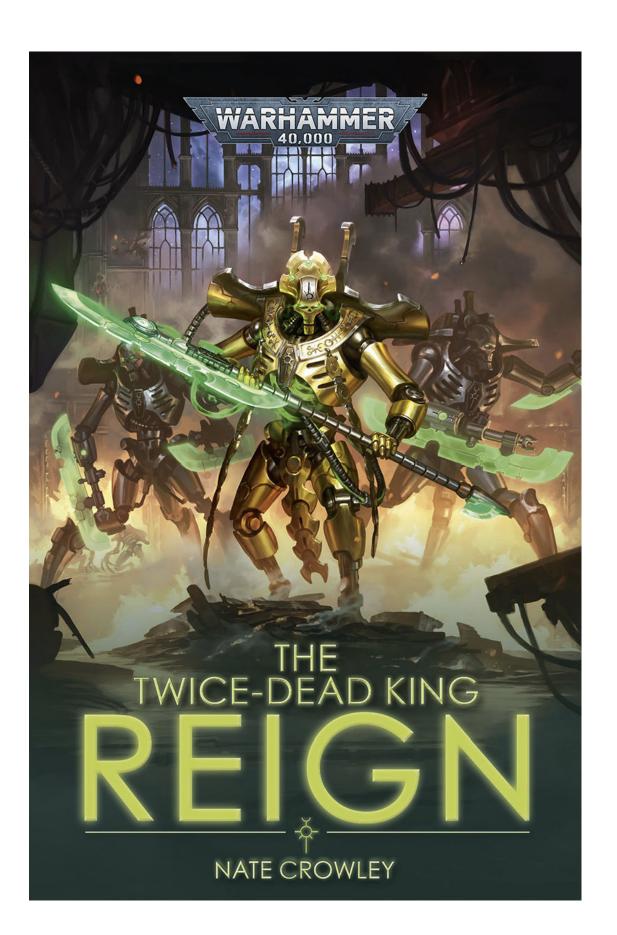
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NATE CROWLEY





For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind. By the might of His inexhaustible armies a million worlds stand against the dark.

Yet, He is a rotting carcass, the Carrion Lord of the Imperium held in life by marvels from the Dark Age of Technology and the thousand souls sacrificed each day so that His may continue to burn.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. It is to suffer an eternity of carnage and slaughter. It is to have cries of anguish and sorrow drowned by the thirsting laughter of dark gods.

This is a dark and terrible era where you will find little comfort or hope. Forget the power of technology and science. Forget the promise of progress and advancement. Forget any notion of common humanity or compassion.

There is no peace amongst the stars, for in the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war.

#### DRAMATIS NECRONAE

#### The Royal House of Ithakas

Unnas, The former dynast and king of Ithakas, equivalent in rank to a phaeron. Honoured by Szarekh himself for his actions at the Sokar Gate, in the war against the C'tan. Now fallen to the flayer curse. Slain in the ruins of Antikef, his capital, where he had anointed himself the Eater-of-Gods.

Djoseras, Kynazh of Ithakas, and elder scion of Unnas. Heir to the dynastic throne. Slain by a captain of the Angels Encarmine, during the fall of Antikef. Oltyx, The younger scion of the Ithakas Dynasty, and second in line to the throne. Formerly exiled as nomerch of the fringeyworld Sedh but now

throne. Formerly exiled as nomarch of the fringeworld Sedh, but now ascendant to the throne after the fall of Antikef. Sole survivor of the royal line.

Duamehht, Head of the House of Erebur, a cadet branch of the Ithakas Dynasty.

Pakhet, Royal warden, and captain of the king's lychguard. Previously sworn to Unnas, and now to Oltyx. A commoner of rare skill and honour.

The scarab, A canoptek creature of uncertain rank, the scarab is host to a gestalt personality comprising five partial copies of Oltyx's own consciousness, created to augment his mind but now emancipated.

#### The Ithakas Dynasty

Yenekh, High admiral of the Sedh defence fleet and captain of the ancient juggernaut *Akrops*. A figure of great renown, called the Razor for his prowess in Szarekh's war, but now suffering from the onset of the flayer curse.

Neth, Praetor of Sedh, and warden of its garrison. Formerly assigned to the

service of the nomarch, but now dismissed upon Oltyx's ascendance. Wishes he was a vargard.

Lysikor, A low-ranking noble from an Ithakan coreworld. Became a nemesor in the most technical sense, after killing everyone on his world who outranked him during the Great Sleep. A self-styled deathmark and master of canoptek constructs.

Borakka, Formerly a common soldier, was appointed Red Marshal of Antikef, charged with ensuring all subjects of the king com plied with the decree of biotransference. Now a war machine afflicted with the Destroyer curse.

Brukt, A skorpekh Destroyer lord, and the most abominably powerful of Borakka's Destroyer cult.

Denet, Sedh's Master of Monoliths – a once great general, afflicted by severe pattern ataxia. No longer possesses monoliths; forgets this.

Parreg, Sedh's Agoranomos (a now obsolete title bearing responsi bility for food imports), and one of the few of the world's nobles to have earned Oltyx's respect.

Taikash, Sedh's polemarch – a necron of extraordinary wealth, and very poor strategic ability.

Erraph, Sedh's Dikast – once a judge in a military court, but never much of a leader.

Korrocep, Once the master of all of Ithakas' navies. Slain at the Battle of the Sokar Gate, but still rumoured to persist in some form within the autonomous spirit of the *Akrops*.

#### **Other Dynasties**

Zultanekh, Crown prince of the Ogdobekh Dynasty, and heir to Anathrosis the Phaeron. Once commander of Ogdobekh forces against the Ithakan rebellion during the Wars of Seces sion, where he became the nemesis of Djoseras. Regarded as strange, even by the Ogdobekh.

Nebbeshken, A forthright cryptek of the Ogdobekh conclaves, known for mastery of drive technology.

Mentep, A cryptek from an unknown dynasty, formerly residing on Sedh in order to research the flayer curse. Gifted Oltyx with the boons of his five subordinate minds, and the strange ability known as the evocatory medium.

Claims to be an engrammancer.

Xott, A canoptek reanimation construct of unusually advanced sentience, which Mentep insists does not possess an auton omous spirit of forbidden magnitude.

## **SUNSET**



#### **CHAPTER ONE**

### REFLECTIONS

How has it come to this?

Oltyx intended to speak the words aloud, but he could not find the will. He did not often speak, these days, as when the silence flowed back into place, it only reminded him how alone he was. And so he let the words settle in the hollow of his mind instead, so as to at least make a companion of their echo.

How has it come to this?

Ismaronsz was burning. Oltyx watched the dawn spread in an arc across the arid tomb world, consuming a night pocked with glowing impact craters, and leaving smoke-streaked desert behind. Ahead of the sun's light moved a line of ugly warships, cruising at the very limits of the world's exosphere, and shedding yet more bombs from their city-broad bellies. Gauss fire streaked up from the shrouded surface, consuming two, three, six of the barbarian vessels. But it was not enough. The wrecks of the stricken craft tumbled silently down into the ocean of smoke, along with the bombs of the survivors, to pulverise whatever still stood beneath.

Oltyx listened to the last carrier wave signals echoing across the interstitial bands, as the remnants of Ismaronsz's orbital defence cohort faced their end.

The Unclean overwhelm us... our core is stricken...

Recall failure approaching totality... The Sixth Legion is gone...

But, my lord, there are no scythecraft left to launch...

A curse on Unnas for this abandonment...

Oltyx had seen and heard enough. Waving a dark, ragged hand through the carnage before him, he swept the vision of the world away, and paced on to the next scene of devastation.

Here was Tarramun, where the mausoleums of his people were suspended in the seething heart of a gas giant. Those diamond-braced tombs had withstood sixty million years of crushing, elemental force down there, thought Oltyx, only for it all to end like this. Amid the tangled bones of necron cruisers, the last of the world's particle whip batteries were in the process of being overwhelmed, picked apart by fighter swarms so dense they seemed like mist. In a silent flash of green, one of the ancient weapons platforms detonated, taking hundreds of attackers with it. But it made little difference. Thousands more craft were streaming through the firestorm of its death already, towards the gravitic aperture that led to the tomb complexes.

Just visible through the faint translucence of the scene, Oltyx could see another planet falling to the enemy, and another beyond that. The images, woven in light down the central aisle of the royal sanctum, were being transmitted from monitoring constructs spread across the breadth of the once mighty Ithakas Dynasty. Oltyx had been pacing up and down along that line for one hundred and four hours now, and he no longer bothered moving around the projections – he just walked straight through them, causing the images to shimmer and distort with his passing.

But they never failed to re-form in his wake, and on each new passage through them, they showed a worse situation. Oltyx had come to accept, some time ago, that he was not observing the progress of a war – he was watching the fall of his empire, in real time. And for all the certain confidence he knew a king should feel, it was beginning to get to him.

With a brief crash of interstitial static, a Scythe-class cruiser foundered off his left shoulder, its drive sepulchre rupturing under bombardment from six opposing capital ships. Trudging through the spectral, gauss-green vapour of its death bloom, Oltyx tilted his faceplate upwards, and watched the crude, blade-prowed victors slink onwards towards the now defenceless world it had guarded. The sight of those ships, barely void-worthy, and yet free to ransack the legacy of Ithakas, made his core boil with loathing.

Humans, he thought, stung by hatred at the thought of the word. This variety of Unclean had only staggered into consciousness at the very end of his own people's Great Sleep. The creatures had blundered through chaotic cycles of expansion and collapse as the necrons had slept on, losing great swathes of what meagre advancements they had once achieved. But they had persisted, and were now in what would be the last throes of a period of empire, begun ten thousand years ago by a thuggish mystic on their homeworld.

They should have been a triviality: a degenerate martial cult, haunting the shell of former conquests. *And yet here they were*, thought Oltyx bitterly. And even armed with such pitiful technology as they were – *they used solid munitions*, *by the Triarchs* – they were sweeping away the entire empire of Ithakas, once the bastion of necrontyr power in the galactic west.

A *crusade*, the humans called this warfleet. A tidal wave of superstition and hatred, manifesting as an armada thousands of ships strong. It had been sighted months ago, approaching Sedh, the fringeworld where Oltyx had waited out the centuries in exile. He had known then that the Unclean fleet would be the doom of Ithakas.

Once, such a foe would have been laughable. But the dynasty had become weak, rotting from the inside as Unnas, its dynast, had languished in madness. Now, like some ancient, dull-witted beast, the kingdom had been all but devoured alive before it even knew it was under attack. For all his bitterness towards the king who had cast him out, Oltyx had not been able to stand aside and watch it all be swept away. After the armada had been sighted, he had travelled to the crownworld Antikef, risking death in breaching the terms of his exile, to plead for the defence of the realm.

First, he had gone to Kynazh Djoseras, his elder, and the heir to the throne. But crippled by his loyalty to Unnas, Djoseras had offered nothing. Then, with no other roads left to him, Oltyx had gone to Unnas himself. It had... not gone well.

The king's court, it had transpired, had fallen to the flayer curse in the years of Oltyx's absence. And so had the king. Unnas had collapsed entirely into degeneracy, becoming little more than a puppet to his honourless adviser, Hemiun. The treacherous courtier had stripped Oltyx of all his royal enhancements, imprisoning him in the desecrated vault of Ithakka the Founder, along with a menagerie of horrors. In the depths of that decaying

ziggurat, Oltyx had come to the brink of losing his own mind.

But in the end, Djoseras had seen sense. While Oltyx had been imprisoned, his elder had rallied those few worlds still willing and able to fight, and had scraped together a fleet for the final, desperate defence of Antikef. With the battle raging, and hundreds of capital ships clashing across the breadth of the home system, Djoseras had stormed Unnas' palace himself, delivering Oltyx from destruction so that they might fight together.

And how they had fought, Oltyx lamented. Within the walls of the crumbling necropolis, the two scions had commanded the defence of the capital against staggering odds. For a full solar cycle, starships had fallen like rain across the crownworld's deserts, until Oltyx had almost begun to wonder if the dynasty would weather the storm. But then the landing craft had come.

Oltyx's ocular array flagged motion to his right; as if summoned from his engrammatic strata, a cluster of crude, bulky shapes lumbered in from the edge of the nearest projection, on a slow approach to the world of Gehsekt. They were giant craft of appalling simplicity: little more than airtight steel boxes, crammed with their reeking organic cargo. But that was all they needed to be, against an empire that had spent the best of its strength so many millennia ago.

Because the humans were numberless, it seemed. On the second solar cycle of the Battle of Antikef, they had invaded in million-strong waves, overcoming the ancient bastion of the necropolis with sheer, wasteful mass of soldiery. Every monstrous, ancient contingency of defence had been brought to bear by Djoseras. Every last scrap of the dynasty's faded might had been scoured from the storage sepulchres and dimensional appendices. But Ithakas had mouldered too long in decadence. What remained, for all its grandeur, had not been enough to hold back the tide.

The crownworld had been lost. And though its surface had been turned to a sea of boiling rock by the *Akrops*, the ship which carried him now, it had been small vengeance. Antikef was now a staging post for the humans' crusade. Even now their ships were emerging from the warp by the hundred, and every few hours, a new attack fleet would split off to target one of the coreworlds. There could be no fighting back against such an onslaught, Oltyx knew. All he could do was watch.

He glared at the spindly shapes now, as they shoaled over the molten surface of the crownworld in the next projection. Although more than half the Unclean armada was barely armed — civilian vessels belonging to their strange cult, plus cargo vessels, hospital ships and troop carriers — at its core were hundreds of naval vessels, some of which rivalled necron voidcraft in scale. And leading this great host of warships, like the heads of some beast from the ancient texts, were three leviathans.

The human flagship was a vessel called the *Polyphemus*, which the *Akrops* had wounded on the way out of Antikef. The strike had torn the ship's prow away, and should have foundered it. But Oltyx knew better than to presume a corpse when there was none to be seen.

The second head of the monster was the *Lystraegonian*, a blood-red hammer of a ship that was both fortress and temple to an order of the transhuman warriors called the Astartes – the *Space Marines*. It had been the ship which had finally breached the necropolis walls, in a reckless atmospheric bombing run, before disgorging waves of Astartes to lead the sacking. That ship was a devil.

The third great ship had arrived just after the Battle of Antikef, and it was the strangest of them. Oltyx looked at it now, as the huge sigil on its flank – a skull and a primitive toothed gear – glowed with the reflected devastation of the planet below. This craft was called the *Tyresias*, and belonged to the machine-cultists of the world known as Mars. They would be here to plunder noctilith from the tombs of Ithakas. But scavengers though they were, they had not come armed lightly – the ship bore relict weapons more formidable than anything he had seen on a human vessel before.

At the sight of the thing, Oltyx could not bear to look at the barbarian ships any longer. Emitting the low buzz which had passed for a sigh ever since his people had given up their bodies, Oltyx dismissed the sight of Antikef, and then cast for all the projections down the length of the sanctum to be dispelled. They faded, their chorus of interstitial distress calls dwindling along with them, until the sanctum was shrouded in darkness once more. The only light now was from the glow of the stars beyond the viewport. And between those stars and him, no longer possible to ignore, sat a blunt black shadow.

The throne.

As far as Oltyx knew, that great slab was the last piece of crownworld stone still under Ithakan sovereignty. It was a replica of the throne which had sat in Unnas' palatial ziggurat, installed here so as to provide proper lodgings to

the dynast, should he have found cause to travel the stars. But Unnas had not left the walls of his court for centuries, and so it had been empty a long time. Now, the emptiness of the seat beckoned to Oltyx. It had gone from being *a* throne to *the* throne.

Stepping resentfully forward, Oltyx considered taking his seat on the thing at last. But just as he had done every time the thought occurred after a few laps of the room, he opted to walk around the throne, and stand in front of the viewport instead, gazing into the void.

Oltyx let out another sigh-analogue, and as the sound resonated in the chill, a glow spread out across the viewport. It was a green glow: smouldering slivers of light, like magma seeping from the floor of some oceanic trench. *Ships?* barked some deep-rooted array in his flux, combat engagement states enacting themselves even before his optic buffer could parse the true meaning of the lights. But Oltyx knew these were no enemy ships. These were his reflection: the discharge nodes of his battered carapace, flaring with minute exhalations of plasma as thoughts stirred his core-flux.

Lit by those smouldering points of light, Oltyx's body was a wasteland of char-dark matter: raw necrodermis, riven with cracks and gouges. A necron of the Ithakan royal line should have worn gold and silver, of course. But on the day of his exile, Oltyx had undergone the rite of excoriation, and been stripped of his status. He had only acquired scars since then.

Nevertheless, glowing now in his reflection was a new, stronger light. At the centre of his hulking, half-ruined form, the thoracic cartouche bearing the sigil of his dynasty glowed as fiercely as ever. It was not like the cartouche on the breast of any other necron in the kingdom. And in the solar cycles since Antikef's death, it had only grown more complex and elaborate. This was the royal sigil, in its most perfect form, and it was a signal of its bearer's divinity.

