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MIKE LEE

GATE OF SOULS

Dirge was a cursed world.

It was a planet of bleak stone and black rock, and it didn't belong in the Hammurat system, of that much the Imperial surveyors were certain. It was a rogue world, one orphaned from its home star countless millions of years in the past, and it had wandered through the darkness of space for millions of years more before being trapped in the grip of Hammurat's three blazing suns. Where Dirge had come from – and what strange vistas it had crossed over the aeons – the surveyors didn't care to know. Its surface was a wasteland of deep craters and jagged peaks, shrouded in thick, poisonous air that howled and raged under the cosmic lash of Hammurat's suns.

What mattered was that Dirge was rich: a virtual treasure trove for the ever-hungry forge worlds of the Pyrus Reach subsector. The planet's crust was thick with valuable metals, radioactives and minerals, and the cometary impacts that had shattered Dirge's surface had brought with them even more exotic elements in amounts never before catalogued. When news of the discovery reached the subsector capital it touched off a frantic rush of prospectors and mining expeditions, eager to cash in on the new world's untapped riches. Within the space of a year, almost two million prospectors, miners, murderers and thieves had come to Dirge to feast upon its riches.

Little more than a year later three-quarters of them were dead.

Seething electrical storms burned out equipment and raging winds tossed fully-loaded ore haulers around like toys. Seismic activity collapsed tunnels or trapped gases exploded under the touch of plasma torches. Men were carved up in backroom brawls over claims too hazardous to mine. The outnumbered proctors mostly looked the other way, pocketing bribes equal to a year's salary on more settled worlds and counting the days until their transfers came through.

Sometimes prospectors would return to the crater-cities from the crags or the deep tunnels, bearing artifacts of polished stone inscribed with strange inscriptions. When the rotgut was flowing in grimy taverns all over Dirge, men would sometimes go quiet and whisper of things they'd seen out in the storms: strange, corroded spires and dark menhirs covered in symbols that made their blood run cold. No one paid the stories any heed. Prospectors loved to tell tales, and what difference did some strange stones make when there was money to be made?

And so the crater-cities grew, spreading like scabs across the deep impact wounds the

comets left behind. Men died by the thousands every day, killed by storms, earthquakes, carelessness or greed. Still more lost their minds from metal poisoning, mounting debt, or simply snapped from the stress of constant danger and merciless quotas from corporate masters dozens of light-years away. They blinded themselves with homemade liquor or wasted away in the grip of drugs like black lethe and somna. Some sought comfort in the words of itinerant priests, putting their salvation in the hands of holy men who took their tithes and sent them back to their dormitories with empty prayers and benedictions.

In the end, nothing made a difference. Until a prospector named Hubert Lohr came down from the crags one day, sold off all his possessions and began preaching a new faith in the bars and back alleys of the crater-cities. Lohr accepted no tithes; instead he offered people the secrets of Dirge. He spoke to broken-down miners, diseased prostitutes and petty thieves and told them of the Lost Princes, who still wandered the void in search of their wayward world. The Lost Princes possessed powers greater than men – greater even than the God-Emperor, who offered nothing but mouldy catechisms and cruel exhortations for the men who lived and died beneath His gaze. Lohr told the fevered crowds that if they made an offering large enough it would shine like a beacon across the void and lead the Princes back to Dirge. And when they returned they would reward the faithful with gifts beyond their comprehension.

By the time the agents of the Ecclesiarchy and the planetary governor realised the peril in their midst it was already too late.

The battered Aquila lander had barely touched the plasteel tarmac before Alabel Santos was out of her seat and striding for the landing ramp. Even without the grim badge of the Inquisitorial rosette gleaming upon her breast she cut a fearsome figure in her ornate power armour. One hand rested on the butt of her inferno pistol and a sheathed power knife hung in a scabbard on her other hip. ‘Get the gun servitors ready,’ she snapped at the portly, middle-aged man struggling with his own restraints while fumbling for his respirator mask. ‘I don’t plan on being here long.’ Her man Balid bleated something in reply but she paid little heed, her armour’s respirator system whining with strain as she headed swiftly out into the howling wind.

Purple lightning flared overhead, etching the bustling airstrip in sharp relief. Tech adepts swarmed over a long line of parked Vulture gunships, tending fuel lines and reloading rocket pods for another fire support mission over Baalbek City. On the other side of the plasteel tarmac sat a cluster of Valkyrie Air Assault craft, red tags fluttering from the Hellstrike missiles loaded on their stubby wings. A platoon of armoured stormtroopers, part of the Guard regiment’s mobile reserve, huddled near their parked transports, cursing the wind and waiting to be called into action.

Santos spotted the permacrete bunkers of the regimental field headquarters just a few hundred metres from the airstrip, the pale colour of the new structures standing out

sharply from the dark grey terrain. The guards on duty raised their weapons at her approach, but hurriedly stepped aside when they saw what badge she wore. She cycled through the atmosphere lock then pushed past bewildered and tired staff officers before marching stiffly up to a broad planning table set with an old-fashioned paper map of Baalbek City. Grainy aerial reconnaissance picts were spread across the table, highlighting different city districts. Studying them was a short, broad-chested officer in the uniform of the Terassian Dragoons, surrounded by a pair of staffers and a tall, forbidding woman whose cold eyes glittered beneath the rim of her peaked commissar's cap.

The colonel glanced up at Santos's approach, a curt order on his lips, but his exhausted face went pale at the sight of the gleaming rosette. His gaze continued upwards. The inquisitor's head was held stiffly erect in a frame of brass, lending her stunning features the severe cast of a martyred saint. 'Colonel Ravin, I presume?' she said without preamble. Red light flashed balefully from her augmetic eye. 'I am Inquisitor Alabel Santos of the Ordo Hereticus. What is your situation?'

To his credit, the colonel didn't skip a beat, as though having an Imperial inquisitor arrive unannounced at his headquarters was all in a day's work. 'Two months ago dissident elements among the mining population engineered a planet-wide revolt, overwhelming the local proctors and PDF contingents–'

'I know why you're here, colonel,' Santos snapped. 'I've been reading your despatches since you arrived on Dirge.' She studied the picts scattered across the table and plucked one from the pile, sliding it over to the colonel. The aerial image showed a mob of citizens surrounding a bleached pillar of bone, their gloved hands raised in supplication before the blasphemous sigil at its peak.

'You aren't dealing with dissidents,' Santos replied coldly. 'They are something altogether worse.'

Colonel Ravin and the commissar eyed one another. 'They call themselves the Cult of the Black Stone,' the commissar said. 'That's all we've been able to learn so far.'

'Then I shall educate you further,' Santos said, leaning across the table. 'This is the symbol of the Word Bearers, colonel.' The inquisitor rapped the pict sharply with her knuckle for emphasis, causing the staff officers to jump. 'The Ruinous Powers have taken an active interest in Dirge, and I have reason to believe that one of their greatest champions is at work in Baalbek City. I've come halfway across the subsector to find out why.' And to stop him once and for all, Emperor willing, Santos thought grimly. You have much to answer for, Erebus.

Colonel Ravin's pallor deepened. 'But that's… that's incredible,' he stammered. 'Traitor Marines? Here? How do you know this?'

‘Because it is the Inquisition’s business to know such things,’ Santos snapped, turning back to the picts. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the colonel stiffen, then with an effort she reined in her temper. You have enough enemies without needing to make more, she reminded herself.

‘It’s all in the reports, colonel,’ she explained. ‘I’ve been studying every status report, Administratum log and Ecclesiarchal dictum filed from Dirge for the last six months.’ Santos picked up one of the picts: it showed the planetary governor’s palace in Baalbek City. Like all city structures, it was low, broad and windowless, built to withstand the frequent cyclones that swept over the crater wall from the wastelands. The resolution of the pict was good enough that she could recognise the impaled figure of the planetary governor, suspended on a girder among an iron forest set on the palace roof. The inquisitor set the pict aside and reached for another.

‘Four months before the uprising, merchant ships were reporting strange surveyor readings in the vicinity of the system’s far asteroid belt,’ Santos continued. ‘The local port authority dismissed the reports as pirate activity, but curiously, there was a dramatic drop in pirate attacks in the system over the same time period. Shortly afterward, orbital traffic control detected a number of unidentified flights into and out of Dirge’s atmosphere. Again, these reports were passed off as smuggling activity, but I have another theory – a Chaos warship entered the system and is likely still here, hiding in one of the system’s asteroid fields.’

Santos studied an image of cultists dragging bloody corpses from a burning dormitory towards the base of one of the cult’s sacrificial pillars. She set it aside with a frown of contempt. ‘Then there are arrest reports from the local Arbites headquarters. In the days leading up to the uprising several cult figures were arrested and when put to the question they described their leaders as armoured giants – the “Lost Princes”, according to one of the prisoners. The cultist described the greatest of these princes as a god among men, who wore the skins of his foes as testament to his power and bore a mighty talisman of his gods’ favour.’

‘The Chaos champion you spoke of,’ the commissar declared. ‘Who is he?’

But Santos shook her head. ‘I dare not speak his name. I’ve placed your souls in peril just telling you this much.’

One pict after another showed cultists at work around hab units and municipal buildings across the city, carting out truckloads of debris and hauling them away. After the fourth such image she began to line them up on the map table in chronological order.

‘If the prisoner was to be believed, there were no less than five Word Bearers present

on Dirge, including the Chaos lord. That's an astonishing number for such a minor world.'

'Minor?' Ravin said. 'Dirge supplies more than half of the industrial materials used by forge worlds across the subsector.'

'The Word Bearers don't make war according to the Tactica Imperium,' Santos declared. 'They don't think in terms of lines of supply or resource interdiction. They fight for souls, spreading terror and debasement from world to world like a cancer. Dirge, however, is both isolated and sparsely populated. From their standpoint, it's a poor target.' The inquisitor studied the line of images and her frown deepened. 'Colonel, why did you order these images taken?'

