Orina Septimus was a world dying a slow, but inevitable death. Thousands of years of exposure to corrosive oceanic vapours had turned its single continent into a rolling dune sea of blackened steppe. Its mountains were little more than slowly disintegrating knolls, eaten away over the millennia by airborne pollutants and rendered smooth as glass by the caustic atmosphere.

Acid seas covered ninety per cent of the planet's surface, and great ore ships of the Adeptus Mechanicus would periodically enter low orbit to suckle from the burning oceans. These monstrous vessels then transported the chemical-rich seawater to the mechanised hell of a forge world where it would be refined into vehicle fuel, propellants and war materiel of all description.

The planet's only other exportable commodity dwelt in the oceans, tiny desquamating invertebrates that swam the acid seas in continent-sized shoals. Ironclad trawlers crossed the oceans harvesting swathes of the minuscule creatures, whose hyper-efficient metabolisms were ultra-rich in proteins that could be processed into Imperial Guard ration packs.

And with many of the Hyrus system's supply lines cut by wolf pack squadrons of Arch-enemy ships, fresh sources of food for the defenders of Obereach and Illius were needed more than ever.

Such commodities were valuable, but dangerous to exploit and only those obliged to come to Orina Septimus ever risked venturing upon such a lethal world.

The Zhadanok Prison Complex housed the sector's most notorious criminals. One of the few man-made structures on Orina Septimus, it sat on the slopes of a black-walled valley at the mouth of a wide bay, the majority of its bulk carved deep into the decaying rocks and battered by waves from the acid sea. Gun towers and utilitarian landing facilities were all that remained above ground, protected from the planet's deadly vapours by a series of energy shields.

There was a grim saying amongst the indentured guards of Zhadanok that no one came willingly to Orina Septimus, they only ended up there.

As though in defiance of that saying, a sleek black cutter dropped through the misty skies towards Zhadanok, its hull streaked silver by the falling acid rain. The ship bore no insignia and flew with an escort of gunships, insectoid craft with gimbal-mounted

assault cannons and racks of missiles slung under each wing.

No sooner had the craft entered the airspace of the prison complex than defence emplacements irised from the rocks and acquired the cutter and its guardians.

Invisible transmissions between the cutter and the prison swiftly established its authority and the guns retracted into the rocks as a series of winking lights illuminated to guide the cutter towards a newly revealed landing platform.

With a speed and precision that spoke of a highly skilled pilot, the cutter skimmed the rocks and touched down as the gunships peeled off and streaked towards the sky.

The landing platform retracted into the prison complex, swallowing the cutter in darkness. Contrary to the guards' proverb, the cutter's owner had not merely ended up on Orina Septimus, he had come here willingly and with all possible speed.

All because of the prisoner.

Warden Pendareva shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot as he watched the landing servitors hose the acid-streaked cutter down with corrosion-retardant fluids. Stinking vapours hissed from the pitted surfaces of the aircraft and Pendareva wrinkled his nose at the acrid stench.

He reached up with a faded handkerchief to mop his sweat-beaded forehead and turned his pale, creased face to Chief Gaoler de Zoysa.

'Damn it, but we could do without this,' he said. 'As if we don't have problems at the moment. The inmates are spoiling for trouble, I can smell it.'

De Zoysa, a shaven-headed, bull of a man in dented bronze mesh armour with a face that mirrored the landscape beyond the prison walls, nodded and said, 'Let them. I've got my enforcers itching to break some heads.'

'I don't doubt that's true, but it would be better if it didn't happen while we have such an august personage here, don't you think?' said Pendareva, gesturing at the cutter.

De Zoysa shrugged, as though he couldn't care less, but Pendareva saw real fear behind the gaoler's bravado. Pendareva had seen de Zoysa wading through blood in the midst of a prison riot with nothing but brute strength and a power maul to protect him. Until now, he had never seen him afraid.

It spoke volumes for the reputation of the new arrival that even a psychotic thug like de Zoysa was nervous, and Pendareva mopped his brow once more as the servitors finished hosing down the cutter and began laying out grilled matting from the iron

doors of the prison towards the dripping craft.

Pendareva normally worked hard to avoid attracting the attention of organisations beyond Orina Septimus, content in maintaining his own private little empire, but the capture of the prisoner had made that impossible.

As protocol demanded, Pendareva had notified his superiors of the capture, expecting a response in the normal period of months, but within days, an omicron-level communication had arrived instructing him to expect the arrival of Lord Syphax Osorkon of the Orders of the Emperor's Holy Inquisition.

Even isolated on a backwater planet such as Orina Septimus, Pendareva had heard of Inquisitor Lord Syphax Osorkon.

There were few in this part of the galaxy that had not.

Syphax Osorkon was a man of fearsome reputation, a man who had uncovered the secret heart of the Pyrus Reach for nearly three centuries. From Hyrus to the outlying systems of Verdis and the Sorien Delta, Inquisitor Lord Syphax Osorkon had unmasked and destroyed scores of sinister cults, quashed innumerable alien incursions and cut out the root of heresy and sedition from uncounted planets. No one was above his scrutiny, and paupers and planetary governors had felt the full wrath of his judgement.

'I want this done quickly and smoothly,' said Pendareva. 'No trouble. You understand me? From the inmates or the enforcers.'

'I understand,' said de Zoysa. 'But you know damn well there's ugly trouble in the air. The scum know something's happening and they're spoiling for a chance to kick off.'

'What have you done about Finn?' asked Pendareva. 'If anyone's going to start something, it will be him.'

'Don't worry, he's secure,' promised de Zoysa.

'He had better be,' warned Pendareva. 'What about his gang, the Brothers of the Word?'

De Zoysa shook his head. 'Ever since Finn attacked Reyan, they've been keeping a low profile. They're smart enough to know that with Finn out of the picture for a while, they're vulnerable. The Devil Dogs and the Red Blades are all looking for a piece of his gang, so they're the ones to worry about now.'

Further discussion was halted by the whisper of the pressure lock on the cutter's side disengaging and the hiss of the hatch sliding open. The hatch was inordinately large,

thought Pendareva, but seconds later he saw why.

A shape moved within the cutter and a giant figure in gleaming battle plate bearing an enormous sword blotted out the light from inside.

Pendareva heard de Zoysa gasp at the sight of the Space Marine, marvelling at the shining plates of silver steel armour and the expressionless, red-eyed faceplate. The warrior's massive width blocked the hatch and his sheer physical presence filled the landing facility. Pendareva had never seen a Space Marine this close and every hyperbolic slogan he had heard of them seemed now to be absurdly understated in the presence of such a magnificently proportioned warrior.

His shoulder guard gleamed silver, with a device of a black sword piercing an open book displayed upon it. Numerous scrolls hung with the same symbol hung from his pauldrons and breastplate. A golden, basket-hilted sword hung at his waist in an etched scabbard of shimmering bronze.

'Are you Warden Pendareva?' asked the Space Marine as he marched down the cutter's landing ramp, the metal bowing under his weight. Despite the vox distortion, the Space Marine's voice was deep and sonorous.

'I am,' replied Pendareva once he'd found his voice. 'Welcome to Zhadanok Prison Complex. And you are…?'

The Space Marine said, 'I am Justicar Kemper of the Grey Knights.' Pendareva nodded as four more Space Marines came after him, giants with long halberds fitted with wide-muzzled weapons below the blades, and armoured in burnished steel plate that eerily reflected the red glow of the landing platform's guide lights.

Finally, with the five Space Marines debarked, Inquisitor Lord Syphax Osorkon emerged from the shuttle, followed by a coterie of brass-fingered scribes, augmetic warriors in form-fitting armoured bodygloves and a trio of white-robed astrotelepaths with their hoods drawn up over their faces.

Compared to the Space Marines, the inquisitor lord was something of a disappointment to Pendareva. The terror of the Pyrus Reach was clad in a long robe of deep, selpic blue and wore his Inquisitorial rosette pinned over his heart. The inquisitor eschewed ornamentation where his servants appeared to celebrate it. Tall and smooth-skinned from extensive juvenat therapy, Osorkon's features held a blandness that Pendareva guessed was easy to underestimate. The inquisitor lord's hair was thinning and cut close to his skull, his gimlet eyes a cold, icy grey.