Because of course, it had not just been land and tombs which had been lost on the crownworld. The dynast himself, King Unnas, had died. That had been a blessing. But Djoseras had *also* fallen, in a duel with an Astartes champion, after commanding Oltyx to seek escape aboard the *Akrops*. That had been no blessing at all.

Oltyx and his elder had never had an easy understanding of each other. Indeed, Oltyx had spent the last few centuries thinking of little but his hatred for the kynazh, who he had always seen as vain and weak of mind. He had

only begun to realise just how worthy an inheritor of Ithakas Djoseras would have been, on the very eve of devastation. And he had only understood in full as he had chanted his funerary rites atop the siege-quaked ruin of the palace.

Djoseras. His mentor, his rival, his brother, for sixty million years. The only being Oltyx could imagine knowing how to fight on against such dire odds, obliterated forever. And in the wake of his passing, Oltyx had inherited his birthright at last. He was king.

*Rejoice*, thought Oltyx, as he gazed into the darkness outside. The stars were faint out here, in the dense cloud of gas and ice where the *Akrops* had taken shelter, at the edge of Antikef's solar system. But even without the aid of his optic buffer, he could make out the slightly brighter light of the crownworld's sun among them. It was a sad thing: a dim spectre, outshone entirely by the reflected fire of his own cartouche.

That was a bleak omen. According to the most ancient principles of the necrontyr, an inscription was not just the symbol of a thing. It was the thing, by right of the inscriber's heka – their sheer will. It was why the necrontyr had always been ready to sacrifice anything in defence of their tombs, as without their monuments the dead could have no honour, nor even identity. In a very real sense, that sigil on his breast was the dynasty now. Already, it outshone the divine light of the crownworld's star. And soon, once he led what remained of his people from this doomed place, that fragile fire in his core would be flickering alone in the great blackness. In the face of exodus, the reflection of the cartouche suddenly seemed very, very small.

In time, Oltyx resolved that he'd had enough of staring at that sad, gloomy scrap of a star, just as he'd had enough of watching his kingdom being dismantled by apes. It was time to face the future. He sent an interstitial order through the bones of the *Akrops*, the strength of his seal riding over all other operations, and with the slowness of sinking dusk, the great ship began to turn towards the great emptiness beyond the system's edge, so that he could look outwards. As the *Akrops* rotated, a transmission made its way back through the interstices, bearing both shipmaster's and admiral's seals. *Yenekh*.

'A new bearing, my liege?' enquired the warrior once known as the Razor of Sedh, his words appended by involuntary stacks of doubt-signifier glyphs as they appeared in Oltyx's mind. Yenekh was unsure, Oltyx noted, of how to address his king. In the long years of Oltyx's exile, the high admiral had been

the nearest thing to a friend in his existence. But that situation could no longer persist, as a king could have no equals.

And a king owes nobody an explanation, thought Oltyx, before dismissing the message without a response. He tried to convince himself his silence was rooted in the formalities of rank, but the ideation collapsed near instantly in his memetic buffer. There was, after all, another far more troubling reason to avoid speaking with Yenekh.

There was a reckoning due between them. Unfinished business. And while he knew neither of them were keen to settle it, it was a problem that would come to find them soon enough if they did not hunt it down first.

That grim matter with Yenekh was just one of the many dreads the future held for Oltyx. There would be no avoiding any of them. And as the engines rumbled deep below, hauling that great keel around to face away from his home star, he began to regret the order to turn altogether, as it had shown him just how little cause there was for hope.

Through the crystal of the viewport was a new set of lights. Shivering green constellations, they huddled together in a loose cluster as if seeking warmth in the void, with smaller sparks drifting between them. This time, the lights really were ships: those which had escaped from the carnage of Antikef, and those loyalist vessels which had responded to Djoseras' summons in the days since. For the first time since Ithakka the Founder had sailed his torchship to Antikef from the homeworld at the other end of time, the dynasty's ruler could see the entirety of his holdings at once.

The ships had gathered here under an apotropaic shroud cast by the *Akrops* itself. The protocol would be sufficient to conceal them indefinitely from the eyes of the Unclean. But as tempting as it was to remain hidden, it would have been a dishonour to Djoseras.

Because this fleet was his elder's real legacy. The kynazh had known Antikef was doomed from the moment he had seen the crusade armada, just as Oltyx had. And so, before he had begun gathering ships from the coreworlds for the battle at Antikef, he had called upon Yenekh on Sedh, and tasked him with his own mission of mercy.

Acting on those orders, the *Akrops* had made lightning visits to the grandest tomb worlds in the dynasty, offering a stark ultimatum: board with whatever troops, war machines, relics and treasures they could translate inside the ship within an hour, or be left to the ravages of the Unclean. Many had scoffed, of

course, too lost in their own decadence to take the threat of a lesser species seriously, or too outraged by the apparent blasphemy of abandoning the *kemmeht*, the divine territory of the necrontyr. Yenekh had not wasted his time on them.

Still, for every domain that had ignored the offer, another had accepted. The *Akrops* had eventually been forced to abandon the mission, racing to Antikef in order to retrieve Oltyx before the capital was entirely overrun. But the siege had held long enough for the gigantic vessel to have made its way round a broad swathe of Ithakas, and so it had arrived heaving with refugees. There were entire *tomb complexes* aboard, teleported in their entirety into the cavernous holds, and hundreds of nobles, all with attendant legions.

The other vessels that had limped here were similarly burdened, and between them all, the ragged hulls of the exodus fleet held the whole of the dynasty. It was nowhere near enough to take back and hold even a corner of their former domain. But it was enough, at least in theory, to claim a new home, somewhere in the sordid bloom of lesser cultures which had afflicted the galaxy during the necrons' long slumber.

Djoseras had arranged all of this. He had let himself be destroyed for it, even. Power had been everything to the necrontyr, and meant even more to the necrons who had inherited their minds. And yet Djoseras had waived the greatest power of all, the divine gold of kingship, purely for his faith in Oltyx. He had been convinced his younger was capable of something that he, like most of their kind, would never be able to grasp – the ability to adapt. Djoseras had thought Oltyx both cunning, and willing to bend the old ways, in the name of preserving his people. He had believed, unshakably, that Oltyx would lead Ithakas to survival.

That was all extremely flattering, of course. But as Oltyx stared out over the lights of the exodus fleet, his phantasory buffer filling with thoughts of all the lords waiting for his orders to sail, a terrible realisation sank over him.

He had absolutely no idea what to do next.

Oltyx felt the weight of the throne behind him then, almost as if the whole of it sat on his shoulders. He turned, glowering at the stone lump with the violence usually reserved for an enemy, and when he finally conceded he could not intimidate it into crumbling, he resigned himself to sitting on the damned thing.

'Perhaps I will think like a king,' he said out loud, appending the words

with flashes of sarcasm-patterns, 'if I sit in the proper chair.'

Oltyx sat, and thought. He floated the question of where to lead the fleet in his memetic buffer time and time again, but no wisdom leaked from the rock of the crownworld, and his flux only grew more turbulent with indecision. Hours passed, until thought crumbled entirely, and all he could do was stare out at those meagre ships, and his own reflection before them: a king defeated at the start of his reign, looking too small on his relic throne.

Oltyx was brought back to himself by a muted warning glyph from his seismoreceptory array, informing him of a vibration in the deck below the throne. The shudder came again, building into a rumble that lasted for seconds, and the sanctum's gauss lamps began to flicker. This was not unexpected. Such disturbances had been commonplace on the *Akrops*, even before the damage it had sustained at Antikef, for it was an old ship, and had long ago been damaged on a level that could never truly be repaired.

But the minute fluctuations in the light had triggered overrides in his optic buffer, calibrated to detect the smallest slip in an assassin's camouflage. And so, for the briefest instant after the flicker, while his vision was being recalibrated, darkness overtook him.

When sight came back to Oltyx, he found the reflection in the viewport was no longer his own.

The figure on the throne was roughly his shape, but it was clad in the gold reserved for the dynast alone. The gold did not gleam. The channels of its carapace were clotted with filth and gore, and around it bobbed a vile haze of tomb-flies. Its faceplate, too, was not his own – it was malformed, but he could not see how, for it was shrouded by a mask in the image of a skull. Only one ocular gleamed from the shadow of its socket; the other was empty and dark.

Was this an image of Unnas, who had once been his father and once his king? Unnas, who had been lost to the madness of Llandu'gor's gift, and had called himself the *Eater-of-Gods*, making a squalid charnel-city of Antikef's necropolis? Or was it some new horror, conjured entirely by the stress inflicted on his own mind? Whatever it was, it was still there, glowering at Oltyx with its lone ocular, and wearing the grin of a corpse.

An error, thought Oltyx, as the coldness of the stone beneath him became suddenly pronounced, matching the dread seeping through his core. *Engrammatic leakage*, he insisted to himself. It had to be. Refrenations from

the stresses of the battle, or from the mending of the damage Hemiun had inflicted on him. The random merging of memories with perception, not to be imparted with any significance. *Just an error*.

Or madness, hissed the apparition, with acid cruelty. Do you realise, Oltyx, the significance of the throne you now sit in? Do you know, I wonder, when it last bore the weight of the divine?

Oltyx froze in place, the only sound the clink of chipping stone as his fingers tightened on the arms of the throne. Would answering this thing dispel the refrenation in his perceptory arrays which had caused it, or simply drive him further into madness? Was a hallucination conjured by the heka of a king a real thing? Whatever the case, he could not help considering its question, for Oltyx knew precisely when the old king had last sat here.

'Sokar,' said Oltyx, and the spectre laughed.

Yes... back in the good old days. The dying days of Szarekh's war – the great War In Heaven. That bittersweet moment, where we saw we had conquered the Old Ones, but spent ourselves to do so. And where, overcome with the fate he had been tricked into inflicting on us all, Szarekh made plans for one last fight.

'Against the C'tan,' Oltyx ventured, increasingly distressed that the fluxglitch behind the apparition had not resolved itself, and the reflected king nodded gravely.

The C'tan had been gods, of the worst sort. They had offered the necrontyr victory not just over the ancient foes of the Old Ones, but over death itself. Szarekh had accepted their boon, but only discovered too late the price his people would pay. Freedom from death, it had transpired, was to be achieved by the abandonment of life. And so, on the day of biotransference, the necrontyr had been replaced by the necrons, shorn of their souls, and bound in frames of iron that would last until time itself wore them to atoms.

'Szarekh summoned you... him... to take part in that final strike, didn't he?' *He summoned Unnas, yes. Him and four others, with their finest weapons.* 'I remember.'

Oltyx did remember. Unnas had left Antikef on this very ship, with the admiral-king Korrocep and a crew of one hundred thousand, and would only say he was bound for a place called the Sokar Gate. After an absence of a year he had returned, aboard a ship beaten to the edge of annihilation. Of Korrocep, or the crew, there had been no sign. And while Unnas had stated

that a victory had been won, he had never said another word about it.

Whatever had transpired at Sokar had changed him profoundly, to the point where Oltyx had long wondered if, in any real sense, what had come back had been Unnas at all. Back at the palace on Antikef, when he had confronted the Eater-of-Gods in his hall, Oltyx had come up against the very edges of the truth, but the whole of it had been concealed from him. He had learned that every dynasty whose king had flown to Sokar had long since fallen into ruin. Ithakas had been the last of them. And now with Unnas gone, there was no being left in existence, save perhaps Szarekh himself, who knew what had happened there.

'What happened to Unnas out there?' asked Oltyx, in a voice so quiet it was like shifting stone. But the lamps flickered again, and the golden thing was gone, replaced with his own coal-dark reflection once more. Oltyx felt a deep coldness, and a sense of absence, as if his core-flux had been vented to hard void. As if something had left him which he badly needed.

He was aware now of the utter silence of the dynast's chamber, and the sheer emptiness of it. It was large enough to hold ten-score warriors, but contained only the throne, and him on it. On Unnas' final flight from the ruin of Sokar, that emptiness would have filled the whole of the *Akrops*. He would have sat alone on this seat, on that burning ship, with only his thoughts – only the memories of whatever he had done – for company.

What happened to you out there?

The floor shook again, then, and a deep groan rose from the depths of the ship.

'My king.' It was Yenekh again, with the unmistakable tone of a noble preparing to deliver bad news to their dynast. 'In your radiance, you will have noticed a brief difficulty with energistic transfer just now. It seems the Akrops' engines have sustained greater damage than we first thought, and your rotation of the ship has triggered a refrenation event.'

Oltyx would have maintained his previous silence, but shaken by the apparition that had worn the guise of the slain dynast, he found his temper breaking the seal of his vocal buffer.

'You criticise a royal mandate, admiral?'

'On the contrary,' continued Yenekh smoothly, with only the most muted stress-signifiers appended to the transmission. 'I mean to praise you, as is right, on your wisdom. In commanding the ship to turn, you provided this

loyal subject with an early warning of weakness in the drive — as you surely intended. Even as we speak, a plasmancer subconclave is translating from the Handtaker, fresh arrived from Phyloskh, to assess the flaws. A full self-refit sequence will be commanded of the ship's autonomous spirit, so we shall not be caught off guard when the need to move arises.'

As you surely intended, thought Oltyx. Szarekh's teeth, he has a nerve. Although he willed his anger to stay alight, Oltyx could not help himself. The Razor of Sedh, somehow, had found the precise tone with which to poke at his own king, while remaining entirely within protocol. It was... atrocious. And in the shadow of what he had just encountered, it made Oltyx profoundly thankful Yenekh existed, despite the gravity of the confrontation which doubtless lay ahead of them. It made him feel less alone.

'Speaking of which,' ventured Yenekh, 'I have been wondering as to where we might move, when the time comes to do so. It is your decision alone, of course, but I have been around the stars in my time. Perhaps I could offer you a series of suggestions so foolish that certainty will be revealed by your own contrasting wisdom?'

Oltyx let the interstices remain silent a moment longer – Yenekh would wait on his king's word for hours, if necessary – and tried to talk himself out of accepting the hand he was being offered. A king could not afford to have equals. A king was made distant by divinity; he could not be close to anyone.

But Oltyx's memetic buffer was nothing if not thorough, and after a full second of deliberation, his mind was clear. All these things are true, he concluded. But this king is not having a good day at all. Perhaps it might not diminish him too much to accept a little counsel in this matter. Or a little company.

'Very well, Razor,' he said at last, letting glyphs of cold ambiguity coat the message. 'You will present yourself to the dynast's chamber at once, where your king will question you, and reveal what other weaknesses in the fleet you have surely failed to spot. Then, perhaps, I will hear your suggestions, and the new dynast of Ithakas will finally address his subjects on the matter of their crownworld to be.'

Yenekh sent nothing in return but glyphs of profound obedience, arranged with an immaculate balance of humility and flare. The fact the sequence could also be read in an obscure homeworld dialect from before

biotransference, in which it would translate as 'took your fly-blown time', was surely an artefact of chance.



#### **CHAPTER TWO**

## A GRAND INHERITANCE

'You know, I never truly appreciated the size of this old monster,' said Yenekh, as they marched through the catacomb stillness of the royal decks beneath the sanctum, 'until I walked the breadth of it for the first time. You can know a ship's mass down to the atom, but there's no replacing the feel you get from pacing its deck.'

'And have you had much cause to pace these *extremely forbidden* decks, over the years?' probed Oltyx, allowing the very faintest edge of playfulness to shine through the threat in his tone, despite himself.

'No, my king,' Yenekh admitted rapidly. 'It is all... entirely novel to me.'

Like the Cairn-class ship its design had been scaled up from, the *Akrops* was wider than it was long, taking the form of a flattened crescent, with a heavily armoured hull that hung back from its widest point. The ziggurat of the command citadel, where Yenekh's bridge and personal suite sat, rose from the very rear of that hull, and its highest tiers were the royal decks, reserved for the use of the dynast, and capped with the sanctum where the throne sat.

'I forgot how much space there was up here, truly,' continued Yenekh, as

they descended a cavernous stairwell, the clank of their footsteps echoing from the *khet*-high statues of former dynasts flanking it. Whereas the admiral usually spoke with the same vigour he strode around with, both his gait and his words were needlessly cautious up here, as if he was a trespasser. He craned his neck to look up at the shadowed faces of kings from the time of flesh, and Oltyx saw there was a hesitance in the set of his oculars.

'What did the shipwrights expect you to do with all this space?'

'Own it,' said Oltyx darkly. 'Same as the rest.' Yenekh's nodes flashed to suggest he was about to speak – no doubt to compliment the magnificence of it all – but the words never came. That was understandable: for all its grandeur, there was little to enjoy about this forlorn, dingy museum of gods.

They walked silently, after that. The initial comfort Oltyx had felt from Yenekh's presence had dried up soon after the admiral had arrived in his sanctum. Yenekh had made a few suggestions for potential courses to plot, but everything he had proposed, Oltyx had already considered and dismissed in his own consultation of the ship's orreries. The admiral had continued to list world after world, but after a while, an ugly shadow had loomed over the conversation. They both knew, after all, that there was little point in talking together about the future, without also discussing the fate awaiting the Razor.

