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STEVE PARKER

THE FALLS OF MARAKROSS

The rattle of gunfire died off as midday approached. Both sides dug in behind solid cover, neither eager to break the stalemate while the sun burned at its zenith. The air hung hot and still and silent between the deadlocked foes.

Across the city, the streets and market-squares emptied. The citizens of Scala, planetary capital of Cordassa, took shelter in their homes from the searing heat. Not so, the officers of the Praeto Scala – the city's civil defence force. The praetos of Precinct 11 had fought for hours to gain this much ground against a cultist cell called Children of the Merciful Lord. The heretics had overtaken a large territory in the western slums and were drawing tainted water from its deep wells in direct contravention to a citywide Imperial edict.

Though the cultists were able to drink the infected water with impunity, they suffered under the baking sun just as much as the weary praetos.

The sudden, earsplitting scream of jets ripped through the silence. A great black shadow dropped over the contested streets, whipping dust into clouds that raced off down avenues of cheap dirty habs.

Startled men on both sides pressed their hands tight over their ears, desperate to drown out the banshee howling of powerful engines as they worked to hold a great black gunship in position.

These streets were too narrow for a landing. As the incredulous praetos stared dumbfounded, a seam opened in the rear of the gunship's armoured body. A ramp lowered and locked into position. And then they came – a storm of dark, gleaming giants. Dropping in twos from the extended ramp ten metres above, they hit the ground like meteors. The impacts of their booted feet shook the surrounding walls. Each hulking green-armoured figure landed squarely, immediately moving out from beneath the ship and into position, covering the descent of the others.

The last figure to descend wore white robes that whipped and flared around his black armour as he dropped. The ramp closed, sealing the ship behind him. The scream of the jets changed pitch. The gunship banked and slid away over the rooftops, drenching the street in baking sunlight once again.

The praetos blinked dust from their eyes and squinted at the giants standing in their midst.

From under his hood, the monster in white robes boomed, ‘Who has command? Step forward at once.’

His voice was harsh. Machinelike. Inhuman. The praetos felt their lungs vibrate with each word.

It was a short, dark woman who rose and moved forward to answer. ‘I’m Captain us-Kalmir,’ she said, ‘of the Praeto Scala, Precinct 11. And I am in charge here.’ Her Gothic was heavily accented. ‘Who do I address?’

The hooded giant stepped forward, dwarfing her. He raised gauntleted hands and peeled back his hood. Some among the younger praetos gasped and scrabbled backwards, certain that death itself had come for them. The giant’s face was a leering bone-white skull.

With deft fingers, the giant detached his skull-helm from its fixings. Cables hissed and snaked away from the masterfully sculpted mask. He lifted it clear.

Beneath, there was a human face. Horribly scarred and pitted, aged beyond its years by the ravages of countless battles, but still a human face. Cold grey eyes locked with the woman’s.

‘At ease, captain,’ said the giant. His voice was deep and compelling – less terrifying than when amplified, though perhaps even more potent. ‘I am Interrogator-Chaplain Artemius Grohm of the Dark Angels, First Company, and I serve the Emperor of Mankind.’

He raised a metal fist into the air. His armoured brothers immediately marched off towards the cultist barricades. The air soon filled with gunshots and screaming.

The giant grinned down at the Scalan captain.

‘We have come to help,’ he said.

‘I can spare a moment only, inquisitor,’ said Artemius, squeezing his bulk through a door built for lesser men. He straightened and surveyed the room: luxurious fixings, delicately sculpted artworks, richly curtained glass doors that led onto a wide balcony – the room dripped with the ubiquitous excess of a governor’s palace. The Cordassan governor had assigned Inquisitor Heiron fine quarters indeed, though Artemius preferred more spartan accommodation. The air in the room was luxuriously cool after the baking heat of the open streets. ‘I did not traverse the immaterium to sit in meetings.’

‘Exactly why I summoned you, Interrogator-Chaplain,’ replied the inquisitor. ‘I wish to know why you traversed the immaterium at all. Particularly to a planet in its death-throes. I doubt you came to end a skirmish between local praetos and a cultist mob.’

Artemius crossed the room to the inquisitor’s desk, his eyes on the old man behind it. Inquisitor Mattius Heiron looked ancient – his skin was scarred and weathered, darkened by the relentless sun of this world. His hair was combed neatly from left to right, gossamer wisps of snow white that looked ready to vanish on the next breeze. He wore delicate antique pince-nez on a long, thin aquiline nose. Drowned in the folds of an expensive Cordassan robe, he presented a vision of pitiable frailty.

That vision was a lie. Artemius had only to look into the inquisitor’s ice blue eyes to recognise it.

This is the man about whom Brother-Codicier Corvus cautioned me. Very well, inquisitor, let us see what part you shall play.

‘Won’t you sit?’ asked the inquisitor.

Artemius looked distastefully at the ornate wooden chair to which the old man gestured. It looked utterly incapable of supporting a man in power armour.

‘I’m sorry. It does look rather inadequate to the task. Perhaps you’ll join me on the balcony instead?’

Artemius followed the old man outside.

The heat had grown only marginally less oppressive in the late afternoon. From the balcony, Artemius looked out over the city to the defensive walls that marked its limits. Below him, ringed by wall-walks crawling with members of the Guard-Royal, lay the gardens of the planetary governor. Even now, with half the citizenry dying of thirst, the rare trees and flowers were being watered by ranks of gardeners.

Beyond the gardens spread the spacious properties of the city’s rich. Another wall stood between these and the lesser districts. At the outer edges of the city, nearest the perimeter wall, were the slums with which Artemius was already familiar.

‘Amasec?’ asked the old man, pouring a glass for himself. ‘It’s a wonderful local vintage.’

‘You requested my presence, inquisitor,’ said Artemius, declining the drink. ‘I’d appreciate it if you would get to the point. There are things to which I must attend.’

‘So again I ask: what exactly are these things, Interrogator-Chaplain? I’m most curious.’

‘It is no great secret, inquisitor,’ lied Artemius. ‘My Chapter is here in force. The Pyrus Reach faces a dire crisis. Your own Inquisitor Santos brought our attention to the fact. I’m sure you knew that.’

‘A predictably evasive answer, and typically unimaginative, Interrogator-Chaplain. You know I refer specifically to Cordassa. What business do the Dark Angels have here, on this world? Answer the question.’

Artemius could feel the inquisitor’s words, his tone, his raw will, all working to draw the truth from his lips. But such tricks were for the masses; they could hardly be expected to work on an Interrogator-Chaplain.

A brightly coloured bird fluttered up from the gardens, over the palace wall and away, its shadow dancing across the shining white domes of the city’s rooftops.

‘We came to assess the situation here, and perhaps to offer assistance to the local forces, should I deem it appropriate. There’s little more to it than that.’

‘A disappointing half-truth at best, Interrogator-Chaplain. When have the Dark Angels ever descended without some greater purpose? Be honest with me, and I may be able to offer valuable assistance.’

‘We waste each other’s time, inquisitor,’ said Artemius. ‘You have asked your question. That the Dark Angels serve the Emperor’s Divine Will should be sufficient. We will brook no interference, whatever the source. Now, if you’ll excuse me…’

Artemius turned from the view and stepped back into the apartment.

‘Why is it,’ asked the inquisitor as he followed, clearly fighting to remain calm, ‘that the Dark Angels are ever eager to avoid the company of the Inquisition? A question often asked in certain circles.’

Ah, this one cuts to the heart of things. How far will he press me?

‘Aimless speculation hardly befits the Ordo Malleus,’ said Artemius, turning to face the old man. ‘You have far weightier matters to occupy you, I’m quite sure.’

‘You presume to lecture me? Live another hundred years before you even consider it. Where the Inquisition appears, the Dark Angels swiftly depart. Is it not so? And here you are, practically running from my apartment, unwilling to answer the simplest of questions.’

‘Then I shall ask you a question, inquisitor,’ said Artemius. ‘I noticed the Ordo Malleus battle cruiser, the Spear Excelsis, hanging in high orbit with the Imperial Fleet. I assume you command the ship. Do you intend to authorise Sanction Extremis? With little of Cordassa held by Imperial forces, I wonder that you have held off even this long.’