Osorkon came down the boarding ramp at a calm, unhurried pace, as though he were descending the stairs at a debutante ball rather than the cold, stinking depths of one

of the sector’s most notorious prisons.

Pendareva stepped forward to greet the inquisitor, bowing expansively before him.

‘My Lord Osorkon,’ he began, ‘welcome to our humble facility.’

‘Is the prisoner secure?’ asked the inquisitor, brushing aside Pendareva’s greeting.

‘Ah, yes, he is indeed,’ said Pendareva, masking his irritation at the inquisitor’s abruptness. ‘My chief warden here has him locked in the Hell Hole.’

Osorkon nodded and said, ‘How many guards maintain a vigil on him?’

De Zoysa answered the inquisitor, saying, ‘I have thirty enforcers watching him round the clock. All armed with lethal force ordnance and weapons free rules of engagement. If the bastard so much as makes a move I don’t like, he’s dead.’

‘Only thirty? Double it. Immediately,’ said Osorkon. ‘Believe me, if he made any kind of move then all your men would be dead before they could cry for help. In fact, I am surprised that any of you are still alive.’

The inquisitor rounded on Pendareva and said, ‘Take me to the prisoner. Immediately.’

Finn lay on his back on the hard floor of the cell, smiling as bubbling pools of acid leaking up through the cracked tiles scorched his skin. The air tasted acrid from the chemical burns, but he enjoyed the sensation of his skin blistering.

It meant the first stage of the plan was already working.

The next stage depended on the psychotic violence of his fellow inmates, and he knew he could rely on that. Zodiac and Wrench had promised him a riot he’d be proud of, and that would be something worth seeing.

The Brothers of the Word were ready to fight and the Dogs and the Blades couldn’t wait to get bloody. He was only sorry he wouldn’t be there for the best of the killing.

He pulled his mind from the slaughter to come and focussed on his current situation, locked in the deepest pit of Zhadanok Prison – the Hell Hole.

The enforcers claimed that anyone put in the Hell Hole would break, that they would be dragged out weeping and soiled and less than human.

Finn knew that it wasn’t the hardship of the Hell Hole that broke prisoners; it was simply that they hadn’t accepted pain. It might be boring stuck here in the deepest cell

of Zhadanok for days on end, but it sure beat working the acid pumps in the lower levels that kept the deadly oceans beyond from flooding the prison complex.

Finn had suffered worse pain than this and not broken, and they weren't going to break him here. It had been three days since they'd thrown him in here after gutting Reyan for looking at him funny in the mess hall. Putting some hurt on the Devil Dogs was always fun, but it had been an incidental bonus to his real reason for wanting put in the Hell Hole.

Countless spells in Imperial Guard stockades had taught Finn all he needed to know about surviving solitary confinement and only his value to his numerous commanding officers had saved him from a commissar's bullet.

For Guardsman Finn was a man with a truly singular talent for killing – above and beyond that possessed by even the most feral soldiers of his regiment, the Kanak Skull Takers. Finn had an uncanny ability to walk out of some of the most intense firefights and brutal close quarters actions without so much as a scratch on him, his claw machete bloody and the light of murder in his eyes.

But his talent for murder and mayhem, so very useful on a battlefield, were liabilities when underemployed during down time between fighting.

At his court martial, no one, probably not even Finn himself, could say for certain how many people he'd killed, but the number was reckoned in the hundreds.

He rolled to his knees as he saw the patterns of light around the edge of the trapdoor in the ceiling of his cell shift. Someone was moving around above him in the enforcers' corridor.

'Hey!' he shouted. 'Hey! Who's that up there?'

'Shut your mouth, Finn,' came the response.

Finn recognised the voice as belonging to Enforcer Dravin, a weak man with a thin neck that would part easily from its skull. Dravin was a stickler for rules and Finn smiled as he realised he couldn't have asked for a better gaoler.

His plan was working, but its ultimate success relied on the true Brothers of the Word returning to Orina Septimus as they had promised in his visions.

Looking at the growing pools of acid on the floor, he just hoped it would be soon.

Pendareva led the way into the Zhadanok Prison Complex, de Zoysa and Inquisitor Osorkon to either side of him and the Grey Knights of Justicar Kemper following

behind. They passed through the armoured gates and into the antiseptic, tiled halls of the prison itself. Numerous isolation halls and double gate entries slowed their progress, but Pendareva didn't mind the wait, sure that this display of his facility's security would impress Osorkon.

As if hearing his thoughts, Osorkon said, 'Tell me again how the prisoner came to be here, Warden Pendareva.'

'Ah, yes, inquisitor, of course,' replied Pendareva, 'though I thought I had enclosed the details of his capture in my report to sector command.'

'You did, but I wish you to tell me.'

'Very well,' said Pendareva as they passed through the main gate into one of the main viewing halls that traversed the length of the main cellblock. 'Though I don't see what will be different.'

'Indulge me,' said Osorkon in a manner that warned Pendareva not to protest again.

Pendareva cleared his throat and said, 'Some six standard weeks ago our system augurs detected a craft approaching low orbit and heading towards us.'

'Did you identify this craft?' interrupted Osorkon.

'Not at first,' explained Pendareva. 'Our equipment here is rather temperamental and it is only thanks to the favour our resident tech-priest is held in by the Machine God that it functions at all – at least that's what he tells me.'

The group passed opposite modular cells stacked upon one another ten deep and which were reached by means of removable walkways run on a complex series of rigs and suspended cables. Teams of enforcers lined the parapet between the cells and main thoroughfare, shotguns cradled in their arms and power mauls hanging from their belts.

'Carry on,' said Osorkon, looking up at wretched prisoners slumped against the doors of their cages, their legs and arms dangling between the bars as they glared with naked hostility at the group passing below them.

'Well, the craft entered our exclusion zone and refused to answer our hails, which is when the guns acquired it,' continued Pendareva, raising his voice as word of their passing spread along the cellblock and hurled insults and the clamour of tin cups rattling against iron bars filled the air. 'It kept coming, so they shot it down. It crashed about thirty kilometres from here and I despatched a team of enforcers to investigate.'

‘And they found the prisoner in the wreckage?’

‘Yes, he was the only survivor,’ said Pendareva, ‘the rest of the crew were killed in the crash. We have them in our morgue if you wish to see them.’

‘No,’ said Osorkon. ‘Destroy them. Tell me about the craft you found.’

‘It was too badly damaged to tell what kind of craft it was, but from what we were able to recover, it looks as though it was an orbital transport of some kind.’

‘So where did it come from?’ asked Osorkon.

Pendareva shrugged, ‘That is a mystery I fear only the prisoner knows.’

‘And it didn’t occur to you to wonder how a ship that size could have reached Orina Septimus on its own?’

‘Frankly no,’ said Pendareva. ‘I leave such matters to men such as yourself.’

The inquisitor frowned and said, ‘It is beholden to all citizens of the Imperium to question the suspicious. I will remember this laxity of alertness when I file my report with my superiors.’

Pendareva was too surprised at the idea of someone like Osorkon having superiors that he nearly didn’t register the demerit he was soon to accrue.

‘Well, what I mean to say is, we wondered where it had come from, but could not answer that conundrum. System surveyors detected nothing, so we ascribed it to one of the mysteries this cosmos is all too full of and awaited your coming to enlighten us.’

‘If there is an answer to be had, then I will get it from the prisoner,’ said Osorkon, ‘have no fear of that.’

‘But if I might ask, lord inquisitor, this prisoner… he appears to be–’

‘Don’t even ask, Pendareva,’ warned Osorkon. ‘The true identity of the prisoner is something you are not cleared to know. Such knowledge is dangerous.’

Pendareva nodded, though he was deeply unhappy at his exclusion from such information. Osorkon might be an inquisitor, but this was his prison.

‘I fail to see how–’ he said.

‘I have had men killed for less,’ said Osorkon, looking him square in the eye.

