber. Astelan followed him with the others and directed Astoric to activate the hololith.

The glass flickered into life, a dull grey at first but warming up to a bright green. As the captain deftly manipulated the controls, a glowing three-dimensional sphere rose up from the table, slowly rotating. The press of more buttons illuminated small patches

on the surface of the globe, and flickering lights sprang up in a haphazard maze around them.

‘This is the system’s fourth world,’ announced Astelan. ‘We are currently standing out some seven hundred thousand kilometres from low orbit on the standard ediptic plane. No visual data is yet available, but I have highlighted sources of energy spikes and radio interference. Most likely they are urbanised areas.’

‘Populated?’ asked Belath with considerable excitement.

‘Yes, populated,’ said Astelan with a smile. ‘You seem to have joined us just in time. Five years we have been out in this wilderness with barely a glimmer of life to be seen. I hope you realise how fortunate you are.’

‘Certainly,’ said Belath. He took a deep breath and then turned to face Astelan, his fist held formally against his chest. ‘With your permission I would like to lead the assault.’

Astoric and Galedan both laughed, but were quickly silenced by a look from Astelan.

‘While your enthusiasm is commendable, it is a bit early to be talking of assaults,’ the Chapter commander told his young peer.

‘Do you plan to make contact?’ asked Belath, his eyes fixed on the hololithic representation of the world.

‘I have not yet decided,’ said Astelan. ‘It is a delicate situation.’

‘As far as we can determine, the inhabitants are as yet unaware of our presence,’ said Galedan, staring at the flickering three-dimensional image as if it was the world itself. ‘Contact would reveal us and we would lose the element of surprise.’

Astelan nodded in agreement.

‘It’s a mess of communications,’ he admitted. ‘I do not know how we would make contact, or with whom. There appear to be no planet-wide official frequencies. It seems that we have several states and governments to deal with.’

Belath looked up at this, his face thoughtful.

‘That could prove to be an advantage,’ he said. ‘We could introduce ourselves to one nation and deal directly with them – use them as a partner to reveal ourselves to the remaining populace.’

‘But with whom would we initially ally ourselves?’ said Astelan with a shake of his

head. ‘We have no means of determining which power bloc is dominant, if any. Such an intercession could provoke conflict between the states, even civil war.’

‘We need more information before we can proceed,’ said Astoric. He glanced at the others before continuing. ‘Local knowledge.’

‘Communications techs are analysing everything that’s incoming,’ said Astelan. ‘We can unravel more through studying the commsfeed.’

‘Why not just go and take a look?’ said Belath. ‘Better still, we should capture some of the inhabitants for questioning.’

‘We’ll need somewhere isolated,’ said Galedan, peering at the hololith. He nodded in satisfaction and indicated an area on the southern continent. ‘This area seems sparsely populated. There’s scattered urban centres, but plenty of open space for us to land undetected.’

Astoric turned his attention to data streaming past the image of the planet.

‘It will be nightfall over that part of the planet in just under three ship hours,’ the captain said. ‘One moon will be in recession, the other dark.’

‘I will lead a short sortie to the surface to establish a ground base and gather more information,’ announced Astelan. ‘We’ll drop tonight with a reconnaissance force and see what we can find.’

‘Is that wise, commander?’ asked Galedan. ‘It would be more prudent if I or one of the other captains led the mission, you are too valuable to risk until we know more.’

Astelan fixed them all in turn with a fierce stare.

‘It’s been three years since I last set foot planetside,’ he growled. ‘I’m bloody well going to step onto this one first!’

AS ASTELAN HAD wished it, so he was the first to step from the assault ramp of the huge Harbinger drop-transport. The drop-ship could be more likened to a small fortress than a transport, silhouetted against the cloudy sky. The outline of the drop-ship was broken by eight armoured turrets armed with lascannons. Smaller automated defences swivelled back and forth; rocket multi-launchers and anti-personnel heavy bolters peered towards the horizon with unliving eyes.

The whine of anti-grav engines caused Astelan to step aside from the ramp. Ten jetbikes swept past in pairs, their riders clad in stripped-down armour. A few metres from the drop-ship their engines erupted into piercing howls and the reconnaissance

squadron fanned out swiftly. Soon the flicker of their jets disappeared into the darkness. Following closely behind, heralded by the deeper thrum of their engines, two land speeders shot from the bowels of the Harbinger, their heavy weapons ready to provide support to the bikers.

Squads of Astartes pounded down the ramps, the drop-ship trembling with the weight of dozens of booted feet upon plasteel. Squad by squad the company assembled under their captain before being dispersed to positions around the site.

Astelan cast his gaze left and right, taking in his surrounds, the landscape digitally projected onto his eyes by his helmet's auto-senses so that the dark was almost as bright as day. According to Astoric there was a medium-sized conurbation three kilometres away. The dropsite was located in a patchwork of fields separated by chest-high walls and ditches. Here and there were dotted clusters of plain buildings. To the west was a thick forest, beyond which lay the town. The fields rose up onto steep-sided hills to the north, but the rest of the terrain was open and flat. It was these long fields of fire that had contributed towards Astelan's decision to land at this point.