Inquisitor Heiron walked around his desk, sat down and laced his fingers. ‘The Inquisition does not take such matters lightly. My assessment is ongoing. If these people are to die, it shall be because our options have run out. Their sacrifice will preserve the purity of the Imperium. But you merely seek to deflect my question. Perhaps you feel Exterminatus is unjustified? Should I simply concede this world to Chaos?’

He dares question my loyalty? My fervour?

‘Have a care, inquisitor,’ said Artemius. ‘Few, if any, serve the Golden Throne as fervently as the Dark Angels. We are ready to die whenever it serves His Divine Will. Never doubt it. Never question it. And never again offend me with accusations of leniency where traitor scum are concerned.’

Inquisitor Heiron raised a placatory hand.

‘My apologies, Interrogator-Chaplain. The Dark Angels are famously zealous. Of that, I’m well aware. But the very fact arouses my interest. Behind the greatest zeal, do we not often hide our secret shame?’

So, we have it at last. No secret is forever. This bloodhound has picked up the scent. But how much does the Ordo Malleus know?

‘Secret shame? Do you wish to confess something, inquisitor?’ said Artemius. ‘I am ready to hear your sins if it shall help you achieve His forgiveness. Perhaps I can suggest a suitable penance.’ Artemius stepped towards the apartment door.

‘I wish to formally request your aid, Interrogator-Chaplain,’ continued Inquisitor Heiron. ‘There is much the Dark Angels could do for the Imperial cause. Will you not place yourself at my service, knowing that I too serve His Divine Will with every breath?’

‘I do not doubt your loyalty, Inquisitor Heiron. But ours will be a short stay. You may petition my Chapter if you wish a force placed at your disposal, but the Lord Militant will have sprung his trap long before you have your answer. While I recognise your authority, I remind you of its limitations. Even you, inquisitor, must work within the legal framework of the Imperium. I understand the burden you bear. You have my

sympathies.’

‘How gracious,’ said Inquisitor Heiron bitterly. ’Since you will not answer truthfully, you may go. But my eyes will be on you every moment of your stay. My word on that. I will uncover your mandate one way or another.’

Without a backwards glance, Artemius squeezed through the door and marched off down the hallway, his footsteps echoing from the marble walls.

‘Dismissed,’ growled the inquisitor, rising from his chair.

The Dark Angel hadn’t closed the door behind him.

Artemius marched from the entrance of the governor’s palace, back into the pulverising heat and glare of the city. He passed ranks of liveried house guards sheltering in the shadows of massive sandstone arches. They snapped to attention, saluting smartly as the Interrogator-Chaplain walked by. Artemius was the first Astartes they had ever seen.

They look at me as if I were a xenos.

At almost three metres tall, Artemius towered over the Cordassan men. These were a short, hardy people with dark, almond-shaped eyes and hair as black as jet. Under this sun, Artemius didn’t wonder that their culture demanded the wearing of the urut – the hooded white robe that only non-civilians might shed in public. Before the coming of the Missionarius Galaxia, the punishment for stepping outdoors without the urut was death.

Artemius’s own hooded white robes – the robes of his chaplaincy – had brought him smiles and bows from the local people as he moved around the city. They assumed that the giant off-worlder was honouring their customs.

Exiting the main gates of the governor’s substantial grounds, Artemius was joined by two of his Chapter-brothers. Brother-Sergeants Syriel and Ogion fell into step on either side.

When Artemius glanced at them, he noted how dark Ogion’s skin and hair had become.

As dark as my own must be. The 13th implant is protecting our cells from the assault of this merciless sun.

Syriel, however, had been recruited from a desert world. He had always been dark, his skin contrasting with his gleaming teeth as he said, ‘We’ve commandeered a barracks and arranged a staging area close to the east gate as ordered, Interrogator-Chaplain.

There were no objections. Most of the city's garrisoned troops were posted to the front lines to bolster Imperial Guard regiments. The Praeto Scala struggles to keep order among the refugees. For the most part, the citizens hide indoors from the sun. Most are dying of thirst and plague.'

'These people feel the breath of death on their necks, brothers,' said Artemius. 'The Cordassan Guard are stolid and capable fighters from all accounts. I fear the Lord Militant Commander has made a grave error in baiting his trap with Cordassa. Are the Rhinos ready?'

'The Rhinos are fuelled and ready, brother-chaplain,' replied Syriel.

'Ogion?'

The brother-sergeant answered in his distinctive gravelly tones. 'The acting-commander of the surviving guard regiments is Colonel Rhamis ut-Halarr, 3rd Cordassan Grenadiers, First Company. A local man. Both he and Commissar Klauvas Brantine returned from the front lines yesterday. They are preparing the city for an extended siege. They expect the front lines to break any day.'

'That gives us very little time,' said Artemius.

'Both were most eager to make your acquaintance, Interrogator-Chaplain. The colonel has invited you to Command HQ. He wishes to share intelligence in return for our aid.'

'Will he remain so willing, I wonder, when I'm forced to deny him our direct assistance? Very well. Brother-Sergeant Syriel, you may return to oversee final preparations. We move out upon my arrival at the staging area. Have both squads ready.'

'Yes, brother,' replied Syriel with a short bow. He turned down a branching main street and double-timed it back to the barracks, untroubled by the heat.

As Artemius turned to continue, he noticed movement from the corner of his eye and spun. In the shadows, dozens of small figures leapt with fright, scattering to the corners of the surrounding buildings. From their partial cover, the children of Scala peered out at the two giant off-worlders.

The children were dishevelled, dressed in tattered urut more dirt-brown than white. Each was thin to the point of malnourishment.

'Street children so far from the slums?' said Artemius.

'With respect, brother,' replied Ogion, 'these children are of the noble families. Most

of the slum children perished from plague months ago. Wealth has merely delayed the inevitable here. These children will soon share the fate of the poor.'

Artemius felt a grain of pity taking root within him.

The moment he recognised it, he crushed it to nothing.

Weak is he who dwells with sorrow on the injustices of the universe. Emperor, guard me from the pitfalls of compassion.

'In death,' he said, 'the shades of rich and poor are equal. Fortunate are we who die in the glory of battle, in the righteous service of the Golden Throne. Only in such service may we rise to His side.'

Ogion bowed. 'As always, brother, your words inspire.' The two Dark Angels turned towards Command HQ. 'We are blessed indeed to serve under your command.'

Small feet stepped tentatively from the shadows. The crowd of children shuffled forwards, eager to keep the strange newcomers in view. None, however, had the energy to keep pace with the Space Marines.

One or two had noticed the shining Imperial eagle on Ogion's breastplate. They began to sing the Hymn of Allegiance Imperius. Soon all the children had joined in, straining their dry throats to be heard. But the Dark Angels were quickly out of sight and the rasped song fell dead in the hot, still air.

The map-room, deep within the bowels of Command HQ, was even cooler than the inquisitor's apartment. Three figures stood in the darkness surrounding a broad table, their faces transformed into eerie masks by the green glow of the map-screen that comprised its surface. Busy cogitators sat against the black stone walls, their myriad lights winking inscrutably. Much of this technology was centuries old.

Brother-Techmarine Ulvo would be fascinated.

'As you can see, Interrogator-Chaplain,' said a stout, high-ranking Cordassan, 'Scala finds itself effectively isolated from other pockets of resistance. We've only lasted this long because of the spaceport. Scala was built on the equator to facilitate easier launches. It's the only such city on the whole of Cordassa.'

This was Colonel Rhamis ut-Halarr, ranking officer of the Cordassan Guard. The map-screen had turned his smart brown uniform to a sickly green and robbed his fine golden epaulets of their grand dignity. But the man himself stood looking up at Artemius with fine military bearing.

To the colonel's right stood a taller, thinner man. An off-worlder. His eyes studied the map from under the peak of a distinctive cap. An augmetic hand tapped idly on the tabletop as he considered tactical data scrolling across the display. This was Commissar Klauvas Brantine. He cleared his throat and said, 'Would that you had joined us sooner, Interrogator-Chaplain. I mean no offence, but the Cordassan Guard could have used the help of the Astartes long before now.'