Pendareva believed him and asked no more on the subject as the group passed from the main detention halls of the prison, leaving the clamour of inmates behind them. They began travelling along a maze of twisting corridors hacked from the black rock, heading down towards the deep levels of the prison. Occasionally, their pathways took them from beneath the rock along shielded walkways with curved transparent plasteel walls that travelled beneath the acid seas.

Weak grey acid-filtered light filled these walkways and Pendareva enjoyed the worried expressions that stole across the faces of Osorkon and his retinue.

‘Have no fear, Lord Osorkon, the shields protect us from the sea, though if they were to fail, the acids would eat through the plasteel in seconds, killing us all,’ said Pendareva, enjoying the discomfort he saw on Osorkon’s face.

The relief in the visitors’ faces was clear as they passed back into the rock and then into vaulted tunnels that were reassuringly metal-walled and sealed with thick steel blast doors.

Soon, Pendareva stopped before a security station manned by six enforcers armed with combat shotguns and glossy black power mauls who stood before a heavy blast door. The image of a yawning abyss had been painted on the door, the lick of flames just visible at its base, and across the width of the door were the words ‘Welcome to Hell’.

Each enforcer wore thick, padded body armour with all-enclosing helms of bronze, and each man had his gun trained on the approaching group. Pendareva could feel the snap of tension from the warriors of the inquisitor’s retinue and, to his credit, Pendareva’s men appeared to be unfazed by the presence of the massive Space Marines.

Pendareva said, ‘Lieutenant Grazer. We are here to see the Prisoner.’

Grazer nodded and stepped forward saying, ‘Access permissions?’

Both the Warden of Zhadanok and its chief gaoler produced control wands from their uniforms and were escorted towards panels either side of the blast door.

‘Insert your control wands when I give the word and then step back,’ ordered Grazer.

Pendareva nodded and readied his wand as the lieutenant dialled in the code known only to him that would allow the door to open.

Grazer said, ‘Insert,’ and Pendareva slid his control wand into the panel, keying in his

personal identification code once it clicked into place. De Zoysa did likewise and the blast door rumbled as internal locks disengaged and the massive portal descended slowly into the floor.

Pendareva removed his control wand and beckoned to Inquisitor Lord Osorkon.

‘Welcome to the Hell Hole.’

‘Hey up there!’ shouted Finn, registering the pain in his feet, but shutting it off from his conscious mind. The rising acid pooled across the entire floor, diluted since it had come through filter traps, but still painfully corrosive. Fumes drifted from his blistered feet and the drain in the centre of the floor dripped molten gobbets from its sagging metal.

‘I told you to shut up, Finn,’ said Dravin. ‘I won’t tell you again.’

‘Listen,’ said Finn. ‘Something’s wrong. This place is filling with acid, it’s not good.’

‘What are you talking about, Finn?’

‘I’m telling you, this place is filling up with acid!’ called Finn, injecting a note of pleading into his voice. He had to bait the hook just right. ‘You’re gonna be hosing me down the drain soon.’

He smiled as the silence stretched. Neither Warden Pendareva or his pet psycho, de Zoysa would shed a tear if Finn died in the Hell Hole, but Finn knew that Dravin was a stickler for the rules. And in Dravin’s ordered world, you didn’t leave prisoners to die in their cells, mass murderers or not.

‘There’s acid in your cell?’ asked Dravin.

‘Sure as I’m down here and you’re up there,’ replied Finn. ‘The soles of my feet are damn near burned through! You gotta get me out of here!’

Finn heard muttered conversation from above and reached down to grip an acid-burned shard of metal from the drain. He pulled and the metal bent, eventually coming away from the drain. Not much of a weapon, but it was still a sharpened fifteen centimetre length of metal. Finn had killed men with less than this.

He blinked in sudden brightness as the trapdoor above him was hauled back and a square of light shone down into the cell. He could see the helmeted head of Dravin above him and he pointed to the floor.

‘See, I told you,’ he said. ‘I ain’t lying.’

‘Shit,’ said Dravin to someone out of sight. ‘He’s right, the cell’s filling with acid. The pumps to this part of the prison must be playing up.’

‘You gotta get me out of here!’

‘Hold on,’ ordered Dravin and vanished from the square of light.

Finn fought to hold back a feral grin of anticipation and secreted the jagged needle of metal in his palm, feeling the acid coating it hiss against his skin.

‘Okay, Finn,’ said Dravin, reappearing at the trapdoor. ‘We’re getting you out of there, but you so much as twitch a way I don’t like, I’ll shoot you and leave you down there to melt. Are we clear?’

‘We sure are,’ said Finn as a battered steel ladder was lowered into the cell.

Pendareva led the way along a bare corridor with a succession of passageways branching off that led along flickering, dismal tunnels with guards stationed at each junction.

‘I can see why this place is called the Hell Hole,’ muttered Inquisitor Osorkon.

‘A name of our inmates’ devising, but it seems to fit, yes,’ agreed Pendareva.

Their journey continued to the end of the corridor, where it passed through a wide opening in the wall that led into a long, vaulted chamber filled with humming machinery and the stink of ozone.

‘Our most secure area,’ said Pendareva proudly.

A gleaming, metallic circle filled most of the chamber, a crackling column of light rising from its circumference to form a domed web of lighting through which nothing could penetrate.

A hybrid of power field and void shield technology, it formed an impregnable barrier of lethal energy that would incinerate anything that attempted to pass through it.

Thirty enforcers surrounded the shimmering energy field, their guns trained on the solitary figure that knelt in prayer at the centre of the circle.

He was a hulking brute, his bulk clearly that of an Astartes warrior, but one clad in unclean red plate armour hung with scorched scrolls and snapped chain links. Vile sigils and blasphemous catechisms were carved into one of the armour’s shoulder

guards, while the other bore a horned, daemonic head worked from dark iron.

His shaven skull was bowed and Pendareva could see the light of the energy fields dancing over the strange scripture-like tattoos that covered his skull.

The prisoner looked up from his devotions and Pendareva shivered, feeling the aeons of hatred and malevolence distilled within that gaze.

Inquisitor Osorkon stepped towards the edge of the circle of light, and Pendareva was put in mind of a predator that closes on its snared, helpless prey.

The Grey Knights moved to surround the prisoner, their weapons aimed at his head as Osorkon said, ‘Erebus…’

The head count was the last thing to be done before lockdown. The cells were opened en masse from the suspended control booth as a barked command ordered the inmates onto the movable gantries that slotted home before them.

Automated weapon mounts swivelled to cover the cells as hundreds of the sector’s most dangerous men and women stepped out to be tallied.

Squads of enforcers covered the cells with their shotguns, but none of the prisoners failed to notice that their numbers were conspicuously thinned thanks to the extra manpower detached to guard Zhadanok’s newest inmate.

Working in the depths of the mechanical plant cavern of Zhadanok Prison was a detail most inmates thought worse than the Hell Hole. Deafening machine-pumps and perforated walkways suspended on thick steel cables filled the cavernous space with the stench of oil, sweat and acid.

Below the walkways, breakers of the acid sea churned and foamed, crashing against the black rocks and dripping from the base of the suspended ironwork.

Those prisoners sent to work the acid pumps that kept the prison complex from flooding were sent in wearing flimsy corrosion-resistant oversuits and rebreather apparatus that looked as though they had come from the earliest days of the Imperium.

Prisoners shuffled around the stinking ocean cavern maintaining the machinery under the watchful gaze of a skeleton crew of enforcers. No one could escape from this place – save by leaping the safety rails into the acid sea – which hadn’t stopped desperate inmates from trying to swim to freedom in their oversuits. Each of those attempts had failed as the escapees swiftly discovered just how little protection the oversuits really offered.

This shift was a mix of prisoners from various parts of the prison, but amongst them were three members of Finn's Brothers of the Word. Two were simply violent men who had killed fellow members of their regiments, but one had been an indentured Skitarii who previously served with work details of the Adeptus Mechanicus and had learned much from his time there before being sent to Zhadanok for tampering with holy machinery in an attempt to learn its secrets.

All of which would have meant nothing were it not for the fact that he had sabotaged the main controls that regulated the acid pumps. Two of the pumps that cleared out the lower levels, including the Hell Hole, had already been deactivated.