It was here that Astelan hoped to make contact with the planet's inhabitants.

Having been present at three other first-contact situations, he knew that the next minutes and hours would be vital. Scans had shown no orbital craft, even basic communication satellites, so the shock of visitors arriving from space might well be considerable. Astelan had chosen this relatively small backwater to acclimatise to the world and to act as a gentle introduction to the natives – it was unwise to drop armoured warriors into the heart of a planet's major cities unless widespread panic was the desired result.

That the world did not have space-capable craft was surprising but not unknown. So much knowledge had been lost during the long centuries of darkness, many worlds had even returned to cruel barbarism and superstition. At the moment, the world was neither friendly nor enemy, simply an intriguing enigma that Astelan wished to swiftly unravel.

Astelan set up his command post some five hundred metres from the Harbinger inside an abandoned farmstead. It was a set of simple cubic constructions of plascrete, of a pattern laid down by the standard template data seen all across the galaxy during mankind's expansion to the stars. As other units moved to similar positions in buildings and along walls surrounding the dropsite, Astelan idly mused whether other standard template construct materiel would be found. It was not a particular concern of his, but the Mechanicum of Mars would be interested.

The sound of a distant detonation tore Astelan from his thoughts and he dashed outside, ducking his considerable frame beneath the low lintel of the doorway.

Amongst the trees a pall of smoke rose into the air. He saw flashes of flame and a few moments later came the crash of more explosions.

His comm-piece crackled inside his helmet and Astelan gave the sub-vocal command that activated the pickup. It was Sergeant Argeon, the leader of the recon sweep.

‘It looks like our small town is, in fact, a military installation, commander,’ the sergeant reported blithely. ‘I don’t think they were expecting visitors.’

Astelan swore loudly. The jetbikes were almost three kilometres distant, several minutes from supporting units. Before he could make any further analysis, the keen auto-senses of his armour attracted his attention.

It was the unmistakeable whine of approaching jets.

The defence arrays on the Harbinger also detected the incoming craft and a hail of missiles streaked skywards upon trails of fire, screaming to the west. Explosions blistered in the low clouds that hung over the whole sky, but there was no way of telling if any had hit their targets.

No more than a minute later the answer came. Small black shapes appeared, a long chain of them drifting downwards towards the Harbinger. They erupted in blossoms of incendiary destruction around the drop ship and upon its hull, splashing some form of burning fuel in their wake. Evidently at least one aircraft had survived.

As the Chapter commander processed this new development, Argeon’s voice was in Astelan’s ear again.

‘They are readying for an attack on our position,’ the sergeant said. ‘What are your orders?’

‘Pull back a kilometre and establish a new cordon,’ Astelan replied. Jetbikes were for scouting, not for mounting a resistant defence.

‘Acknowledged, commander,’ said Argeon.

The tactical display showed that Sergeant Cayvan was moving his three squads forwards on his own initiative, securing the boundary of the woods. Astelan left the experienced sergeant to his own devices, confident that he knew what he was doing.

‘Withdrawal pattern, commander?’ asked Sergeant Jak in the comm-piece.

‘Not until we know what their aerial capability is,’ said Astelan. There was little sense in piling the troops back onto the burning Harbinger until Astelan knew whether the

enemy had the means to shoot down the transport.

A different tone signalled a message incoming from orbit.

‘I have coordinates for orbital barrage confirmed.’ It was Belath, his tone quiet and assured.

‘Negative,’ responded Astelan. ‘They might not have orbital craft but we have no idea if they have ground-based defences capable of striking back. Do not give away your position.’

‘I understand,’ said Belath. ‘I am dispensing craft for atmospheric dominance.’

‘Yes, cover the landing zone and put your companies on their ships in preparation for landing,’ Astelan said.

‘They already are, Astelan,’ replied Belath with a note of umbrage.

‘Stand ready for my word then,’ said Astelan.

By now the Harbinger was ablaze along half its length. Its surviving turrets were firing a near-continuous stream of anti-air rockets into the clouds. Their approach all but masked by the din, more unseen jets screeched overhead and a short while later the ground was rocked by massive explosions.

The heavy bombs tore huge craters in the grassy mud and sent plumes of stones and dirt high into the air. Several scored direct hits on the landing craft, tearing out great chunks of plasteel armour and rockcrete superstructure.

More thunderous detonations swiftly followed, the explosions much smaller than those of the bombs though more accurate and numerous. It appeared that artillery was also being brought to bear on the drop zone.

The rattle of small-arms fire drifted from the woods, interspersed with the heavier cracks of bolter rounds. Cayvan’s squads were being engaged by their new enemy. Astelan swore again. He had so little information with which to construct a suitable strategy. The enemy had unknown numbers, unknown positions and unknown capabilities.

In the face of his own ignorance, the Chapter commander fell back on the principal strategy of the Astartes – attack and dominate.