In the end, the increasingly stilted exchange had calcified Oltyx's resolve to move forward and establish leadership of his exile court. He had been no more eager to face the gathered survivors of the dynasty, but the prospect had at least become more favourable than the exponentially increasing sadness involved in trying to speak with Yenekh. So he had sent summons for all nobles of sufficient rank to assemble on the *Akrops*, and had brought his lychguard forth to escort their king to his court.

The broad-shouldered warriors moved ahead of their king in a wedge formation, ceremonial spears casting deep shadows to either side as they passed through the statue-haunted colonnades. The dynast of Ithakas had, by tradition, been accompanied by twenty lychguard. But service to a decaying mind had taken its toll, even on these stalwart warriors, and only twelve had made it through the long madness of Unnas' reign to be inherited by Oltyx.

They were clad, like all the dynasty's troops, in the mirror-silver plate of Ithakas, while each bore a slim crescent of gold on their brow, just below their plain cranial crests, to denote their status as royal protectors. To Oltyx, they were all identical, except the larger figure leading the wedge – a

formidably armoured fighter barely a palm's span shorter than the king himself, and armed on this occasion with a heavy stave.

This was Pakhet, he had learned, the phalanx's practor. Most lychguard were identified only by an interstitial signifier-glyph, of course. But Pakhet had the rare honour of a name granted in the noble tongue, in recognition of her prowess in service. She certainly looked capable, Oltyx thought: her nodal arrays pulsed with ever-ready aggression, and scanning the shadows from the deep cupola of her clavicle collar was a long faceplate capped with a bifurcated crest and set in an expression of permanent, raptorial vigilance.

That faceplate turned to him now, seeking instruction, for they had arrived at the stone portal which sealed the sanctum from the command citadel it nested on. From here on in, they would proceed down through the tiers of the ziggurat, and then forward along the spine of the *Akrops*, until they reached the point where its vast wings met. There, inside a sphere of extradimensionally braced godsteel, sat the synedrion. It was where Oltyx had once convened his council of misfits during the strange years of his exile on Sedh, and so it seemed fitting that he had now decreed his new court to meet there, too.

Once these gates were breached, Oltyx knew, his people would see their king for the first time, and form their opinion of him. And while their obedience was guaranteed, their respect was not. It certainly would not do simply to translate in with the cheap flourish of a conjurer, and so he signalled for his lychguard to advance and open the gates by hand. Pakhet inclined her brow, and obeyed.

She made it five paces towards the portal, before Yenekh raised his hand in meek objection, and Oltyx halted the praetor with a wave of his hand. Then, he turned on Yenekh with oculars dimmed to the very coolest smoulder, brimming with the threat of the business they had not yet discussed. The look did not go unrecognised.

'Believe me, great dynast, when I say I make this statement purely out of loyalty, and without any forgetfulness of your freedom of will-'

'But,' prompted Oltyx.

'But... I wish to remind the king he no longer need even raise a council, should he not be inclined. His word is law over all matter, after all, by nature of his divine heka. Whatever opinions that rabble in the synedrion may hold need never pollute his aural buffer – they will obey, no matter what.'

Oltyx wanted to respond with vicious indignance, as he knew a king should, when questioned. But Yenekh's meaning was clear – he had seen Oltyx's trepidation, and was trying to spare him the ordeal. It was kindness. And to his own surprise, Oltyx found himself rewarding it with truth.

'The king wishes to raise a council, Yenekh,' said Oltyx dolefully. 'Because the king, as you may have inferred from our conversation in the sanctum – and in an admission which shall *never* be repeated – has no idea what to do next.'

Yenekh's next words came frayed at the edges, as he was clearly distressed at such an unfathomable idea being presented so bluntly.

'It will come in time, Oltyx, surely? And you have time. The eyes of the enemy are crude – we are well hidden from them here. And it will take time for the ship's drive to be coaxed back to proper function. If you wish longer to refine your choice, you have every reason to delay. You owe no explanation to these lords, and you certainly owe them no haste.'

'No, admiral. But I owe them a future. Djoseras told me, once, that to lead well means being able to serve, as well as rule. I owe them a king who is seen from time to time, too. Ithakas has been ruled too long from behind closed doors. Let us get this over with.'

With that, he nodded to Pakhet, who had waited with hands braced on the doorway throughout the conversation. Shoulder-plates rippling with obedience-patterns, she leaned forward to heave against the noctilith slab, and the doors were opened.

After traversing the sombre caverns of the royal decks, the halls of the command citadel seemed bright as daylight, and almost in a state that could be described as busy. After millennia operating with a severe crew shortfall as the ill-favoured *Akrops* had languished at Sedh, its decks were once again trodden by Immortal deck officers, maintenance canopteks, and nobles bedecked with the ornamentation of a dozen different worlds.

'Have you the wits of warriors?' barked Yenekh, at a group of Triszheni shipmasters who stood in their path, consumed with their jealous inspection of the *Akrops*' interior. 'Your envious perusing obstructs the dynast's path! Scatter, dust-specks! You may kneel – from *beside* the royal procession.'

As the pack of lesser lords scrambled to clear the way, Oltyx was reminded once again of the state of the dynasty's decline, even before the humans had invaded. Their joints ground and their limbs spasmed, and one corroded

captain who failed to move fast enough was toppled by the butt of Pakhet's stave, landing on his side with a dull clatter. Oltyx passed them by without a glance, and without having said a word.

As they moved through the common decks between the ziggurat and the synedrion, they became genuinely crowded. Clearly, a great deal of those necrons with the autonomy to do so had translated aboard after rumours of the king's appearance had spread, and the *Akrops* probably held more of their people now than it had carried even in its heyday, at the peak of Szarekh's great war. Many of the new shipmates were old acquaintances, thrown together now after aeons of isolation. Before the bow wave of Pakhet's phalanx, Oltyx saw ancient rivals arguing, former comrades locked in either glee or despair as they reminisced on wars long won or lost, and even a grudge about to be settled by phase blade.

All these encounters, however, fell still as the king approached. Even before the clanking lockstep of the lychguard reached their auditory transducers, the nobles felt the golden pressure of Oltyx's interstitial shadow on the edges of their perception, and fell to their knees. It was as if a bubble of silence and stillness had broken free of the royal sanctum, to cocoon Oltyx as he moved through the ship.

Within that bubble, however, beyond the perception of all they passed, Oltyx and Yenekh – with some ease returned to them by their immersion in the life of the ship – had begun attending to matters of state. In practice, given the state of Ithakas had been reduced to a cluster of forlorn voidcraft, this meant a review of ships, conducted either by shared ocular scry, or by projections in the air ahead of them, coded only to their optic buffers, while they spoke in the blinking code.

'It's a miracle we're moving at all,' admitted Yenekh, as a projection of the *Akrops* loomed above the heads of the advancing lychguard. Seen from the outside, it was in a bleak state. Plasma trailed in slim green threads from a galaxy of punctures, and the hull was clouded in places by thick swarms of repair scarabs, as the ship's vast, sullen autonomous spirit deployed its megaton matter reserves to shore up ruined armour.

'I am surprised it did not fare better,' Oltyx replied.

'My king, the ship flew into the heart of an armada that took your crownworld in a matter of days, and then broke free *through* the enemy

flagship, on the bow wave of an artificial nova. I think the old thing fared passably, given circumstances.'

'This ship was designed to wrestle with gods,' Oltyx reminded the admiral.

'Yes, my king. And it still bears the scars. Some fights, you can never fully heal from.'

'Very true, Yenekh.'

The Razor took a few moments to reply to that, and when he did, he changed the subject swiftly, sweeping away the *Akrops* to cast fresh projection protocols in the air before them.

'Still, we do not stand alone,' he began, and a procession of ships began to materialise down the length of the central arcade, as if on parade. 'Djoseras was clearly persuasive in his missives to the coreworlds. We have, to my knowledge, now consolidated every vessel still loyal to the dynasty under the *Akrops*' shroud. And although they are not many, they are – on the whole – fine ships.'

'Come then, admiral,' said Oltyx. 'Reveal these glories I have inherited.'

'I can begin with good news. The Cairn-class battleship *Godcutter*, damaged but still comparable with the *Akrops* in power, is inbound from Geb-Ismenth. It comes captained by Duamehht herself, who is—'

'I know very well who she is,' said Oltyx sharply, as he was not sure if this was good news at all. Duamehht was head of the line of Erebur, Ithakas' most powerful subordinate house, whose worlds lay far to the north-west. They were the last of Ithakas' vassals he would have expected to send help, having grown more and more distant from the crownworld since the Great Sleep. But then, Duamehht was hard to predict.

He had known her, back in the time of flesh. When Oltyx had been young, Duamehht had spent a year studying bladecraft at the palace on Antikef. It had been while Oltyx had been suffering the blood-sickness which had withered him for years, and she had taken every opportunity to persecute him for his weakness. In her bullying, just as in everything else, she had excelled, for Duamehht was tachyon-fast in combat, and viciously intelligent.

And now, here she was with a Cairn. And Oltyx was king. *Perhaps*, he dared to hope, *circumstance might have made a rival into a powerful ally*.

And then, with a dark lurch of his flux, he considered the alternative. Or Erebur has chosen its moment to seize the throne.

'What else?' he prompted Yenekh.

'Six Scythe-class cruisers are to be our mainstay, my king. Three – the *Handtaker*, *Bitterdraught* and *Reedstalker* – arrived in the last solar cycle, from Teppihuk in the north, plus we have *Scorn* and *Reckoning*, which escaped Phyloskh as its defence collapsed. And then, there is a... modified vessel called the *Failed Harvest*, from the fringeworld of Karkh on the southern border.'

'Karkh?' said Oltyx. 'You must be mistaken – that world was lost during the Great Sleep. They cannot have sent a vessel.'

'Indeed, my king. Djoseras and I were both surprised, as such, when the *Harvest* responded to the summons. And now it has arrived, without a single necron aboard.'

The *Failed Harvest* rotated before them, its running lights pulsing to a strange rhythm as it hung on the outskirts of the fleet. Like all Scythe-class craft, it bore the shape of a polearm, with a crescent blade affixed to its drive complex with a long, haft-like hull. But all along that haft were unusual accretions of necrodermis – spires and mounds which merged with one another, and protruded at strange angles.

'Another haunted vessel,' flashed Oltyx, as he studied it. 'Outstanding.'

'Only by canopteks, thank the Founder's sun – they've formed a weak gestalt with the vessel's autonomous spirit. Witless as a stock-beetle, of course, but it'll fight well enough under proper command.'

'I'll take it. And what of Sedh's defence fleet, Razor?'

'Sundered in the course of breaking the orbital blockade for the *Akrops*, alas, save for the *Koptas* and the *Buhto*, my king.'

'Those relics?' protested Oltyx, as projections of the two hammer-headed, Henet-class ships lumbered overhead. 'They've been in service since the First War of Secession, by the Triarch – what use are they to us?'

'More than I expected, in truth. Though they were retrofitted for Szarekh's war, they remain configured to the ancient style – all armour and no sophistication. A fool's idea of a battleship, in short. But against barbarians who still fire chemical rockets, it transpires, they perform admirably. We shall be glad of them.'

The rest of the fleet was unsurprising. Seventeen light cruisers swooped overhead – Khopesh, Cartouche and Sekhem-class ships, mixed in with older variants – followed by two-score support ships, from assault raiders to shadow-hulled scout craft, and a hundred or so flights of scythecraft.

At the tail of this procession came a collection of oddities, varying in utility. The industrial worlds of the Thrassonos Cluster in the east had sent a pair of world-drills and a vast, skolopendriform mining canoptek, which made Oltyx wonder whether the lords of Thrassonos had fully grasped what aid was being requested of them, while the decrepit tomb-colonies of Bu-hennen had sent only a lone Shaddh-class light freighter between them, good for little more than storing raw materials for the repair canopteks.

The Tyrant of Barrahyx, a universally hated vassal dynasty, had managed to make his contribution into an insult. He had sent a vast scythecraft carrier called the *Forty-two Judges*, but had first taken care to strip all but a single flight of Night Shroud bombers from its bays. Oltyx took only faint pleasure from having watched Barrahyx razed, just hours previously.

'And that's all that remains of Ithakas, is it?' Oltyx asked, as the projections faded.

'Not quite. When the *Akrops* came to evacuate the moons of Reppyt, we found them long fallen to orks. But there was one Taweret-class light assault carrier still operational in orbit, and so Borakka took it for the barracking of its... contingent.'

Oltyx stopped in his tracks, so shocked that his thoughts went straight to his vocal buffer and came out aloud.

'Borakka? Szarekh's bones, Yenekh. The Destroyers came with you?'

'Those which could be prised from hammering the remains of the orkish incursion flat, yes,' said the admiral, transducers hushed, as every lord along the corridor's length had turned their heads to their king's sudden outburst. 'Which is to say, not many of them. And while Borakka came of its own accord – the Red Marshal still at least recognises something of hierarchy – it took a battery of stasis projectors to compel the others.'

'The Red Marshal's contingent will fight with us, when the time comes?'

'They will certainly fight, my king. Beyond that, I would be wary ofpromising anything.'

At least the Flayed Ones had been left behind, thought Oltyx, as he looked

at Yenekh and felt a heaviness in his core. *Most of them, anyway*. But the Razor had it right about the Destroyers – repugnant though they were, if there was ever a moment to have them onside, it was this. Oltyx reviewed the details of the vessels which had just been presented to him, and suppressed a pulse of despair from showing across his nodal array. Ten capital ships, many of them damaged, plus seventeen light cruisers, forty escorts, and a parade of freighters and indignities. That was the dynasty, now. And it was being hunted by an armada thousands strong.

When they arrived at the entrance to the synedrion, the lychguard parted to flank it, and looked back at him with empty, death's-head faceplates. Between them, the gateway seemed as forbidding as the throat of a black hole. He had spent years stacked upon years conjuring simulations of this moment in his phantasory buffer, yearning for the day when Ithakas would at last behold him as king. Now that the moment had come, Oltyx wished more than anything that he could put it off for another few centuries.

Bringing his glaive to hand from its transdimensional sheath, Oltyx sealed down his memetic buffer to prevent himself from dithering over his entrance, and locked his kinetic actuators into a brisk advance. He marched through the entryway as if breaching a siege; the lychguard entered fluidly beside him, and at his first step inside they banged their staves against the deck in unison. This was, indeed, the moment.

Such was the din in the audience chamber, there was no reaction at all for a fraction of a second. The synedrion, which only ever had to hold a couple of dozen necrons in the *Akrops*' long years at Sedh, was now thronged with lords of towering rank. They were all deep in raging arguments, as they scrabbled for their place in this new, chaotic hierarchy. But as the impact of the lychguard' staves swept across the crowd, followed by the invisible presence of Oltyx's own interstitial shadow, they glanced around, and began falling to their knees in a wave of silence.

There were ninety-one lords in the room, most of them nemesors or nomarchs, ruling a lunar colony or a capital necropolis, at the very least. And as his oculars roved over them, fleets of glyphs collected in Oltyx's vision, annotating their dipped brows with ranks, lineages, virtues and weaknesses. This, he observed, was new. His had not been an auspicious coronation, back in the ruins of Unnas' ziggurat. But at the moment when he had inherited the throne of Ithakas, his interstitial node had been opened by the crownworld's

autonomous spirit, and a host of royal protocol-patterns embedded in his flux. As there had been no cryptek on hand to prepare him for their use, Oltyx had been left to discover these new faculties as they had activated themselves, leading to disconcerting moments like this.

The annotation of the nobles was as much a curse as a blessing, however. From the condensed biographies scrolling across his sight, Oltyx could see there were necrons here from across the breadth of Ithakas, and maybe only three whose names he had encountered before. But then, there could be no strangers to the king: as he drank in their haloes of information, Oltyx found he had access to records of their every deed, debt, grudge, rivalry and weakness.

Yes, thought Oltyx, with a dark glow of satisfaction rising in him. This will indeed be of use.

When at last the final disputes had been strangled by the silence of his entry, Oltyx left Yenekh behind and walked waist-deep in a sea of bowed heads, towards the platform at the synedrion's heart, where the globe-shaped projecting-sphere of the orbuculum sat.

At that moment, the attention of the entire nobility of Ithakas was upon him, and now he had taken the plunge, he found it was... not so bad. Indeed, the dozens of unblinking oculars fixed on him as he walked only seemed to bolster the flux in his core. Despite the loss of Djoseras, the loss of Antikef, and the loss of any certainty as to how he might get the dynasty through the next few hours – let alone the millennia to come – Oltyx allowed himself to savour the moment. He had waited an eternity for this.

The glory he had always dreamed of was real. But it was all too fleeting, and followed closely by familiar dread, as the pressure of the chamber's expectations sank down on him. Now the subject of his lifelong desire had been granted, it was as if the gravity of his existence had been switched off, leaving him weightless.