Ravin looked over the picts and waved dismissively. 'We were trying to gauge the extent and composition of the enemy fortifications based on how much material they were excavating. Those work teams have been at it day and night since before we got here.'

Santos straightened. 'Excavations.' The inquisitor felt her blood run cold. 'These cultists aren't using floor panels and wall board to build fortifications, colonel. They're hollowing these buildings out to dig for something. That's why the Word Bearers are here. Why he is here. The rebellion was just a diversion so they could search the planet without interference.' Her hand was trembling slightly as she snatched up the last pict in the line. The time code in the corner indicated that the last excavation had begun almost three days ago. No new excavations since, she realised. They must think they've found what they're after.

'Colonel, I require the use of your mobile reserve and a flight of Vultures,' Santos declared in a steely voice. 'I'll brief the platoon leader en route.'

The building had formerly housed the local tithe assessor's office. Only three storeys tall, square, windowless and slab-sided, the structure was built like a treasure vault, which wasn't far from the truth. A small army of servitors and stooped scribes had toiled night and day within its cold, gloomy cells, recording the profits of the mining cartels and the independent prospectors and assessing the Emperor's due.

Now the square outside the building was piled with the guts of the Imperial tax collection machine. Large, ornate cogitators stood in drunken ranks, their wooden cabinets splintered and their brass gauges tarnishing in the corrosive air. Drifts of torn cables and mounds of flooring and wall board were plucked and pushed by the restless wind, and a pall of glittering dust swirled endlessly in the harsh construction lamps erected by the work crews outside the building.

Glass crunched like brittle bones beneath Erebus's armoured boots as he stepped

through the narrow doorway. Just beyond the threshold a tiled floor extended for less than a metre before ending in a jagged cliff of permacrete and steel.

The miners of Dirge knew their trade well. Working day and night, they'd completely torn out the first two floors and the building's two sub-levels. Tangles of shorn wiring, crumpled metal ducting and shreds of wallboard hung like man-made stalactites from the gutted ceiling, painted white with a layer of grit that sparkled in the harsh light of the construction lamps.

All work had stopped in the pit below. More than two dozen men set aside their tools and prostrated themselves on the rocky ground at the Chaos Lord's arrival. Erebus looked out over the fruit of their labours and was pleased.

Once the sub-levels had been removed the miners had dug another three metres into the grey, ashy soil before they'd found the first of the black stones. It had taken another day of careful work under difficult conditions to lift away millions of years of rock-hard encrustations that had covered the strange symbols carved into their surface. The work had gone slowly because the delicate sonic brushes would run out of power after only a few minutes in proximity to the rocks, and because the workers' brains disintegrated from prolonged exposure to the symbols themselves. Even from where Erebus stood he could feel the power of the warp rising like black frost from the surface of the accursed objects.

On the orders of Magos Algol, the tallest of the stones had been pulled upright again. It rose five metres into the air, casting a long, misshapen shadow across the excavation site. The surface of the object looked crude and rough-hewn, but the symbols carved into the rounded surface were sharp and precise. They climbed the stone in a kind of spiral, following the rules of a language that had died out before the birth of mankind. At the top of the stone the symbols ended at the base of a perfect sphere, haloed by an arch of stone wrought in the shape of twining tentacles.

Erebus smiled, revealing pointed teeth and the fearful demeanour of a cruel and vengeful god. The Chaos lord was clad neck to foot in the imposing armour of a Space Marine – but where its ancient engravings once extolled the might of the Emperor of Man, it now preached an altogether different faith. Blasphemous runes and symbols of ruin pulsed sickly from the Traitor Marine's breastplate and the edges of his pauldrons, and the skulls of defiled Imperial priests hung from a brass chain around Erebus's neck. Psalms of vengeance and depravity were scribed in blood upon the tanned hides of fallen Space Marine heroes and stretched between barbed spikes across the Chaos lord's pauldrons and from hooks at his waist. In his right hand Erebus held aloft a talisman of fearsome power – the dark crozius, symbol of his faith in the Chaos Gods.

A broad ramp, wide enough for two men to walk abreast, had been built from the

ground floor to the base of the excavation. Its steel supports quivered slightly as Erebus descended slowly into the pit. His black gaze was fixed on the standing stone and the orb at its summit.

Erebus stepped unflinchingly into the stone's twisted shadow. The darkness that fell upon him was unnaturally cold, sinking effortlessly through the bulk of his daemonic armour. The Chaos lord felt his shrivelled insides writhe at the icy echo of the warp, and Erebus welcomed it, spreading his massive arms wide. His mind filled with visions of the Seething Gulf, the ocean of mad wonder that the servants of the false Emperor called the Occularis Terriblus. It was the font of godhood, the birthplace of universes. Amid the roiling sea of unfettered power, Erebus beheld a swollen red orb that glittered like a drop of congealing blood. He heard the cries of multitudes, the chorus of supplication sung at the feet of his unholy master, and he longed to join his voice to the song. Lorgar! His mind called into the void. The time draws nigh, unholy one. Soon the gate will swing wide!

Erebus chuckled to himself, the sound echoing in the cavernous space and causing the cultists to tremble in fear. He turned to the assembled multitude, his eyes alighting on two figures kneeling apart from the storm-suited labourers. One was a hulking giant in red armour similar to Erebus's own; the frail, elderly man hunched next to the Word Bearer looked as slight as a children's puppet, all slender sticks and grimy rags, too fragile to touch.

The Chaos Lord favoured his servants with another dreadful smile. 'Arise, Phael Dubel,' he commanded gravely. 'And you, Magos Algol. Blessed are you in the eyes of the Gods Who Wait.'

The magos rose to his feet with an agility that belied his frail and aged appearance. His skin had the grey pallor of a corpse, his thin, wrinkled lips pulling back from gleaming steel teeth in an avaricious grin. His dark robes, once decorated with the fur mantle and chains of a Magos Archaeologis, now bore lines of depraved script that spoke of his allegiance to the Ruinous Powers. Algol's eyes glittered like black marbles in the shadows of his sunken eye sockets, bright with forbidden knowledge and reptilian cunning.

Dubel, one of the Chaos lord's chosen lieutenants, bowed deeply to his master and stepped to one side, turning so that he could keep the assembled workers and the open doorway in view at all times. One hand rested on the butt of his holstered bolt pistol. The other, clad in a fearsome, outsized gauntlet called a power fist, opened and closed in an unconscious reflex, as though the weapon hungered for a victim to crush in its grip.

Magos Algol walked a careful path around the sharp edges of the stone's shadow, looking up at Erebus with a calculating smile.

‘You see, great one? It is just as the Book of the Stone described,’ Algol’s voice was harsh and quavering, like the sharp note of a plucked wire. ‘I told you we would find it here.’

Erebus regarded the towering stone greedily. ‘Have you deciphered the runes yet, magos? Does it tell us where the Orb of Shadows lies?’

‘In time, in time,’ the magos said, raising a wrinkled hand. ‘The runes require careful study, great one. Their meanings, if interpreted without proper care, could be… explosive. But,’ Algol added quickly, ‘it does indeed speak of the orb. You will have the answer you seek.’

‘Then do not let me keep you from your work, blessed magos,’ Erebus said to the man. ‘Inform me the instant that you have deciphered the text.’

The magos bowed to the Chaos lord and approached the stone, his hands fluttering eagerly as he began to contemplate the inscriptions. Erebus joined his lieutenant. ‘Send word to the Throne of Pain,’ he said quietly, referring to the cruiser hiding in Dirge’s outer asteroid field. ‘We will return to Ebok as soon as Algol has uncovered the location of the orb. Then our work will well and truly begin.’

Dubel looked back at the looming stone, his black eyes lingering on the sphere. ‘Once we have the orb, what then?’

‘Then we seek the Temple of Ascendancy,’ Erebus replied. ‘I believe it to be on Fariin, in the Elysiun System, but the orb will tell us for certain.’

The Traitor Marine stiffened, fixing his master with a suspicious stare. ‘Ascendancy? You seek to follow the same path as Lorgar?’

Erebus returned his lieutenant’s stare. ‘I? No, Dubel. I am but a humble servant,’ he said enigmatically. ‘Perhaps I seek to blaze a path for Lorgar to follow me.’

Dubel’s eyes widened in shock. Before he could reply, however, the ground shook beneath a drumbeat of thunderous explosions as Imperial rockets slammed into the side of the hollowed-out building.

One hand gripping a support strut just inside the Valkyrie’s open hatchway, Alabel Santos leaned out into the assault craft’s howling slipstream and watched the Vulture gunships streak over the flat roof of the target building. Fires were burning from rocket strikes in the debris-choked square and tendrils of smoke rose from craters blasted into the building’s thick permacrete wall. The landing zone looked clear.

The three Valkyries of the mobile reserve platoon – plus an extra support craft carrying Balid and his gun servitors – were howling along at roof height down one of the city's narrow streets, right on the heels of the gunships. She could already feel the Valkyries start to slow as they dropped toward the deck, preparing to flare their engines for tactical deployment.

Santos swung back into the passenger compartment and addressed the platoon commander. 'Once we hit the ground we're going to have to move fast. Have two of your squads form a perimeter around the Valkyries and I'll have my gun servitors provide support. You and the assault team go in with me. Once we're inside, don't hesitate. Don't think. Just kill everything that moves.'

The stormtrooper lieutenant nodded at Santos, his face hidden behind a full-face tactical respirator that gave him the look of an automaton. His vox unit crackled. 'We're with you, inquisitor,' he said curtly. 'The Emperor protects.'