‘Cayvan, hold position,’ Astelan barked quickly over the comm-net. ‘Sergeant Argeon, I want the locations of those artillery pieces relayed to Chapter Commander Belath. Jak,

deploy your Devastators onto the hills and provide cover fire. Move the rest of your squads north and support Cayvan. Melian, stand ready to reinforce either flank.'

His warriors thus set into motion, Astelan ducked back inside the farmhouse. It was empty inside but for a few broken pieces of furniture and discarded rags. Sergeant Gemenoth had erected a tactical display unit in the centre of the main room. It was a simple vertical glass plate and projector, linked into the comm-net of the Dark Angels' battle-barge in geostationary orbit thousands of kilometres above them.

The screen showed the rough topography of the surrounding area, and the locations of Astelan's squads were marked out by symbols that juddered across the artificial battlefield. Astelan tried to match the fragmented display and the gunfire and explosions outside with the reports buzzing over his helmet's comm-link. It was no good; he still felt he had no clear picture of what was happening.

'Squads two and three, form up on my position,' he told his guards as he moved back outside.

The Dark Angels closed in on Astelan as another salvo of shells tore at the ground around the farmstead, showering them with clods of earth, shrapnel and pieces of stone clattering upon their armour. As Astelan vaulted over the low wall encompassing the group of buildings, he cast his gaze to the woods.

There was still a considerable amount of firing and detonations tore at the treetops. There seemed little threat from other directions so it was towards the forest that he led his men.

Another barrage landed around the Dark Angels as they jogged towards the treeline. Astelan felt the shockwave buffet him, while battle-brothers Rathis and Kherios were thrown from their feet by the impacts. Astelan stopped and turned with concern but the two Astartes pushed back to their feet and retrieved their bolters, their armour pitted and scored but not breached. Assured that neither was injured, Astelan continued towards the trees at a brisk pace, slipping his power sword from its sheath and unholstering his bolt pistol.

The trees were closely packed, the thick canopy of foliage swathing the woods in darkness. A few ferns broke through the leaf mould but the woods were otherwise free of undergrowth. The ground was soft underfoot and the heavy Astartes sank into the mulch, their boots leaving deep prints in the rotting leaves.

Muzzle flashes and the roar of bolters drew them to the left, and barely a hundred metres under the trees, Astelan saw the first of Cayvan's squads. The Astartes were standing just beneath the lip of a long, low ridge, trading fire with an enemy as yet out of Astelan's view. Bullets kicked up sprays of mud and pattered from the Dark Angels'

armoured suits.

Astelan reached the squad, and their sergeant turned to address him.

‘Sergeant Riyan is flanking to the north, Chapter commander,’ the Astartes said. ‘He believes several hundred attackers, maybe up to a thousand, are trying to push through to the landing site.’

‘Then we must push back,’ said Astelan.

He waved for the squad to follow him and stepped over the ridge. Astelan saw immediately that the enemy were using the trees and undulating ground for cover, darting into view, firing their crude automatic rifles and then ducking back out of sight.

As soon as he strode over the ridge, the intensity of fire rose sharply. The flare of gunfire seemed concentrated to his right as the fusillade tore bark from trees and slashed through low-hanging branches. He felt impacts across his chest and right shoulder but paid them no heed.

Behind him the squad advanced in two sections, one laying down a storm of bolter fire while the other advanced. The foremost Astartes then took up position and unleashed their own weapons while the rest of the squad moved up past them. The explosive-tipped bolts tore chunks out of the trees and ripped apart any enemy soldier unfortunate enough to be hit.

As they closed in, Astelan could make out his foes more clearly. They were dark-skinned and dressed in drab blue overalls. They looked more like farmhands or factory workers than soldiers, but they held their ground as the Astartes approached and their fire was both accurate and determined.

Glancing around, Astelan saw the bulky shapes of other Astartes moving in from the left and the right, pressing forwards alongside their Chapter commander.

A bullet struck Astelan’s helmet, its impact knocking his head back. Dizzied by the hit he fell to one knee. Static blurred the vision in his right eye as his helmet’s auto-senses attempted to recalibrate themselves.

Astelan could see indistinct shapes along a low ridge just to his right. Though half-blinded, he raised his pistol by instinct and fired off eight shots, the whole magazine, in the direction of the enemy. Two soldiers were torn apart by the bolts and the rest ducked for cover.

Several seconds passed and still the vision in his right eye was fuzzy.

With a grunt, the Chapter commander stepped sideways and stood with his back to a tree. Shells were now erupting around him, blasting apart foliage and bark, and bullets whined and splintered close by. Unperturbed, Astelan stowed his weapons and then twisted the helmet free, which came away from the neck guard with a hiss of escaping gases. He hooked the helmet to the belt band of his armour.

Tasting blood, he reached up to his right cheek. There was blood on the fingertips of his gauntlet. Astelan had no idea how deep the wound was, but registered no discomfort, so he assumed it was superficial. His enhanced blood would have clotted the wound already.

He calmly reloaded his bolt pistol and drew his sword again.