But that was only the beginning.

As the shift changeover klaxon sounded, a red light winked to life on the console, indicating that several of the pumps were failing, but they went unnoticed as the enforcers concentrated on moving the prisoners.

The first light was swiftly followed by another, then another and another. A whining alarm sounded, but was swallowed by the roaring breakers below and the noise of the shift change.

Red lights spread across the console as, one by one, the pumps that kept the deadly acid from Zhadanok Prison shut down.

And the ocean rushed in.

Inquisitor Lord Osorkon laced his hands behind his back as the prisoner rose to his feet and glanced with disdain at the Grey Knights surrounding him. His presence was enormous, greater even than the Astartes warriors, though he was surely no taller or broader than them. Pendareva grimaced as he studied the prisoner, who now had a name if what Osorkon had given voice to was indeed his true name.

Erebus.

A name that carried with it a weight of ages and dark myth. If the tales were to be believed, Erebus was said to be one of the ancient leaders of the great rebellion that legend told of in ages past. Erebus had been one of its chief architects, a warrior priest from one of the ancient Space Marine Legions that rebelled against the rule of the Emperor and were cast down almost ten thousand years ago.

Pendareva had never put much stock in such tales; after all, how could a being exist for ten thousand years? Such a thing was ludicrous, but looking into the twin pools of bitter malice of Erebus's eyes, he found it all too easy to countenance that the prisoner

had nurtured hatred for so long.

‘Five?’ said Erebus. ‘You think so little of me, you only come with five Astartes?’

‘They are of the Grey Knights,’ replied Osorkon. ‘More than enough for the likes of you, traitor.’

‘Traitor?’ laughed Erebus, his cruel features twisting in a snarl. ‘That word no longer has any meaning for me. It is you and your pathetic shadows of warriors who are the traitors. You and men like you betrayed the Imperium long ago when you fought against the Warmaster.’

‘Do not speak his name,’ warned Osorkon. ‘Your time is over. Within the day you will be suffering the torments of the damned in an Inquisition cell.’

‘Torments of the damned?’ said Erebus. ‘What do you know of such things?’

‘Enough to make you rue the day you fell into my hands.’

‘You know nothing,’ snapped Erebus, pacing within his energised cell. ‘Wait until everything you have striven for is naught but ashes and the gods you once walked amongst are legends to be reviled. When you feel the weight of betrayal on your shoulders for an age of eternity. Then you will be fit to speak of such things.’

Osorkon laughed. ‘Spare me your theatrics, Erebus. You are finished, you and your dreams of conquest. Without you, the invasion of the Hyrus sector is over. I know it and you know it too, so shall we dispense with the tedious grandstanding?’

Erebus snarled and hurled himself at the inquisitor and the enforcers racked their shotguns, but not before the Grey Knights each had their long, crackling halberds aimed unerringly at his head.

Osorkon didn’t flinch as Erebus was hurled back in a blaze of light, his armour scorched and his skin blistered from the discharge of his enclosing energy field.

‘Tiresome,’ sighed Osorkon, as Erebus rolled in pain on the ground within the energy field. He turned to face Pendareva and said. ‘Disengage the field. We will assume responsibility for the prisoner.’

Pendareva nodded dumbly, sharing a glance with de Zoysa that spoke of his unease at releasing Erebus.

‘Warden,’ said Osorkon. ‘Now, while he is disorientated.’

Pendareva nodded as de Zoysa moved around the circumference of the energy field, ensuring that each of his enforcers were ready should anything untoward occur. The Warden made his way towards a bank of controls maintained by a white-robed adept and a trio of hard-wired servitors.

The adept bowed as Pendareva approached and within moments, the bass hum of machinery faded and the ever-present stink of ozone diminished.

Erebus was on one knee, surrounded by Grey Knights, their silver plate reflecting the ruddy red of his spiked and chained armour. Each warrior had the glowing blades of their halberds aimed squarely at the prisoner and though each wore a full enclosing helmet, Pendareva could feel their hatred for Erebus. Justicar Kemper stood behind the prisoner with his sword raised to strike.

‘Up,’ commanded Osorkon and Erebus painfully forced himself to his feet, glaring with undiluted hatred at the inquisitor.

‘You think you can break me, Osorkon?’ said Erebus. ‘You haven’t even begun to suspect the depths of pain I can show you.’

‘Spare me your threats,’ said the inquisitor, turning away from Erebus. ‘I have no wish to hear anything you say for now. Bring him.’

Surrounded by the Grey Knights and de Zoysa’s enforcers, Erebus was led through the arched entrance. Previously, Pendareva had thought that such numbers were ridiculous for one prisoner, but faced with the sheer physicality of Erebus without the protection of the energy field, he wasn’t sure it was enough.

Finn climbed the first few steps of the ladder, the metal feeling blessedly cool on the burned soles of his feet. He squinted in the light from the corridor above, taking more time than he needed to allow his eyes to adjust and give the impression of weakness. He’d been in the Hell Hole for three days now and they’d expect him to be weak.

That would be their mistake.

‘Come on, Finn, get a bloody move on!’ snapped Dravin.

‘Alright, alright, I’m almost there,’ replied Finn, lifting his shoulders beyond the level of the floor. He could see three pairs of boots and lifted his head, squinting theatrically and shielding his eyes to get a better look at the enforcers around him.

Dravin in front of him, one to the left and one behind him.

‘Little help here?’ said Finn. ‘My feet are all burned to hell.’

‘My heart bleeds,’ said the enforcer behind him.

Gimme time, thought Finn.

He hauled himself over the lip of the trapdoor and sat on the corridor floor with his legs dangling into the cell. The level of acid was really beginning to rise quickly, reflecting the wan light of the corridor in rippling waves.

‘On your feet,’ ordered Dravin.

Finn nodded and pushed himself onto one knee. He made a pantomime of climbing to his feet, letting the pain of his burns free of the force of will he’d placed around it for a brief instant.

He stumbled and Dravin instinctively reacted by reaching to grab him.

Finn’s hand shot out and grabbed Dravin’s wrist, wrenching him off balance and pulling him forward. Even as the enforcer fell through the trapdoor, Finn was moving.

He spun low, kicking backwards and hammering his fist to the left. The long needle of drain metal in his fist stabbed into the second enforcer’s thigh tearing through his coveralls and ripping open his femoral artery. The ball of Finn’s foot connected squarely with the kneecap of the enforcer behind him. The bone shattered, shock and pain driving the man to the floor.

Finn dived left as a shotgun blast tore up the floor and landed on top of the screaming enforcer with the sliver of metal jammed in his leg. He swept up the man’s fallen weapon and rolled, racking the slide and firing shot after shot at the other enforcer.

Deafening booms and stinking, acrid smoke filled the corridor, and Finn yelled with the thrill of combat. The enforcer was pitched backwards, his body armour ripped up where the shotgun shells had torn it up.

Though the man Finn was lying on was bleeding to death, he still fought as blood gushed from the wound on his leg. Finn smashed the butt of the shotgun into his face and slithered off him, rising to his feet and swinging the weapon into his face like a club to shut his screaming up.

The enforcer he’d shot was struggling to push himself into a sitting position in order to use his weapon. Finn didn’t give him a chance to fire, calmly walking over and planting the barrel of his shotgun in the centre of the enforcer’s chest.

‘Let’s see if your heart really does bleed,’ said Finn, pulling the trigger.

The enforcer’s body armour was designed to resist knife thrusts and bludgeons, not a point-blank shotgun blast, and the grey floor of the corridor was sprayed with a fan of blood and bone.

Finn could hear painful curses and splashing from below and risked a glance through the trapdoor. A shotgun blast ripped through and shattered the glow-globe above him, but Finn had been expecting the shot and ducked back with a whooping yell of laughter.

‘Emperor damn you, Finn!’ shouted Dravin. ‘You’re a dead man! You hear me? When I get out of here, I’m going to kill you, regulations be damned!’

‘Whatever. Enjoy drowning in acid, Dravin,’ said Finn, hauling the cover back over the trapdoor and muting the enforcer’s shouts.

He quickly gathered up a pair of boots and the rest of the ammunition from the dead men, feeding a full load of shells into the shotgun then stuffing the rest into his pockets.