Santos drew her pistol just as the Valkyrie plummeted like a stone and then stopped less than a metre over the rubbish-strewn square with its engines shrieking. There was a stuttering roar as the door gunner let off a burst with his heavy bolter at some distant target. 'Go, go, go!' she shouted, leaping from the assault craft and heading for the building at a run. Behind her the stormtrooper assault team deployed with speed and precision, hellguns covering the building's entrance. The lieutenant followed right behind Santos, a plasma pistol in one hand and a crackling power sword in the other.

The inquisitor pulled her power knife free from its scabbard and thumbed its activation rune. She rarely carried it; the knife was an heirloom weapon, given as a gift from her mentor Inquisitor Grazlen when she attained the rank of inquisitor.

Santos held the weapon in a white-knuckled grip as she charged into the building's narrow doorway. She was going to bury that burning blade in the Chaos lord's eye or die trying.

Chunks of broken permacrete and twisted plasteel continued to rain down from the gutted ceiling among Erebus and the cultists as turbofans shrieked and heavy weapons fire hammered outside. The Chaos Lord looked for Magos Algol and found the corrupted scholar on his knees, coughing wetly amid falling drifts of dust. 'Finish your translation, magos!' Erebus thundered, then raised his accursed crozius before the huddled cultists and spoke in a piercing voice. 'Rise up, warriors of the faith! The servants of the false Emperor are upon us! The eyes of the gods are upon you – go forth and win their favour!'

With a lusty howl the cultists staggered to their feet and brandished the tools of their trade: heavy sonic drills, power mattocks and arc hammers. They knew from bitter experience what those tools could do to soft flesh and brittle bone.

Dubel drew his bolt pistol. There was a searing crackle as he ignited his power fist's disruption field. 'Death to the servants of the false Emperor!' he roared, and the cultists surged forward, racing up the ramp to the doorway just as the first of the attackers stepped into view.

An inquisitor, Erebus thought, catching sight of a woman in ornate power armour leading the charge. Her alabaster face was distorted in a snarl of almost feral rage, and she fixed him with such a black look of hate that he could not help but think they'd met somewhere before.

Erebus bared his teeth in challenge and spread his arms in welcome, words of blasphemous power hissing off his tongue.

There! The shock of seeing the Chaos lord again sent a bolt of pure, righteous fury through Alabel Santos. Erebus was mocking her, grinning like a devil, his arms open wide. I'll give you something to smile about, she thought, raising her inferno pistol. Just as she drew a bead on Erebus, another armoured shape rushed in front of the Apostle, bolt pistol raised. The mass-reactive rounds smashed into her shoulder and chest before her ears registered the flat boom of the pistol's report. The impacts spun her around, the servos in her power suit whining dangerously as they sought to compensate for the blows.

Footsteps thundered up the ramp towards Santos as a dozen cultists charged forwards, weapons ready. The lieutenant appeared beside the inquisitor, levelling his pistol and firing two quick shots into the oncoming mob. Bolts of superheated plasma blew the lead cultists apart. 'Flamer to the front!' the platoon leader ordered over his vox.

Armoured stormtroopers fanned out on the narrow lip of permacrete to either side of the doorway, firing red bolts of lasfire into the charging cultists. Then a soldier stepped to the top of the ramp and fired a hissing stream of burning promethium point-blank at the charging miners. The cultists shrieked and fell back from the tongue of searing flame, setting the ramp alight with their tumbling, thrashing bodies.

Two stormtroopers to Santos's right were blown off their feet by bolt pistol rounds, their carapace armour no match for the Traitor Marine's deadly fire. The inquisitor dropped to one knee, trying to peer through the thickening black smoke and strobing lasfire for another glimpse of the Chaos lord. She couldn't see him, but she could hear him, his deep, sonorous voice chanting terrible words that sent a shiver down her artificial spine. The Chaos lord's voice rose to a terrifying crescendo – and for a moment it felt as though the very air in the room was receding, drawing back from the battle as if in horror.

The screams of the burning cultists went silent all at once. Then Santos felt the fabric of reality come unravelled. She heard a chorus of screeching howls and tasted hot brass on her tongue, and before she could draw breath to shout a warning the daemons were upon them, charging straight through the fire.

They had faces like skinned wolves and their powerfully-muscled bodies gleamed with freshly-spilled blood. Their eyes, their fangs and their twisted horns were pure brass, bright from the forge, as well as the razor edges of their two-handed axes. Upon their sloped brows was carved the mark of the Blood God, and they had come for a bounty of skulls to lay at the foot of his throne.

Men screamed. The stormtrooper carrying the flamer fell to one knee and toppled onto Santos, splashing the inquisitor with blood. Roaring an oath to the Divine Emperor, she pushed the corpse aside just as a blood-spattered figure loomed above her.

She didn't feel the blow. There was a hot wind against her face, and then there was the strange sensation of warm blood soaking through the bodyglove around her shoulder. Her left arm locked in place and Santos felt the sting of needles as the suit's medicae unit attempted to keep her from lapsing into shock. All she could think was thank the Emperor it missed my head, then she put her pistol against the daemon's midsection and pulled the trigger. A bolt of pure cyan, powerful enough to pierce the armour of a Land Raider, tore the daemon apart and then detonated with a thunderclap against the ceiling. The bloodletter dissolved in tatters of stinking, oily smoke.

Santos fell backwards, landing against the marble verge. As though in slow motion, she could see another daemon rushing at her, axe raised to strike. There were screams and the clash of steel somewhere nearby – and then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the smoke shift and reveal the red-armoured form of the Dark Prophet, standing before a monolith of twisted stone.

Death approached on cloven feet. Santos could feel her strength fading, and between one heartbeat and the next she made her choice. Taking her eyes from the daemon, she steadied her pistol against the marble tiles. With a tic of her cheek, she activated her augmetic eye's laser sight. The needle-thin beam glittered in the smoke, tracing a merciless line across the open space and painting a bloody dot on the Chaos lord's forehead.

'This is for Krendan Hive,' she whispered, and pulled the trigger.

The bloodletter howled above her – and then staggered as a bolt of plasma smashed into its head. The daemon staggered, then the blade of a power sword sank into its chest. The lieutenant leapt over Santos's body as the daemon's form dissolved. 'Get the inquisitor to safety!' he ordered, taking aim on another daemon and shooting it in

the face. ‘The Emperor protects!’ he bellowed, taking another step down the burning ramp.

Santos felt hands grab the collar of her armour. Darkness crowded at the edge of her vision. The thunderclap of her shot rang through the open space and she tried to catch a glimpse of Erebus again, but all she could see was the lieutenant advancing coolly into the face of the onrushing daemons and firing shot after shot from his plasma pistol. The weapon’s discharge vents were glowing white-hot, and his armoured gauntlet was melting from the heat.

‘The Emperor protects!’ she heard him say as another daemon loomed before him. The lieutenant fired his pistol again – and this time the overheated power core exploded, consuming him and his foe in a ball of incandescent light.

Santos felt herself dragged across the stone floor and passed out in a fiery wave of pain.

Erebus saw the bright flare of the inferno pistol and for the briefest instant he feared that the dark gods had deserted him. His vision deserted him in a blaze of cyan, and a clap of terrible thunder dashed him to his knees.

By the time he regained his senses the battle was over.

The ramp was gone. Indeed, the entire front of the building had collapsed, sealing the doorway with tons of broken permacrete. A bare handful of flickering work lights still cast a fitful glow over the site.

After a moment, Erebus started to laugh. He raised his crozius and offered his thanks to the Ruinous Powers for their dark gifts. Nothing in this universe would keep him from reaching the Damnation Gate.

Still laughing, the Chaos lord turned to look for Magos Algol, and saw that the Dark Gods had been fickle with their blessings.

The inquisitor’s bolt had missed Erebus and struck the monolith instead. Its dark surface had exploded, erasing the engravings in a storm of razor-edged shrapnel. Algol lay on his back at the foot of the ancient stone, his frail body shredded and a look of surprise etched on his bony face.

Erebus knelt by the body of the dead magos. Nearby, he heard a shifting of fallen rock, and glanced over to see Dubel picking himself up from the rubble. The Traitor Marine saw what had happened to Algol and hissed a vicious curse. ‘We’ll go back to Ebok empty-handed now,’ the Traitor Marine spat.

The Chaos lord studied Algol's shocked face. 'I think not,' he said, taking the magos's head in his left hand. The man's thin neck snapped with an expert twist of his wrist; vertebrae popped in dry succession, and then Erebus held Algol's head up to the flickering light.

'The monolith is gone, but the eyes that beheld it still remain,' Erebus said. 'The eyes are the gateway to the soul, Dubel. And gates, once opened, will give up everything they contain.'

Erebus looked into Algol's eyes and laughed, seeing his future.

FATE'S MASTERS, DESTINY'S SERVANTS

Matt Keefe

The room was silent apart from the fizzing static of the communications array and even that was so slight in volume that Captain Elogos found himself stifling the noise of his own breathing just to hear it.

His hasty summons to the bridge of Guilliman's Hand had come while he had been at prayer. So, he wore ceremonial white robes, and not the blue power armour of his chapter, the Ultramarines.

Elogos's uncustomary appearance provoked no reaction from the assembled trio. They were all captains, and this was a matter of great importance. Between them, they commanded four full companies, four hundred Space Marines in all, yet no more than a few dozen of those were present on the huge battle-barge their captains now occupied. The kilometres-long ship required just a handful of Space Marines for its operation, being otherwise crewed by thousands of loyal Chapter serfs and machine-minded servitors.

The remainder of this huge force was dispersed across the two further battle-barges and countless strike cruisers and rapid-strike vessels that made up Fleet Camidius. Periodically, one of these craft would drift into view in front of the vast observation window, which filled the front wall of the elevated bridge.

Brother-Captains Junius and Aulus nodded silently as Elogos approached them. Only Omneus made no reaction. He was the only one who wore a helmet and the communications array ran low for his benefit. A purer signal at a lower volume was relayed through the superior sensors of Omneus's helmet in the hope of capturing some of its badly degraded content. For the others, the faint crackle offered few clues as they waited patiently. Omneus stood near motionless over the ship's console, the rapid movements of his gauntleted right hand over the side of his helmet the only sign of activity.