Still, there was no reason for the lords in the chamber to know that. Oltyx stalked along their front row, regarding them at such close distance that the glow of his oculars cast their faceplates in green, and pored over their sins and secrets. As his interstitial array probed the borders of their inner selves, he could almost feel their vocal buffers sizzling with overflow, and he saw the tiny twitches in the alignment of their faceplates, as every one of them watched their neighbours for signs they might be about to speak.

Oltyx stopped abruptly and stooped down, leaning until his oculars were just a hand's breadth from those of Keredhrak, a rail-thin nomarch from the moon-belt of Akphen-ur. His subject seized up like a piece of statuary, and Oltyx recognised what instinct told him was fear. Of course, the necrontyr had emerged from biotransference unshackled from such weaknesses. That was the principle, at least; Oltyx would have been fascinated to see it asserted by Keredhrak, in that moment. Certainly, something very much like fear was coursing through the nomarch's flux as Oltyx stared at him, and the thought brought gravity back to Oltyx's mental landscape.

Why would these lords not feel fear? he thought. Most of them knew him only by rumour and reputation — as the young scion who had gone into the biofurnace on the cusp of adulthood, and come out as something dark. He had been spoken blackly of by Unnas for centuries: the rogue kynazh, ruthless and honourless, exiled by his own dynast for attempting crimes so heinous they were only whispered of. Fratricide. Patricide. Regicide.

Oltyx looked at himself reflected in the shining silver of the lord's faceplate, and saw for the first time what he was to these people. He was charred, gouged, cracked and acid-worn, with a brutality that shone from his form just as darkly as his flux shone bright. And despite his size – for Oltyx had always been big – he stood with the hunched malevolence of a carrion flyer as it waited for its prey to die. The whole of him seemed to hang from the scabrous mounds of his shoulders, while his faceplate jutted from the clavicle collar between them, gaunt and shadowed.

Worst were his oculars – they flickered like tiny green embers in deep caves of necrodermis, while across his body, his discharge nodes sputtered constantly in the same rhythm. They displayed an anger so pervasive and so constant that he had forgotten it was there at all.

Back on Sedh, Oltyx had spent countless hours practising the ways in which a proper leader should stand, or walk, or gesture to the horizon. Yenekh had caught him in the act once, and had remarked that *this was what one might expect, from one who became immortal before fully escaping adolescence*. Somewhere between then and now, Oltyx saw in his reflection, he had stopped thinking about how to project power, and had instead *become it*. He might not have possessed the simple grace and nobility of Djoseras, but he was terrible to look upon. That would be quite sufficient, in times like these.

Turning abruptly away from the nomarch, like a predator deciding its prey

was not worth consuming, Oltyx ascended to the orbuculum platform. There he stood, and waited. The silence stretched. None of these nobles wanted to be the one to speak first, in case it invited their new king's glaive. It felt... superb.

And then, Neth did his very best to ruin it all. Oltyx saw the old practor, who had served him ineptly through the interminable twilight of Sedh, the instant before he spoke. The dishevelled old soldier was annotated, helpfully, with the reminder that Oltyx himself had appointed him as bailiff to the synedrion. This, he saw now, had been a mistake.

'His majesty *the dynast* is on the deck!' Neth announced, in a parade ground shout which was completely unnecessary, and his nodal banks radiated pure delight. Not for the first time in their long acquaintance, Oltyx sorely longed to put a blade to him. His sycophancy had been embarrassing on Sedh. And now, even though his status finally demanded such obeisance, it was somehow more excruciating.

It got worse.

'Your excellency!' cried the bailiff, voice grinding and hanging its way through every phoneme, 'we have f-f-forged you something, to mark your-coronation, and your great victory at Antikef – a new th-th-throne, for Ithakas!'

Neth stepped aside, and an obfuscation field fell away from a patch of deck beside him, where the throne stood.

Oltyx hated it. The 'throne' was as much a work of art as Antikef had been a victory. It was well made, certainly, and precise in its detailing to the picolevel. But it was hideously ugly, even for necron craftwork, bearing images of grimacing faceplates on the armrests, and worst of all, an inept representation of Djoseras on the headboard. Once he had sat down on the damned thing, he would be tempted never to rise again, if only so he did not have to look at Neth's work for a second time.

He was about to castigate the bailiff for such a dreadful gift, when Neth saw the lychguard fanning out beside the throne, filling the role he had held for hundreds of years, and let out a tiny, grinding sound of dismay. The corroded soldier actually sagged, with an audible clank, as if all his core-flux had leaked out at once.

'It will suffice,' Oltyx said of the throne, more kindly than he had planned, and hoping it did not sound like the drastic lie it was. 'All of you – rise,' he

told the room, and lowered himself onto the throne. There would be no speech; it was for his subjects to inform him, not the other way round, and he wanted to see which of this new crowd would be bold enough to address him first.

It would be Duamehht, to his dismay. She slunk forward from the crowd, and stood with one hand resting on the butt of her long-bladed sword, in a manner that could easily have been interpreted as casual. She was the only noble in the room to bear the gold of the royal house, which ran in a thin stripe down her faceplate in the Erebur style, and her poise made it all too clear that she knew this. Oltyx became acutely aware of the fact that he himself bore no gold: while his excoriated form had seemed such an asset just moments ago, as it had intimidated the nomarch, it now felt like nakedness.

'Dear Oltyx... Dynast. You have grown!'

'Just dynast, nemesor,' replied Oltyx, in a tone colder than the dust clouds outside the hull.

'As you wish, dynast,' said Duamehht slyly, with just the faintest light of amusement in her nodes. Oltyx leaned forward almost imperceptibly in his seat.

'As I command.'

'As you command. Dynast, I call on you – will you tell us of the last days of Unnas, beloved of so many here?' Duamehht paced as she spoke, oculars roaming over the court. 'And tell us of noble Djoseras, who would have succeeded him... but who perished, through cruel, cruel chance, on the very same day. We are fortunate, indeed, that you survived them both.'

Oltyx stared, hard. Some lords among the crowd looked at each other expectantly, while others backed away fractionally, leaving an increasing patch of clear deck between the king and his vassal. The interstices began to vibrate with encrypted message traffic, even as the silence intensified.

'Djoseras died in glory, defending the palace,' stated Oltyx, 'as I departed with his orders to lead this fleet. That was his will. And now, its heka unbroken, it is mine.'

Duamehht did not move.

'And Unnas, the king? Did he will all the power of Ithakas to be set upon your shoulders, too?'

The Oltyx of exile on Sedh, and certainly the Oltyx of the time of flesh,

would have crumbled before such a veiled accusation. But Duamehht had been right in her greeting to him. *He had grown*. And now, he would show her what he had grown into.

'Unnas was afflicted by the gift of Llandu'gor,' he said, stilling his nodes to darkness to conceal his fury, and rising from his throne. 'The flayer curse, which troubles *all* houses of this dynasty. He spent his last days as he had spent the centuries before – in blasphemous squalor, masked with the defiled flesh of Ithakka the Founder himself. He deserved nothing but death, and so I cut him down with my own blade, for the honour of the dynasty.' Almost delicately, Oltyx knocked the butt of his colossal glaive against the deck, striking a low, sonorous chime. 'Do you have issue with that, nemesor?'

A long stillness followed. And then, another relic of Oltyx's past on Sedh made himself known from the crowd. Lysikor.

'With profound apologies for the interruption,' announced the eerie deathmark, 'I just could not contain myself from speaking, to propose this council... hmm. Are we a council?'

Nobody answered.

'Regardless, I propose the motion that, whatever we are, we formally congratulate the dynast on the occasion of his first regicide.'

Oltyx's flux went entirely still for a moment, and even Duamehht looked round at the gangly, single-eyed creature, profound confusion pulsing along the nodes of her limbs. If it had been anyone else – *anyone* – Oltyx's blade would have been deep in their central core already. Certainly, the whole synedrion was waiting for him to erupt. But the self-styled Duke of Deathmarks, whose company had been inflicted on Oltyx for so long on Sedh that his ways had eventually started to make a black sort of sense, was being entirely serious. Oltyx looked at the sniper's long, bare faceplate, and as much as he could read anything from its bearing, saw only profound respect.

'Your... commendation is... accepted and approved, Lysikor,' said Oltyx calmly. And to his surprise, he saw maybe half the faceplates in the chamber dipping in subtle assent. Lysikor was not alone. Many of these lords would have heard reports by now of the state of Antikef in its final days – and they recognised the justice Oltyx had delivered.

But there were also some subdued flashes of anger in the room, from those who saw the slaying of a monarch, no matter what his condition, as unforgivable. Oltyx was pleased to see his annotation protocol make a record

of each lord's response, among the glyphic data that hung around their forms in his vision. He would watch for them.

'Very well,' said Duamehht at last, her momentum stolen by Lysikor's intervention. 'To the future, then – where will you lead us, O dynast, once this great ark is ready to begin its voyage?'

Now, Oltyx was taken aback. This had not been how he expected the session to proceed. He had thought the synedrion would light up with furious arguments about what should be done next, as the old Council of Sedh had done, until such time as the crowd had determined an answer for him. But the silence just stretched and stretched, until he finally understood that, despite some familiar faceplates, this was not Sedh any more. Even Duamehht, for all her hostility, recognised his power. They were all waiting on his decision. And he had made no decision.

He was saved from admitting this, in the end, by the leaden tone of the *Akrops*' general alarm – for an unknown ship had just appeared off their bow, just outside the range of their guns.



### CHAPTER THREE

### **OLD FRIENDS**

Within a fifth of a second of the unknown vessel's mass signature being detected by the *Akrops*, six flights of rapid-response scythecraft had been disgorged from dimensional appendices anchored to the ship. Their egress loci were generated in motion, so that the fighter craft were deposited into reality already travelling at maximum speed. There was no question of pilot readiness. The near-mindless wretches built into the fighters had been sitting in perfect, absent preparedness, surrounded by blackness and hard vacuum, since their last deployment. For some of them, that might have been centuries ago. Oltyx did not like to think too much about that.

Even as the rapid-response flights closed the distance to the target, a further fifteen flights were being prepared for gravitic acceleration inside the battleship's conventional launch bays, along the inner curves of its crescent hull. They took flight much more slowly, only hitting void once the intruder had been present for a second and a half.

By the time three seconds had elapsed, oceanic volumes of the *Akrops*' core-flux had been diverted to its gunnery blisters, where sheaves of hyperstimulated necrodermis were sloughing away from the buds of the

weapon systems they usually armoured. Towering particle whip projectors rose silently from the pits revealed, while thickets of lightning arc pylons unfolded from their recesses like vicious, impossible flowers.

Inside the *Akrops*, too, changes were taking place. Matter reserves were being translated into temporary realities, ready to be shunted into hull sections under fire in order to absorb shocks, or into the transreal hoppers of the reconstruction vaults, where a hundred million repair scarabs were being roused from dormancy.

But even as all this went on, the nobles gathered in the synedrion continued to wait for Oltyx's answer to Duamehht. It was not that they didn't take the news of the incursion seriously, so much as that nobody wanted to miss what looked like it could progress into a royal duel. Since no intervention by necron minds could improve the efficiency of their ships themselves in the opening seconds of any battle, there was still time enough now for politics.

Oltyx still had no answer to Duamehht, of course. But it suited him to look like he was making her wait on one. The time of flesh, though long gone, had left an indelible mark on court politics, and since that society had been dominated by chronic sickness and early death, time had become the most precious of all its commodities.

Before biotransference, only those with the most meticulous comforts, and access to the finest oncomancers, could afford to live in anything less than a blistering hurry, and so to take one's time in doing anything had become the most conspicuous display of wealth and power possible. Equally, to waste someone's time was the most grievous of insults. And so Oltyx leaned back into his dreadful throne, steepled his fingers, and waited.

After seven seconds, however, it was beginning to become awkward, and Oltyx began to wonder about the enemy ship.

'Yenekh,' he signalled in their code, 'is there not a hostile vessel bearing down on us that will imminently require the adjournment of this court, despite my clear keenness to proceed with this discussion?'

'There is a ship, but...' answered Yenekh, before transmitting a simplified bafflement-glyph in place of words. As he spoke, the Razor's hands were tracing intricate approach vectors for the *Akrops*' fighter vanguard, and Oltyx's interstitial node told him the admiral was connecting himself to everything currently aimed at the newcomer vessel.

'But what, Yenekh?'

#### 'I believe we have a stroke of fortune here, dynast. And it may have bought you the time you need, as the ship is... well. You should see for yourself.'

Oltyx was curious now, and sent an interstitial command for the orbuculum to show them this mysterious trespasser. Immediately, the sphere activated itself, casting an illusion of the void which filled the synedrion, so it seemed as if the meeting were being held on the outside of the hull. When the projection resolved itself fully, there was a huge, flawlessly armoured warship suspended menacingly in the middle distance, and as if drawn by a gravitic generator, every faceplate in the crowd turned to regard it.

It was a necron heavy cruiser.

Oltyx's first thought when he saw it was that Yenekh, cunning as ever, had been keeping one of the exodus fleet's vessels secretly in reserve, ready to deploy for distraction's sake in a moment like this. Implausible, dramatic and entirely overengineered – it had all the hallmarks of a Yenekh ploy. But there was one problem. Necron though it may have been, the ship was not one of *theirs*.

A more robust variant on the Scythe-class hull profile, the voidcraft was like nothing to be found among the fleets of Ithakas. Its prow was built into a squat, reinforced cylinder, rather than the more elegant crescent of the standard Scythe pattern, and its central spindle was clad in toroidal armour plates, etched all over with glyphs denoting its victories.

Those inscriptions would probably have given away the vessel's identity, with a little deduction. But there was no need: the burnished copper plating which covered the ship, as well as the dark green smoulder of its core lights, told Oltyx everything he needed to know. This was a ship of the Ogdobekh Dynasty, the fabled line of metalworkers who had ever been both the neighbours, and the bitter enemies, of the Ithakas Dynasty. And according to its interstitial shadow, this ship flew under the seal of the Ogdobekh royal house itself.

The synedrion's nobles began to whisper, and then to argue with each other, as their wariness of Oltyx was overtaken by excitement at the possibility of renewing old grudges. Oltyx permitted the disorder, but paid their speculation no heed. Because he was near certain he knew this very ship, and the lord which commanded it.

'Recall the scythecraft,' he commanded. 'This is no enemy.' The order was

relayed to the hangars and obeyed, returning the outbound fighters to their roosts, but a susurration of concern ghosted across the interstitial bands between the lords, in reaction to his decision. Oltyx's flux pressure built steadily, as he waited for the inevitable salvo of heavy gauss fire from the mace-headed cruiser. But its turrets remained silent.

'But what good intentions could they possibly have, dynast?' called Parreg the Agoranomos from the crowd, as the strange vessel hung motionless before the *Akrops*. Parreg was another of the old-timers from the Council of Sedh, and while his rank technically precluded him attendance at this new, royal court, he had always been pragmatic enough – wise, even, at times – that Oltyx had been willing to overlook the indiscretion. The dynast regretted that decision, now, as he had no answer to the Agoranomos' question.

'We must board them immediately and seize their treasures!' bellowed the polemarch Taikash, and Oltyx's fists clenched involuntarily. Taikash, too, was a relic from the king's former existence in exile. But unlike Parreg, the polemarch was an idiot. Oltyx could not bear him. The moment this situation was resolved, Oltyx told himself, he was going to have Pakhet drag the fool out by his gaudy, ornamental brow-crest, and make clear that he was not to return.

'There will be no boarding, nor any seizing of treasures,' thundered Oltyx, in a voice that silenced the entire chamber. 'Yes, we fought the Ogdobekh in the Second War of Secession. But that was at the other end of time, and nobody who made war on that front was sad to see hostilities conclude. All that is done with. And so, as long as they hold fire, we shall return the favour.'

'The vessel is hailing us, my king,' announced Yenekh, breaking the tension. 'Offering an encrypted scry-band to our orbuculum. It identifies itself as—'

'The *Philotomokh*,' finished Oltyx, relief plunging through his flux. 'I know. Answer their hail.'

The exterior view of the ship was replaced with the gloomy, brass-clad confines of its bridge. However, when Oltyx saw the blocky, heavy-headed figure who stood at its centre, flanked by hammer-wielding lychguard, he was taken aback. *Maybe he has fallen and been replaced?* Oltyx wondered. But then he imagined how the giant might have looked before biotransference, and his suspicions were proved correct after all. *Well*, he

thought, bolstering himself for the exchange, this will certainly be... colourful.

'Great Zultanekh, crown prince of the Ogdobekh Dynasty,' Oltyx began. 'It has been... some time. I hope you will not take offence at my somewhat cold welcome. As I'm sure you can imagine, the timing of this visit is... unorthodox.'