Astelan resumed his advance, cracking off single shots as heads and limbs moved into sight from behind the trees. At close quarters the fighting was becoming chaotic. Rounds zipped and screamed past every few seconds, though none struck him. The artillery fire was slackening, perhaps for fear of hitting their own soldiers or perhaps from some action by the Astartes. Still, a few shells were detonating close at hand, spraying Astelan with charred leaves and baked mud.

A new sound entered his consciousness: the throbbing bass note of an autocannon. The sound was reassuring, and Astelan looked to his right and saw an Astartes laying down a curtain of fire with the heavy weapon, his legs braced wide apart, a torrent of shell casings clattering off his backpack.

This proved too much for the enemy and their fire quickly diminished as fighters were driven into cover by the autocannon’s fearsome torrent of fire. In the lull, the Astartes charged forwards, bolters coughing, battle cries ringing from the trees.

It seemed that Riyan’s flanking manoeuvre had been successful, for the enemy were streaming away from their positions, heading back westwards, while more Astartes moved in from the north. Tongues of fire licked out through the trees from flamers, while bright lances of multilaser fire strobed with deadly effect along the foxholes and shell scrapes the enemy had dug into the ground.

The retreat turned into a rout before the fury of the Dark Angels. Some of the soldiers threw down their weapons in their flight, their panicked shouts drowned out intermittently by the crack of exploding bolter rounds, the hiss and boom of frag missiles and the distinctive snap of lascannons.

‘Hold pursuit,’ Astelan ordered. ‘Find me a dozen wounded for prisoners.’

‘Armour! Armour! Armour!’ Riyan suddenly shouted over the comm. ‘Tracked fighting

vehicles approaching our position from the north and west.'

There was the sound of an explosion close at hand and the line buzzed with static. Another voice cut in.

'This is Brother Nikolan,' the Astartes said. 'Armour has large-calibre weapons. Sergeant Riyan is seriously wounded.'

'Jak, move up to Riyan's position and take command,' snapped Astelan.

The sergeant gave an affirmative and headed off northwards at a run. Astelan waved for the remaining Astartes to follow him to the north-west.

Within a few minutes, the growl of combustion engines drifted through the trees. Denied his auto-senses, Astelan relied on the reports of his battle-brothers to identify the tanks' positions in the darkness. Exhaust plumes lit up like fireworks on their helmet displays and a steady stream of coordinates was passed across the comm-net.

The stench of oil-based fuel wafted from the west, and Astelan peered into the gloom. A moment later he saw the glaring blossom of a muzzle flash highlighting a tank less than two hundred metres away, its bulk concealed behind an outcrop of rock. The shell exploded just behind the Chapter commander and he heard cries from wounded Astartes as grit and dirt showered down onto him.

Now that he knew where it was, Astelan could make out the tank's shape a little better. It was compact, its turret seemingly oversized for its hull, with a short-barrelled cannon. Secondary weapons opened fire with flashes, and more bullets screamed past. The turret adjusted slightly and the main gun angled down towards the Dark Angels' position.

'Disperse!' bellowed Astelan, sprinting to his right. His power armour took him across the ground in huge leaps, covering half a dozen metres with every pace.

The explosion smashed apart a tree trunk just metres from where the squad had been stood. Brother Andubis was flung sideways by the detonation, smashed head-first against another tree. He sat up and raised his arm to show that he was not badly injured.

As the squad regrouped, Brother Alexian took up a firing position with his lascannon. He shouldered the anti-tank weapon like an immense sniper rifle, peering along its sight towards the hull-down tank. A beam of blinding energy spat forwards as he pressed the firing stud, smashing into the tank just above the turret ring. Flames sprang up immediately, and in their light Astelan saw helmeted figures popping the hatches and scrambling free. Two cleared the wreck before the ammunition inside

ignited, blowing apart the vehicle in a spectacular detonation that sent fire and shrapnel high into the air. The light of the explosion revealed scores of soldiers were now moving back into position to attack, bolstered by their armoured support. The Astartes levelled their weapons and began to fire once more.

Over the din of bolter rounds and the burning tank, Astelan recognised a loud roar overhead: the tell-tale engines of a Castellan bomber. Explosions rippled through the blasted trees barely a hundred metres from the Astartes' positions, tearing apart scores of enemy. The rapid barking of heavy bolter fire heralded a strafing run that cut down dozens more. Satisfied with his work, the pilot banked his craft back towards the landing zone.

Astelan sent the order for the rest of the force to fall back by squads and secure the perimeter of the landing zone once more. Though the enemy attempted a counter-attack, the swift intervention of Castellans and Deathbirds pouring missiles and fire into the woods soon convinced the opposing soldiers to allow the Astartes to pull back in peace.

Back at the landing site, Astelan saw that though the enemy had suffered horrendously, the Dark Angels were not without their losses too, mostly from bombs, artillery strikes and tank guns.

Clusters of wounded Astartes sat or lay around the force's three Apothecaries, who stapled wounds, cauterised gashes and did what else they could to patch up the injured warriors until they could receive proper treatment back aboard ship. Most were back on their feet and ready to fight within minutes. Three would never fight again.