Seven or eight minutes passed before Omneus conceded defeat with a swift shake of his head, removing his helmet as he did so.

‘Nothing?’ said Elogos.

‘Nothing I would repeat for fear of a lie,’ said Omneus. ‘I could make a thousand words from what I have heard, but they would be little better than the thousand faces I could see staring at the clouds above Ultramar.’

Aulus smiled a little at the memory of beloved Ultramar and pressed his armoured palm to Omneus’s shoulder by way of thanks for his efforts.

‘Then where the machine fails,’ said Aulus, ‘the man must surely succeed.’ His voice rose to a confident boom as he spoke and his free hand motioned to two figures huddled in the doorway. Alerted by his voice and summoned by his hand, two astropaths shuffled slowly across the room towards the four Astartes. The awkward, bald-headed pair were in obvious contrast to the towering Ultramarines.

The crude machine-audio of the communications array was useless to the psykers and they instead funnelled the laser, by which means this unfathomable signal had first reached their ears, through an ancient crystal spectrum hoping to make clear with their minds what the ear simply couldn’t discern. That the communication had been sent in this crude, material fashion in the first place hinted at a remote source, a place where no astropath could be found to transmit it by the intangible, otherworldly means upon which such communication most commonly relied. Some trace of the psychic, however, clearly remained.

The astropaths’ sightless eyes rolled back and they started to shuffle about. They began a slow intonation. One astropath’s voice rose sharply higher than the other’s, yet the result was uniform nonetheless, their finely pitched tone and measured pace forming a single, unearthly voice.

‘Alpha-alpha-alpha,’ it rang out, emanating from nowhere at all it seemed, an effect that would be startling, if not horrifying to ordinary men, but was unremarkable to the assembled Space Marine captains.

‘Alpha-alpha-alpha,’ it came again.

‘A distress signal,’ said Omneus, though the meaning was clear to all.

‘Alpha-alpha-alpha, omega-san-omega,’ it went on. ‘Alpha-Alpha-alpha, omega-dox-omega.’

Elogos gasped – it was an Ultramarine distress signal.

‘Omega-san-omega, respond, omega-dox-omega,’ said Junius hunched over the console, barking at it as his fingers skimmed over the operation runes inset into its surface.

‘It’s phased and relayed,’ said Omneus who had earlier so closely scrutinised the signal. ‘There’s no way of sending a reply.’

Junius rose to his full height and turned to the others, a troubled grimace playing across his features.

‘Alpha-alpha-alpha.’ The intoned message still resounded across the room, though it had long since faded into nothing more than repetition. Omneus drew closer to the console, though it was an altogether different frame of runes over which his fingers now danced.

‘Do you have its source?’ said Elogos.

‘Yes,’ said Omneus.

‘Good,’ said Elogos. ‘Then give it to me, and there I will go.’

‘Elysium.’

The words droned out of the metal pipe that served as the servitor’s mouth as the ship shuddered in the backwash of its translation back into real space. They had barely strayed more than a day into warp space, for which Elogos was thankful.

The ship shuddered as its impulse engines returned to life, igniting once more to propel the ship through the cold vacuum of space after its motionless, spectral voyage through the warp. Space offered no resistance, the jarring was not turbulence, but time in the warp invariably affected the alignment of the ship’s impulse engines and their great thrusts at first fought against one another.

Elogos and his company had broken off from the main fleet, taking a strike cruiser to investigate the curious distress signal. Though it was a large vessel in its own right, the cruiser, Shield of Vigilance, was dwarfed by the immense battle-barge where they had first detected the signal’s origin. Guilliman’s Hand was now many miles away, with the rest of Fleet Camidius.

The shuddering soon faded as, far below, the serfs properly calibrated the engines for the return to real space under Brother Caius’s watchful gaze. While it might be Caius’s wisdom that instructed them, it was the serfs’ dutiful labours that brought such swift

results. These serfs were responsible for all such labours across the ship, sparing their Space Marine superiors for the more important tasks of command and defence. The serfs themselves were humans, recruited from the Ultramarines' homeworld of Macragge, and their knowledge made them skilled and useful servants. Hundreds of them, garbed in their customary blue and white robes, scurried throughout the Shield of Vigilance's endless corridors.

'Have you determined the source?' asked Elogos. From the distant Guilliman's Hand, Omneus had been able to do no more than trace the signal to this particular star system. Now that they drew nearer, Elogos demanded more accuracy of his crew.

'The northern continent of Elysium,' came the reply, though its source was of some surprise. Cyriacus, the Librarian stood in the doorway, his hands pressed to the low arch which divided bridge fore from bridge rear. Elogos had insisted upon Cyriacus's presence but was unaccustomed to the venerable psyker involving himself so readily, and on such a vast ship it was rare that Elogos would find himself accompanied on the bridge by anyone but the servitors and Chapter-serfs.

'The serfs have set a course already,' said Cyriacus, his prescient anticipation of the question probably little more than that. Elogos nodded and sank into his seat.

'Elysium,' said Elogos as the last of his battle-brothers emerged into the hangar bay. The planet and its moons turned slowly beneath them, the thinnest wedge of its surface visible beyond the invisible field of energy which divided their otherwise open hangar from the void of space beyond.

Sergeants Nerion, Auralius and their men clustered around the lowered ramps of the Thunderhawks they had each dutifully occupied throughout the voyage, ready, if need be, to man the gunships in case of attack. Sergeant Estarion's men, having returned separately from their myriad stations across the length and breadth of the strike cruiser, formed a loose circle around Elogos and Cyriacus.

'Auralius, Estarion,' said Elogos. 'Your squads will accompany me to the planet's surface. One Thunderhawk per squad. Estarion with me. Auralius, Brother-Librarian Cyriacus will accompany you. Nerion, remain here and await further instruction.'

'Aye, my captain,' came the only verbal reply, from Nerion. Both Auralius and Estarion nodded dutifully in response. Nerion's men moved away from the ramp of the foremost Thunderhawk and Elogos quickly ascended, followed by Estarion and his squad. Behind them, Auralius led his own men back in to the second Thunderhawk, the venerable Cyriacus following close behind. A third such craft remained unmanned at the right-hand side of the hangar and Nerion's men made for it as the other two craft prepared to launch. It would be their deaths if they remained in the hangar when the Thunderhawk's engines ignited.

Elogos settled himself in one of the many transport seats towards the rear of the Thunderhawk. He had little desire to interfere in Estarion's well-drilled routines simply for sake of rank and deferred the cockpit seat to his brother-sergeant. Two Marines accompanied Estarion to the front of the vessel as the remaining seven men of the squad settled quickly into the transport seats around Elogos, their positions, even in this largely empty Thunderhawk, carefully rehearsed to allow a swift, and if need be, fighting, deployment.

'Vigilus-Di, ready for launch.' The sound of Sergeant Auralius's voice crackled over the comm-link.

'Vigilus-Prime, ready for launch,' replied Estarion from his seat in the cockpit, the engines of the Thunderhawk roaring to life at the same time. Another moment's pause and the comm-link crackled into life again.

'Shield of Vigilance, ready for launch,' said Nerion, he and his men obviously well clear of the hangar. 'Emperor guide you,' he said.

Vigilus-Di rose up first, its slowly retracting legs passing across Estarion's vision as it crossed the hangar and entered the launch bay proper. Vigilus-Prime followed, rising more swiftly than its mate to glide over the motionless Vigilus-Ter below. The Thunderhawk turned sharply as it drifted towards the launch bay, sharp enough to bring it to a position out to the rear-left of the leading Vigilus-Di. The two craft remained in this formation as they straightened up and entered the long launch corridor at the very front of the bay. Stepping their engines up to full power, the craft raced out of the launch bay and into the starry-black gulf beyond.

As the craft sailed out into space, the sturdy adamantium blast door slid into place between the cockpit and transport compartment, depriving Elogos of any view of the Thunderhawk's exterior whatsoever. At that, he removed his helmet from where it was clipped to the top of his thigh, and secured it firmly on his head.

'Transmission source located,' came a voice from the comm-link mounted inside Elogos's helmet. It was Estarion, from the cockpit.

'Follow it in, sergeant,' said Elogos.

'Yes, my captain.'

The comm-link fell silent and Elogos dipped his head in quiet meditation. The calm persisted for little more than ten or fifteen minutes before the Thunderhawk was rocked and buffeted violently from outside – a sure sign of atmospheric approach. The noise of the engines rose immeasurably and the roar of afterburners and stabiliser jets

was added to the relatively meagre output needed to guide the gunship through space.

‘Contour scan gives us safe touchdown point-five kilometres from signal source, captain. Approach?’ The voice rang out inside Elogos’s helmet once more.

‘Yes. Approach and land at once,’ said Elogos.

The Thunderhawk lurched and Elogos felt his weight slide against the broad metal harness which covered his chest. A moment later and he found himself pressed hard back in his seat as the gunship banked and then began its rapid descent. At the last moment, the Thunderhawk levelled out and dropped vertically to the ground, landing with a just noticeable thump.

No sooner had the gunship landed and the rear exit ramps descended to the ground than the Space Marines around Elogos were up, out of their seat-harnesses and moving down the sloping metal ramps in well-practiced covering formations.

A signal crackled over the comm-link and the cockpit’s blast door rose swiftly. Estarion and his two brother Space Marines emerged and the three, accompanied by Elogos, descended the ramp while the rest of the squad formed careful guard around it on the ground below.

The Ultramarines had arrived at the edge of a large plain, covered in tall grass that bowed in the strong wind that raced over the ground. Beyond this, close by the landed Thunderhawks, a forest rose up, ringing the edge of the plain. The forest masked higher ground, and the treeline visibly rose and fell in a series of undulating crests.