Artemius ignored the comment. To the Cordassan colonel he said, 'Our objectives in coming here are, of course, confidential. I cannot enlighten you. But it should suffice that we act for the good of the Imperium. Our actions here will strike at the heart of those who ravage this world. Perhaps you may take some comfort in that.'

Colonel ut-Halarr nodded and said, 'May the Emperor hear my prayers that you will make them suffer, Interrogator-Chaplain. I've seen my people turned into savage madmen by these cults. However, without even vague details of your mission, I can hardly offer relevant assistance.'

'My Dark Angels require no assistance as such, but I seek information.' Artemius tapped a fingertip on the map-screen. 'This river,' he said, 'the Immen. This is the cause of your internal troubles? The unrest in the slums?'

'Indeed,' replied the colonel. 'The river provides the city's only source of water during the dry season. Deep wells throughout the city tap its life-giving supply. It is regarded as a holy river by many.'

'The inquisitor and the local Missionaria tolerate such beliefs?'

Commissar Brantine spoke. 'The worship of the river is regarded as benign. The Ecclesiarchy have deemed it tolerable during the changeover to Imperial rule.'

'Changeover?'

'Cordassa was only rediscovered by an explorator fleet about two hundred years ago,' continued Commissar Brantine. 'Rather than instigate a civil war, the Adeptus Terra decreed that Cordassa's return to the Imperial fold should be a more gradual process. Hence the election of popular local men as interim governors.'

Artemius raised an eyebrow. Such patient consideration was rare in the workings of the Imperium. Out here in the Halo Zone, however, where Imperial presence was by nature thin, there was wisdom in such methods.

'And now the river is taking lives, rather than sustaining them?'

'Indeed,' said the colonel. 'The symptoms of the plague slowly materialise over the

course of a standard week. Weeping sores, pustules containing fat white larvae, eventual muscular necrosis – not something to witness before a repast. Thousands were infected before we realised there was a problem.'

'The local Missionaria alerted us to the first cases,' added the commissar. 'Now the city's wells and waterways are covered with razorwire, as you've seen. Drinking the water of the river is banned by Imperial edict. The Praeto Scala run constant patrols, but they're woefully undermanned. Punishment by death hasn't stopped the truly desperate. Your men assisted the praetos shortly after your arrival, yes? Against the Children of the Merciful Lord?'

Artemius nodded. 'I was told the cult were so named.'

'Heretic dogs,' spat the colonel. 'With all their proclamations of immunity to the plague, it's no wonder our civilians are flocking to join them. They recruit the thirsty and the desperate. They organise assaults on praeto patrols. They spread their heresy all over the city.'

'Are they immune?' asked Artemius.

'That's the damnedest thing about it. We've autopsied hundreds of them, but to no avail. It's nothing biological.'

'But they bear a mark,' said Artemius. 'An unseemly glyph of some sort? A brand, perhaps?'

'Yes,' said the colonel. 'All who enter the cult bear it.'

'Describe it to me.'

'It is a brand, burned into the flesh of the chest, shoulder or buttock; a circle pierced by arrow-headed spokes that radiate from a central hub. Merely gazing upon it makes one nauseous.'

'I don't wonder that the mark sickens you,' said Artemius. 'Your eyes have beheld the foulest of sigils, the most accursed mark of the unclean. It is the Star of Chaos – the antithesis of all for which the Imperium stands.'

'By the Emperor,' growled Commissar Brantine. 'The Children of the Merciful Lord are daemon worshippers?'

'They have bought their immunity,' said Artemius, 'at the price of their immortal souls. The servants of Chaos are masters of exacerbation. It is all too easy to convert the desperate. The source of the river – tell me of it.'

‘The waters fall from the Dhargian Plateau in the north-east, down into the city of Marakross,’ replied Commissar Brantine. He pointed to an area on the map to the north-east of Scala.

‘Marakross…’ said Artemius.

It is as you said it would be, brother-codicier.

‘These maps are recent, sent to us from orbit by Battlefleet Gorgorus,’ said Colonel ut-Halarr. ‘As you can see, Marakross is rather unique – the city is built around a man-made lake at the base of a massive arch dam. The dam is set into a hanging valley, a gouge in the edge of the plateau.’

‘Is the city not in a most precarious position? Surely one could wipe out the occupying force by destroying the dam.’

‘Certainly, but the dam is a vast structure and built to endure incredible pressure. The Cordassan Guard have nothing that might even crack it. Besides, we’d have to retake the city just to get close enough. Cordassa has a history of war, Interrogator-Chaplain. Our cities are built to last. Marakross stands as a quintessential example of this.’

Artemius studied the orbital pict. Marakross was indeed impressive for both its defensive strengths and its engineering. The city nestled in the crook of a great curving escarpment. Tall cliffs walled the city on two sides. At its rear, the towering structure of the dam stretched to the full height of the plateau. The forward face of the city was a vast defensive wall not dissimilar to Scala’s own. The River Immen flowed from outlets in the dam, through the city’s canals, and out through a number of watergates.

‘How high is the plateau?’ asked Artemius.

It was the commissar who answered. ‘Those cliffs rise almost two kilometres from the plains.’

‘You’ve conducted aerial assaults?’

‘Initially, yes. We don’t have the resources now. Everything is tied up at the front line. We’re down to ground units for the most part. Besides, if you look closely, you’ll see that the heretics have shored up the defences since they took possession. Heavy-bolters, las-cannons, anti-air batteries – weapons salvaged from all over the planet. For all their madness, these dogs are well organised.’

It is no mere heretic behind the occupation of Marakross. Corvus, so far your foresight

has been uncanny. But I wonder, were there things you did not disclose?

‘So the dam is no weak point. Did you not request an orbital strike on the city itself?’

‘Not at first,’ replied the colonel. ‘We’d hoped to take Marakross intact. With our borders hard-pressed and the plague ripping through our regiments, that quickly became infeasible. When we did request a tactical strike, the Imperial fleet denied us. They didn’t deign to justify their refusal.’

The influence of Inquisitor Heiron at work. What does he seek in Marakross? He could end the plague with a single stroke.

‘Your water is being tainted by the powers of Chaos,’ said Artemius. ‘Even now, they sit secure in Marakross, gloating prematurely over their victory on this world. With the paltry water shipments you’re receiving from Battlefleet Gorgorus, you’ll be hard pressed to last out the coming siege. If the capital falls, the spaceport falls. If the spaceport falls, this planet is lost.’

Artemius turned his eyes to the commissar and said, ‘With the Inquisition in primary authority here, you know exactly what that will mean. It is fortunate my own objectives lie in Marakross.’ Artemius faced the Cordassan colonel. ‘It may be that the Dark Angels will end your plague in the course of our own business.’

Colonel ut-Halarr bowed before the massive Space Marine and said, ‘If there is anything you need, simply name it and I will try to provide.’

The man’s eyes were filled with hope.

Damn your hope, Guardsman. If it is the Emperor’s Will, ending your plague will be a byproduct of my success. It will not distract me from the hunt.

‘You can do two things,’ said Artemius. ‘Two things only. First, I want all maps and information relevant to Marakross copied to a data-slate and given to me at once.’

Colonel ut-Halarr nodded his assent.

‘And the second?’ asked Commissar Brantine.

Artemius scowled.

‘Keep that infernal inquisitor out of my way.’

For almost a day, two Rhino personnel carriers tore across the hard, dusty surface of the Alhaal Plains following the course of the Immen upriver. They passed the

carcasses of great gastropods – indigenous land molluscs with shells as big as houses that had died of thirst rather than drink from the deadly tainted water running nearby.

For a long time, the only plants visible were the hardy dry-grasses and thorn bushes that broke the expanse of baked earth. Everything close to the river, plant and animal, was dead. The silvery, bloated corpses of long-necked amphibians littered the riverbanks, stinking in the heat.