'Unorthodox,' repeated the heavyset prince, before saying the word twice more, almost fondly. His faceplate was sculpted heavily, so as to give the impression of a brutish smirk above the stark promontory of his chin-crest, and his voice was as deep and rich as molten lead as it poured from it. 'Unorthodox! Who else used that word, Zultanekh wonders? It was Djoseras, of course! Djoseras, whose destruction, I will add, I am dismayed to learn of.'

'Dismayed?' cried some lord from the western border worlds, nodescoruscating with fits of jingoistic wrath. 'Do not jest. He was your damned nemesis for three centuries of war, copperclad!'

'Indeed!' boomed Zultanekh, with laughter like the sounding of a slaughter-house bell. 'He was the greatest enemy I ever had! How did I feel, when I had outmanoeuvred him in the great games of the steel frontier? Like a god! For that was what it took, O nameless accuser, to match Djoseras in wits. Was I glad, when Szarekh enforced peace between us? Certainly. For otherwise, one of us would have slain the other, and that would have been very sad.' The crown prince paused then, his mountainous shoulders slumping with a heavy clang. 'Now, therefore, Zultanekh supposes... he is sad.'

Estimating the impromptu speech to be at an end, Oltyx seized the conversation, before it could fall back into the hands of the rabble of lords.

'You know what has transpired at Antikef, then?'

'Do I know the full account? No, I do not. But I see that Oltyx is dynast at last, and so conclusions must be drawn. Let us hope, Dynast Oltyx, that you live up to Djoseras' expectations as a master for your people. They were high indeed.'

'Let us,' agreed the dynast, with a calculated absence of tone. These were not comfortable matters to discuss in public, least of all in front of Duamehht. 'But enough of this, Zultanekh. My new position makes many demands of me, not least the problem of the Unclean invasion currently occupying my

crownworld. So, with respect, tell me what you seek here. I will either grant it gladly, or refuse it, as rapidly as I can.'

'What do I seek?' protested Zultanekh. 'Nothing at all. But I offer my service to you, if you will have it.'

'I am flattered,' said Oltyx, profoundly confused. 'But need I remind you of the... history of our houses? I know you as an honourable lord, but you are not the first ally I would think to call on in times of strife. Which leaves me... uneasy as to your arrival here, uninvited and unannounced.'

'You presume me uninvited only because you, rude youth, did not invite me!' retorted Zultanekh. 'Who did invite Zultanekh? Djoseras, again! You think we did not continue to correspond, once the old wars were done with? That we would let such a rich adversity wither in peacetime? No, Oltyx. We were close, in our way. And when you spurred your elder into his mission of rallying, he called on me, as well as your own worlds.'

'And so, you... pledge... yourself to me?'

'Not until you prove yourself, young dynast, no. I gather you keep... strange habits.'

What did he mean by that? Oltyx thought.

'But will I pledge myself to Djoseras? Yes, with ease. I do so to cherish the recollection of a perfect foe, to avenge his death, and to find a little excitement, since eternity is so long and filled with boredom.'

'You will fight with us, then?'

'I said I wished for excitement, did I not? The forges of the Ogdobekh overflow with bounty, and we have long been driving back the armies of this human "Emperor", on his very doorstep, no less! I wonder, is such expertise a thing you may be direly in need of, on this day? I suspect it is.'

'I will tell you now, Zultanekh – we cannot stay here. And we cannot retake Antikef, unless you plan to lend me the whole of the Ogdobekh war machine.'

'Does that matter to me?' ruminated the prince. 'No. Do as you wish, Oltyx King. As custodian of Djoseras' memory, you have the loyalty of my legions, and the guns of the Philotomokh, until the day your dynasty is settled anew. Is the Philotomokh just a single ship? Yes, it is. But what a ship it is! It is havoc itself. And if you accept this service, Dynast Oltyx, we will sail to the very gates of death with you.'

'Which leads us,' interjected Duamehht slyly, drawing the royal giant's gaze, 'to the matter that was under discussion before your... visitation,

crown prince. To whit – I wish to hear the course our dynast has plotted for this great voyage of renewal.'

Zultanekh seemed briefly as if he was trying to squint, before remembering he could not, and leaning forward instead. He had lost nothing of his bearing – Oltyx could well imagine his once fleshy brow crunching in confusion and contempt as he tilted his head to Duamehht.

'Are my oculars plagued with refrenation?' asked the prince, in a metallic gasp of feigned shock. 'Perhaps you are plated in gold all over, and not just in a meagre stripe! Perhaps Zultanekh owes you his gravest apologies for mistaking Oltyx for the lord and master of Ithakas, when it is actually you! Or perhaps my oculars function perfectly, and you are owed nothing at all—least of all a justification of your dynast's will!'

Duamehht stared at the projection, utterly rigid, with just the slimmest flash of green fury escaping her thoracic cartouche.

'Of course, honoured ally,' she responded, and if it weren't for the sharp clink of necrodermis splintering as she clenched her fists, she would have sounded perfectly serene.

'Where will Oltyx King lead his people?' boomed Zultanekh. 'Who knows! Out-system, I should imagine, as soon as the great Akrops has healed from its mighty exertions. Which surely will not be long now, yes?'

Oltyx was just beginning to feel relief, when the ponderous mass of the Ogdobekh lord swung round to point a wrist-thick finger at him.

'For the time being, perhaps the great dynast would care to receive a delegation of Zultanekh's finest metallurgists in his royal sanctum, so that he might bask in the scintillating detail of Ogdobekh alloys for the first time. How many are these alloys? Hundreds! And how great a pleasure is the knowing of their mysteries? Near infinite.'

The hope rising in Oltyx's executive buffer collapsed then, as it became apparent the years had made a woeful buffoon of the crown prince. But then a deeply encrypted transmission stung the depths of his interstitial node, limned in richest copper-orange.

'You are new to this, Oltyx King. I see it, in what were once your eyes. Fear not, though! I am not half the fool I wish to seem. Do I really wish to subject you to a presentation of alloys? Not at all. They would be unspeakably dull to you. But have I bought you time? Yes.'

'I had the situation under control,' lied Oltyx, as the foreign lord reclined in

the expanse of his throne and continued their silent conversation.

'Wonderful,' said Zultanekh, with only the smallest scattering of amusement-signifiers appended to the transmission. 'Then use the time to revel in the satisfaction of a plan well made, or to honour the traditional Ithakan pastime of staring miserably into the void. However you choose to spend this gift, though, know that you would be advised to declare a course of action sooner, rather than later. Ah! And there is one more thing, Oltyx King.'

'Yes?'

'Will I offer you one piece of metallurgy-themed wisdom? Yes. It is this — you look like something built by orks and then set on fire. Remember, heka is everything — and you are a king of Ithakas. Where is your damned gold, young Oltyx?'

Oltyx had intended to take the ritual of chrysopoeia, in which he would be plated in the royal gold, immediately after the Battle of Antikef. But just as he had put off sitting in the throne, and just as he had put off addressing his people, so too had he avoided the ritual, due to the same unease. He had doubted that he was truly worthy of the gold. And he had even more reason for reluctance now, after hallucinating the auric phantom in the sanctum. But he had no desire to admit any of these things to Zultanekh.

'I shall think on it,' he conceded, and politely dismissed the crown prince from his mind, before speaking out loud again.

'Metallurgists,' he deadpanned, straining the limited abilities of his phantasory buffer to sound as if he concealed abyssal dismay. 'What a rare and hitherto forbidden ecstasy you offer. How could I resist? Send your smiths without delay, Zultanekh, and have them spare no detail. Ithakas recognises your honour, crown prince.'



### CHAPTER FOUR

## THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

'Why was Lysikor there anyway?' asked Yenekh, as they plunged into the depths of the Akrops' hull, down one of the vessel's antiquated gravitic transfer shafts.

'He was entitled to be,' grumbled Oltyx. 'He is a nemesor, after all.'

'Only by virtue of killing every other noble in his tomb while they slept. It's not like he's ever actually *ruled* anything.' Unlike Oltyx, who wavered between hatred and faint appreciation with regard to Lysikor, Yenekh had always hated the deathmark, and the two had nearly come to blows several times during the years on Sedh. 'Unless you count his ever-growing legion of glyph-cracked canopteks, of course. Who knows what he managed to plunder from the worlds we evacuated.'

'Plenty, I'm sure,' said Oltyx, as they sank through the armoured mountain of the hull. 'But he uses them well. And he uses them in my service, after all.'

'Until he betrays you,' Yenekh pointed out, and Oltyx gave a sombre nod.

'Until he betrays me. And then they will be my canopteks anyway.'

Yenekh sighed. 'You are right of course, your solar excellence. I just think he has become... too strange, over the years, is all.'

'Haven't we all, Yenekh?' said Oltyx gravely, and met Yenekh's gaze for long enough to see the concern shivering in the light of his oculars. The admiral, after all, was not in a position to make many judgements on that front.

Yenekh was quiet, then, and Oltyx almost regretted the small cruelty of the jibe. But the matter would soon be addressed one way or the other, along with many others, given who they were headed to see.

Oltyx had not, of course, received the delegation of Ogdobekh metallurgists. Instead, he had decided to use the time Zultanekh had provided to seek out the only necron aboard who might have advice worth listening to. *The only necron I trust*, thought Oltyx, but the notion sent minor refrenations racing across his executive buffer like cracks through ice, as even that was no longer true.

Their descent began to slow, and Oltyx's equilibrioceptors registered the dwindling of his body's weight to that of an anvil, a stone, a feather. At the same time, the quiet hisses and clanks and ticks of the ship around him faded to absence, for just as there was no need for simulated gravity down here at the heart of the ship, there was no need for atmosphere. There was no need for atmosphere anywhere aboard, of course, given nobody was in the habit of breathing. But the upper decks were pumped full of low-pressure argon anyway, so as to allow for vocal communication. It was important to retain such habits.

The central hollow, however, was no place for speech, or for people. As the chute's wall slid open onto darkness without a sound, Oltyx gripped its edges with his hands and launched himself out into emptiness, with Yenekh following close behind.

A khet or so out from the chute, Oltyx's optic buffer finished recalibrating itself to the low light, and began to paint details onto the dark. The space they were crossing was large enough to hold a city, criss-crossed by the khet-thick godsteel spars of the ship's bones, and bordered by swooping membranes of necrodermis. The hollow's scale was absurd – it was a storage space for bulk cargo and raw matter, capable of swallowing the mass of a comet with ease, and moving unfathomable quantities of mass via its ever-shifting, prehensile walls.

As they soared through the expanse, using interstitial hook-protocols to seize anchors set beneath the fabric of reality, it was as if they cruised

through the depths of some great sea. The *uatth*, indeed – the great ocean of the homeworld, which the ancient necrontyr had hated with a passion. It was an unpleasant thought, therefore. But Oltyx felt it was better to consider this than how much the hollow reminded him of an organic gut.

They descended gradually from their entry point, towards the enormous accretion of matter which filled the space's centre. As they approached, streams of green pinprick lights became visible moving across its surface. Tiny canoptek constructs, modelled on the long-extinct hive creatures of the homeworld, which the ship fabricated by the billion to tend to the hold's contents. They flowed in fractal patterns across the cargo of the *Akrops*, and by their collective light Oltyx saw monuments from a score of lost worlds becoming visible like the bones of a sunken monster.

'We saved more than you might expect,' transmitted Yenekh, as they floated over the cracked tiers of an uprooted mausoleum. 'Resting places for more than two thousand nobles, in all. Sometimes just their caskets, but we translated as much masonry as we could, where time allowed.'

'It is... impressive,' allowed Oltyx, as they passed between rows of pillars like ribs. Given the lack of gravity, and the unthinking efficiency with which the ship had stored the stonework, the displaced tombs had a dreamlike feel to them. They had been clustered together in strange reefs, oriented contrary to one another, like the final, manic design of an architect lost to madness.

They passed over the lip of a broad, glyph-carved portico, revealing a whole valley of dismantled stonework beyond. And there in the ruins, revealed like something out of legend, was gold. A vast quantity of gold, like a lake between the tombs. Oltyx feared he was seeing things that did not exist again, but then he read the glyphs that materialised above the shining mass, and he understood.

'This gold is human-forged,' he stated, and Yenekh signalled assent.

'Indeed, my liege. The figurehead of the *Polyphemus*, which was caught on our horns as we tore through the ship's prow.'

'The statue of the... deformed avian, yes?'

'Quite. It represented their corpse-king, somehow – theirs is a strange cult. But they have an appreciation for scale, at least.'

'It is pure, I take it?'

'It is now, my king. It certainly was not before. Would you believe the

# humans are such shoddy metalsmiths, that the metal of the figurehead contained traces of skeletal matter, of all things?'

'I would believe it, Yenekh,' said Oltyx, and said no more as they left the lake of gold behind them. But the image of it remained in his executive buffer for some time, along with Zultanekh's admonishment. Where is your damned gold, young Oltyx?

Eventually, they passed into the interior of the masonry-heap and, after making their way down a long, winding passage, reached their destination. It was a simple crypt, roughly circular, with a slab-like stasis casket at its centre. Inside, according to the carvings on its side, lay a city-master from Teppihuk, still trapped in the dreamless slumber of the Great Sleep. Ithakas had been one of the earliest dynasties to wake, and at this point there was little hope for those still unroused. Still, their caskets were maintained, and treated with the honour afforded to the noble dead.

Or at least, they were usually. The city-master's resting place, however, was being used as a workbench.

'It was just the right size,' said Mentep the cryptek, without looking up from his work. 'And besides, I'm sure the esteemed city-master will not be too upset at the intrusion, so don't you be upset on his behalf.'

'You've filled this place with atmosphere,' said Oltyx on realising he could hear the cryptek, before cursing to himself. What a gormless thing to say.

'Yes,' said Mentep. 'I like to hear the sounds of my work. It aids my concentration. There's gravity too, if you wish to use it. More light please, Xott.'

A low, melodious trill filled the chamber, and a shieldlike head dipped down beside Mentep on a long, segmented neck, turning its single ocular on the arcane mess of components spread across the casket to illuminate them.

Oltyx had never known quite what to call Mentep's towering reanimation construct, but to call it a pet would have been a woeful underestimation. Apart from anything else, Xott stood three times the height of its master. Like the cryptek himself, the canoptek was plated in near-white enamelled necrodermis, with warm amber flux-light shining both from its ocular, and from the orbs mounted on its humped back.

Oltyx was not sure what to call Mentep either, now. When the ornery mystic had arrived on Sedh, not long after Oltyx himself had been exiled there, he had claimed to be an engrammancer – a wandering scholar, with a

fascination for pathologies of the mind. Needless to say, such interests had been very well fed on the desolate, flayer-infested fringeworld. But during Oltyx's time on Antikef of late, he had begun to realise just how little he truly knew about the cryptek.

He had come here purely to seek their wisdom. But now he saw Mentep – who had still not even looked up from his work – the anger was surging in his ducts. Advice, he decided, could wait. First, I shall have answers.

'Do you not know, cryptek, that it is considered rude to greet a king in such a fashion,' said Oltyx, as he touched down on the stone of the crypt floor with a soft clink. 'In the strictest interpretation of tradition, you could even call it... treasonous.'

'I'd consider it equally rude to show up and harass a cryptek concentrating on a difficult calibration exercise, Oltyx, but I have a lesser stock of thinly veiled threats with which to season my opinion. And in any case, I am not of Ithakas, so you are not my king. Still – lord dynast of Ithakas, consider yourself acknowledged.'

Oltyx was not sure how he held his temper in check then, but managed – with some effort – to speak with his vocal actuators rather than his glaive.

'Why, Mentep, did you not *warn* me?' he said simply. 'When I set out for Antikef, you said nothing about the state the capital had fallen to – let alone that of Unnas. Why did you not warn me of Hemiun? He took me apart, Mentep. I was nearly annihilated, on account of your hoarding of the truth.'

'It must have been a dreadful ordeal,' said the cryptek, not without pity in his tone. 'But you prevailed, did you not?'

Mentep's hand pointed directly upwards as he asked the question, and Oltyx followed the direction of the slender digit: a large, ornate scarab construct was descending from the ceiling to settle on Xott's flank, like a sweat-fly on a titanic grazing beast.

There it is, then, thought Oltyx, as the canoptek flashed him a greeting with its optic cluster, and he knew the cryptek's meaning at once. The dynast had, indeed, only survived Antikef thanks to the diminutive construct. Or at least, thanks to the strange collective of minds which now resided in it.

In the early years on Sedh, not long into their acquaintance, Mentep had given in to Oltyx's demands for augmentation, and had installed five secondary sapiences within his body, each seeded from the exile's own mind-pattern, but grown around a particular capability. Embedded in semi-

independent flux-cores which linked to his own, allowing their minds to mix at the edges, that strange council had aided both his mental and martial prowess for centuries.

They had irritated him in equal measure, of course, as they had queried and complicated his every direction of will. But on Antikef, that very discord which he had always resented had pulled him back from the edge of self-destruction, and he had realised their true value.

Hemiun had torn the subminds from him, removing the cores and decanting their substance into storage canisters. Still, though, they had found a way to circumvent their imprisonment and aid him. And so, after Djoseras had liberated him from Hemiun, Oltyx had retrieved the cores, and had emancipated his subminds at last.