Beside Elogos, Auralius’s squad emerged from the second Thunderhawk, Cyriacus with them. Two of the Marines configured auspexes, searching for the signal’s exact source, only to have their search cut short as Cyriacus raised his staff and pointed towards the heavily forested ground away to the south-west. The Librarian’s mind was keener than any machine.

Following his lead, Elogos led his men in the direction indicated by Cyriacus. Five Space Marines surrounded Elogos as he marched while four more remained with Estarion, taking up position some way behind. Between these two groups, Cyriacus, accompanied by four of Auralius’s men, followed suit, while Auralius himself led the remaining men out on a wider route, guarding the flanks of their brothers, ever mindful of attack.

There was no need for such concern, and the brief march proceeded unhindered. The group crossed the flat plain quickly, arriving at the edge of the forested area beyond. From its edge, the forest appeared deep and dense, but upon entering it the Space Marines found it quickly dropped away, forming a forest carpet over a series of deep

ravines beyond. Their path fell away into the first of these ravines as they advanced and brought the horizon up short in front of them. Elogos paused before allowing himself to descend the ravine.

Cyriacus came up close on his shoulder and nodded ahead, towards where a second rising bank of trees covered the opposite slope of the ravine. Elogos sent two of his men forwards and down into the ravine to search out a viable crossing, though he himself waited a moment longer, allowing Estarion and his men at the rear to catch up. By the time Estarion arrived, another opportunity had presented itself.

'There is a crossing to the north.' Auralius's voice came over the comm-link. Auralius and his men, ranging wider out across the landscape had reached the ravine some distance from Elogos's own position, a fact which had clearly proved fortunate. Elogos recalled the two Space Marines from the ravine below and, now accompanied by all bar Auralius's own men, picked his way along the ravine's edge, heading north to the promised crossing.

Here and there, the ravine's edge fell away so sharply that the marching group was forced back into the woodland in order to find a safe path, and their view of the chasm beside them was greatly obstructed. A great rocky spur jutted out halfway across the ravine, covered in a thick mass of vegetation, and this, combined with a sharp turn in the ravine's course, blocked out any view of what lay beyond.

It was thus almost by surprise that they emerged from the heavy vegetation to find Auralius and his men perched atop a flat, rocky promontory that extended some several metres out over the ravine.

Beyond this ran a high, gradually arching bridge, though it was not rock and its colour did not at all match the surrounding landscape. It was the colour of bone, and its surface, while not quite smooth, boasted a form quite unlike the craggy spars of rock that pock-marked the ravine's edges. Its shape too was more deliberate than could have come from the simple ageing of rock by the ravages of wind and rain. The bridge's underside bore smaller arches, their sides forming regular fans or wings which strafed down towards the narrow valley at the ravine's base. The bridge looked like no product of nature, but by whose hand it had been made, there was no clue.

No matter its origin, its nature was plain enough. It was a bridge, and it would get them across the ravine. As Elogos and the others emerged from the wooded edge, Auralius strode out beyond the promontory and onto the bridge itself. It was not especially broad, but offered no real danger as the Ultramarines moved across it in single file.

Nearing the bridge's centre, its very highest point, Elogos gazed down into the valley below. A trail of broken rock, buried amidst a raft of smaller shale and pebbles,

littered the floor. No water now ran there, but the winding course of the debris made clear it had been carried there by some long-gone river, the same river which had surely cut the ravine itself in an age gone by.

Focusing his sight, Elogos could make out a handful of solid shapes. Some of those sections of crumbled rock beneath him stood out as brighter than the surrounding stones, though still considerably tarnished, and their shape gave hints of the same architecture as that of the bridge beneath him. The remains of other such artificial crossings, he thought, fallen to the river below. Much more than just this solitary bridge had once stood here, Elogos thought to himself as he reached the far side of the ravine.

The edge here was higher and steeper, and the Space Marines remained in single file as they snaked up this farther, equally forested, slope. Its crest was the highest of all the surrounding hills, and as Elogos ascended it, the source of the mysterious signal that had brought them here became immediately apparent.

Beneath them, a second ravine opened up, shallower, and divided by a fork in its dry river bed. On the island of rock formed between these parting, now long-dead, streams stood a fort of kinds, a thing of stone and steel with a look to it so aged and worn that it appeared almost derelict. Yet its surface was adorned with a very familiar insignia: the brilliant white omega symbol of the Ultramarines.

‘Then we are not alone,’ said Cyriacus wryly as he joined Elogos on that high vantage point.

‘How can this be?’ said Elogos as he received the final report from Estarion, on his reconnoitre of the fort. It had taken almost an hour to complete a thorough search of the building, but it had been clear from the beginning that few answers would be found and Elogos felt himself merely waiting for the inevitable.

The fort’s construction had proven to be surprisingly primitive, formed of a mass of roughly hewn stone and metal that was really no better than scrap. Yet for all this, the place bore all the marks of the Astartes, providing for their most basic needs.

This was exactly as Estarion’s men found it. The fort was bereft of so much as a single brother Ultramarine.

‘Nothing?’ said Elogos in reply to Estarion’s shaking head. ‘Nothing at all?’

‘Not nothing,’ said Estarion. ‘A dozen serfs, but mutes all of them.’

Elogos’s face wrinkled up into a quizzical frown.

‘Mutes?’ said Elogos.

‘Yes, captain,’ said Estarion.

‘Show them to me.’

Elogos entered the dingy chamber, the lowest room in the entire building, a cave within the rock itself, its entrance covered by the fort’s structure. A dozen serfs stood lined up against the far wall. They were a sorry bunch, almost all bearing extensive modifications, their bodies greatly damaged by the additions. Some appeared more like servitors than true serfs. Whoever created these sorry specimens would have been in desperate need to use serfs in such a way, thought Elogos as he approached the first creature in line.

The serf’s eyes blinked with a speed seemingly impossible for any living thing. They flickered and flashed, open and shut, several times every second, sometimes independently of one another as though the blinks somehow mimicked the clicks, beeps and flashes that raced through the creature’s machine mind.

Elogos drew back from the serf, able to decipher nothing from this frenetic blinking. He had seen serfs muted before, but it was not a practice he had ever witnessed amongst his own Chapter except where function demanded it, and it puzzled him greatly now to see these dozen subjects, the monastery’s only inhabitants, mute to a man. One or two bore augmentations that could perhaps have caused their speechlessness but the others seemed silenced for reasons of custom alone and Elogos could not fathom the meaning of such a practice.

These frantic blinks might perhaps be the substitute for their lost tongues but if communications they were, they meant nothing to Elogos or the assembled Space Marines. The mutes seemed possessed of no other form of communication for they remained unresponsive to the gestures Brother Longinus traced in the air with his hands.

As Elogos passed down the line, even the Librarian, Cyriacus, conceded defeat with a growl, the serf’s mind too machine in nature to be easily probed by one such as he. The stylus offered by Caius to another serf remained unused, unnoticed in fact, and it was clear to Elogos that these serfs would indeed be keeping whatever secrets they held.

Elogos motioned for Cyriacus to join him as he moved towards the door.

‘I am confounded, Brother Cyriacus,’ said Elogos.

‘It is, I agree, most strange,’ said Cyriacus. ‘Though this is without a doubt a place of

our great Chapter's making. Its relics are real enough, its every design is as Codex demands and its spirit is as pure as the heart of Macragge. I cannot doubt its origin, but I cannot explain it.'

'And none have ever set foot here before us? You are quite certain?' said Elogos.

'Quite certain,' said Cyriacus. 'The Fleet Camidius alone has heretofore entered the Pyrus Reach at all, and this distant Elysium, well, we are the first sons of Guilliman to touch its soil by any account I can find. I have yet to receive final word from my brothers but I am sure they will confirm that this world is a place to which no Ultramarine has ever before been.'

'Not one Ultramarine, and yet a whole fortress for their occupation,' said Elogos.

'Indeed,' said Cyriacus. 'I shall consider it. Though, I have little hope of finding answers soon.'

'I will pray on it,' said Elogos, moving towards the far end of the corridor, away from the venerable Librarian. 'Yes, I will pray on it.'

Elogos knelt silently in prayer, his lips framing the words of an Ultramarines' catechism as he reached deep within himself for answers to what whim of destiny had brought him to Elysium and what fate now awaited him.

Though comforting, his prayers had yielded few answers. He rose from his genuflection and paced across the stone floor of the chapel, his armoured boots giving off resounding clangs as they struck the cold surface.

Elogos reached the far end of the chapel, where a large banner, hung like a mural, occupied fully two-thirds of the wall. He stopped at the foot of this relic and knelt in reverie. As he did so, the last of the day's light fell upon him through gaps in the fort's stone wall.

The banner's design was typical enough. In its centre stood the almighty Emperor, presenting his side to the observer, his stride carrying him from one side to the other and his face turned away as if looking beyond. Behind him rose a landscape dominated by a vast mountain, a symbol, perhaps, of his might, while his head was crowned with a halo of six stars shining brilliantly in the night sky above. He touched the top of his left arm with the hand of his right and where his fingers parted, blood ran. Upon his right cheek there was a single tear. Elogos was sure that this place was truly of Astartes manufacture. Such humanity as this grim portrait cast upon the Immortal Emperor was a thing known only to the Space Marines; there was no mere man who would know so truly the face of their saviour.

Elogos rose and walked slowly towards the high arch of the chapel's only doorway. Before he even reached it, Caius appeared, greeting his captain with a meaningful stare. Elogos knew his meaning at once but thought better than to break his silence while within the chapel's walls and allowed himself to pass through the door before addressing his brother Marine.

'You have some news, Caius?' said Elogos as he passed from the chapel into the dimly lit corridor.

'Brother-Librarian Cyriacus requests your presence, my captain,' said Caius.