In the rear of one juddering transport, Artemius studied his data-slate, searching for weaknesses in the Marakrossian defensive wall. It was futile to consider the outflow pipes and watergates – the pressure of the water made such an entry impossible. Likewise, scaling the cliffs; the traitor armaments were well placed. Attackers climbing the cliff-faces would be picked off with ease. The defences bore all the hallmarks of a veteran commander.

A broad rockcrete highway connected Marakross with towns and cities across the continent, but this was extensively mined.

Instead, Artemius had decided to lead his forces through the thick platewood forest that dominated both banks of the Immen as it cut through the valley.

As if gaining entry didn't constitute enough of a problem, Artemius had yet to consider the untimely disappearance of Inquisitor Heiron. Moments prior to the Dark Angels' departure from Scala's east gate, a messenger from Commissar Brantine had informed Artemius that the inquisitor and his retinue had absconded from the planetary capital. The inquisitor's distinctive Chimera transport was last seen rolling out of the city's south gate and turning east.

So, the inquisitor had given himself a head-start, though what he hoped to gain by it remained a mystery.

How did the old crow know we made for Marakross? The colonel and the commissar would not have betrayed my confidence.

'Interrogator-Chaplain,' said Brother Balthur as he slowed the Rhino, 'we're coming up on the forest.'

'Very well,' said Artemius. He opened a vox-channel to his men in both Rhinos and said, 'Dark Angels, prepare to debark. From here, we travel on foot.'

The sun sank at the Dark Angels' backs, casting its orange glow across the land, throwing out the last of its rays before night came to leech the heat from the ground. Artemius's small force – two tactical squads, each of nine Marines from the sixth company, plus Brother-Apothecary Tarros – moved through the forest. In the sky

above, the stars winked on like lights, and Cordassa's egg-shaped moon, ahl-Goluss, began its journey across the heavens.

Artemius could see none of this, however, as the wide circular chloroplates of the trees overlapped each other to form an impenetrable canopy.

The Dark Angels moved swiftly, marching between the thick white boles, their genetically enhanced eyesight attuned to the slightest movement in the deep shadows ahead.

Hours passed, with only the sound of booted feet marching on hard ground.

Then, at the head of the column, Artemius suddenly halted. Between the trunks ahead sat confirmation of his grim expectations. In a small clearing, shrouded in the darkness, unwilling to make a fire that might give their position away to the enemy, Inquisitor Heiron waited with his bizarre retinue.

Artemius motioned for his Space Marines to ring the interlopers and close on them from behind. But before any of the Dark Angels had moved from cover, a familiar voice called out: 'Don't bother trying to take us unawares, Interrogator-Chaplain. It's about time you and your men showed up. My patience has its limits.'

Damn the man's arrogance. His attention may be unavoidable, but it complicates my mission beyond tolerance.

Artemius walked forward into the clearing.

'Should we risk a little light?' asked Inquisitor Heiron.

'Not on my account, inquisitor,' replied Artemius. 'I can see you and your people well enough, would that I could not. What in the Emperor's name do you think you are doing out here?'

'You know full well, Astartes, that we have been waiting for you. I've sought entry into Marakross for quite some time. It never occurred to me to request a Space Marine force for the purpose. And here you've fallen right into my lap. The Emperor smiles upon me. But I forget my manners – introductions are in order.'

Artemius growled at the seated inquisitor.

Heiron, who had looked so frail to Artemius back in his palatial apartment, had donned black power armour bearing the Inquisitorial 'I'. The workmanship was exquisite. Even in the shadows, Artemius could see intricate gold filigree describing holy symbols and scripture across the suit's massive pauldrons. Inquisitorial rosettes and purity seals

hung from Heiron's breastplate. In one hand, he held an ornate laspistol; a power sword hung from a scabbard at his waist.

'I have neither the time nor the inclination, inquisitor,' said Artemius.

'Nevertheless,' said the inquisitor, undaunted. He gestured to a large pale figure on his far left and said, 'Biggest first, I think. This is Klegg 66.'

The man was a brute, as big as any Astartes, though his raw bulk was less refined. Size aside, this was no ordinary man. His head was enclosed in a pacifier helm – a complex mask of titanium and plastic tubing. Through the tubes coursed hormones, stimulants and suppressants. His fingers had been replaced with thick adamantine claws terminating in razor-sharp points. This living puppet was the inquisitor's notorious arco-flagellant.

To the left of the giant slave sat a hooded man, cloaked in the robes of the Adeptus Mechanicus. 'Tech-Adept Ossio,' said the inquisitor, 'of the Machine Cult.'

Ossio's unblinking eye-lenses stared at Artemius over the apparatus of a complicated rebreather. From the tech-adept's back rose powerful twin mechadentrites – the invaluable mechanical appendages so beloved of the servants of the Machine God.

On the inquisitor's right sat a scar-faced veteran of the Imperial Guard. This man was almost as old as the inquisitor himself, though far more robust. 'Major-General Adaemus Goodwin,' said Heiron.

The old veteran stood and bowed formally to the Space Marine Chaplain and said, 'Formerly of the 112th Cadian regiment. I've fought alongside the Dark Angels before, Interrogator-Chaplain. I'll be honoured to do so again.'

'I've heard of you, major-general,' replied Artemius. 'Your solid reputation precedes you. But I'm afraid you've been misled. We've no intention of fighting alongside anyone during this operation. The inquisitor makes a grave error if he thinks I've come to facilitate his work.'

The major-general glanced at the inquisitor. Heiron waved off the comment and proceeded with his final introduction.

'This,' he said with evident pride as he indicated a thin woman of middle years in robes of dark purple, 'is Orphia LeGrange of the Adeptus Astropathica.'

The woman sat with her back to a tree trunk, playing with an Imperial tarot deck, seemingly uninterested in the Interrogator-Chaplain.

This is how he knew our destination. She must have plucked the information from the mind of the commissar or the Cordassan colonel.

The psyker LeGrange radiated power. Artemius could feel the faint touch of her mind brushing against his psychic defences, looking for chinks in his mental armour. Looking for the things that had brought him here.

His thoughts turned to his brother Space Marines, unprotected from such intrusions. Though withholding the truth from his brothers sat most unwell with Artemius, the presence of Heiron's psyker only highlighted the necessity for secrecy.

Secrets are the progenitors of all lies. But if these brothers from Sixth Company knew of our quarry, this psyker would have it from them. The shame of our Chapter would be known throughout the Imperium.

No. I have watched brothers fight and die for causes they could not comprehend. The honour of the Dark Angels must be served and the stain removed forever.

Artemius raised his bolt pistol, aiming at the psyker, and said, 'Probe my head and we shall see what the inside of yours looks like. Do you understand?'

'Come now, Interrogator-Chaplain' said the inquisitor, rising slowly. 'There's no need for that. Besides,' he continued with a grin, 'I don't think you want to shoot the one person who can get us inside. Do you?'

It didn't take long.

Artemius had little choice. From the cover of the tree line, shrouded in midnight shadows, he surveyed the great perimeter wall of Marakross and knew Heiron's words for truth: the only weakpoint in the city's defences lay in the minds of the defenders themselves.

That was the territory of Orphia LeGrange.

Silvery moonlight lit the scene before him. From the large water gate in the middle of the city wall, the Immen issued forth. Tonnes of water roared and crashed in great spumes at the start of a journey that ran all the way back to the planetary capital and beyond. It seemed inconceivable that, in the presence of all this water, the people of Scala lay dying of thirst. The taint was invisible; the water appeared to promise life itself. But this foaming torrent brought only death.

Death was written all over the curtain wall, too. Hundreds of the city's civilian inhabitants had been hung from high battlements on lengths of rusting chain. Many of the sun-shrivelled corpses were missing heads or limbs. Their pierced bodies had

spilled blood down the height of the wall, streaking the smooth white stone, staining it red-brown.

In that same blood, hideous glyphs had been daubed at the base – a circle pierced by arrow-headed spokes radiating from a central hub.

The Star of Chaos.

There were other markings, most unfamiliar to Artemius, though all were equally offensive in their obvious dedication to the dark gods of the warp. One among them caught his eye, repeated over and over along the broad surface – three circles in triangular formation linked by two angled strokes, all set against a greater circle.