Astelan watched with grim resignation as Vandrillis, his Chief Apothecary, moved from one dead Astartes to the next. He disengaged the cables of the Astartes's backpack and pulled it aside. Vandrillis then used his reductor, a complex array of blades mounted on his forearm, to cut through the back armour plate to expose the flesh below.

The shiny, hard shell of the battle-brother's black carapace was slick with blood. Vandrillis drilled down into the flesh of the dead Astartes and then punched the reductor deep into the exposed spine. With a twist and a yank, he tore free the lower progenoid, an egg-shaped gland that stored the Astartes's gene-seed so that it could be recovered and implanted into a new recruit. Vandrillis placed the precious organ into a vacu-flask and continued his bloody work on the Astartes's neck.

Though it was a reminder of the fate of every Astartes, to die in battle, it was also reassuring. Every warrior carried within him the primarch's gene-seed and with it the means to create more Astartes. To know that even in death the Legion would be

strengthened was a thought that allowed the Astartes to fight without fear, to make the noblest sacrifice without hesitation.

Astelan knew that his fate would not be on the end of a reductor, for his progenoids had matured over two decades ago and had been removed in the relative safety of a shipboard medical bay. He had made his contribution to future generations of Dark Angels and could fight now safe in the knowledge that others would be able to follow.

Turning away from the grisly scene, Astelan signalled for Gemenoth to bring him the long-range comm-array; with his helmet damaged it was the only way for Astelan to contact the fleet. He punched the frequency of Belath's battle-barge into the readout.

'Signal received, this is Belath,' the Chapter commander answered. 'What is your situation?'

'Get us off this rock,' Astelan replied.

THE WITHDRAWAL OF Astelan's landing force was to last for the rest of the night, during which the local forces tried three more times to attack the drop-zone. Under heavy air cover, three more Harbingers were brought down from Belath's fleet and the Dark Angels were able to collapse back to their transports under the covering fire of the heavy weapons and armoured support that the reconnaissance force had lacked.

Astelan was the last to leave, staring balefully at the ravaged drop-zone as the ramp closed in front of him. All he had wanted was to secure some locals for intelligence, and now he had overseen a significant battle. In the dim light of dawn he looked at the ravaged forests and crater-pocked field that had been the battleground. This did not bode well for a peaceful introduction to the Enlightenment of the Emperor.

HE WAS NOT surprised to find Belath aboard the Spear of Truth's operations room, awaiting his arrival.

'We must move fast and regain the initiative,' said Belath. 'We have lost the element of surprise and even now the armed forces of the world will be at full readiness. The more time we give them, the harder the battles ahead.'

'What are you proposing?' asked Astelan, his gaze directed towards the glowing orb above the hololith.

'While you were sparring with the locals, I conducted more analysis of the transmissions data,' said Belath, leaning with his fists on the edge of the glass tablet, his eyes fixed on Astelan. 'The locals refer to the world as Byzanthis. There are six continents, each in essence a separate nation-state. We strike at each state simultaneously, dropping from orbit into their capitals. We disable their governments

and military command within hours, and isolate power and transport networks in a matter of days.'

'Divide and conquer?' said Astelan, finally meeting the stare of Belath.

Before Belath could answer, the door hissed open and Galedan strode in.

'You should listen to this,' he said, crossing to the comms centre. As he dialled in a frequency a tinny voice crackled from the speakers.

'—ed. Unwarranted attack on the sovereign territory of Confederate Vanz will not be tolerated,' the voice was saying. 'Byzanthis Committee of Nations has convened to decide a response. Confederate Vanz will not stand alone. Aggressor strangers will be resisted. Unwarran—'

'It's a looped message on a broad range of frequencies,' said Galedan, switching off the unit.

'We can reply?' asked Astelan.

'Of course,' said Galedan.

'This is a distraction,' said Belath. 'We need to strike now!'

'We have a means to make peaceful contact,' said Astelan. 'Why choose to ignore it?'

'There is little sense of a planetary nationhood,' Belath argued. 'Two states are currently at war, the others have all fought against one another on and off over the past centuries. Crush each state individually and the world falls.'

'There is a global council, this Committee of Nations,' said Astelan. 'The situation is easily retrieved through them.'

'Diplomats and ambassadors for the most part,' countered Belath. 'You have not heard what I have heard. The Committee of Nations is considered weak and ineffective. They have no real power or control.'

'Then we will give them that power,' said Astelan. 'We shall make amends for the inadvertent conflict and communicate with the council. The state governments will be forced to treat with us through the Committee of Nations, and from that we will forge a common fate for the whole planet.'

'And if they refuse?' said Belath, straightening. 'We simply give them more time to swell their armies. Not only will more delays give these forces time to build their

strength, they will spread propaganda about their supposed victory over us.'

'It does not strike me as right that we give these people no chance for a peaceful solution,' argued Astelan. 'What would history think of us? What would Caliban be now if the Emperor had come with a closed fist rather than an open hand?'

'Caliban is different,' said Belath.

'Because it is your world?' said Astelan, pacing towards Belath.

'Because we have the Lion,' said Belath confidently. 'The Emperor had no choice but to treat with us. Any invasion would have been costly and counterproductive.'