'Very good,' said Elogos. 'Show me the way.'

'This was the transmitter they used,' said Cyriacus. He stood at the head of a large, wooden table at the centre of this, the building's largest chamber, serving apparently as its great hall As well as the stone walls common throughout the fort, this larger room boasted a great many metal struts running from floor to ceiling. The ceiling itself bore a covering of metal plates, making it armoured, after a fashion.

'This is it?' said Elogos. Cyriacus nodded.

'Paleus has confirmed it.' At the far side of the room, Paleus nodded. Such matters were well within his expertise and Elogos trusted his judgement without hesitation. On the table between Elogos and Cyriacus sat a transmitter, its shell stripped away and its contents connected to a vast array of auspexes, sensory arrays and receivers used by the cunning Paleus to uncover the little box's secrets.

'Then what more does it tell us, Cyriacus?' said Elogos.

'There was more to the transmission, captain. There were messages sent that we did not receive.'

'And what did they say?'

'Chaos attack, captain. They said Chaos attack.' Cyriacus fell silent and Elogos frowned.

He turned away from the table and gestured for Estarion to follow him. The pair paced out of the room side by side, before moving through the building's dimly lit corridors. The external walls of the fort lacked windows, and instead light flooded in through blank spaces in the wall where stones had been omitted to provide ad hoc, glassless windows.

'I will take ten men and discover what I can,' said Elogos. 'You may inform Sergeant

Nerion that this place is safe and he and his men may join us on the planet surface. Wait here until they arrive, then take ten men and begin a search elsewhere. Nerion will protect the fort.'

'Yes, captain,' said Estarion, nodding and stepping aside as the pair reached the door. Elogos stepped through it, out onto the broad steps at the building's front. Behind him, Elogos gestured to the Marines following a discreet distance behind and several hurriedly made to catch up with Elogos while others halted their advance and stood dutifully beside the fort's doors.

'Captain?' said Sergeant Auralius, as he emerged into the fading daylight. 'Where do you wish us to go?'

Elogos paused, stepping down three of the broad stone steps so that the building's edge no longer blocked his view as he surveyed the landscape.

He pondered for a moment before his eye caught an oddly familiar sight. He pointed. 'There. We will go there,' he said, pointing at the great mountain that rose up on the distant horizon. It looked just like the one in the chapel's mural.

Elogos marched on and, as the sun set behind him, his suspicions were proved correct. The coming night revealed a half-circle of six brilliantly white stars piercing the not-yet-black sky above the mountain's peak. If the mountain's likeness had not been enough, these brilliant beacons made Elogos certain that he was headed towards the very same landscape he had earlier seen depicted so vividly in the banner on the chapel wall.

Their journey in the Thunderhawk had narrowed the distance considerably, but with the broken terrain at the mountain's base offering precious little hope of a suitable landing spot, it was still a trek of an hour or more before Elogos and the eight men who followed him at last reached the foothills of the mountain proper. Two more battle-brothers remained in the Thunderhawk some way distant and Elogos would periodically hear Brother-Marine Longinus's comm-link crackle to life as the Thunderhawk's remaining crew tracked their party's position.

Like the ravines amongst which the mysterious fort nestled, these foothills were heavily forested and surveying the landscape for a great distance in any direction was remarkably difficult. Elogos cast his gaze over the tree tops and was at last rewarded with a promising sign – smoke rising from a spot some distance ahead.

The group moved swiftly through the trees and as they drew near they could hear the crackling noise of a fire and the sound of voices. Bolters were raised and the Ultramarines moved apart from one another, forming an encircling chain as they closed in on the source of the smoke and the fire.

Elogos burst from the cover of the trees into a broad, oval shaped clearing. Beyond him, the blue-armoured figures of his brothers also lurked, bolters raised. In the clearing, a dozen or more savage-looking men and women danced and whooped around a huge pyre in the clearing's centre. At the sight of Elogos, one of the wild men turned from his revelry and launched himself at the captain, a huge bloody bone in his hand, wielded like a club. He struck at Elogos, the bone shattering harmlessly against his shoulder pad before Elogos voiced his bolter and silenced the wailing savage.

The other Space Marines stepped from the trees, ready to cut down the rest of the primitive group, but Elogos raised his hand and bade them hold their fire. His first display of power would be more than enough to quell any fight these primitive wretches had in them. Elogos lifted the man's corpse from where it lay at his feet and hurled it effortlessly across the clearing. It flew several metres before crashing to the ground amongst the other savages beside the flaming pyre.

Two of the women fell to their knees over the body, wailing in a series of screams and howls that could have been either rage or grief. Three small children cowered behind two more women while half a dozen of the men fell to their knees, clasping their hands together and uttering indecipherable grunts in an apparent plea for mercy.

Elogos lowered his bolter and stepped forwards whilst the remaining Ultramarines closed in, forming a tight circle around the clearing and its primitive occupants.

The savages scurried away from Elogos as he approached, but the ring of armoured men prevented them from fleeing. They shuffled nervously back around the pyre, trying to keep the flames between themselves and the hulking Space Marine captain. As they parted, the pyre's purpose, and the cause of the savages' celebrations, became apparent.

A huge armoured corpse, its surface blackened by the flame but its substance hardly touched, lay atop the pyre. Elogos reached into the fire with his armoured first and, grabbing at what he could find, hauled the corpse to the ground.

The thing smouldered as it lay at his feet but the heat bothered Elogos little as he stooped and cracked away the charred top layer of the corpse's power armour. A great sheet of blackened armour came away in his hand. Beneath it, a second layer of armour was revealed, entirely untouched. Untouched by the flames, that was, but bedevilled with craven symbols.

'Emperor damn all you have ever done,' said Elogos as the Chaos Space Marine's armour became apparent, cleared of its blackened exterior. Elogos tore the heretic's plated armour from his shoulder. He smacked the butt of his other hand against the sooty, charred covering, bashing away the flakes of scorched metal to reveal the dread

insignia beneath. Word Bearers.

Elogos threw the armoured piece to the ground and made for the nearest savage. He snatched the scrawny, wild-haired man up by the rags he wore around his shoulders and lifted him clear from the ground.

‘What happened here?’ said Elogos as the terrified man writhed in his grip. He pitied the wretches for what they had surely seen, and in some ways felt a great sense of pride in seeing their obvious joy at the demise of the traitor, but he desperately needed to know what had transpired in this place and he had no time for kind treatment. He could not for a moment believe that they themselves had killed the monstrous Chaos Space Marine.

‘Y… y… you kill them.’ The man stuttered as he spoke, never once daring to look Elogos in the eye.

‘Yes, I am going to kill them,’ said Elogos. ‘But tell me what has happened here. Tell me!’

‘He means,’ said Cyriacus, grabbing Elogos’s attention, ‘that you have killed them. Not that you are going to.’

Elogos turned his head to see Cyriacus close by the pyre, his hand on the shoulder of one of the frightened women, though unlike the struggling man in Elogos’s grip this woman seemed frozen by her terror and did not so much as flinch from where she stood beside the Librarian.

Cyriacus took his hand from her shoulder and the woman fell to the floor, her mind reeling from the Librarian’s inescapable grasp.

‘They have seen others like us and mistook us for them,’ said Cyriacus. ‘Ultramarines killed this traitor, and more like him. The girl has seen battle raging, close by here I think. You surprised the first man, made a cornered beast of him and he attacked you, but these people do not think us an enemy. They are harmless enough, and they are loyal in their own way.’

Elogos thought on that a moment, then said, ‘Very well, set them free. But destroy the traitor’s body and get these wretches away from here. I do not wish them to look upon it a second longer.’

At the far side of the circle, Caius stepped aside, giving the frightened savages an escape route. They clustered together, one woman picking up the other from where she lay at Cyriacus’s feet and the whole crowd shuffled slowly towards the edge of the clearing, not yet sure of their fate.

Elogos released his grip, pushing the man towards his companions as he did so. The force of it sent the man into a run and this was enough to send the savages fleeing, diving for trees through the gap left by Caius. In an instant the clearing was empty but for the Ultramarines, their grisly find and the fire that raged between them.

Longinus stepped forward, taking a grenade from his pocket before hauling the corpse upright against the edge of the pyre. He thrust the grenade into the traitor's breastplate and withdrew swiftly. A moment later the corpse erupted into an incandescent mass, the meltabomb's fiery charge first engulfing then utterly consuming the wretched thing's every tissue.

A sheet of ash lay where the heretic had been a moment before, and even this was but a passing shadow as the licking flames of the fire caught up the ash from the air, or else cast a hot breeze with which to disperse the gruesome silhouette painted on the ground. Elogos paused just long enough to see that no trace remained before turning and leading his Ultramarines once more into the line of densely packed trees at the clearing's edge.

'This is the way,' said Cyriacus, opting for the higher of two paths where the forest's floor offered one route towards the mountain's peak and one towards its base. Elogos nodded in agreement and the group adopted single file as they marched quickly behind Cyriacus, the Librarian apparently familiar with sights his eyes had never before witnessed.

The tree cover quickly thinned and a broad, low spur of the mountain rose up from the forest. Cyriacus stared at this for a moment, cementing the image in his mind and checking his bearings, before leading the others forwards once more.

The ground quickly became open and rocky, bare in places where it was exposed to the wind and blown clean of any covering of sand or rocky debris. Turning around the spur, the mountain path became entirely exposed and the distance which they had covered now became apparent to all. The wind blew hard about them at this great height and, as they reached a small plateau topping the spur, they found the enemies they had been looking for, and with them the friends they had yet to meet.

They were all dead. A dozen proud Ultramarine warriors and twice that in heretics lay strewn across the plateau, the signs of their struggle readily apparent. Elogos knelt beside the body of the nearest Ultramarine and carefully prised the helmet from his head, taking great care not to besmirch his brother in death. The face that greeted him was that of a stranger, and yet eerily familiar. The figure was aged, a swathe of grey hair covering his head and Elogos found himself greatly unsettled staring into the dead eyes of a brother whose name he thought he should know but could not quite bring to mind.