Getting out of his cell had been the easy part, now he had to get to the landing platforms and that wasn’t going to be easy unless the rest of the plan kicked in soon.

As though on cue, the sound of the acid alarms screamed from the battered iron klaxons mounted on the walls.

‘Music to my ears,’ chuckled Finn. ‘Music to my ears.’

The main halls of Zhadanok resounded to the deafening howls of the acid alarms, the blaring tones catching everyone off guard. The Brothers of the Word were the first to react, sprinting across the suspended walkways and rushing the enforcers before the first peals finished echoing.

Cries of pain and booming shotgun blasts followed, as old scores were settled and bitter rivalries flared up in the wake of the alarms. The Red Blades went for the Brothers of the Word and the Devil Dogs fought anyone in reach of their makeshift shanks. Hundreds of prisoners on the lower levels hurdled the railings to the main floor of the viewing hall and charged at one another in the confusion. Enforcers shot down prisoners and the automated weapon mounts opened fire, spraying the rampaging inmates with bullets.

Blood sprayed as shards of mirrored glass or sharpened lengths of metal were used to open veins and rip out throats and blasts of gunfire knocked prisoners back from the suspended control booth. A team of enforcers kept inmates at bay with disciplined

volleys of shotgun blasts, but the rushing bodies of prisoners reached closer with every charge.

Hundreds of rioting prisoners hacked and stabbed at one another, filling the viewing halls with blood and screams. Splintering glass rained down from above as frenzied prisoners stormed the control booth and stabbed the enforcers to death. Bodies fell from above as inmates and enforcers alike were hurled from the high walkways to smash headlong onto the hard floor of the viewing hall.

Psychotic violence reigned within the main prison halls of Zhadanok, but the real bloodshed was yet to come.

Justicar Kemper of the Grey Knights was the first to register that something was wrong. Pendareva shot de Zoysa an interrogative glance. Zhadanok's gaoler shrugged, but slipped his shotgun from his shoulder and racked the slide.

'What is the matter?' asked Inquisitor Osorkon, halting their procession with a raised hand.

'Gunfire,' said Justicar Kemper. 'Shotguns.'

'From where?' asked Pendareva. 'I didn't hear anything. Are you sure?'

'I do not make mistakes,' said the Grey Knight, and Pendareva believed him.

Pendareva looked through the wall of plate armour to where Erebus stood and felt a shiver travel the length of his spine at the gloating smile he saw there.

'Who else do you have locked in here?' demanded Osorkon, turning to Pendareva.

'Finn…' said de Zoysa, answering the inquisitor's question for him. 'Emperor damn him! It has to be.'

'Who is this Finn?'

'He's no one,' said Pendareva. 'A murderer from some feral regiment of Guard who claimed the voices in his head made him kill a great many hivers. He's a troublemaker, but no one to worry about really.'

Pendareva jumped in surprise as the acid alarms went off, sudden dread filling him.

Lord Osorkon looked him square in the eye and said, 'Are you sure? What are these sirens?'

‘It’s the acid alarms,’ said Pendareva, hurriedly. ‘Some of the pumps must have failed, but I’m sure it’s just a coincidence.’

‘There’s no such thing,’ stated Osorkon, turning to Justicar Kemper and pointing to Erebus. ‘Watch him.’

‘I’ll take some men and check it out,’ said de Zoysa, forming a detachment of armoured enforcers around him. ‘If it’s Finn, then I’m going to take pleasure in blowing his brains out.’

Pendareva nodded as de Zoysa led a group of ten enforcers off into the corridors of the Hell Hole towards the sound of the shotgun blasts. The vox-unit on Pendareva’s belt chirruped and he unhooked it, saying, ‘Pendareva here.’

‘Warden, this is perimeter control.’

‘Yes?’ asked Pendareva, with a sudden sense of events beginning to unravel.

‘We, uh… we’ve picked up a vessel moving into low orbit that looks like it’s on an intercept course with us.’

Pendareva glanced over at Osorkon and said, ‘Yours?’

The inquisitor shook his head. ‘No, my vessel remains in hiding behind the third moon.’

‘Perimeter control,’ said Pendareva, returning his attention to the vox. ‘Can you identify this craft?’

‘No, sir, it doesn’t match any vessels in our registries, but then they’re not exactly complete.’

Inquisitor Osorkon said, ‘It’s his…’ and turned to face Erebus. ‘They’re coming for him. Justicar Kemper. Where is your vessel?’

‘On the dark side, lord inquisitor,’ answered Kemper. ‘As you requested,’ and Pendareva thought he detected a note of reproach in the Space Marine’s tone.

Erebus chuckled and said. ‘You are all going to die.’

‘Know this, traitor,’ said Osorkon. ‘I’ll kill you before I allow you to be rescued.’

‘Fool,’ said Erebus. ‘I was alive when the Emperor and the Warmaster bestrode the galaxy, your threats mean nothing to me.’

‘Sir,’ came the distorted voice over Pendareva’s vox once more. ‘We’ve detected a number of incoming signals from the approaching ship.’

‘What are they?’ asked the warden.

‘I… I’m not sure, sir,’ said the officer on perimeter control, unable to keep the fear from his voice, ‘but I think they’re orbital torpedoes.’

Finn loped through the tunnels of the Hell Hole with the familiarity of one who had been marched along its corridors many times before. The shotgun felt natural in his grip, but he wished he had his familiar claw machete for the up close killing that was sure to come before he met up with the Brothers of the Word and got off this damned planet.

The acid alarms continued to screech and he knew that within the hour this level of the prison would be knee-deep in deadly acid. He followed the dismal corridors back towards the security station, knowing that evac crews would be on their way to remove inmates incarcerated on the lower levels.

With his shotgun, he should be able to cause enough bloody confusion to get past the evac teams and any security detail they had with them.

After all, they wouldn’t be expecting an armed prisoner with nothing to lose.

The first orbital torpedoes struck the molten landscape above Zhadanok Prison, smashing through the acid-softened rock and exploding with terrifying force. Burning scads of debris rained down as a cascade of searing lance strikes hammered the landscape. Most just cratered the landscape, forming deep bowls in which acid lakes formed that would, in time, melt great sinkholes through the mountains.

Buried beneath this region of the mountains was a heavily shielded mechanical facility not dissimilar to the cavernous machine plant of the acid pumps. Its structure was designed to withstand the slow, but inevitable erosion of the climate, not the horror of an orbital barrage and, when the first shells broke apart the mountainous cover, it was a matter of moments before the facility was smashed to a tangled ruin of metal, oil and flesh.

The machines lay in a million pieces, their turbines shattered and transformers vaporised.

And without them, the power in Zhadanok failed.

Pendareva stifled a yelp as the corridor was plunged into screeching darkness, feeling

more than hearing the Grey Knights close in around Erebus almost at the same moment. The ceiling-mounted lumen strips flickered dimly as low-wattage emergency batteries kicked in and Pendareva fancied he could sense a rumbling vibration through the stone floor over the howls of the acid alarms.

‘Torpedo impacts,’ said Justicar Kemper, matter of factly. ‘Close.’

Lord Osorkon nodded and said, ‘They’ll be coming soon,’ before turning to Pendareva and adding, ‘What measures are in place to prevent a forced entry to this facility?’

‘Entry?’ said Pendareva, shouting to be heard over the alarms. ‘Uh, well, the guns and the thickness of the doors. Generally our defences are geared to preventing the inmates from leaving, rather than people trying to get in.’

‘Not good enough,’ snapped Osorkon as Pendareva’s vox squawked to life again. Even over the hiss of static and screech of sirens, he could hear the gunshots, screams and the clang of metal through the vox.

‘Code Imperator!’ screamed a voice. ‘Code Imperator! We need help here. Now, damn it, now!’

The vox barked one last hard bang of static and went dead.

‘What is Code Imperator?’ demanded Osorkon.

Pale-faced and shaking, Pendareva said, ‘It’s a full-scale prison riot.’

Six gunships, their blood-red hulls streaked with the scars of re-entry and the acid storms, swooped like raptors towards Zhadanok, their prows curved and cruel. Blue jetwash flared from their engines and silver contrails spiralled in energetic vortices from their wings.