The cores had been installed in a dimensional appendix and linked with an ornamental scarab, which they had commandeered during their captivity in the palace. Now, through that construct's jewelled chassis, his former half-selves had complete freedom from him. *And they've been hiding from me here*, thought Oltyx, before turning his attention back to the opalescent cryptek.

'Yes, they saved me,' he admitted curtly. 'But if you expect me to thank you for giving me the means to survive a disaster you let me walk into, Mentep, you have made an error. On which point, since you are yet to answer me, I will ask again – why did you let me go to Antikef unaware?'

Mentep continued to tinker as he answered. 'Because in your outrage, stoked by your bitterness towards Djoseras and Unnas, you would have sent the *fleet*, Oltyx. You would not have spoken with Djoseras, and he would not have been convinced. You would have fought him instead, and the humans would have arrived to the smoking aftermath of a civil war. Which you would have lost, disastrously.'

This made Oltyx furious, as it was correct. 'You have Orikan's gift of divination, now, do you?' he growled, shaking dust from the cracks in the stonework around them.

'No,' said Mentep wearily. 'But I have something more precious, and more burdensome, still. I have knowledge of how people tend to think.'

'And in this arrogance, sorcerer, you questioned the wisdom of a king.'

'You were not a king then, Oltyx. You were a nomarch. More to the point, you were an obsessive, self-pitying exile, who had been trapped in the mono-

maniac entitlement of adolescence longer than the lifetime of most stars!'

The answer was so fearless, Oltyx did not know what to do with it. Most of all, he worried that if he thought about it long enough to argue with it he might end up agreeing, so he let his rage grow.

'I am a king now!'

'Yes. And I hope, for all our sakes, that your wisdom has begun to grow to match your rank.'

Oltyx had hoped to move on to the subject of his visit, as time was scarce, but his anger got the better of him. Now was as good a time as any to rip away the veil, and deploy what he had learned on the crownworld.

'I am sure you know a lot about personal growth, *Mentep of Carnotite*. For that is what Djoseras knew you as, despite your removal of your existence from my every report to Antikef over the years. Why did you not wish your presence known, *psychomancer?* For I heard you called that too. That is what Hemiun knew you as, when he said you were "abroad once more". Who are you, Mentep? The lies end here.'

The cryptek sighed, seeming to age a million years over the course of a few moments, and put down his tools at last to meet Oltyx's oculars.

'You assume, dynast, that I know the answers to these things myself.'

'What do you mean by that?' asked Yenekh, sounding more circumspect than outraged.

'I take it, Oltyx, that in your adventure in the desert, you became... more familiar with the function of the evocatory medium?'

The medium had been the second of the gifts Mentep had augmented Oltyx's mind with during his exile. What it was, precisely, was beyond him, but its power – to allow him to relive the objective reality of moments from his past, at the cost of destroying all memory of them – was undeniable. After the subminds had been robbed from him, the medium had been what saved Oltyx from the talons of madness during his imprisonment under Unnas' palace.

'I have come to know the medium well,' he said, in a hollow voice, since it remained a painful time to recall.

'So, then,' said Mentep, spreading his arms in incredulity. 'You think that such a miracle was something I created for the banished prince of a dying dynasty, to help him grab his father's throne before it crumbled to dust?' Mentep let out a harsh peal of synthesised proxy laughter. 'Please, Oltyx. Yours was an improved design, I'll grant you. But it was merely an iteration

of something I designed and installed within myself, to burn away my own past.'

'So I ask again, what is your past?'

'That is what I'm telling you, Oltyx. I don't know! My version of the medium is a harsher thing than yours. It burns away my memories so cleanly that I remember nothing of my reveries at all. It is a machine to destroy the past, and nothing else. And what few details do survive its ravages are so warped by engrammatic retranscription, they have become memories of memories of memories. *Fantasies in garb of facts*, as the Great Scribe Sayhenyet wrote. In truth, if I thought such nonsense would have been any use to you, I would have divulged it all already.'

'Well, in which case, I suggest you divulge it now.'

'Very well. I was, indeed, a psychomancer.'

'A master of the art of fear!' said Yenekh, with bright recognition. Clearly, he was keen to interject in a conversation where so far, never having been the most learned of lords, he had felt far out of his depth.

'Not quite, admiral. That's how the charlatans who use the title these days would spin their tawdry craft, with their cheap conjurations to frighten the Unclean. I, by contrast, was the real thing.'

Xott cooed then, as Mentep halted pensively, and Oltyx could not work out whether the canoptek's sound denoted admiration or sympathy.

'I was a devotee of the ancient, true school of psychomancy. True to its principles, my conclave was one of the few which dared look inward, into the necron mind itself. The seat of our study was the world of Carnotite, and we did astonishing things there. Works of... such promise.'

'What happened?' asked Yenekh, with all the breathless excitement of a child regaled with tales of horror.

'Terrible things happened, Yenekh.' Xott made another sound, but it was much lower than the last. 'No, no, I should not glaze the truth. *I did terrible things there*, during the time of Szarekh's great war. And when the Great Sleep came, I decided I could not bear to wake with the memories of them. So I left Carnotite, vowing never to return. We all did – the whole conclave. And as I built my own tomb to keep me through the ages, I built the medium within myself. Before I slept, I purged all memory of what I had done.'

Mentep sighed, with a long rush of white noise like a receding wave.

'And when I did wake? I knew only that I had to atone. I knew not what for,

or how. But after deciphering what faint vestiges of my notes I had not destroyed, I determined that I had to dedicate myself to the problem of the Longing Sickness.'

'The flayer curse,' hissed Oltyx, annoyed as ever by Mentep's euphemism for the madness that plagued Ithakas, and the cryptek nodded.

From the side of his visual field, Oltyx saw dread-patterns begin to creep across Yenekh's carapace. For although it was a secret to the entire dynasty outside of the chamber they stood in, Oltyx had learned, on the eve of his departure for Antikef, that Yenekh himself was tainted.

He had managed to retain his appearance, for now. But the mind beneath the flawless carapace of the Razor of Sedh was not what it had once been. For decades now, the legendary warrior had been concealing the horrible urges of Llandu'gor, and in recent years he had finally given into them. Before Oltyx had left for the crownworld, he had confronted the Razor in his private suite aboard the *Akrops*, and found him concealing a festering, blasphemous stock of flesh.

Distressing though it had been, Oltyx had considered it a problem which would solve itself, since the human armada had been bearing down on the fringeworld, and seemed certain to wipe it away. He had never thought he and Yenekh might both survive to have to deal with it – but here they were.

Yenekh would never get better. His road led only to one place, and Oltyx was taking a vast risk even letting the admiral remain among the people of Ithakas, let alone in command of the fleet. Every other victim of the curse had been excluded from the exodus fleet, after all, left behind in their sordid warrens beneath the tombs.

Oltyx looked at Yenekh, and wondered for the hundredth time what to do with him. What would happen, when he degenerated to such an extent that his condition could no longer be kept secret? And what precedent would Oltyx's clemency with Yenekh have set, when the next lord fell to the curse? Even now, there were probably hundreds of thousands of victims aboard the exodus fleet in the earliest stages of their decline. Before long, claws would rattle again in the dark places of the dynasty.

Oltyx could run from the human crusade, he realised, but he could not run from the vengeance of Llandu'gor. The thought brought on a crushing depression, and under its shadow, the matter of their destination hardly seemed to matter any more.

That was when, to Oltyx's immense surprise, Yenekh solved both problems at once.

'Was the... curse the subject of your mysterious work in the long-ago, on this world Carnotite?' he asked Mentep, with deathly solemnity.

Mentep nodded. 'I begin to suspect that it might have been, yes.'

Yenekh dipped his faceplate in thought, and then spoke quietly to Oltyx.

'Forgive me, my king. I have always abhorred cowardice, and I have been dangerously close to making a habit of it, of late, in avoiding the topic of my sickness. We both know that you have spared me from banishment. But we both also know you cannot do so forever. However. If what Mentep says is true... perhaps we may find answers at this place, Carnotite?'

Oltyx let the idea float in his memetic buffer. It was insane. And still, it was the only remotely viable plan that had come up since the fleet had gathered here.

'I can find no mention of Carnotite in the royal orreries,' said Oltyx, as the dynasty's star maps flicked through his optic buffer.

'You would not,' said Mentep grimly. 'But it is there, all the same. I know where that hidden world lies, and it is not far from here. What exactly we will find there, I cannot tell you. But Yenekh's suppositions are correct – it is our best chance of finding answers.'

'Mentep,' said Oltyx, facing the cryptek with a stare as hard as singularity-forged crystal. 'Do you still believe Yenekh could be cured, in time?'

'Cured is a strong word.'

'You believe there is hope, though?'

'Always, Oltyx,' said the cryptek, maintaining contact with Oltyx's oculars. In the shadows above them, Xott produced a long, mournful hoot.

Oltyx considered. Mentep was, to understate the matter drastically, no fool. His hope was not something to dismiss lightly. But to stake all that remained of Ithakas on a desperate voyage, to a world barely removed from myth... It was a lot to sacrifice, for the salvation of one necron.

But then, he thought, it was not just Yenekh. The curse hung over the whole of the dynasty, and even if they had been freed of its victims for now, more would come.

'And what of the crusade, if it detects us and decides to pursue?' asked Oltyx, and Mentep buzzed with bleak amusement.

'If they are fools enough to follow, Carnotite will teach them their error.

While I have no idea what remains there now, it will not be amicable to the Imperium of Man.'

A thought occurred to Oltyx then that did not sit easily in his flux.

'Mentep. If Carnotite represents our best hope for making progress against the curse... then why, in all the years of your studies, have you not been there so far?'

'Because I have been afraid, Oltyx. Afraid to return to my own past. Afraid of what might remain there, in the shadows of that world.'

'That doesn't sound ideal,' said Yenekh.

'No,' said Mentep, absently resting a slim hand on Xott's head as it sank down beside him from the dark. 'But it is cause for hope nonetheless.'

'It will suffice, then,' declared Oltyx, 'if only because time is running out to seek other options. We sail for Carnotite, and all other decisions – including the fate of the Razor – shall be contingent on what transpires there.'

Oltyx expected at least a word of gratitude from Yenekh, but the admiral only stood stock still, with his nodal patterns frozen in shock, and said nothing. His interstitial shadow swelled, reaching out from the chamber in a hundred directions, and Oltyx knew he was receiving information from the ship. A lot of information. Instantly, Oltyx realised something was wrong.

'The armada,' said Yenekh at last.

'What of it?'

'It's coming for us.'

'Impossible,' snapped Oltyx. 'There's no way they could detect us here. It must be sheer chance – a patrol straying close, but blind to our presence. How many ships?'

It took Yenekh a full second to find his answer, and when it came, it was so hushed that Oltyx initially mistook the admiral's tone for dread, instead of warlike anticipation.

'All of them, my king.'

'Well then,' said Mentep, as Xott's manipulator tendril passed him a fresh set of tools. 'It's fortunate, then, that we finally have somewhere to go.'

The bridge of a necron warship should have been as silent and as still as a tomb, even at the height of the most intense fighting. But that had never been Yenekh's way.

The only thing he had ever relished more than the power of commanding a

voidship was the glory of close combat, and the boarding actions which had made him and his twin *khopesh* blades so renowned. Since he had never found a way to do both things at once, he had adopted a method of command that evoked something of the fervour of a close-quarters fight, as if he was forever in the process of boarding his *own* ship.

He moved constantly, hands sweeping through drifts of projected data, and orbited by interstitial relay-scarabs, as his mind glowed in euphoric communion with half a dozen ships at once. Around him, the bridge thundered with the footsteps of Immortals moving between crew-pits, and the clatter of auxiliary canopteks. There was no need for any of this, of course; there was barely a need for bridge crew at all, given the power of the ship's autonomous spirit. But Yenekh came from a line of shipmasters so ancient that his forebears had made war from wooden decks, between banks of sunravaged oar-slaves, and he felt it to be an essential part of naval war.

Oltyx, meanwhile, stood like a pillar of silence in the middle of it all, and occupied himself with watching the first of the Unclean racing in to die.

They were fearless; he would give them that. And even though the Imperium of Man relied on drive technology the necrons had left behind before their attackers had even acquired opposable thumbs, there was little to fault in their speed of response.

Just as it had been on the surface of Antikef, civilian vessels made up the vanguard of the attack. While their long-range scries showed the dedicated naval vessels gathering into formations for the attack as they pulled away from Antikef, these craft had simply begun racing for the system's edge piecemeal, at full burn. Given their acceleration, Oltyx could only imagine that the brutality inflicted on those inside was saving the necron guns a lot of work.

And still, there was no indication as to *how* the humans had learned of their location. Against a necron foe, he would have instantly presumed treachery from within his court. But even the most ruthless lords he had ever encountered, even the most *deranged*, would not have betrayed their worst enemies to the Unclean. Perhaps, though, he had just not met a lord ruthless or deranged enough yet.

Since the attack was coming from the aft, the huge arc of crystal at the bridge's front had been locked to a scry-band with oculars on the *Akrops*' rear. On it, what seemed to be a converted freight vessel in the livery of the

human Emperor's cult hurtled towards them at the very limit of its spluttering drive unit's power. How must its pilot feel, he wondered, to have got so close to the enemy flagship. Did they consider themselves blessed? They probably had no idea that the *Akrops*' guns were simply calibrated to avoid wasting energy on such an insignificant target.

That was what Night Scythes were for.

Barely straying from its patrol route, one of the black, green-laced fighter craft dipped into view from above, and loosed a casual volley from one of its wing-mounted cannons. The first shot cracked the transport in two, and as its front end disintegrated in lightning-sheathed fragments, the ship's main section broke apart and spilled its stinking cargo into the night.

The Unclean zealots – tightening the focus of his oculars, Oltyx saw they were not even armoured, but clad in filthy textile scraps – were travelling so rapidly that they had not yet frozen by the time they struck the armour of the command citadel. Then they were gone, save for a row of tiny, overlapping red starbursts on the hull.

All over the fleet, the same brief, violent story was being told. Within four seconds of the first contact, thousands upon thousands of human cultists had ended up either as clouds of charged particles, or yet more stains on necron hulls.

A flight of scarabs droned mindlessly past the bridge's vantage point to begin scrubbing clear the mess, and the king's gaze lingered too long for his liking on the row of gore-splatters they descended upon, before he made himself look away. It was nothing, of course, compared to the charnel horror he had seen in the flayer-infested streets of Antikef's capital. But it *should* have triggered a revulsion in him that he just did not feel any more.

Most of the lords who had gathered on the *Akrops* had now returned to their own ships to meet the incoming attack. Unfortunately, as they had no ships of their own to go to, the former members of the Council of Sedh had ended up drifting onto the bridge of the *Akrops* after the crowd in the synedrion had dispersed. They were now spectating the battle in a group, at the minimum respectful distance from their king, and prevented from moving any closer by the motionless figures of Pakhet and her lychguard.

Alas, Pakhet could only guard him from so much. Taikash had already offered Yenekh enough inane suggestions to lose an entire war, while the wretched Denet, whose mind was barely an ember of what it had once been,

kept calling for the deployment of the century of monoliths he had mislaid before the Great Sleep. Neth, at least, was silent.

It was a relief, as ever, to see Yenekh working at his best. But Oltyx could not share his thrill at the fight. Contemptible though the fanatic vanguard might be, they all knew this was only the prelude to the real assault.

Under any other circumstances, there would not have been an engagement at all. With a whisper of its inertialess drive, the *Akrops* could have doubled the distance the humans had to travel in just one of their plodding heartbeats, and then done so ten times more. But the ship's drive problems, it appeared, had only grown more severe after Yenekh had initiated the self-repair process. Their inertialess drive was entirely offline, and even the *Akrops*' most basic propulsion systems had been reduced to a fraction of their usual efficacy.

Something was not right with the giant vessel, and even Yenekh could not fathom the source of the problem. So they were limited to moving out-system at a crawl, with no means to outpace their pursuers, and no indication of when the drives might return to health.

Within minutes, the berserk advance fringe of the armada began to give way to dedicated warships, unmistakable thanks to the strange, beaklike structures on their prows. But even these ships, with their supposedly disciplined crews, were overextending drastically in their race to reach the *Akrops*. They came on like stinging-flies from the hollow of a carcass, with ships maintaining full speed even as their neighbouring vessels were torn apart by the barbed lightning of the Ithakan guns. They were furious, it seemed, and at more than just the wounding of their flagship.

The dynast of Ithakas was almost jealous. With every blow struck by the turrets, he found himself more consumed by longing to be out there in the void, dealing death himself. It would deliver him from the prattling of the Council of Sedh, apart from anything else. But more than that, Oltyx longed for the *certainty* of it. Perhaps the only advantage of lower rank, he had always felt, was the ever-greater amount of fighting it demanded in the name of protecting one's betters. To be the one *protected*, Oltyx was now beginning to understand, was a perpetual exercise in frustration.