Worshippers of Nurgle – master of disease and bodily corruption. The traitor has allied himself with the God of Decay.

‘Well?’ whispered Inquisitor Heiron from behind Artemius. ‘Do you agree? Only by working together may we breach the city.’

Artemius turned his gaze to the high battlements. Gun towers adorned the crest of the wall, equipped with heavy bolters. Searchlights swept the broad killing ground between the tree line and the main gate.

No chance of rushing that gate without taking heavy casualties. Even then, those doors are solid. Without tripping the mechanism from inside, no one is getting through. How many melta bombs would it take to burn a hole in plasteel that thick? And we have none.

Not for the first time, Artemius lamented the departure of the Dark Angels’ battleship The Relentless from orbit. Lance batteries would have breached the wall without difficulty.

There was nothing for it. No other way.

The inquisitor’s plan was sound, Emperor damn him.

Massi ut-Houda was sitting in the lamp-lit gloom of his gun tower, fingering a pictograph of his dead wife, when he heard his com unit crackle and hiss.

‘Open the gate, quickly!’ ordered a voice through the static. ‘All wall-gunners to stand down.’

‘On whose orders?’ asked another on the same channel.

‘On the Master’s, fool. Can’t you see him approaching the gate?’

‘The Master? Truly?’ said ut-Houda excitedly.

He longed to meet the Merciful Lord in person. Ut-Houda, born and raised in Marakross, had always suffered a less-than-solid immune system. He’d contracted plague earlier than most. As the disease ate away at the flesh of his face, his young wife had abandoned him. A family friend had come to him with talk of a man who could offer salvation.

One need only follow the teachings of the Merciful Lord to be saved from death. Ut-Houda, terrified of his own mortality, had followed his friend’s instructions and pledged his soul to the God of Rot, begging for clemency. After all, what was a soul worth? A life could be felt and lived, but a soul was such an intangible thing.

His face had become bloated and strange, so disgusting that he’d smashed every mirror in his hab. But while countless others had died moaning and wailing in pools of their own filth, ut-Houda had lived on. Itchy, scratchy, sticky and smelly, but very much alive.

He bore one regret: when the cult rose up to take Marakross for themselves, ut-Houda, driven by feelings of rage and shame, had slaughtered his wife and her family.

He’d skinned them, boiled them and shared their flesh with the others.

He rose from his chair and limped to his post. From beside the mounted heavy bolter, he peered down towards the base of the wall. In the black of night, the searchlights had picked out two figures moving slowly across the killing ground. One, a dark giant whose armour bore the accursed eagle of the false Emperor, was bent over, moving as if wounded.

‘Death to the enemies of great Nurgle,’ spat ut-Houda, his heart filled with contempt.

The figure at the rear held a whirring chainblade at his captive’s back, pushing him forward with his other hand. He was everything ut-Houda had imagined him to be. This was the Merciful Lord in all his splendour. How much taller he stood than the Imperial slave. How glorious he looked, his black armour shining in the searchlights. Ut-Houda felt his lord’s uplifting presence wash over him from below.

‘Open the gates, my faithful,’ said a voice over the comm. ‘I have captured a son of the false Emperor.’ It was the voice from ut-Houda’s dreams. At last, the disfigured cultist would meet the saviour whose teachings had spared him a painful, miserable death. ‘Open the gates at once,’ came the glorious voice once more. ‘Tonight, we share in the

desecration and consumption of enemy flesh.’

Along nearby sections of the wall, cultists were abandoning their posts to rush to the city gates, eager to greet their saviour. Ut-Houda turned and hobbled as fast as he could down the tower stairs shouting, ‘Open the gates! Open the gates!’

Artemius watched intently from the tree line as Brother-Sergeant Syriel and Brother Phaeton acted out their parts. The watching Dark Angels tensed, ready to break cover and rush the gates early should the psyker’s illusion fail.

Beside Artemius, Inquisitor Heiron looked down at Orphia LeGrange with obvious concern. Her veins were bulging with the effort of deceiving a hundred pairs of eyes. Thin rivulets of blood trickled from her nose and ears. Just a little longer. It helped that the cultists were so eager to believe the illusion. If Orphia could just get the two Space Marines inside….

Artemius raised a hand to the inquisitor’s armoured shoulder. ‘They’re in,’ he whispered.

All else rested with two brave Dark Angels.

The moment the Merciful Lord entered behind the prisoner, the assembled cultists fell to their knees, pressing their scabbed foreheads to the ground. Though each longed to gaze at the face of their lord, none dared until bidden.

And yet, something wasn’t right.

As ut-Houda held himself prostrate, he felt something change – something elusive. He wasn’t sure when, but all sense of a sacred presence had disappeared. He raised his wretched face from the rockcrete, no longer feeling so awed. His eyes met the broad barrel of a boltgun.

‘I am protected,’ he said to the massive Imperial slave standing over him. ‘The Merciful Lord has granted me immortality.’

‘Let’s put that to the test,’ rumbled Brother-Sergeant Syriel.

Death erupted all around.

‘That’s it,’ barked Artemius on all channels. ‘Forward, my brothers!’

Dark Angels exploded from the tree line, charging towards the open gate. Artemius’s feet pounded on the hard-baked earth as he raced forward. The psyker’s manipulation had only stretched to the area immediately around the city gate. Now that gunshots

had been fired, it wouldn't be long until the Traitor hordes began filling the streets. So be it; the Space Marines preferred a pitched battle. Stealth was for scouts and assassins. With hours of night time remaining, the Astartes held the advantage. Their gene-boosted vision, augmented by helmet-visor displays, rendered the midnight streets in daytime clarity.

As the last of the Dark Angels passed the walls, Artemius turned to order the gate locked. Leaving the inquisitor outside would be the smoothest way to ensure his non-interference. But, as he turned, he saw the inquisitor step through the gates followed closely by his people. The exhausted psyker LeGrange was draped over the back of Major-General Goodwin.

Artemius cursed.

'Most dramatic,' said the inquisitor as he surveyed the pile of cultist corpses left by Syriel and Phaeton. 'Mutation appears to be rampant among members of the cult.' The inquisitor kicked a headless corpse from his path – its seven-fingered hand gripped an old pictograph of a smiling woman. 'What do you propose, Interrogator-Chaplain, now that we are finally inside?'

The Dark Angels moved to positions of cover. Brother-Sergeant Ogion sealed the gates, destroying the control mechanism. None in, none out.

'I propose, inquisitor,' said Artemius, 'that we separate. Seek your objective without my interference, and I will seek mine. You have my gratitude for the assistance of your psyker.'

'Not a chance,' said Inquisitor Heiron, grinning at the absurdity of the suggestion. 'Your presence is the very reason I dared finally breach these walls. A Space Marine escort is our only chance of survival in this place. I intend to stay very close indeed. I'm afraid you're stuck with us, Interrogator-Chaplain. Unless you wish to commit treason with the murder of faithful Imperial servants.'

Don't tempt me, Heiron. Hounding me invites death among your people. Should any uncover my purpose here, a bolt-shell will find them. The Inquisition will never have proof of its suspicions.

Still slung over the back of the veteran Guardsman, the psyker LeGrange stirred and said, 'On the far side of the city, I sense a presence dark and sick and terrible.'

That was all Artemius needed.

The Dark Angels moved off at speed.

It is as you said, Corvus. Here at last, we have caught up with him. The traitor will know retribution, at last.

Alarms echoed through the ruined streets as the Dark Angels moved from cover to cover, scouring the darkness for hints of movement.

Many of the buildings were pocked from the spray of autocannons. No doubt the Praeto Marakross had fought bravely, but the traitor leader boasted almost ten millennia of experience in war. It couldn't have been a fair fight.

On the main streets, many of the corner buildings stood half demolished. Their crumbling facades testified to the ferocity of the conflict. Some were burned out, but the smoke had ceased rising long ago.

Artemius knew the enemy would have prioritised the taking of all praeto precinct buildings. If even one of those precincts was receiving surveillance pict-feeds, the Dark Angels were being watched even now.