Of ancient design, they resembled the Astartes Stormbirds of old, but with added embellishments of unclean runes and sigils.

They streaked through the rain-lashed air towards the prison complex, the warriors within grim-faced and ready to visit death upon their enemies. Without power, the guns of the prison did not track them or open fire, their auxiliary batteries long since depleted and never replaced.

The lead vessel broke away from the pack and circled low on an attack run directly at the recessed prison gates. Four missiles leapt from the underwing rails and streaked towards the gate, exploding in quick succession and blowing a path within.

Even as the smoke cleared the others were circling in to land, each disgorging twenty warriors of such discipline and methodical precision that they could only be Astartes.

Or had once been Astartes…

De Zoysa checked for signs of life on the two downed enforcers, even though he could see from the blood and pallor of their flesh that it was useless. Both were dead, though he had no idea what had happened to the third enforcer on duty in this section.

A faint, acrid smell of burning metal came to his nostrils and he looked down at the lip of the cell trapdoor that led to the oubliette below. Streamers of brackish liquid oozed from around the edges and hissed with faint wisps of steam.

‘Shit,’ he said, hauling on the chain that opened the trapdoor.

Stained acid spilled from within and sloshed over the raised edges in a sudden flood. A battered and mostly corroded helmet was carried clear and the fate of the third enforcer was no longer a mystery.

De Zoysa and his men backed away from the bubbling, frothing trapdoor as foaming runnels of acid bloomed into the corridor. Hissing trapdoors along the length of the corridor leaked streamers of acid as they too were burned through from below.

‘Shit,’ said de Zoysa again.

The main halls of Zhadanok were awash with blood. Until the power had failed, an uneasy peace had fallen over the complex with the bulk of the enforcers having drawn back within sealed internal bunkers and the inmates contenting themselves with random acts of vandalism and the settling of old grudges.

Firelight danced from makeshift bonfires, and burning rags fell like bright leaves from the highest cells as prisoners set light to bedsheets or anything combustible they could lay their hands on. Whooping yells, tribal and feral, echoed from the high cloisters of the prison as those unfortunate enough to have fallen victim to the savage prison gangs were beaten and hung from the high platforms, their entrails hanging in gory ropes from slit bellies.

The enforcers that had fallen into the hands of the inmates suffered far more gruesome fates, tortured beyond endurance with makeshift blades and flame. Those who didn’t die immediately were dismembered and their limbs feasted upon by the more barbaric prisoners.

Zhadanok had become a charnel house, a temple to degradation and blood, its inhabitants its supplicants in search of a high priest.

From somewhere higher, a huge detonation shook the prison, but amid the chaos of the riot no one paid it much mind, too intent on wreaking as much bloody havoc as could be done in these precious moments of freedom.

Between the running battles between the gangs, the occasional attempt would be made to assault the enforcers' position, but with only short-bladed shanks to their name, the booming shotguns of the enforcers hurled back every attack in smoke and blood.

But once the lights went out, all bets were off.

Lights failed, the blaring acid sirens were silenced and the motorised wheel locks disengaged with harsh clangs that were clearly audible in the sudden silence.

Slowly, the internecine battles between the prisoners halted as they realised that the hated enforcers were no longer secure in their bunkers and a gathering mob began to encircle each lonely bastion.

Though there were no leaders left alive by now, a hierarchy of the strongest and most ferocious prisoners had established itself, and they now led the screaming charge towards the enforcers' bunkers as a new light broke upon the main halls of Zhadanok.

The main gate at the far end of the hall vanished in a blinding detonation, hurling killing blades of metal spinning through the air. Prisoners milled in confusion and dozens were cut down by gunfire from the enforcers.

The smoke of the explosion billowed and whipped in the freezing air that knifed into the prison from high above. Shapes moved in the fog of debris and fire, massive forms swathed in brazen plates of armour the colour of coagulated blood.

Like daemons of the abyss they marched into Zhadanok Prison, spreading out and forming an unbroken line of red warriors. They each carried a monstrous, unwieldy-looking weapon before them, the eyes of their snarling helmets glowing with the fires of the warp.

Some prisoners wept and soiled themselves, seeing only death in these horrible figures, while others cheered, seeing liberty. Such optimism was hopelessly misplaced as the intruders' guns barked bright flames and blew apart those who ran towards them, bursting them like wet, red blisters.

Screams of fear and rage erupted from the prisoners as this new enemy gunned them down. Primitive knives and looted shotguns were no match for boltguns and power armour and all who came near these warriors were slaughtered in seconds.

The enforcers, likewise not knowing the identity of the intruders, but sensing nothing but ancient and terrible purpose in their implacable march, fell back in a rout, abandoning their posts and fleeing deeper into the prison.

‘What’s happening above?’ said Osorkon. ‘We need information.’

‘I don’t know,’ snapped Pendareva, his patience with the inquisitor lord finally wearing thin. ‘Nobody’s answering their vox. At least not with any sense.’

‘Inquisitor Osorkon,’ said Justicar Kemper. ‘We should move back down into the prison until we can gain a clearer understanding of the situation above.’

‘There’s a damn riot going on above!’ shouted Pendareva, an edge of panic in his voice. ‘That’s the bloody situation above! If you hadn’t come for this bastard, we’d be sitting pretty. This is all your fault!’

‘Be silent, Pendareva,’ snapped Osorkon. ‘Without the Grey Knights here, we would not even have a fighting chance. Now unless you have anything pertinent to say, keep your mouth shut. Justicar Kemper, you are sure of this strategy?’

‘Yes,’ nodded the Grey Knight, ‘if the vessel above is truly of the Word Bearers, then it is likely they come in strength to retrieve this traitor. We will need to wait until my men are in position to launch a counterattack and we can trap them between us.’

‘Agreed,’ said Osorkon. ‘We move deeper into the prison.’

‘That would be a very bad idea,’ said de Zoysa, reappearing from around a bend in the tunnel and jogging back to join them.

‘Why?’ asked Osorkon.

‘Because the prison’s filling up with acid from below. You heard the sirens. The pumps have failed and the lower levels are already full.’

‘How long?’ asked Pendareva.

De Zoysa shrugged. ‘The oubliettes are full and the acid’s coming in at a hell of a rate. If the blast doors hold… then we’ve got an hour, maybe less.’

Finn peered around the corner and saw the sealed blast door that led from the Hell Hole. He’d been waiting anxious seconds, but nothing had yet come through and he knew he didn’t have long. Someone must have found the bodies he’d left behind him by now and they’d be on his tail like spoorbugs on a fresh turd if he didn’t get moving.

Then, as though in answer to his prayers, the door began to rise and he tensed himself for action.

He heard running feet and screams of panic and fear, watching in amazement as a bloodied, terrified mass of enforcers streamed past him.

Finn slid down the wall, drawing himself into a tight ball and keeping the shotgun clasped tight to his chest, as the enforcers fled down the corridor he'd been about to turn into, oblivious to anything except their own terror. He saw their faces and knew that this was more than just panic from a riot – something had seriously freaked these guys.

Hard barks of gunfire followed them and Finn was sprayed with fine mists of red as enforcers exploded from within. He looked back through the door to see red-armoured daemons following the enforcers, malevolent and implacable, fire and death blasting from the roaring muzzles of their weapons.

'Holy shit…' breathed Finn, seeing that these guys were seriously bad news. Then he saw the insignia on the shoulder guards of their armour, a dark daemonic face with curling horns… the same as he had seen in his dreams and he knew then that these were the true Brothers of the Word.

But as he watched the slaughter of the enforcers, he realised that these were not the liberators of his visions and that they'd kill him just as happily as they were killing the enforcers.

He pushed himself from the wall as the red-armoured warriors slaughtered the last of the enforcers. On one level, they were so very like the devotional picts he'd seen of Space Marines, yet horribly different. As uncaring as Finn had been to the majesty of the Astartes, he saw on a very basic, instinctual level these warriors were just… wrong, plain and simple.

Finn turned tail and ran, taking off in the direction the enforcers had been heading.