The others moved out amongst the carnage and inspected the other bodies. Though all were plainly Ultramarines, the personal insignia and monographs of their armour did nothing to reveal their identity. Most curious of all, they were every single one as aged as the proud slain warrior Elogos had first knelt over.

Beneath the knee, their armour bore a curious marking, a campaign badge displaying a halo of seven stars. Elogos took it at first to be a marking taken from the banner he had seen on the chapel's wall before close attention revealed the extra star. Whether the badge was meant to match the window or not, neither symbol matched any campaign in their Chapter's long, proud history.

These were the certainly bodies of Ultramarines, but they had no place in any company which Elogos or any of the others could bring to mind.

The near total darkness of night fell as Elogos and his brothers made proper the bodies of their strange brethren. Their gene-seed was taken, their bodies made pure and committed to the earth. The traitors were destroyed just as before, every sign of their treachery scorched from existence. And still no answers. Elogos muttered a prayer as he puzzled this continuing enigma.

The brilliant orange sun was just beginning to rise as the Ultramarines' long march brought them close to the mysterious mountain's peak, where Cyriacus and Elogos were both sure answers must be found.

The rising sun brought with it a revelation. The first fronds of orange light to cross the horizon illuminated the silhouette of an ancient monolith perched atop the mountain's peak, just thirty metres above them. The shape of its two delicate, yet impossibly high arms, had been masked from sight lower down the mountain by the cunning angle and elevation of their construction. It was only from their position on the high ridge leading to the peak proper that the monolith was made apparent to Elogos and his men. They made for it at once, but stopped suddenly as a terrible sight greeted them.

The Word Bearers were encamped around the monolith, twenty or more of the traitors engaged in some vile ritual with the monolith as their focus.

Elogos, Cyriacus and the others sank to their knees, or pressed their bodies close to the mountain's slope, keeping themselves out of sight as they readied themselves to attack. They suffered from a position below the Word Bearers and would have to be cunning if they were to defeat an enemy on higher ground.

Elogos gazed around and saw a high ridge running parallel to the plateau at the mountain's peak. The ridge offered a spot just two or three metres lower than the peak itself, and Elogos gestured for two of his battle-brothers to follow him as he moved

stealthily towards it. He paused by Auralius as he went, and with several swift hand gestures indicated his plan to him. Auralius nodded and began his own ascent up the steeper path in front of him, accompanied by Cyriacus and followed by the remainder of his squad.

Elogos headed around the mountain rather than up it, moving behind the ridge and leading the other two men up the slope, behind the ridge, safely out of sight of the traitors. Reaching the crest of the ridge, Elogos paused for a moment until the two by his side gestured their readiness and all three sprung up over the ridge, unleashing a withering volley of bolter fire at the Word Bearers. Attacked from such an angle, the Chaos Marines sorely lacked for cover in their exposed position and were instantly driven back towards the monolith. Three of the heretics fell to this first volley, two more before they reached the safety of the monolith.

With the Word Bearers driven back from the edge of the plateau, Auralius, with Cyriacus and his men, took their opportunity to dash the short distance up the mountain's slope. They reached its peak quickly and hauled themselves up on to the high plateau. A moment later the sound of their bolters joined those of Elogos's men and the Word Bearers were trapped in a deadly crossfire. The Word Bearers shuffled backwards once more, returning fire as they turned back to back in a desperate attempt to prevent their complete encirclement.

Elogos quickly led his men forward along the ridge, heading for the plateau. The semi-circular shape of it allowed them to move round the monument, bringing the retreating Word Bearers into sight once more. The Ultramarines opened fire, driving the Word Bearers further round the monolith. As the Word Bearers regrouped behind the monolith, Elogos and his men dashed for the edge of the plateau.

Auralius split those Ultramarines at his command into two smaller groups, one of which was led by the Librarian. They surged towards the monolith from both sides, one group circling it clockwise, the other anti-clockwise, trapping the traitors between them and creating a crossfire that pinned the Word Bearers to the ground, slaying several more in the exchange.

Encircled and increasingly desperate, the Word Bearers responded with a brutal counter-assault. They concentrated their fire forwards, towards the group led by Auralius and rushed towards them, ignoring the other Ultramarines entirely.

Caius fell to the heretics' fire as they retaliated. Longinus drew his body to the safety of a shallow dip beneath the monument's base, but he couldn't raise his fallen brother and relayed to Elogos that the first Ultramarine blood of the day had been spilled.

With Caius dead and Longinus momentarily out of the fight, the Word Bearers rushed Auralius and the lone Space Marine who remained by his side. Two of the traitors at

the fore of the pack raised their chainswords and made to engage Auralius at close quarters. Auralius counter-charged, ducking beneath the first swinging chainsword blow and unleashing his bolt pistol at point blank range into his enemy's armoured stomach. A second clumsy swipe followed before the Word Bearer toppled backwards, dead. The blow was a pathetic last strike and the chainsword's teeth skidded ineffectually across Auralius's vambrace, but the force of the blow was still enough to send him reeling. As he tumbled, he caught sight of fellow brother Tyrus beside him, overwhelmed by three more Word Bearers and finally succumbing to their blows. There was no sign of Cyriacus.

The second Word Bearer drew nearer and raised his chainsword as Auralius struggled to regain his footing. The traitor grasped the chainsword in both hands, ready to plunge it straight down into Auralius's back before a hail of bolter fire rang out and sent the traitor's bullet-riddled body tumbling to the floor.

Elogos and Auralius's second battle squad had rounded the monument and come up on the Word Bearers from behind, saving Auralius at the last moment. One of the traitors, their apparent leader, caught sight of the encircling groups and led the others away from the monolith. Their headlong rush had overwhelmed Auralius and allowed the Word Bearers an opportunity to escape their encirclement. Any more delay and they would be surrounded once more, so the traitors hastily retreated towards the plateau's edge, leaving a fortunate Auralius to haul himself to his feet.

The Word Bearers were far from defeated, however. Sonarius, one of Auralius's men who had led the second group around the monolith, tried to pursue the traitors, but moving away from the sturdy structure and into the open only served to hand the Word Bearers a swift victory. Sonarius, Psalitus and Gregorius fell as the Word Bearers covered their retreat with a hail of fire. With their pursuers slain or repulsed, the Word Bearers threatened to reach the cover of the forest which lay just beneath the plateau on the opposite slope.

Their threatened escape ended explosively a moment later as Vigilus-Di hovered into view above the mountain. Auralius's men, left with the Thunderhawk and summoned at a moment's notice, unleashed the full fury of the gunship's considerable weaponry and the startled crowd of traitors was consumed by the hail of bolter fire and the barrage of battle cannon as the Thunderhawk roared overhead. Elogos and Auralius halted their own pursuit as they saw it made needless by the gunship's timely intervention.

Lacking a place to land, the Thunderhawk disappeared from view as quickly as it had arrived, a swift message of thanks over the comm-link the only signal its pilots needed that the battle was over. As its engines roared off into the distance, the survivors gathered around Elogos, Cyriacus emerging from the treeline. There was, again, much that had to be done. The Ultramarines' dead had to be laid to rest and the traitors

cleansed. Two battle-brothers, under Longinus's watchful eye, were quickly set to it. Elogos, his mind on the aged Ultramarines they'd found before the battle, wasted no time in investigating the colossal monolith, Cyriacus in tow. Auralius followed close by the captain and Librarian as they scrambled over the series of circular plinths, which led up to the artefact. It was immense, though curiously delicate in appearance. It was immediately apparent that it was constructed from the same curious, bone-white material as the bridge which had earlier offered such an expedient crossing. Its makers and the monolith's were one and the same.

Those makers, it seemed, were not the Word Bearers themselves, for Elogos saw now that they had done their best to defile the thing, daubing it with bloody symbols of their own craven gods. Auralius called up Brother Teleus, who at once unleashed the cleansing fire of his flamer over the heathen symbols in an attempt to obliterate them, but this was not at all the result it brought.

As the flames licked over the reaching arms of the monolith, their fiery, orange glow was at first sucked upwards, as though carried by some unseen force, and then repelled utterly, hurled back from the monolith in a cloud that threatened to engulf Teleus and the others. Teleus quickly cut off the gout of his weapon and plunged to the floor. Elogos, Cyriacus and Auralius escaped harm likewise before all four rose to their feet and stared in amazement at the monolith.

Between the high span of the monolith's arms, an opaque purple light now throbbed, crackling and swirling with the fury of lightning, yet racing and spiralling towards the sky like smoke escaping a fire. The beam of light burst upwards, piercing the sky and shooting towards space. Elogos gazed up, following the light's course and gaped in astonishment at what he saw above him.

The rising sun had not yet blotted out the stars, and in the dim grey sky, something moved. Its shape was unclear at such a distance, but even then Elogos was certain that something vast was suddenly awake amongst the stars above him.

The Thunderhawks roared into the launch bay, side by side, their pilots setting them down with little thought to their location, such was the urgency with which Elogos now ordered their return to the Shield of Vigilance. The planet below still held many secrets to be uncovered, the mysterious fortress certainly warranted further investigation, but there was clearly one matter in priority greater than either of these.

Elogos dashed down the Thunderhawk's ramp and swiftly crossed the hangar. All around him the other Marines raced back to their stations.

A minute later and Elogos arrived on the bridge, where Nerion patiently waited in his place.

‘Greetings, Elogos,’ said Nerion. ‘And tell me, what is this you have conjured up for us?’ Nerion gestured towards the forward observation window and Elogos cast his gaze out into space – straight at a second, colossal monolith. The thing was vast, its arms reached out to such a width that a ship could easily pass between them, yet apart from its size it was all but identical to the smaller monolith on the planet below.