A row of seven frigates was approaching them now, cast in brutal silhouette by their own engine flares. So intent were they on getting within firing range of the *Akrops*, they did not even react to the *Philotomokh*, rising up from the

concealment of its own apotropaic shroud to position itself behind them. The Ogdobekh ship lined itself up like a predator finessing a strike, before seven of its flank batteries opened up in perfect synchronicity. Each weapon fired one shot, and each shot found the fuel store of a human frigate through the exhaust of an engine. Seven balls of plasma expanded harmlessly between the two necron capital ships, troubling the *Akrops* with nothing more than a light rain of shrapnel.

'Did I think the necrontyr hated dancing?' roared Zultanekh, in a needless broadcast to the Akrops' bridge. 'I did. But I see now how wrong I was. Our two ships, it seems, make fine partners.' As he spoke, the Philotomokh rolled lazily from the position of the kill, and shrouded itself to wait for the next wave.

The Ogdobekh were a dour people, Oltyx had always known, but Zultanekh had ever been afflicted with an unseemly sense of exuberance, which had only seemed to grow more intense following biotransference. And worse still, it was infectious. As the fizzing atomic debris of the frigates washed over the *Akrops*' quantum shielding, Oltyx was almost tempted to revel in their superiority. Wasn't that what a king should be feeling, at a time like this, rather than despair over the odds still to be faced? Again, and almost overwhelmingly, he felt the desire to be at the forefront of the killing, in a place where he could at last be sure of himself.

'Szarekh's teeth!' barked Yenekh from across the deck, breaking Oltyx from his gloom. A split second later, a sharp crack sounded from the deep structure of the hull, and the deck trembled, sending Denet to his knees with a clatter. The battle outside vanished from view momentarily as thick armour sheets slid down over the viewport, and the bridge was plunged into the baleful green light of emergency gauss lamps.

'Boarders?' snapped Oltyx, incredulous that anything could have reached them undetected, but Yenekh only flashed a pattern of negation in reply.

'No, my king. Worse. That was ship's bones. Something big is coming.'

Like any necron warship, the *Akrops* was reinforced with noctilith spars throughout its structure. As well as raw strength, they provided a ward against the incomprehensible warp sorcery which had been used against them by the Old Ones, and which their enemy's inheritors among the Unclean still made use of. For the noctilith within the ship to have reacted even detectably, let alone with such force, it would have to have undergone an enormous

psychic shock. The sort of shock, Oltyx now realised, one might expect from the bow wave of an extremely large vessel, making egress from the empyrean.

Sure enough, when the armour sheets withdrew from the viewports, Oltyx was greeted with the sight of the *Polyphemus*, still crackling with the residual energies of the warp, and positioned just beyond firing range of their hull.



### **CHAPTER FIVE**

## STOUT-MINDED ENGINEERS

The crusade's monstrosity of a flagship had survived, just as Oltyx had suspected. But for all its primitive resilience, it still bore grievous scars from their last clash. The front of the ship remained shattered from where the *Akrops* had smashed through it, and even now his oculars could just make out the infinitesimal sparks of plasma torches in the depths of the wound. Flesh-and-blood repair crews, continuing their work even as they were thrust into the guns of an enemy battleship – the callousness of the human shipmasters was almost worthy of the necrontyr themselves.

'They cannot do that!' announced Taikash indignantly, as if his complaint might send the hulking ship back into the empyrean. 'Their warp sorcery is the crudest of arts! No pilot could navigate a ship of such size with such precision, let alone within the reach of a star's pull!'

'They have just done it, fool,' snarled Yenekh, as he cast a projection of the developing battlefield across a section of the bridge, with ships denoted by glyphic symbols. 'And they knew precisely where to go, too. They're close, my king. And slow as they are, with our drives in this state, they're outpacing us. Unless we find our spark again soon, we'll be under their guns within the

hour.'

Darkness throbbed at the edges of Oltyx's vision, eating away at the golden light of his optic overlays. Once again, the thought that he had been betrayed swelled in his flux. Had it been Lysikor, perhaps? The deathmark, ever the loner, had not joined the other lords from Sedh in their loitering, and was undetectable to his protocols of location. But then, when had Lysikor ever been easy to find? No. When the self-proclaimed duke's betrayal came, it would be more blunt, more absurd, than this.

Before he could cultivate further suspicions, his attention was drawn by movement from the spatial map Yenekh had conjured. Across the broad arc of the exodus fleet's deployment, ships were beginning to turn about and move towards the enemy, so as to put themselves between the *Polyphemus* and the beleaguered *Akrops*.

'For the honour of the dynast, we advance,' proclaimed the shipmaster of the Bitterdraught over the interstitial band, as her cruiser completed its turn.

'Vengeance for Phyloskh!' announced the council of five who commanded the Reckoning, as quantum catalysers sent it surging towards the human guns. Scrying into the Akrops' forward optic banks, Oltyx saw the fleet's scattering of heavy craft forming into an assault line, their hulls glowing with the stored ferocity of heavy gauss rounds. At first, he felt exaltation – they were soaring forwards to die for him, without a second thought. But then, the same thought became one of dismay – they were soaring forwards to die for him, without a second thought.

'No, Yenekh!' bellowed Oltyx. 'This is senseless. Have the fleet gather around the *Akrops* in support, but forbid any counter-attack. We cannot fight this.'

'Those ships, O dynast,' protested Yenekh, sounding aghast. 'Those guns, those crews – they exist only to serve you. You know this. Let their ferocity be your shield. Let their core-flux be vented to preserve Ithakas.'

'They are all that remains of Ithakas, admiral. What point is there in this voyage at all, if we squander what we seek to salvage, at its very opening?'

'I beg you to reconsider, my liege. We are already severely damaged from one meeting with that... atrocity. If we spend too long under its wrath, there will be no voyage to continue.'

'And if you disobey me a second time, there will be no admiral,' shouted Oltyx, his temper collapsing at last. Protocols of disinterment brought his

glaive to hand in a blaze of green light, and with a bow of contrition, the Razor remembered himself.

'Of course, my liege. We can only hope fate favours us.'

'Let go of hope,' growled Oltyx. 'You do not need it, when you have the assurance of my will. And my will is that we shall break free of this pursuit. For now, *hold*.'

Yenekh held. And while the *Akrops* remained sullen in its refusal to pull itself out of whatever malaise afflicted it, the Razor had commanded the ancient, cantankerous vessel for long enough that he had come to know ways around its obstinacy. Through suites of protocols he had crafted specifically as tools for working around the ship's idiosyncrasies, he managed to coax the drive banks through a series of tiny, incremental increases in potency. By the time he had run out of tricks to attempt, they had achieved nearly a four per cent improvement to their speed.

The *Polyphemus* was still faster, but by a very slim margin, so that its gain on them had slowed to a glacial pace. Since the titanic ship had emerged from the warp, the demeanour of their attackers had changed completely. The initial, wild attack runs had subsided, with the armada now gathering in a cluster around the *Polyphemus*, bristling with ever more raptor-beaked prows as squadron after squadron made it out from the inner system.

It had developed into a maddeningly slow battle. So slow, in fact, that it had barely been a battle at all, for a time. The warships of the Unclean had simply waited around their flagship, jostling with hungry anticipation, like desert scavengers slinking through the footprints of a dying behemoth.

Yenekh's tinkering had kept them beyond the reach of the *Polyphemus*' guns for the time being, but as its shattered prow edged ever closer to them, the smaller craft in its shadow were becoming bolder. Flights of narrow-hulled escort craft would surge ahead suddenly, weaving through the glowing clouds of waste flux which poured from the *Akrops*' stricken drive-stacks so as to frustrate the targeting of their particle whips, before loosing short-range bombardments and falling back.

Their weapons were pathetic – lasers, of all things, and the solid munitions so beloved to humanity – but just as they had worn down the defences at Antikef, they were gradually eroding away the necron hulls. And no matter how many torpedoes were obliterated by point-defence heat rays, or how

many ships were stricken from reality by well-aimed particle strikes upon their retreat, there were always more jockeying for a place in the next run.

Discipline had at least been maintained among the exodus fleet. Duamehht had made multiple requests to lead a counter-attack, which Oltyx had long stopped even acknowledging, while Zultanekh's ship had slunk around the flanks of the engagement according to its master's strange whims, picking off exposed human voidcraft. And of course there was the assault carrier bearing the Destroyers, which attempted to break formation and ram the *Polyphemus* every six minutes or so, prompting Yenekh to force it back into place with the *Akrops*' gravitic shunt projectors.

Beyond that, the line was holding. But as soon as the *Polyphemus* brought its preposterous cannons to bear - or if either the *Lystraegonian* or the *Tyresias* were to enter the field - the situation would rapidly worsen.

Oltyx glared at the shattered prow of the *Polyphemus*, as if he might bore through the ship himself with his gaze, or at least goad it into hurrying up and finishing the fight. Yet again, he was just standing and waiting for the fate of his dynasty to be decided, and the urge to fight something, to do *anything*, was unbearable. He almost felt sympathy for Borakka and its contingent of Destroyers, in their endless, thwarted suicide attacks.

He had grilled every cryptek in the fleet for consultation on the *Akrops*' engine failure, but any with even remote expertise had long been herded to the drive sepulchre, and they were yet to even divine the root of the problem. He doubted they ever would. The orders of Ithakan crypteks had never wanted for masters of the arcane and the esoteric, but the dynasty had always been short of mundane, pragmatic technomancers.

What I would not do for a conclave of stout-minded engineers, thought Oltyx. The phrase gave him pause, though, as he realised those words had been borrowed. Casting a protocol of retrieval to seek them out among his most ancient, crumbled engrammatic strata, he was unsurprised to find their source. Like so many of his supposedly original thoughts had turned out to be, over the years, it had originally been one of Djoseras'.

Yes – there it was. It had been during the disastrous early years of the secession wars, when Oltyx had been learning the disciplines of grand strategy. His elder had been surveying footage of a particularly dire fleet engagement, and observing just how outmatched their voidcraft had been by those... of the Ogdobekh. *Of course*.

'Hail, Zultanekh,' said Oltyx, a quarter of a second later, as the broad faceplate of his strange ally appeared in projection on the bridge.

'Hail, Oltyx King,' said the crown prince, inclining his head. But before he could speak, Oltyx found himself struck by a thought so obvious he had not even noticed it yet. If he was looking for betrayers, he reasoned, the warship captained by one of his dynasty's most ancient enemies, which had arrived just hours before the Imperial attack, might be a good place to start.

Zultanekh appeared puzzled by his silence, and then boomed his deep, brassy laugh once again. 'Do I know that look you wear, Oltyx? Oh yes. I know it, from the time I invited Djoseras to receive a container barge full of finest Ogdobekh sulphur-wine, after his victory at the Baltagiiy forges. You wonder... has mighty Zultanekh betrayed you?'

'Yes,' admitted Oltyx, taken somewhat off guard. 'Zultanekh, have you betrayed me?'

'Oltyx King, did Djoseras enjoy that wine, in the end? No, he did not, for he was of infuriatingly plain tastes. But it was no poison.' The crown prince gestured with his shovel-blade chin-crest then, at the body-long warhammer wielded by the lychguard to his left. 'Ogdobekh fights with hammers, not with daggers. If I ever take issue with you, dynast, I will strike you in your face, not your back. Now, is that why you made contact? I suspect it was not.'

Somehow, despite every instinct honed by half an eternity of Ithakan politics, Oltyx was reassured. Zultanekh had a point; this was not his betrayer.

'To the point, then. Speaking theoretically, what expertise might your crypteks be able to offer, with regard to Ithakan drive systems?'

'What expertise? Ha! A hunting-beast could fathom Ithakan drivework, Oltyx King. We always pitied it, in truth. You require technomancers?'

'You have one aboard with you?'

'No,' said Zultanekh, with feigned sorrow. 'Because I have already translated them inside the drive sepulchre of your ship! She is called Nebbeshken, and she is almost unbearably dull and miserable. But she will solve your problem. Now go, dynast, and see to your sorrowful engines, while Zultanekh spreads terror at random within the human formation.'

With that, the transmission ended abruptly, and Oltyx found Yenekh and the

full complement of lords from Sedh looking at him with uncertainty-patterns spiralling on their carapaces. Nobody, it seemed, knew quite how to react to that. Nevertheless, when a bloom of deep green gauss light erupted at the edge of the pursuing swarm, followed by the searing death-flashes of a string of human vessels, the Ogdobekh's parting words required no further explanation.

'I suppose I shall take him at his word,' said Oltyx, as the *Philotomokh* continued laying waste to the vessels at the edge of the gathering armada. 'Admiral, I will make sense of the situation in the drive sepulchre. Maintain the situation here as long as you can, and let no ship break ranks in my name. Let the *Akrops* take the brunt, where it can.'

'And when our armour is worn through?'

'I will ensure we are on our way to Carnotite before then. That is my duty, Razor. Now do yours.'

As soon as Oltyx translated into the sepulchre, he was confronted with such a racket that for a moment, he wondered if some new, dire ruin had been inflicted on the ship's cores.

Alas, it was just crypteks, doing what they did best. There were thirty of them clustered in the emerald-bright cavern where the ship's heart was enshrined, and every one of them was locked in raging disagreement with at least two other crypteks. Their nodal arrays flashed furiously in time with their strident, metallic voices, and not one of them seemed to be engaged with the business of investigating the problem at hand.

At the centre of the cluster, standing a head taller than the rest, was a cryptek clad in blackened bronze, being shouted at by no less than eight Ithakan crypteks. *That would be Nebbeshken, then*. The Ogdobekh technomancer had three oculars arrayed vertically on her long, crested head, and four arms – two slender, and two others ending in heavy, crushing pincers – all of which were weaving their way through thickets of glyphic projections in the air. It seemed she was entirely ignoring the crypteks of Ithakas as she worked, and it only enraged them further.

'Enough,' said Oltyx, and although he spoke softly, his royal augmentations ensured it sounded with the force of a hurricane in the auditory array of every cryptek besides the newcomer. The mystics cringed almost in unison, like vermin cast into sudden light, and from the flashes of alarm in their oculars,

Oltyx almost expected them to scuttle into the nearest crevices they could find. They did not, but they remained perfectly silent.

'Gratitude, king,' said Nebbeshken, with a perfunctory nod. 'Your drives are bad.'

'I gather,' Oltyx replied, feeling strangely refreshed by the prospect of a cryptek blessed with the gift of summary. He would be just as direct. 'Here is my problem – we need to make inertialess transit soon, or we will be destroyed. Can we?'

- 'Might as well ask a warrior to sing.'
- 'So it's impossible?'
- 'Yes.'
- 'Very well.'
- 'Unless I solve the leak. Then it will be possible.'
- 'A leak?' asked Oltyx, deciding not to challenge the cryptek's logic. 'That sounds simple enough.'

'It isn't. I'm using the word as the true description of the problem can only be expressed with transreal numeromancy. But you may think of it as a hole, between the core and the drive stacks, where flux is escaping.'

'I will do that, cryptek. And can you plug this "leak"?'

'No. It is not in this reality. But we can work around it.'

'How?'

'I could talk of interstitial seedlines and flux-dispersal manifolds. That would waste time. So – the *Philotomokh*'s drive array is better than this one. If you allow it, I will link them together across space, and transit will be possible.'

All around the three-eyed technomancer, the Ithakan crypteks were radiating pure hatred. Oltyx was curious to see how far the foreign engine-charmer's manner could stretch their tempers, but decided to speak first.

'It will be as easy as that?' he asked, already suspecting the answer.

'Probably not,' said Nebbeshken, with a double-armed shrug. 'But I won't know, until that's done.'

'So, then,' said Oltyx, stunned that the usual ordeal of getting sense from a cryptek had been so truncated, 'do it.'

'It is being done, king. I started before you arrived.'

'Good,' said Oltyx, hoping ferociously that he had not been mistaken in trusting Djoseras' old enemy.

Ever since the time of flesh, there had been an unspoken understanding which stretched across the ruling classes of the necrontyr, and which transcended all dynastic boundaries. For the sake of common interest, every ranking lord from the azure abyss of Thokt to the Charnokovh Expanse had agreed to uphold the lie that they understood the workings of their own technology.

But in truth, the slim portion of a young noble's education which did touch on the cryptek's arts was concerned much more with the effective feigning of knowledge, than with the knowledge itself. There was no shame in this. Especially in the wake of biotransference, the sophistication of their arcane sciences was such that to wield it did not feel like the use of technology at all, so much as it felt like the simple exercise of will. The question of 'how' was the burden of the conclaves alone.

Oltyx was pleased, then, to have encountered a cryptek who understood this with perfect clarity. Directing the crypteks of Ithakas by the icily issued mandate of Oltyx himself, Nebbeshken had rapidly progressed with the work of lending the *Philotomokh*'s strength to Yenekh's crippled dreadnought, leaving him free to concentrate elsewhere. There had been no long-winded prevaricating, no endless nonsense questions – just passionless, brutally quick execution of the task. And now, it was ready.