A flash lit the streets behind the Dark Angels, followed by the deafening bark of a krak-grenade. Brothers Thracius and Marhod had run trip-lines between a number of buildings as their brothers pressed on. The cultist horde had picked up their trail and quickly learned how unwise it was to try taking Dark Angels from behind.

Artemius glanced backwards. Despite the pace, the Inquisitorial team was still there, running with great effort at the back of the column. Major-General Goodwin had passed the exhausted female psyker to the massive Klegg 66, but the monster's razored hands had already opened a number of small cuts on her back as he ran.

Artemius sighed and opened a channel to Brother-Sergeant Syriel. 'Assign a brother to carry the inquisitor's psyker before she bleeds to death on the arco-flagellant's back.'

'Immediately, Interrogator-Chaplain.'

Brother Oltos broke ranks and jogged back to the rear of the column. He lifted LeGrange from Klegg 66's wide shoulders, placed her across his own, and resumed his run.

Like any densely packed city, Marakross presented a maze of streets to confound the newcomers. Corners and alleyways were littered with the bones of murdered civilians. Banners of tattered human flesh, painted with sickening sigils, hung limp in the still night air. At street level, many of the walls had been decorated in blood.

The air was thick with flies and a dead-meat stench.

Having memorised the orbital pict-files from his data-slate, Artemius led his men, and by default the inquisitor's retinue, unerringly towards the far side of the city. From this distance, the crashing of the falls could be heard as an unending white noise that drew them on.

Crossing the city's bridges and wide intersections presented the greatest problem. Artemius's auspex showed cultists occupying buildings with good positioning over the streets below.

Snipers on the upper floors and roofs. They'll have raided the precinct armouries.

At the first such crossing, Artemius ordered Syrius and Ogion to pick a single man from each of their squads. Then, he turned to the inquisitor and said, 'If we wish to cross these wide roads, we'll have to take out their watchmen. I want you and your people to dig in and stay hidden until my brothers have cleared the way.'

'That would be a damned waste,' replied Heiron. 'Both Goodwin and Ossio have augmetic eyes and are damned fine shots. Why not use snipers against snipers?'

'As far as I am concerned, inquisitor, this is entirely a Dark Angels operation. I'll not presume to issue orders to your people save to keep them out of our way. If you wish your men to draw enemy fire, I will not object. It would provide a convenient decoy, if nothing else. Are you so willing to sacrifice two of your men?'

The inquisitor paused.

'I thought not,' said Artemius. 'Let the Dark Angels deal with this. Besides, your people need to catch their breath.'

'Don't take us too lightly, Interrogator-Chaplain,' growled Heiron. 'You'll yet see what we're made of, I assure you.'

But Artemius was already turning to give orders to his Marines.

Brother Methandes wasn't built for stealth. He was large, even for an Astartes, but he moved slowly and surely up the stone stairs, mindful of traps and alarms that might give him away.

Twice he noticed thin wires strung across the stairwell and stepped cautiously over them before moving on. A lone streetlamp buzzed and flickered outside, throwing orange light through shattered windows. For a moment, Methandes's shadow was thrown onto the facing wall. Then the streetlight gave a final electrical death-croak, and blinked out.

He reached the top of the stairs and crossed to the only doorway on the landing. He peered into a wide room. Though the interior was utterly black, Methandes's superior vision picked out the sniper immediately. And more besides.

The man had scattered shards of broken glass around the doorway so that none could take his back unawares. This sniper was no civilian cultist; he was probably a traitor praeto.

Methandes crouched silently, waiting for the prearranged signal.

There!

The dark walls flashed bright white as a krak-grenade detonated in the middle of the intersection below.

The sniper reeled back from the window-ledge, blinded by the flash, hands held up to his eyes.

Methandes surged forward and plunged the saw-toothed blade of his close-combat knife deep into the back of the cultist. When the big Space Marine pulled the knife out, the sniper's torso was almost ripped in two.

Before the carcass had even struck the floor, Methandes had dropped his knife and raised his bolter. His hololithic visor-display zoomed in on the roof of the opposite building.

There, shaking his head, desperate to regain his sight, was another sniper. Methandes's bolter gave a single, angry bark, and the cultist's head exploded, leaving a dark, wet mist.

'West corner cleared. North corner cleared,' said Methandes into his comm.

'South corner cleared. East corner cleared,' crackled another voice.

'Good work,' voxed the Interrogator-Chaplain. 'Check your scanners. We have large mobs converging on this position. I want supporting fire from above. Frag-grenades at your discretion.'

'Yes, brother,' replied Methandes. He turned to retrieve his knife, sheathed it and checked the magazine in his bolter.

On the street below, a mob of thousands roared as it pressed towards the intersection. Ugly, twisted faces screamed and laughed in the glow of flaming brands. Madmen fired wild shots into the air, wasting ammunition in their excitement and lust for blood.

Some among the heretics carried tattered standards of human skin.

Methandes placed a booted foot on the windowsill, took aim, and said to himself, ‘They shall know His wrath. Lion, guide my bolts. Let me smite the enemy in His name.’

His bolter rained death from above.

Guided by the Interrogator-Chaplain and the maps on his data-slate, the Dark Angels pushed onwards through the city. They faced an enemy that outnumbered them thousands-to-one and, inevitably, there were casualties among their number.

Brothers Kyrris and Lanidei fell to suicidal cultists strapped with stolen meltabombs, but they did not sell their lives cheaply. Throwing themselves at the bombers, the brave Space Marines held them back. The detonations vapourised hundreds of cultists and cooked the selfless Astartes alive in the shells of their armour. Their sacrifice spared the Chapter a much heavier loss. The Space Marines turned and made the surviving heretics pay. Apothecary Tarros removed the progenoid glands of his dead brothers with great reverence. Artemius committed the two brave souls into the care of the Immortal Emperor.

‘None that die in his name die in vain,’ he told his Space Marines as they saluted their dead brothers. ‘Ogion, have the bodies concealed. When the battle is won, we will take them to be interred in the Tower of Angels.’

During a skirmish in a broad market square, Brother Oltos fell to concentrated lasfire as he covered the retreat of the inquisitor’s retinue. The Dark Angels took bloody and vicious revenge on those responsible. Even Heiron had difficulty stomaching the brutality of the response.

The psyker Legrange knelt weeping over the Space Marine’s body until the inquisitor gently pulled her away. Oltos had carried her on his back after her psychic efforts gained them entry.

Now he was gone.

But the Dark Angels could allow no grief to weigh them down as they pressed on. Instead, they opened their hearts and minds to a howling anger, and unleashed even greater fury on those who opposed them.

Inquisitor Heiron marvelled at their speed and savagery. His own people fought hard alongside the Astartes, but the only member of his retinue to even approach the lowest number of kills among the Dark Angels was the mindless Klegg 66.

The arco-flagellant threw himself into the deepest knots of mutated cultists at a single

word from Heiron's lips, unmindful of the cuts and bullet wounds that marked his pale flesh. His razor-sharp adamantine talons raked the gibbering hordes of the damned. Klegg 66 loosed no battle-roar – not a single word – as he hurled the broken bodies of his master's enemies high into the air.

As night gave way to the coming of day, the Astartes finally broke free from the maze of city streets. They had reached the falls of Marakross.

Artemius imagined he could smell his enemy on the air – a rancid, nauseating latrine stink. 'Inquisitor,' he called, beckoning the old man forward. Together, they crouched in the shadow of a burned-out warehouse. Artemius pointed, watching as the inquisitor gaped. There, reaching up to the sky, stood the vast white wall of the Marakrossian dam.

'Quite something,' said Artemius.

Inquisitor Heiron nodded wordlessly.

The great concave surface of the dam stretched all the way to the top of the escarpment, almost two kilometres tall. A third of the way up the wall, at a height of about seven hundred metres, outflow pipes disgorged tons of foaming white water that crashed to the man-made lake below with a ceaseless roar. A cool wet mist rose from the pounded surface of the lake and drifted across the rockcrete quayside.