He doubted it would lead to safety, but it sure beat staying here.

Pendareva could see that Osorkon was rapidly running potential scenarios through his head, but was coming up dry. They couldn't go deeper into the prison thanks to the acid pumps' failure and their enemies were coming from above. Pendareva now knew the full implications of being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

'Are there any cells near here that aren't below the acid line?' barked the inquisitor.

‘Not now,’ said de Zoysa. ‘All the oubliettes are flooded and the corridors between here and the lower levels will be full of acid by now.’

‘There are interrogation chambers on this level,’ added Pendareva. ‘Not as secure as cells, but they’ll do in a pinch.’

‘Take us there,’ commanded Osorkon.

Pendareva nodded and indicated that de Zoysa should lead the way.

The party moved off with a hurried desperation, de Zoysa leading them back through the Hell Hole towards its upper levels. Twice they passed beneath areas of transparent plasteel, their surfaces now a worrisome concave bow as the acid rain softened them almost to the point of bursting.

They heard distant shots and screams echoing weirdly along the tunnels, their proximity impossible to pinpoint due to the twisting acoustics of the lower levels. Each time de Zoysa led them along another corridor, Pendareva expected to meet fiends from the pits of his worst imaginings; beings like Erebus.

Thinking of the traitor made him turn his head as he made his way towards the interrogation chambers. For someone so dangerous, Erebus was about as docile a prisoner as any warden could hope for. Perhaps it was the acceptance of his fate or the prospect of potential rescue that kept him calm, but whatever it was, Pendareva was thankful for it.

They made their way into a wide corridor. The turning that would take them to the interrogation chambers was fifty metres ahead of them, the corridor travelling onwards for half that again.

‘Halt,’ said Justicar Kemper and everyone jumped. Without words, the three of the Grey Knights moved to the front of the party and braced themselves with their be-weaponed halberds held out before them.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked.

‘Something’s coming,’ said Kemper, by way of explanation.

Pendareva bit his lip as the sound that had alerted the Grey Knights came to his own mortal senses. The sound of running feet and panicked breathing. A lone figure skidded around the corner of the tunnel far ahead and Pendareva saw that it was no daemon or monster, but an inmate.

An inmate carrying a shotgun.

‘It’s Finn!’ shouted de Zoysa, raising his own weapon. ‘Put him down!’

Pendareva watched Finn hear de Zoysa’s shout and throw himself flat as a hail of shots sawed the air from the Grey Knights’ weapons, ripping a line of gouged rockcrete in the wall above him.

Finn slammed into the wall, losing his grip on the shotgun and the weapon skittered away from him. He rolled onto his front, knowing that trapped like this, there was no way he could avoid another fusillade.

De Zoysa racked his own shotgun, but before he could fire, Osorkon said, ‘Hold your fire. He may know what is ahead of us!’

‘What?’ shouted de Zoysa. ‘He killed three of my men!’

‘Irrelevant,’ said the inquisitor. ‘Bring him.’

De Zoysa looked pleadingly at Pendareva, but he could only shake his head.

‘Do as he says.’

Cursing under his breath, de Zoysa led a team of enforcers forwards and hauled Finn to his feet none too tenderly, sweeping up the fallen shotgun and returning to the main group.

‘Man, you don’t want to hang around here,’ coughed Finn. ‘They’re right behind me.’

‘Who?’ demanded Osorkon. ‘How many?’

Finn shook his head. ‘Don’t know. Big guys like them,’ he said, nodding warily at the Grey Knights, ‘but bigger and with red armour. The Brothers of the Word. I saw about thirty, maybe more. Look, gimme a gun, they’re gonna kill me just the same as you.’

‘Shut your mouth, Finn,’ snarled de Zoysa, and Pendareva could see the man’s lust to do Finn harm.

‘The Brothers of the Word,’ said Osorkon. ‘Where did you hear that?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Finn, casting nervous glances over his shoulder. ‘Look, they’ll be here soon. They killed all the others and they’re gonna kill you if we don’t get the hell out of here.’

Osorkon seemed to consider this for a moment, and Pendareva willed him to speed his

thought processes as the rhythmic tramping of marching feet echoed from ahead.

‘Come on, for the Emperor’s sake!’ shouted Pendareva, running towards the corridor that led to the interrogation chambers. ‘Even I can hear them coming!’

The rest of the group followed him down the turning, the corridor eventually opening out into a wide, semi-circular chamber with iron doors spaced at regular intervals along the curved wall opposite them. A thick transparent dome of armoured glass spilled a bleached light into the chamber, its outer surface slick and sheened with acid rain.

Pendareva ran to the door in the centre of the wall and slid his control wand down the locking mechanism before he realised that the power was out. Only an unknown time of battery life remained and there obviously wasn’t enough to power secondary locks.

He pulled the door open with a squeal of rusted metal and said, ‘This is as secure a location as we have that isn’t under the acid.’

A dim glow filtered out from the interrogation chamber, where a silver gurney sat in its centre, surrounded by trays of excruciation implements and banks of innocuous-looking machinery.

Justicar Kemper pushed the compliant Erebus inside, turning to one of his warriors and Pendareva could hear the click of inter suit vox. The Grey Knight nodded and braced himself before the door, readying his halberd at the same time.

‘Spread out,’ ordered Kemper as de Zoysa and his enforcers opened the other chambers and began dragging out gurneys, tables or anything that could be used as a barricade or shelter. Finn was unceremoniously tossed against the curved wall, still protesting that he needed a weapon.

The sound of approaching warriors was even louder now and Pendareva felt his terror suddenly seize hold of him in a bone-crushing embrace. Until now, he had felt that the Grey Knights would protect them without giving the matter a second thought, but hearing the inevitable, drum-regular footfalls of their enemies drawing nearer and nearer, he realised that they were all doomed.

‘Here,’ said de Zoysa, pressing a shotgun into his damp palms.

‘What?’ he said numbly. ‘I don’t know how to use this.’

‘It’s easy,’ growled de Zoysa, racking the slide for him. ‘Just point it at any bastard that tries to come along that corridor then pull the trigger. Pull the stock tight into your shoulder, ’cause it’s got a kick like a grox to it.’

Pendareva nodded and pulled the weapon in tight, though he was shaking so much he didn't know that he'd have a hope of hitting anything. De Zoysa moved among his men, barking words of encouragement and promises of the rewards they'd get once this was all over, but Pendareva was sharp enough to hear the lie in them.

Osorkon drew an exquisitely tooled boltpistol from beneath his robes and his augmetically enhanced warriors took up position, crouched low to either side of the entrance to their refuge.

'I'll not let them take him,' hissed Osorkon. 'By the Emperor I won't.'

'You may not have much choice,' pointed out Pendareva.

Osorkon shook his head. 'If they want him out so badly, then it is our duty to deny them that if we can't hold on until our reinforcements arrive.'

'Do you really expect them to?'

'If we can hold on long enough,' answered the inquisitor. 'And do not forget, we fight alongside the Grey Knights, the finest fighting warriors of the Astartes. Anything is possible.'

Osorkon's optimism gave Pendareva hope and stilled his shaking hands a little. The inquisitor was right. The Space Marines were the greatest warriors of humanity and if anyone could hold against such dreaded foes, it was surely them.

The first warning the enemy was upon them was when Justicar Kemper raised his arm and opened fire with the weapon fitted over his gauntlet. The report was deafening and Pendareva almost dropped his own weapon. The rest of the Grey Knights fired a heartbeat later and Pendareva yelled in released fear as he saw red shapes jittering in the strobing flashes of gunfire.

He squeezed the trigger of his shotgun, grunting in pain at the power of the weapon's recoil. He didn't know if he'd hit anything, but racked the slide as de Zoysa had done and fired again.

In the lull between shots, the inquisitor's augmetic warriors leapt to their feet and danced amongst the red-armoured figures still standing, shimmering swords and energy sheathed daggers cutting through armour, meat and bone. Even Astartes plate was no protection from such esoteric weapons and limbs were lopped from torsos, heads from necks and arms from shoulders.