‘Approach it,’ said Elogos. ‘Slowly.’

‘Aye,’ came the reply and the strike cruiser moved slowly forward. Its progress was interrupted as the ship suddenly rocked with a force sufficient to fling Elogos to the ground and leave Nerion desperately clutching the seat beside him in order to keep his feet.

‘We’re under attack!’ roared Nerion into the comm-link, instantly alerting all stations.

A dizzying blur of motion raced past the view screen and two brilliant streaks of light shot forth before the blast hatch came down and obscured the view. Elogos waited for the inevitable impact but instead felt only the mild judder of shields receiving fire. Auralius, it seemed, had got just a little more out of the Shield of Vigilance. Elogos gazed down at his console as he hauled himself to his feet; a dizzying array of sensory readings and energy signatures across it.

‘Eldar,’ said Elogos, cursing as he hammered the console with his fist. Nerion braced himself at a console behind his captain, as they readied for a counterattack. Only an eldar ship could have come upon them so utterly unseen, and moved with the disconcerting ease that Elogos had witnessed moments before through the view screen.

‘What are they doing here?’ said Nerion. His console comm-link sparked and died before him as he spoke.

‘I do not know why the accursed alien wretches do any of the things they do. If I did, I would be their master, nay, their destroyer and this matter would be done,’ snarled Elogos, his temper building as, one by one, the rest of the bridge’s delicate systems began to fade into powerlessness, or spark violently as energy coursed through their damaged circuits.

‘Brother Longinus,’ Elogos said through the comm-link, raising his voice to be heard over the sound of the warning claxons that rang throughout the whole ship. ‘Order the serfs to fire at will.’

‘Aye, my cap–’ came the disjointed reply. The ship rocked furiously again and for a moment all lights dipped out. A moment of black silence fell on the bridge before the ship’s emergency lighting came to life and bathed everything in its dull red glow.

‘Weapons down!’ came the frantic reply from Longinus in his post in the gun-batteries far beneath the bridge.

Elogos roared in annoyance but waited no more than a moment before forming a new plan of action.

‘Brother Auralius, do we have warp engines?’ said Elogos.

‘No, captain, our warp engines are crippled, but we have impulse power,’ said Auralius, his voice faint over the comm-link, now running on low power. The situation was grim.

‘Make for the gate,’ said Nerion, his voice lacking conviction.

‘What?’ said Elogos.

‘That gate out there, head for it. We can escape.’

Elogos frowned, but he had little other option. Nerion was right. The monolith was clearly some kind of astral gate. It was a massive risk, entering into the unknown; they could be ripped apart by the ravages of the warp or be thrust into some hellish daemon dimension. To do nothing meant certain destruction. The choice was not a good one, but it was the only choice Elogos had. Reluctantly, he gave the order.

‘Brother Auralius. Make a course for the monolith, pass between its arms and go through the gate, do you understand?’

‘Yes, captain.’

Elogos punched at his console and the small screen in front of him rolled over to a view of space beyond the ship. Sure enough, its approach summoned the monolith into life and the same hazing purple energy that Elogos had seen on the planet played in a swirling whirlpool at its midst. A moment later, and the Shield of Vigilance passed into this curious maelstrom.

They were in it for barely a moment before Elogos’s screen showed them emerging out into space once more.

‘Nerion,’ yelled Elogos. ‘Confirm position.’

‘Position reading is…’ Nerion paused. ‘No readings, Captain Elogos, we are not yet clear of the gate.’ A tense wait ensued before Nerion spoke again.

‘Position is… Captain, we are still over the planet Elysium, our position is just beyond the gate.’

‘Curse the aliens!’ roared Elogos, his hopes of escape dashed.

‘We don’t appear to be under attack, captain,’ said Nerion, ‘but the hull is badly damaged and we are unable to hold our course.’

Elogos leaned forwards to consult his console but halted as he felt a dread sensation run through him. All around him the ship seemed to twist and turn, slowly at first, then speeding up into a spiral motion. Such a sensation was impossible in space and Elogos knew instantly that his ship had lost all power and been cast into the well of Elysium’s gravity.

‘All power to engines,’ roared Elogos. For a moment, the ship was gripped by inertia as the engines fought back against the planet’s deathly grasp, but it was hopeless and a minute later the engines fell silent, burned out and made useless in their futile struggle to escape the force of gravity.

Trapped in the gravity well, the Shield of Vigilance was doomed, and its crew with it, unless Elogos acted swiftly. There was no escaping such a plunge, and Elogos cursed as he gave what might very well prove to be his last order.

‘All crew to drop-pods! Abandon ship!’

Nerion released the hatch and crawled out onto the damp ground outside, followed by Elogos. They now stood side by side on Elysium’s surface gazing up at the sky to see if any more of their brethren had managed to escape.

They stared at the sky for what seemed like hours looking for signs to tell them they were not the sole survivors. When first they saw something, it was not a sign of hope.

Two blazing white streaks appeared in the sky, hurtling earthward at a terrifying speed. As they fell, their shape became clear – it was the Shield of Vigilance, its hull severed in two by the eldar’s attack and now falling through the atmosphere in a dazzling blaze of light. The shooting streaks of light vanished from sight over the horizon and a moment of calm reigned until a huge explosion sounded through the air and a cloud of smoke, flame and debris rose up in distance.

The noise deafened Elogos and it was with utter surprise that he looked up once more to see a second group of white streaks tearing through the sky. They were smaller, but far more numerous, perhaps a dozen in number. Drop-pods. A moment later and Nerion’s auspex came to life. Inbuilt beacons broadcast their positions and a dozen white dots flashed up on his screen. Elogos and Nerion didn’t waste a second in

heading for the nearest one.

It was several hours before Elogos reached Cyriacus and located all the survivors, moving one by one to the location of their drop-pods, guided to each by the invaluable auspex. In time, their little group numbered a dozen brother Space Marines and perhaps four times that number in serfs and servitors. These were all that now remained. They were, however, without so much as a Thunderhawk. They were stranded, and only one thing now offered them hope of survival.

‘This is it, all the auspexes say so. It was right here,’ said Auralius, clearly finding it hard to believe his own words.

‘It can’t be, it simply cannot be. It can’t have just disappeared.’ Elogos was disbelieving. For all the auspex’s readings, he simply could not believe the spot they were now standing on was that which the stone fort had occupied, earlier. He fought against his doubt, but as he gazed out in every direction, the rise and fall of the ravines, the splitting of some ancient river’s course and the gentle slope of the high crest above him made him more and more certain this was indeed the place they had been less than a day before. But there was simply no fort in sight, or even any evidence of its existence.

‘How can this be?’ said Elogos, though none could offer him an answer.

He cast his gaze out towards the mountain now so familiar and, as dusk began to settle over it, he counted the stars over its peak. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Seven of them! To the right of those he had seen before, a seventh star now burned, though much dimmer than the rest, as though weak, dying. His surprise must have been audible.

‘What is it?’ said Auralius, drawing near.

‘This is the place,’ said Elogos.

‘What do you mean?’ said Cyriacus, standing and moving away from the fire.

‘There will be a fort here soon enough,’ said Elogos. ‘And before it is finished, that star will have burned out. The chapel of that fort will house a banner, bearing an image of six stars, but from this day our armour, will bear seven stars, there, beneath the knee. This will be our badge henceforth.’

A look of surprised realisation spread over Cyriacus’s face. ‘It seems we have come a long way indeed,’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’ said Auralius.

‘The gate,’ said Elogos. ‘It has taken us little distance, but carried us far. We are cast adrift, flung to a time I cannot place and stranded here until destiny comes to meet us. Then, I think, we shall find ourselves here all over again. It is the Emperor we serve but I think it is destiny that commands us now.’

‘Destiny?’ said Cyriacus. ‘I would not be so sure it is destiny that leaves us here. And for what end?’

‘To be sure that this place never falls to Chaos,’ said Elogos, strong and confident in his belief of a destiny waiting for him and all his brother Astartes. He looked at Auralius, worn and tired after their frantic escape from the strike cruiser, and in that haggard face he saw an older version of the same man. It was this aged Auralius whose body he had discovered the day before, whose helmet he had removed and whose face he had not then been able to place. Elogos was sure that to wait in this place, to be ready to fight the traitors when they came and set the chain of events in motion once again was the duty for which he and his men were now destined.

‘The Emperor began our march, and guides it still, but it is destiny that wills the universe to mankind. It is destiny that gives us a part in that now. We will do as it asks of us: we will keep this place and all its ancient secrets safe, and for our efforts, the universe will one day be mankind’s, just as the Emperor told us it would be.’

‘Nerion,’ said Elogos, turning to his sergeant. ‘Draw together the serfs. Mute them all, every last one. It will not serve to have those who come after us too well prepared – they must find themselves unwitting, as we have been, or they will have too little reason to follow in our steps.

‘Once that is done, take the serfs and find the wreckage of the Shield. Salvage from it all that you can. Her hull will provide a fine starting point.’

‘A starting point for what?’ said Nerion.

‘For a fort, a fort of stone and metal,’ said Elogos. ‘We are going to build a bastion of the Ultramarines here, right where I stand, and we will be ready when Chaos comes. Or, at least, some of our number will be ready, though we may not live to see it.

‘That is why we have been brought here, that is what destiny demands of us – to guard this place, to be ready and to fight and die in this place. This is how it must be, for we are destiny’s servants.’

‘It is as it should be,’ said the old farseer, the elegance of his race less apparent on his aged figure, his shuffling gait carrying little of the lithe grace so characteristic of his kind as he moved slowly towards the seat that awaited him beside his predecessors in

the Dome of Crystal Seers now that his work was complete.

‘All is as it should be?’ said the young acolyte.

‘Yes, all is as it should be, the gate will remain open for us, I have made sure it will be so,’ said the farseer. ‘For we are fate’s masters.’