Canals spread out from the water's edge, many blocked by closed flow-gates during the dry season. These would be opened at other times of the year to prevent the lake breaking its artificial banks. Warehouses and manufactories were abundant on the quayside, dominated on the north-west bank by the cyclopean bulk of the hydropower station, and on the south-east bank by a desecrated Imperial cathedral.

Artemius saw the inquisitor's face flush red with rage as he looked upon what the cultists had done to the Sacred House of the Emperor. The gold eagle had been torn from the stone face of the building. It lay on the ground, covered in mounds of human excrement about which buzzed clouds of fat black flies.

In its place there hung the twisted sigil of Chaos, wrought from human bones, bound together with bloodstained razorwire, adorned with sun-bleached skulls. From the cathedral's many spires swung the desiccated bodies of hundreds of sacrificed Marakrossi.

'We have come almost to the end of our journey,' said Artemius, 'and I must reiterate my earlier warning, inquisitor. It is imperative that you do not interfere in Dark Angel affairs.'

Before Heiron could respond, Orphia LeGrange spoke from nearby. ‘Lord,’ she said, ‘it is here, the dark and terrible presence.’ The woman looked pale. Her hands were shaking.

‘Will you not level with me now, Astartes?’ said Heiron to Artemius. The Interrogator-Chaplain’s expression was masked by his fearsome skull-helm, but the tension he radiated was palpable.

‘Something unnatural,’ whispered the female psyker, ‘cloaked in absolute evil.’ She gasped and turned her head in all directions, searching frantically. ‘He sees us even now!’

Heiron’s gauntleted hands took hold of LeGrange’s own as he said, ‘Go back among the Dark Angels. They will not let you fall.’

Artemius said nothing.

The psyker walked back down the line on unsteady legs.

‘She is not ready for this,’ said Heiron to himself. ‘The evil here is overwhelming her.’

‘You should take your own advice, inquisitor,’ said Artemius. ‘Stay among my Space Marines. Fight at their side. Your survival depends on it.’

Artemius saw the traitor’s plan: the hunted had laid a trap for the hunter. The traitor had chosen this site for their confrontation, knowing that the Dark Angels would be pressed back, right to the water’s edge. There was nowhere else to go. His auspex showed massed bio-signs converging on them from every part of the city. A full attack had been ordered now that daylight had robbed the Astartes of their night-vision advantage.

I alone must face the traitor. I alone can bring redemption to our Chapter. My brothers must guard my back. The inquisitor and his people must be kept busy with the mad horde.

It would be foolish to play the traitor’s game, to fight on the open quayside. Ammunition was running low; they weren’t carrying anywhere near enough for a sustained firefight against such numbers.

‘Brothers,’ voxed Artemius, ‘the slaves of Chaos are amassing at our backs. Move in twos, protect each other. Brother-Sergeants Syriel and Ogion, you have squad command. I want everyone in position on nearby rooftops and high balconies. Try to force the enemy into bottlenecks and utilise your grenades.’

‘Yes, Interrogator-Chaplain’ replied the brother-sergeants simultaneously.

‘I must conduct the business with which I have been charged. Cover me, brothers. Let no heretic dog slip through to take my back.’

The dark-green colossi bowed to their leader.

‘The Emperor is watching over us,’ continued Artemius. He felt righteous zeal wash over him as he spoke. ‘The Lion stalks beside us. His fangs shall pierce, his claws shall tear. You are those fangs. You are those claws. Let the Emperor’s wrath fill you. May every one of you be a storm of death descending on the enemy in His Name.’

‘In His name,’ came the group response.

‘Bless your weapons, brothers.’ Artemius turned to the inquisitor and said, ‘Take cover, inquisitor, for now the battle truly begins.’

Don’t make me kill you, Heiron. Don’t make it a battle of wills.

Behind him, even over the roar of the falls, Artemius could hear the constant screaming of the dying cultists, the sharp crack of grenades, and the ceaseless low barking of Space Marine bolters as his brothers punished the Chaos horde. But despite the great cacophony, his every sense was focused like a laser on the figure that threw open the double-doors of the desecrated Imperial cathedral and marched across the quayside towards him.

‘You’ve caught up with me at last, little brother,’ rumbled the figure. The words came, not from his jawless ruin of a face, but from vox-speakers sunk into corrupted power armour. Even through speakers, the voice was wet and sickly. ‘I only had to wait here on this planet for, oh, about a year.’

‘I almost had you on Tranteth V,’ replied Artemius. His stomach was knotted with all the hatred he carried for this blasphemous figure. ‘If you hadn’t bombed that bridge…’

They stood face to face in front of the cascading water.

Artemius was tall, but the traitor was even taller.

Borroleth the Corruptor. Borroleth the Fallen. Traitor Captain, servant of Nurgle the Unclean. Finally, it ends.

The sun peeked from the rim of the high cliffs, painting the figure before Artemius in disgusting detail. The Chaos Space Marine wore black ceramite covered with pustules and blisters as if, somehow, the hard surface were subject to the same diseases as his

rotting face.

Borroleth's shoulders and knees were adorned with leering daemonic faces carved from the bones of his victims. Some of those victims had been Artemius's brother Astartes.

A cape of tattered human skin hung from the monster's back – faces flensed from the dead and sewn together.

'My appearance pleases you,' laughed the Fallen.

I must try. It is my duty to try. If he can be made to repent, perhaps he will guide us to the others. Perhaps…

'Your appearance saddens me and sickens me,' said Artemius. 'You were once a chosen son of the Emperor Himself. You stood beside the Lion, the primarch. Your deeds shone in the annals of our Chapter. How could you have come to this? How could you have fallen so far?'

Again, that wet chuckle rendered toneless through the vox-speakers. 'You wish me to repent. I see those black pearls on your rosarius. How deeply you desire to add another. The desire consumes you. We are not so different. I too feel powerful desires.'

'What could such a wretched being desire but to return to the light of the Holy Emperor? Do you not wish to bask in his forgiveness? You can be redeemed, fallen one. I can offer you this.'

The Traitor Marine's brow creased in a scowl, bursting fat pustules that dotted his head. Pus ebbed slowly out and down over his rotting features.

'Forgiveness for what? For surviving? When Caliban was sundered, I was cast into the warp, there to die in the jaws of unspeakable things. But the Master of All Decay found me, saved me, and bestowed his great gifts upon me. While your pathetic false god gasps for every breath, kept barely alive by machines and sacrifices, the Lord of Rot has granted me immortality. Ten thousand years have I lived, and for ten thousand more shall I dedicate myself to the undoing of your precious Imperium! Even now, the Dark Angels couch their actions in lies, and yet you talk of light and redemption. Hypocrite! Your brothers die behind you, the truth kept from them. Your guilt gnaws at you, burning in your heart, eating you alive. You are sick of the charade, are you not? How long can Azrael and Ezekiel prolong this unworthy deceit?'

I must not let his words reach me. He merely seeks to undo my will. I shall not listen…

The stinking figure glanced over Artemius's shoulder, laughed again and said, 'Here

comes another who lives by lies. Here comes another filled with hypocrisy. Another pathetic dog lapping eagerly at the vomit of your crippled, incontinent false Emperor.'

Artemius heard several pairs of booted feet on the rockcrete. He knew without turning that the inquisitor and his people were approaching.

'So this is your quarry, Interrogator-Chaplain,' said Heiron.

'Welcome to our little family gathering,' rumbled Borroleth.

Behind the inquisitor, LeGrange was vomiting violently, unable to tolerate such proximity to the Chaos Marine's malign aura. Tech-Adept Ossio stood unable even to look upon the disgusting abomination.

'Family gathering?' said Inquisitor Heiron. He glanced at Artemius.

Artemius watched in disgust as the jawless Traitor tried to smile.

Time is up, inquisitor. I warned you not to get in my way. I have to take the traitor alive. All else is meaningless. You should have stayed with my brothers.

Artemius moved forward in a blur, his fist flashing out at the Traitor Space Marine's face. Borroleth caught the strike on a massive armoured forearm and countered, kicking Artemius hard in his plated abdomen. As Artemius was thrown backwards with the force of the blow, he lashed his foot out at the traitor's weapon, sending it clattering to the rockcrete before it skittered over the edge of the quayside and into the lake.