'And so because no primarch dwells here, we should offer them no choice?' snarled Astelan, stepping right in front of Belath, who stood his ground. 'Their blood, their lives, are worth less because of a chance of fate?'

'It was not chance that brought the Lion to Caliban,' said Belath with quiet assurance. 'Destiny brought our leader to us.'

Astelan did not speak for a moment and stepped back, rubbing the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

'I will contact the Committee of Nations and explain our peaceful intentions,' Astelan said finally. 'Galedan, make preparations.'

The captain left the room, casting a wary glance at Belath as he walked past.

'I cannot consent to this course of action,' said Belath as soon as the door had hissed shut. He raised a placating hand before Astelan could respond. 'It is clear we cannot agree on this. We must send word to the primarch for guidance, so that his orders might be understood by us.'

Astelan laughed but there was no mirth in tone.

'We are Chapter commanders of the Dark Angels,' he said scornfully. 'We cannot run to the Lion or the Emperor every occasion that we face difficulty. We are leaders of an Astartes Legion. We must act, not vacillate. If you wish to cry off to Caliban, then you are free to leave. I am staying here and contacting the council.'

'This is a war of reconquest,' spat Belath. 'What we are building is more important than the lives of a few men, larger than the sacrifice of thousands, even millions. You are soft, and I wonder what the Lion will make of your lack of courage.'

With a wordless shout Astelan seized Belath by the edges of his breastplate and charged him into the wall, plascrete cracking under the impact.

‘Your lack of respect will not be tolerated,’ snarled Astelan.

‘Nor yours,’ replied Belath calmly, his blue eyes piercing in their intensity.

‘I fought for the Emperor and he chose me to be the tip of his spear,’ said Astelan, his tone low and measured. ‘My Chapter has fought on a dozen worlds against foes the like of which you have no comprehension. We have earnt battle honours given to us by the Emperor of Mankind, and I have earnt his respect and praise.’

‘I too have my honours,’ replied Belath with no sign of trepidation. ‘I was the first of my order to be chosen by the Astartes, I am the first to be made Chapter commander. I have been raised on traditions far older than your Legion, Terran. Many generations of my forefathers fought for the Order of the Raven’s Wing and their blood flows in my veins. You may look down in dismay at the heritage of Caliban, but it is your home now. Its people will be your people. It is the world of the Lion, and his traditions shall be the traditions of the Dark Angels. It is by his judgement that I mark my worth, not by yours.’

Astelan released his grip and sighed.

‘I say not these things to insult your heritage, nor as a threat, but as a warning,’ the Chapter commander said quietly. ‘Be ready for battle at all times, but do not rush heedlessly towards it. It is not just the lives of those below that you condemn, but some of your own. Your battle-brothers will shed their blood in this cause, and some will lay their lives upon its altar for you. Do you not owe it to them to make sure that what you do is righteous and unavoidable?’

Belath turned away and walked towards the door. He stooped just short of it and turned.

‘It was your mistake that has precipitated this situation,’ he declared. ‘I cannot forgive that but I shall allow you the chance to redeem yourself. You have seniority and I would not have it known that I abandoned a battle-brother.’

With that he opened the door and strode out, leaving Astelan with his dark thoughts.

ASTELAN CAST HIS gaze upwards in frustration, his fists clenched. He was sat at the main comms panel of the operations room, with Galedan, Belath and a horde of technicians on hand. He had spent the greater part of the last two days dealing with various Byzanthisian functionaries in his attempts to organise a delegation; two days spent talking to bureaucrats and politicians had left his patience very thin. Now he

was finally talking to somebody who had the power to convene the Committee of Nations.

‘There was no premeditated attack,’ he repeated, forcing himself to remain calm. ‘I only acted to defend my men.’

There was a pause while his message was transmitted. A few seconds passed before the response came from the planet below.

‘What assurances do you give that you do not “defend” yourselves again?’ the voice of Secretary Maoilon hissed from the speakers.

‘You expect to land troops at a military base and not consider it provocation?’

‘Our choice of landing site was an error that I deeply regret,’ said Astelan, and never had he felt the truth of his own words so strongly.

‘I will attend a meeting of your committee and explain everything. All of your questions are best answered face-to-face.’

Again there was a pause filled with static.

‘You alone will come?’ asked Maoilon. ‘Unarmed?’

‘I and my fellow commander,’ said Astelan. ‘Two of us. Unarmed. Transmit the location of the chambers and a time suitable for the meeting.’

‘Treachery will be dealt with harshly,’ said Maoilon.

‘There will be no treachery,’ said Astelan and then he signalled for the radio link to be cut. He swivelled in his chair to face Galedan.

‘Organise whatever needs to be organised. Belath and I will teleport in.’

‘We should have squads ready to follow us,’ said Belath. ‘They will be able to deploy within moments onto our location should the locals attack us.’

Astelan considered arguing, but from the expression on Belath’s face he had already made his decision.

‘Do what you will as precaution, but you will accompany me unarmed,’ said Astelan.

‘Agreed,’ said Belath.