They killed six of the red-armoured enemy before the first of them fell as one of the

armoured killers trapped his glowing sword between pierced armour plates and snapped the blade with a twist. A daemon-mouthed bolter was rammed into the warrior's chest and his back exploded in a halo of splintered ribs and shredded meat. The second of the inquisitor's warriors spun away from a brutal clubbing blow and ducked beneath a slashing sword, but was unable to avoid a thunderous boot that hammered into the side of his head. The impact split his skull from jawbone to temple and he dropped, limp and dead, bone and oozing matter spilling from his burst brainpan.

More gunfire lanced out and Pendareva flinched as thunderous impacts hammered amongst them, ripping through the space like horizontal rain. Enforcers were hurled back, torn apart by explosive bolts that were little short of missiles and Pendareva was struck by how ludicrous an idea it was that these gurneys and tables might offer protection from such weapons.

More red warriors were pushing up the corridor, heedless of the fearsome casualties they were sustaining plunging headlong into this firetrap. Only the weapons of the Grey Knights and the inquisitor were having any real effect, the gunfire of the enforcers' shotguns pattering like rain on their enemies' armour.

Numbers were telling as more and more of the red warriors gained the interrogation chambers and, without seeming to give any verbal command, Justicar Kemper led his Grey Knights forward with their halberds lowered. Red and silver warriors clashed in a din of plate armour, the fighting close and brutal. The Grey Knights spun their long, be-weaponed halberds in practiced motions, stabbing, hacking and bludgeoning the enemies with disciplined strikes.

An enemy warrior fell, his head a splintered ruin and his limbs jerking spastically as he died. His finger continued to pump the trigger and explosive rounds sprayed in a curving arc up the wall…

…and across the transparent dome of armoured glass.

Against normal solid rounds the glass might have held, but against heavy-calibre, mass-reactive shells it cratered explosively and a spiderweb of cracks snarled across its surface from the epicentre of the bolter round's impact.

Pendareva looked up, hearing the high, sharp tink, tink, tink of the cracking glass as it crazed wildly.

'Oh no…' he breathed. 'The glass… it's–'

The warden never got the chance to shout his warning as the armoured glass finally gave way, shattering into a thousand fragments and falling in a diamond rain of razor

glass. Pendareva rolled towards the curved wall, hearing the heavy crash of the shattered dome and the screams as his men were torn apart by long, glittering daggers of glass.

The heavily armoured Space Marines were untroubled by such inconsequential missiles, but the enforcers were not so lucky. Pendareva saw de Zoysa sliced from shoulder blade to groin as a sheet of glass struck him edge on. Another enforcer was impaled by three long, glittering spears, while a blade of glass sliced down like a guillotine and sheared off another enforcer's arms.

In the wake of the glass came the acid rain. A howling gale of corrosion poured into the interrogation chambers, swirling the broken shards of glass around in a whirlwind. Pendareva cried out as he felt the acid's burning touch and desperately scrambled towards the nearest door as he saw Finn drag himself through the doorway of one of the excruciation rooms opposite.

He hooked his blistering fingers around the edge of the iron door, hearing a shout of pain from behind him. Inquisitor Lord Osorkon lay on his side, his robes smouldering and holed where the acid had eaten away at it. The inquisitor's hand reached out for him, the flesh hissing and spitting like fat on a griddle.

Pendareva wanted to help him, but knew that to head back into the maelstrom of battle, swirling acid and dancing glass was to die…

A blur of red moved past him, the thud of heavy footfalls sounding close to his head, but he ignored it and crawled onwards, pulling his battered body into the coolness of the excruciation room, rolling onto his back and gulping great gasps of air.

The clash of arms, gunshots and the shrieking hurricane of wind and acid still echoed from beyond and he pulled himself backwards on his elbows, trying to put as much distance between himself and the horror beyond the door as possible. Pendareva looked up as he heard gurgling moans of pain and the same heavy footfalls that had passed him not seconds before.

Erebus stood silhouetted in the doorway, Inquisitor Lord Osorkon gripped by the scruff of the neck in one meaty fist, with a grin of triumph splitting his tattooed features.

'The Emperor's wrath…' hissed Osorkon, just barely hanging onto consciousness.

Erebus silenced the inquisitor with a backhanded slap across the jaw, then turned his horrifying, ageless gaze on Pendareva.

'Please,' said Pendareva as the noise of battle was suddenly, horrifyingly silenced from

beyond the door.

All he could hear was the roar of the wind and the hiss of bodies dissolving under the assault of the acid.

‘Please what?’ said Erebus. ‘Don’t kill you? Take you with us?’

‘I don’t want to die,’ said Pendareva. ‘Please, your… friends have rescued you, isn’t that enough? I never mistreated you here. You don’t need to kill me, do you?’

‘Rescued me?’ laughed Erebus, a harsh, humourless bark. ‘Is that what you think happened here?’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘Do you really think that one such as I would allow myself to be taken by a grubby little gaoler like you? My presence here is by design, not chance.’

‘Why?’ was all Pendareva could think of to say to that.

In response, Erebus lifted the supine inquisitor, holding him as easily as a man might hold a limp rag.

‘This deluded corpse-worshipper has knowledge of secrets I very much desire to know – secrets I will learn as I tear his flesh and soul apart. He knows things unknown to the blind masses of ignorant humanity, ancient knowledge that has been secreted in forgotten places and the location of forbidden gateways to the Empyrean where awaits my lord and master.’

Most of Erebus’s words meant nothing to Pendareva, but one thing was abundantly clear: Erebus had engineered his own capture to lure Inquisitor Osorkon to Orina Septimus, knowing that only a figure of infinite malice would draw him into the open.

Everything that had transpired this bloody day had been in service of this moment and Pendareva knew that he was a dead man.

‘Good,’ said Erebus. ‘You see your fate.’

Finn heard the solitary gunshot from the other excruciation room and pressed himself into a tight ball in the corner of the chamber. The liberation his dreams and visions had promised him had come to nothing. He prayed that these red-armoured warriors would do whatever the hell it was they were here to do and get lost.

There was still a slim chance he could come out of this with his hide intact, though he

wasn’t going to bet the farm on it. Finn held his breath, hearing the heavy tread of armoured warriors enter the room, and he stood, determined to face death on his feet.

Two of the daemonic warriors had entered the room, towering above him. One was without a helmet, his skull covered in twisting tattoos and Finn recognised him as the warrior who had been a prisoner earlier.

‘Kill him and be done with it, Erebus,’ said one of the warriors. ‘We have what we came for.’

‘Yeah, go ahead, Erebus,’ snarled Finn, spreading his arms defiantly. ‘Kill me.’

The tattooed warrior stepped towards him and leaned down, reaching towards his face. The fingers of his armoured gauntlet brushed Finn’s cheek where blood from the dead enforcers had spattered him.

Finn locked his gaze with Erebus, knowing that his life was hanging in the balance.

‘He is warp-touched,’ said Erebus. ‘I can taste it, like cold steel in my mind. This is who led you here, though he knew it not.’

‘Then shall we take him too?’

Erebus shook his head and said, ‘No. We will leave him and he will bring hell upon anyone who finds him.’

Without another word, Erebus turned and marched from the room, leaving Finn standing bewildered in its centre. Through the open door he saw the red warriors gather up their dead and make their way from the interrogation chambers, Erebus dragging a blue-robed figure behind him.

As they left, Finn could see the hulking bodies of Space Marines in torn silver armour littering the blood-slick ground, taking a measure of satisfaction from seeing de Zoysa’s corpse amongst the dead.

He let out a long, shuddering breath and held himself upright against the doorway, unable to believe that he was still alive after such carnage. Wind from beyond the shattered dome still whipped acid squalls around the chamber, but its force was spent, the storm above moving onwards.

He reached out and hooked his fingers around the canvas strap of a shotgun and pulled it from under the body of an enforcer. Acid burns had rippled the stock, but he smiled as a quick inspection of the firing mechanism told him that it was still locked and loaded.

Finn racked the slide as he considered his situation.

He was trapped on a world bathed in corrosive acid storms in an underground prison that was rapidly filling with acid.

Erebus had said that he was going be bring hell on whoever found him…

Well, he got that right, thought Finn with a malicious grin.