The traitor screamed with rage, a sound like grinding metal, at the loss of his ancient bolter. He moved towards Artemius, raising a booted foot to stomp on his skull-helm.

A las-blast caught the Fallen on the shoulder. At such close range, the blast punched right through the traitor's black ceramite pauldron to the diseased flesh below, sending him reeling backwards.

Artemius looked up. Heiron's laspistol hissed as it cooled.

Borroleth howled and spun, sprinting for the doors of the defiled church. On Heiron's order, the inquisitor's retinue gave chase.

'No!' barked Artemius. He leapt to his feet and sprinted after them, but as he began to close the distance, something huge exploded from the water, almost knocking him over.

Artemius leapt backwards and rolled to his feet, drawing his bolt pistol. He smacked a gauntlet to his chest, activating the power-conversion field of the sacred rosarius that hung from his neck.

There before him, writhing and squirming on the rockcrete quay, was a bloated abomination to rival even the horror of Borroleth the Fallen.

Its fat white body was sectioned like a great maggot over thirty metres long. Each fleshy segment was ringed with obscene, pink-lipped mouths from which poured stinking torrents of effluence. Rockcrete bubbled and hissed where the acrid brown liquid splashed the ground.

This, then, is the source of the Scalan plague?

Artemius tried to dash around it, desperate to prevent a dialogue between the inquisitor and the Fallen, but the creature vomited at him every time he moved.

Artemius fired his bolter into the fat flesh. Shells thundered into the soft body leaving holes as large as fists, but though high screams sounded from many of the mouths, the beast continued to writhe and vomit and block the Dark Angel from his prey.

No time to find another way around. Let us see how you handle this.

Artemius fired again and again into the creature’s body, this time grouping his shots, opening a wide, bloody hole in the pallid tissue. Gouts of blood splashed the ground, mixing with the brown excreta.

Artemius pulled a frag-grenade from his belt, tore out the pin and hurled it into the open wound.

Seeing this, the monstrosity began shifting its weight, writhing frantically, trying to roll towards Artemius with some vague plan of crushing him or catching him in the blast.

But the thing was too slow.

There was a muffled boom and a section in the middle of the beast exploded outwards.

Artemius threw himself down.

A foul brown mist descended, hissing where it touched his armour. But Artemius had no time to worry about that. The creature was still alive, or rather, it was now two creatures, each severed part squirming and screaming with a life of its own.

Artemius sprinted through the space he'd created in the massive body, too fast for the fiend to bring its jets of vomit to bear.

Within seconds he reached the double doors of the cathedral. He raced through.

Don't let it be too late.

The scene that lay before him stopped Artemius dead in his tracks.

Hot sunlight filtered through holes blasted in the high vaulted ceiling and through the shattered remains of intricate stained-glass windows. The remains of smashed wooden pews littered the stone floor. Dust motes sparkled and danced in the air.

Framed in the golden light, Inquisitor Mattius Heiron stood, breathing hard, with his humming power sword pressed to the neck of the Chaos Space Marine.

Borroleth the Fallen knelt only metres from Artemius. Blood poured in streams from great jagged rents in his ancient armour. Flesh had been cut from his cheeks and hung in raw, bloody flaps at his neck.

How did they…

Then, Artemius saw how.

Even now, the inquisitor's powerful arco-flagellant, Klegg 66, lay slowly dying, his life running in red streams from grievous wounds.

Ossio, the servant of the Machine God, had had his augmentations torn from his body in the battle. Parts both mechanical and biological lay where they had landed on the floor. He had been spread over quite an area.

Of the old veteran Guardsman, there was no immediate sign.

But the psyker LeGrange was there. She lay unmoving on her back, her eyes rolled up into her head, her skin discoloured where blood vessels had ruptured during her psychic assault on the traitor.

Artemius reached up and removed his skull-helm. He locked eyes with the inquisitor. There was no victory, no gloating, in the inquisitor's glare. Only bitterness, regret, hatred.

Hatred towards whom?

'So,' said Heiron through gritted teeth, 'the Inquisition achieves what the Dark Angels

could not. And it seems I hold all the cards at last, Interrogator-Chaplain. Would that we could have worked together. However, the book belongs with the Ordo Malleus. Explain to me now what business the Dark Angels have with such a thing?'

He thinks we came for a book?

'What book?' asked Artemius.

'You still play games? It belongs with the Inquisition, you must see that. Molchoi's Liber Nefestum is of great value to the forces of Chaos. My order will turn that very power against them for the glory of the Golden Throne.'

There came again that toneless laugh from one remaining undamaged vox-speaker on the traitor's chest. 'He thinks you came for the book,' gurgled Borroleth. 'Let me live, inquisitor, and I will give you the book and much more besides. I will tell you of the Dark Angels. You think them heretics? Ah, let me share their deepest secrets.'

So, Brother Corvus, now comes the moment of choice about which you would not instruct me. I must choose which path to take. Our secret has brought me to this. Who shall it be: the traitor or the old fool?

'And just how would you know the deepest secrets of the Dark Angels, treacherous dog?' asked Heiron.

The question was never answered.

The deep crack of a gunshot echoed off the walls of the desecrated sanctuary.

A single fat, brass shell-casing rang like a tiny bell as it struck the stone floor.

Thick blood and gore spattered Inquisitor Heiron's face. He gasped and tossed his head, unable to see, trying to shake the blood from his eyes.

Where Borroleth's head had been, only a stump of flesh and exposed spine remained. The Chaos Space Marine fell lifelessly forward.

Forgive me, brothers. I could not kill the inquisitor. Detest him as I may, I cannot stain our honour further with such a death.

So it ended – years of hunting, years of obsession. Borroleth the Corruptor, Fallen One and Traitor Captain, was no more.

Artemius turned and strode from the cathedral, his sacred rosarius unusually heavy around his neck. The two black pearls he'd already earned winked at him in the

sunlight, taunting him. Behind him, Heiron roared with rage.

‘This is only the beginning, Interrogator-Chaplain. I will bring the resources of the Inquisition to bear on your Chapter. If you are engaged in heresy, I will uncover it. Do you hear me? You have my word on that, Astartes.’

Keep your damned word to yourself.

Of an initial force of twenty Dark Angels, seventeen remained alive after the operation on Cordassa. The dead were brothers Artemius had known all his life. These heroes were interred in the Tower of Angels, where their names joined so many others in the Books of Remembrance and Honour.

Though Marakross was purged, Artemius could never come to see it as a victory.

He kept his oath to Colonel ut-Halarr of the Cordassan Guard. The Dark Angels saw to the destruction of the foul Chaos abomination that had tainted the water supply. They burned its screaming, vomiting body with promethium.

Upon returning to Scala, Artemius discovered that Colonel ut-Halarr had died, victim of a lasgun blast to the head. Commissar Brantine had survived to bury his friend and companion. The city was under full siege from the planet’s Traitor Legions, but the morale of the local forces had returned with the end of the plague and the renewed flow of drinkable water. The Cordassan Guard dug themselves in and prepared for a long fight.

Heiron hadn’t given up searching for his unholy book. The man was convinced it was hidden somewhere in Marakross. Of his retinue, only Major-General Goodwin survived, having stayed among the Dark Angels during the final battle. Heiron dedicated himself to pushing back the enemy, buying more time to search for the accursed Liber Nefestum.

As his gunship lifted into the air above the spaceport of Scala, bound for high-orbital rendezvous with the Dark Angels cruiser, The Relentless, Artemius prepared to explain his failure to his Deathwing brothers.

How much might Borroleth have divulged under the Blades of Reason. How many of the Fallen might he have given us? Emperor, save us from the meddling of the damnable Inquisition.

He gazed at his brother Astartes sitting silently with their thoughts. He could not tell them what the sacrifice of their brothers meant. Only the Deathwing could ever know. And yet, these survivors would do it all over again without complaint, go through hell on the order of their grand master, never needing a greater motive than to serve the

honour of their Chapter.

That is what it means to be a Dark Angel.