CRACKLING ENERGY SWATHED Astelan, bathing the Chapter commander and his squad in an actinic glare as the teleporter activated.

Astelan felt the usual jarring dislocation and a burning sensation throughout his whole body. In milliseconds the transition was over, but just like the Spear of Truth emerging from the warp, Astelan needed a moment to gather his wits.

He blinked rapidly to clear his fogged vision and found himself in a wide circular hall built from white marble, or some similar local stone. It was a circular amphitheatre in layout, with rows of seats ranged around the low central platform on which he was stood. Five sets of steps led up to tall, narrow double doors spaced evenly around the hall's circumference. Halfway between each set of doors were windows of the same proportion through which Astelan glimpsed a deep-blue sky.

The hall was filled with people, some dressed in strangely cut suits, others in bright robes or simple smocks. There were all manner of different skin colours and features, jewellery and headdresses, but the hundreds packed into the auditorium had one thing in common: the absolute terror written upon their faces.

Most were wide-eyed and open-mouthed, some were visibly shaking and sweating and others were on their feet or cramming themselves into the backs of their chairs in an effort to put as much distance between themselves and their new arrivals.

A few moments later more teleporter energy crackled across the floor to Astelan's left, and where there had been empty air now stood Belath. He was dressed, as was Astelan, in simple robes of black. At his right ear Belath wore a comm-piece and Astelan could see that it was on open transmission; the Chapter commander's troops in orbit would hear everything said.

Astelan raised his arms out and held his palms up to show that he held no weapon.

'I am Chapter Commander Astelan of the Dark Angels Legion.' Astelan's voice boomed out and rebounded from the walls and ceiling, carrying easily to every part of the broad chamber. 'I am here as the representative of the Emperor of Mankind. Who here has authority to speak with me?'

The assembled delegates glanced nervously at each other until an elderly man limped forwards, a walking cane in his right hand. He was bald but for a few wisps of hair and a thin beard that hung to his chest. His skin was like dried leather and a cataract scarred his left eye. The remaining good eye regarded Astelan with a mixture of apprehension and awe.

The elderly man hobbled forwards to stand in front of the giant Astartes. Astelan was almost two feet taller than the man who stood before him, and his broad body could

have contained his frail frame ten times over. The man stood regarding the newcomer with his good eye, and Astelan returned his stare with a steady gaze.

‘I am Chairman Paldrath Grane,’ said the man. His voice was strong and unwavering, utterly at odds with his physical condition. ‘I speak for the Committee of Nations, but others will speak for their own.’

‘Your world is but one of many thousands spread across the stars,’ Astelan said, speaking slowly and clearly. ‘The ancient empire of man was shattered, but a new power has arisen. From ancient Terra the Emperor of Mankind now builds a new galaxy upon the remnants of the old. Humanity unites under his leadership and benefits from his protection.’

‘Of ancient Terra, we know not,’ said Grane. ‘Old worlds, old star empires, this we recall in our most prized histories. You come with war and offer peace. What right has your Emperor to rale Byzanthis?’

‘By his own power and destiny has he been chosen to lead us,’ said Astelan. ‘Prosperity, technology and peace will be yours if you embrace the Emperor’s Enlightenment.’

‘And if we refuse?’ This was from an equally ancient man sat in the front row of seats just to Astelan’s left. The Chairman turned with a scowl, which was returned in kind.

‘Identify yourself,’ said Belath, stepping forwards.

‘President Kinloth of Confederate Vanz,’ the man replied. Though old, he was more sturdily built than Grane, with a full head of short grey hair and a close-cropped beard. His eyes were sunken and ringed with dark lines and his teeth much stained. ‘It was my army you attacked four days ago.’

‘A misunderstanding, it was not our intent to fight but to make peaceful contact,’ said Astelan.

‘And what peace you bring to families of two thousand, seven hundred and eighty men killed?’ demanded Kinloth. ‘What peace you bring to one thousand, six hundred and fifteen more that lie in hospitals?’

‘The peace of the knowledge that no more need die here,’ said Belath.

‘They will be remembered for their sacrifices and gloried by the Emperor’s servants,’ said Astelan quickly, hiding his annoyance. ‘None fall in the Emperor’s service and go neither unheeded nor unremarked, nor their families unrewarded.’

‘If what you say is true, Confederate Vanz will welcome your Emperor when he arrives,’ Kinloth said. His eyes had lit up at the mention of reward and it was clear he saw some personal gain in the unfolding events.

‘Lashkar Kerupt will not welcome your Emperor,’ said another dignitary, a short middle-aged woman in a flowing silken red dress embroidered with butterfly designs. Her dark hair was bound into a tight knot, and her face was painted with yellow and her lips with black. She stood and turned to address those behind her.

‘Listen to me!’ she cried out. ‘Strangers come with hand offering peace while holding gun behind backs. Our astro-stations detect strangers’ ships above our cities. Warships intent on destroying. Strangers come to kill or enslave our world. We must take hostages to guarantee freedom.’

Astelan darted a glance towards Belath at the mention of ships in orbit above the world’s cities, but the Chapter commander gave no acknowledgement.

‘Seize them!’ cried the woman and the doors were flung open. From entrances all around the hall black-unformed soldiers burst into the room, stubby carbines in their hands.

‘Wait!’ Astelan shouted, both a warning to the soldiers and a command to Belath.

‘Protect your commanders!’ snapped Belath, his eyes regarding Astelan with cold hostility.

No more than two seconds after his command, the air around the pair snapped with energy. Bulky figures shimmered into view encircling the pair; ten massively armoured Terminators raised their combi-bolters and opened fire. The initial salvo was devastating, tearing holes in chests, ripping off limbs and decapitating by the score. Such desultory return fire as existed pinged harmlessly from the inches-thick ceramite-and-adamantium bonded shells of the warriors’ armour.

‘Withdraw,’ said Astelan as bullets skipped from the tiled floor and plucked at his robe.

Facing foes coming at them from every direction, the Terminators formed a defensive ring and began to walk towards one of the doorways. Hysterical shouting and panicked shrieks mixed with the deafening crash of combi-bolters. The delegates clawed and kicked at each other as they streamed away from the Astartes. Some snatched up weapons from fallen soldiers but were blasted apart in turn. Stepping over blasted and blistered bodies, the Astartes retreated up the steps, through the doorway and into the room beyond.

They were in some form of small antechamber, filled with soldiers. As the Astartes

entered, the soldiers turned and fled without firing a shot. Two Terminators moved forwards to secure the other doorway, and for the moment Astelan found himself in a centre of calm.

‘They detected your ships!’ he bellowed at Belath. ‘I told you not to move without my command!’

‘I have made no move as yet,’ Belath replied calmly. ‘Drop forces stand by to respond to my command. I await your consent.’

Astelan opened his mouth but said nothing, unable to give voice to the mixture of rage and incredulity that was boiling up inside.

‘Should I strike now or shall we withdraw again?’ Belath asked, his voice barely heard by Astelan through the thundering of his heartbeat in his ears.

‘What?’ Astelan said.

‘Shall I order the attack or shall we teleport back to orbit?’ Belath said. ‘All of their leaders are here. Those who wish to surrender can do so now. Those that wish to fight will face the consequences of their decisions.’

‘This is how you wanted it to happen, isn’t it?’ said Astelan.

‘I had no idea the natives were capable of detecting a vessel in low orbit,’ said Belath. ‘However, we cannot rectify that and should act as necessary to preserve our troops and foster victory. To delay further would be a grave error.’

Astelan took a few paces back and forth, his brow creased in a frown as he considered what to do. Eyes narrowed with anger, he turned his glare upon Belath.

‘Do it!’ Astelan snapped. ‘Order the assault!’

Belath nodded, showing no signs of emotion. He turned away and whispered something into his comm-piece.

‘It is done,’ Belath said, turning his attention back to Astelan. ‘What of the council?’

‘I fear there is little to be salvaged here,’ said Astelan.

The two of them pushed past the Terminators guarding the door back to the main chamber, whose weapons had been silent for more a minute. The council hall was a scene of utter ruin. The marble was slicked with blood, chairs smashed and bodies, of soldier and delegate, were piled up around the doors. Some still moved, groaning from

their wounds. Slumped at the bottom of a flight of steps was Grane, a fist-sized hole in his lower back. Astelan crossed the chamber to gaze down at the decrepit Chairman. There was no sign of life.

A thunderous rumble shook the floor and Astelan looked up sharply. Another followed swiftly after, shaking the entire hall and sending dust and shards of stone showering down from the ceiling above.

‘It has begun,’ said Belath, gesturing towards a high window. Astelan followed his pointing finger and gazed outside.

As he walked towards the window Astelan could see fire raining down from the heavens as the ship lying in space above unleashed its bombardment. The city stretched for kilometres in every direction around the hill upon which the council chambers sat. Avenues of high buildings radiated outwards and long terraces of houses clung upon steep hills in the distance. Plasma warheads detonated upon the boulevards and bombardment cannon shells obliterated parks and tenements.

After several minutes the devastating torrent of fury abated. Astelan looked upwards and saw the dark shadows of drop-ships growing in size. On fiery tails drop-pods screamed downwards, slamming into the roofs of buildings and smashing into cracked and burning streets. Their doors opened like armoured petals and the Astartes within disembarked with bolter and flamer. Astelan could hear nothing from here but could imagine the crack of bolter and the screams of the dying.

The wrath of the Dark Angels had been set free.

Belath stepped up to the window and gazed out, the fires reflected in his eyes. He turned his head and looked at Astelan.

‘The cities will be under our control within hours,’ he said. ‘The world, in a few days.’

‘The blood of all who die is on your hands,’ said Astelan. ‘I will not let this go unpunished.’

Belath smiled at that moment, and it was a hard, emotionless expression that chilled Astelan to see it.

‘You do not decide guilt or punishment,’ said the young Chapter commander. ‘My astropaths already send word to Caliban of what occurs here. You will soon learn the consequences of disobedience, Terran.’