'It's ready,' said Nebbeshken, as she appeared without warning in a wisp of translation energy, barely six kubits from where Oltyx stood on the bridge. Oltyx dipped his brow in assent, and considered Yenekh's projection-map of the void around them. Under the cryptek's guidance, every ship in the fleet had manoeuvred into a protective sphere formation around the *Akrops*, as the *Philotomokh* hovered above its midline, tethered to its cores by two shimmering, half-present torrents of phased energy. One in, from the cores, and one out, to the drives. It was so tempting, seeing that, to think it simple.

As fast as the work had been, the *Polyphemus* had continued to eat away at the distance between them. Just sixteen seconds prior to Nebbeshken's appearance, the first ranging shots from its heavy guns had begun bursting behind them, sending ripples across their shielding. The flurries of escort craft, meanwhile, had merged into a near-constant torrent. Yenekh was certain, now, that the armada was only minutes away from rushing forward and overwhelming them. This was the time to make their exit.

So why was Nebbeshken standing there, saying nothing?

'Are you waiting for gratitude, sorcerer? Activate the inertialess drive.'

'Can't.'

'Why... can you not?' managed Oltyx, his temper straining like a stormblown sail.

'Not enough fuel,' replied Nebbeshken, with the half-shrug of her pincer-limbs which Oltyx had begun to suspect meant there was a lot more to it than she cared to say. 'You'll ask where to get more, so here is the answer – you wait. If I tether more ships to the *Philotomokh*, their cores can supplement the feed. It will take time.'

'How long?'

'Hours.'

'Will they be able to fight, as part of this... array?'

'No. It will break if they, or the *Philotomokh*, move from position.'

'Madness!' cried Yenekh, even as he paced before the viewport, overseeing the distribution of their point-defence turrets. 'We can't make our own ships helpless – not now. The humans are about to make their push. We'll never hold them off.'

'So the drive won't fire,' said Nebbeshken, nonplussed. 'It is your choice, lords of Ithakas.'

The moment the technomancer finished speaking, the onslaught began.

It started with a nova cannon round, from some cruiser deep in the press of human voidships: a searing, star-bright trail of plasma, which only became visible after the slug of metal it trailed had slammed into the midsection of the *Handtaker*.

It was a phenomenally well-placed shot, striking the thinnest part of the long stem connecting the Scythe-class cruiser's fore and aft sections. It was intercepted by the ship's quantum shielding, of course, in the picosecond before it made contact with the hull. But this defence had been designed to protect the ship against weapons of unfathomable power during Szarekh's war, and was simply not optimised to resist something so simple as a lump of metal made to travel at extreme velocity.

In this case, the *Handtaker* would have been better off unshielded. The shot caused the vessel's quantum shielding to fold in on itself through the substance of the ship, wherein it became briefly rigid, and then tore itself apart in a failure cascade of spectacular violence. The cruiser was obliterated near instantly, leaving just a patch of shivering, tortured reality where it had been.

Whether it had been intended as the start of the push or not, the vessels of the Imperial crusade leapt forward at the annihilation of the necron capital ship, as if it had been some manner of divine signal. The *Polyphemus* was still not close enough to fire, but that barely seemed relevant now, given the wall of ships thundering past it towards them.

Oltyx had not thought it would end like this. He had not thought it would end so *soon*. Once again – perhaps for the last time – he had no idea what to do. He felt weak. And as the bridge's orbuculum began shimmering to life with a transmission from the fleet, Oltyx was glumly certain as to whose image it would resolve into.

'Lords of Ithakas, I can remain silent no longer,' said Duamehht, as the hard, gold-divided planes of her faceplate appeared in projection before him.

She was casting her image on the broadest interstitial band, Oltyx noted, so that every shipmaster across the fleet would be seeing and hearing her. Already, his royal augmentations noted murmurings along the interstices all around him, as the nobles stood around the edge of the bridge reacted to her presence.

'I have waited for the dynast to provide the means for his own salvation,' Duamehht said, her tone a flawless synthesis of weary loyalty. 'But instead, he remains silent, and consorts with foreign crypteks in the bowels of his ship. With deep sorrow, I realise that I must act.'

'Reconfigure weapons to Ithakan target profiles,' Oltyx ordered Yenekh, the instant he realised what was happening. He was stunned at the sacrilege of the words, even as they emerged from his vocal buffer. But in the ironbound hierarchy of a necrontyr court, treachery had to strike as hard and fast as lightning in order to succeed. He had to be ready to strike first. Duamehht continued.

'This is no act of insurrection that I carry out now,' she lied, 'but one of loyalty. I cannot sanction regicide, after all. Whatever my opinion of the dynast, my loyalty to the throne stands above all else. Therefore, I act now to preserve the king of Ithakas, as he cannot preserve himself. I will be destroyed in the process, if I must. Those with the honour to do so – follow me.'

Oltyx found himself transfixed by Yenekh's map of the battle where, even as the sea of glyphs denoting Imperial ships were rushing forward, the ponderous sigil representing the *Godcutter* was accelerating forward to meet them.

'I can't believe it,' Yenekh said, as protocols of divination flickered before his oculars. 'She's going directly for the *Polyphemus*.'

Even as the shock of the moment consumed him, Oltyx conceded it was a sublimely shrewd move on Duamehht's part. Amassed behind her ship, the fleet might well stand a chance of taking out the human flagship. They would have no chance of defeating the armada as a whole, of course. But they did not need to. If his rival could strike a mortal blow to the enemy capital ship, she would become divine in the estimation of his people – even those nobles currently still loyal to him.

She would not need to lay a single blade stroke on Oltyx herself, afterwards. All she would have to do, was wait for the armada to descend on the *Akrops*, and then withdraw from the field, expressing her deepest regrets that the dynast could not be saved. And then, of course, with even deeper regret, she would accept the mantle of dynast herself, to rule over whatever scraps limped away from the fight with her.

Before rage overtook him entirely, a notion occurred to Oltyx, and with a calm that he should not have been able to muster, he dilated his chronosense to a modest factor of ten, and addressed Nebbeshken via interstitial signal.

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'Cryptek.'
'Yes.'
'We need fuel, yes? Ship-flux?'
'Yes.'
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'Let us say, for example, the quantity held within the drive sepulchre of a Cairn-class battleship. Would that suffice?'

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'Yes. But you would have to siphon it over time.'
'Or?'
'Or the donor ship would be destroyed.'
'Excellent.'
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When Oltyx allowed the accelerating chaos of the bridge to resume at its usual speed, he found himself suddenly unconcerned by it, as if that inexplicable moment of calm had somehow extended itself. Almost casually, he walked over to Yenekh, lit by the discharge-flashes of human artillery in the void outside, and directed his attention to the *Godcutter*, now cruising past overhead with its particle whips charging to fire.

'Seize that vessel with our gravitic harpax, and tow them in. Have every scarab on the *Akrops* pulled from its current task, and slaved to the command of this fine Ogdobekh cryptek. Nebbeshken, I trust you can carry out the operation I just proposed to you?'

'Yes,' said the cryptek, with the first, faint stirring of passion Oltyx had seen in her yet. 'It will be an interesting exercise.'

Then, with the pace at which he would have paced Sedh's fortifications to while away its endless twilight by himself, back when he had enjoyed the privilege of being entirely insignificant, Oltyx walked across the bridge and sat down on Neth's terrible throne. It had been a good idea for his old praetor to carry it here, after all.

Just as expected, Duamehht's projected image appeared again moments later, oculars blazing with outrage.

'What is the meaning of this, Oltyx?'

'You will address me as your dynast,' stated Oltyx, looking past the traitor's crackling image to watch her ship being tugged slowly down towards the horns of the *Akrops*.

'What are you doing, my dynast?' she spat, as the first softly glowing streams of scarabs began winding up towards the Godcutter's belly.

'Why, Duamehht, can't you see? I'm preserving the king of Ithakas, just as you have so passionately implored my people to do. And you will be destroyed in the process. You must feel honoured to have served with such devotion.'

'This is madness, Oltyx.'

'This is justice. Do you think me so foolish, Duamehht, that I have not fathomed the means by which the armada of the humans learned of our location?'

The image of his adversary became still then, and her oculars pulsed with shock. When she spoke again, her tone was grave.

'I will be honest with you, slayer of Unnas. I regard you with contempt. But I spoke the truth to the fleet, and I speak it to you now – I honour the crown. I would never betray it.'

'You lie.'

'No, Oltyx. You see things which are not there. You have become twisted by your exile, and you strike out at enemies of your own imagining.'

'So why do you charge the heart of the enemy now,' roared Oltyx, flux

seething in green flames from the cracks in his carapace as he stood, 'if not to seize my people from me?'

'Again, dynast, I did not lie. This is near certainly a doomed attack, and one against your wishes – but would you rather I had stayed in formation and waited to be destroyed, rather than do something?'

'That was my command,' Oltyx snarled, his voice rising to fill the bridge like a firestorm. He leaned in towards the image of his rival and spoke again, in a low and level tone. 'Now, *traitor*, I command you to be consumed, along with your ship. And should you wish to disobey your king in this regard? Then, Duamehht, *you may do so in person*.'

Oltyx could only imagine, from the fractal patterns that flashed across her nodal arrays then, what confusion was passing through Duamehht's flux. For all her scheming, she had not expected this ruthlessness from her king. He had shocked her, and she had no response ready. But soon enough, as the *Akrops*' scarab swarm began to gnaw away at the back of her ship, and the deluge of human munitions began to impact against its forward hull, she made her decision.

'So be it,' she said, dipping her brow in grave formality. Then, with a brief whisper of energy along the edges of the unreal, she had vanished from the projection, and appeared on the bridge before him.

They looked at each other then, through the photonic mist of her transit, and Oltyx felt disquieted. With what little emotional finesse her nodal arrays allowed her, Duamehht seemed to be... *imploring* him. As if there was still some other route they could take; some peaceful way out of this mess. Around them, every noble congregated on the bridge was transfixed, hanging on the moment to see what would happen.

But Oltyx shook his head grimly. Their bridge was burned, and any appeal from Duamehht now could only be a ruse. The king decided he would not fall for it. He brought his glaive to hand, already strobing with ripples of phased energy, and raised it to his foe. As Duamehht's own weapon – a two-handed sword nearly the length of her body – appeared in her grip, the nobles began to slide backwards, leaving a broad circle of deck clear around them.

Whatever happened now would transpire through violence. So Oltyx attacked.



### **CHAPTER SIX**

## THE ECSTASY OF GOLD

Duamehht had always been fast. Even in the time of flesh, their sparring sessions had left Oltyx more often on his back than his feet. Biotransference, clearly, had only driven her reflexes to new extremes.

As their blades crossed, Oltyx saw it had opened her way to new advantages, too. Her limbs moved almost too quickly for Oltyx's oculars to follow, even within the heightened perception of his combat engagement state; their movement emitted the telltale quantum rhythm of the crypteks' arts.

Duamehht's body appeared to blur with each movement, as if it was temporarily stretched across a spectrum of parallel realities. It would only commit to one of them when her blade was nearly upon him, and Oltyx knew it was only a matter of time before the first strike made it through.

She wasn't just fast, he learned, when one of her transreal feints got the better of him at last. Duamehht was strong, too. Her sword had been forged with a grip halfway along the length of its blade, and in the first lunge that made it past his engagement state, Oltyx saw why. Duamehht turned the weapon in her grip in a single, liquid motion, hauled it back behind her

shoulder, and swung with a ferocity that would have put an ork to shame.

Oltyx charged into the blow, untroubled at the prospect of being clubbed with the pommel of the sword. But when the deep green sphere struck his forearm, smashing a hand's breadth into his armour, his engagement state was quick to tell him his mistake: the globe which capped the weapon's hilt was laced with neutronium filaments, and packed nearly half his mass into its fist-sized sphere. Stiletto slivers of shattered necrodermis exploded across the bridge, followed by a gout of rushing core-flux. And then, before the debris had even hit the deck, her second strike came in from the other side, aimed at Oltyx's right temple.

But he had seen the attack coming. Right before the moment of impact, Oltyx's intact forearm shot up to guard his faceplate. His sempiternal weave drew the entire output of his core for an instant, and turned the carapace of his wrist briefly into something harder than singularity-forged diamond. The armour sprung a crack under the blow, but did not split, sending the force of the impact back up the Erebur noble's arm. Any limb of flesh and blood would have exploded to mist from the shock. But Duamehht just took a step backwards, momentarily staggered.

Oltyx kept his focus squarely on his foe, and pushed on towards her through the ground she had ceded. As he advanced, he allotted a sliver of his executive buffer to examining the reaction of the nobles around him. More had joined them now, shimmering with the telltale sign of hardscry projections. None of their ships were going anywhere for the time being, despite the onslaught they were enduring outside, and so the attention of the high-ranking lords had turned here to see the tilt of history.

They were all silent, as still as ossuary ward-statues. But Oltyx could almost see their heka straining, as they willed their fighter on. As dynast, he should have felt certain that every lord there willed his victory. But his interstitial node felt the tingle of them murmuring to each other all around him, and Oltyx knew that some of those hidden words wished him death.

The realisation fuelled his anger, as he closed on Duamehht. *This*, he thought, *would be his message to the unfaithful*. Letting his engagement protocols drive his limbs, Oltyx leapt forward before Duamehht could recover from the impact, and rammed her with his shoulder, leaving a half-cubit dent in one side of her thorax.

His foe turned her fall into a roll, moving with grace that seemed

impossible from the bodies they had been given, and managed to buy herself just enough space to escape his glaive's reach. Oltyx vented a searing plume of core-flux in frustration and fell into a crouch, glaive held low and ready to sweep upwards into any attack.

They began to circle one another. As he moved, Oltyx glimpsed movement through the cataract of combat data tumbling across his visual field, and saw both Pakhet and Neth advancing rapidly towards the duel. They meant to aid him, but he thrust glyphs of negation at them both via his interstitial node, even as Duamehht dashed forward to strike again. He had been protected enough already today.

They clashed once more, and then fell back, and then clashed again. But now that the surprise of her weighted hilt was spent, Duamehht had lost the initiative. She still possessed a more natural aptitude for bladework than Oltyx ever had, and had honed it more finely over the years. But it was not enough to overcome him.

A boiling mix of rage and momentum had carried him through countless battles over the years, and had proved brutally effective against the Unclean in particular. But now, Oltyx felt there was something more at play, which had not been there for him before Antikef. It was not that his style of fighting had changed – it was the way it made him feel. Before, the thick of a fight had always felt like he was descending into something ugly, but irresistible. Now, it felt more as if was he climbing towards something, although he did not know what that was.

As he waded back along the edge of the bridge's viewport, smashing aside a series of thrusts with the flat of his glaive, he could not help but see the crenellated juggernaut of the *Polyphemus* at the edge of his visual field. Time was wearing on. And for all that he was able to twist Duamehht's blows aside, time after time, he could not find the speed to interject with his own, beyond-fleeting, ineffectual jabs.

A duel like this, he knew, where both participants were bristling with royal-calibre pattern augmentations, could last a long time. And with neither of them liable to tire in any meaningful sense, even if they were to fight for a full solar cycle, there was a genuine danger that the human attack would finish off the *Akrops* before either of them were able to land a mortal blow.

The next time they broke free of their deathlock, Oltyx scoured the options presented by his engagement state for something, anything, that might

precipitate a kill. But for every trick his body might deploy, he knew Duamehht would be able to counter with her own armoury, as it was so nearly a mirror of his own.

Then, an uncertain sensation began pounding through Oltyx's flux, coming from the shattered casing of his left arm, and when he recognised what it was, he realised there was one faculty he possessed that Duamehht did not. It was pain.

Pain was not something he should have felt at all, of course. The very knowledge of such an obsolete sensation was a relic: an array transcribed uselessly from the creatures of flesh and blood his people had once been. For most necrons of rank, it had been suppressed from the day of biotransference. But Oltyx's pain had been reawoken by Hemiun, as the bitter low-born had taken him apart in the cells beneath Unnas' throne room, so that he would feel every mutilation inflicted on him.

How curious, thought Oltyx, that I never thought to suppress it again. As recognition of the pain from his arm bloomed, it was joined by a symphony of other small agonies. The cracks and gouges and burns in his necrodermis, even the scrape of his plating against the deck as he ducked and twisted from Duamehht's strikes, filled him with that blunt, senseless fire that had meant so much during the time of flesh. He could not say, in all honesty, that it troubled him.

And so, without thinking too much about it, he charged forward, straight onto the point of Duamehht's sword.

Superheated core-flux blasted from the impalement point, just a finger's breadth below Oltyx's thoracic cartouche, and briefly obscured the world in crackling, searing green. When it dissipated, his would-be usurper's faceplate, with that mocking gold stripe down its centre, was barely a kubit from his own. It was as expressionless as it had been since the day she had come out of the biofurnace, of course. A pitiless death mask, lit with flame and gauss fire from the battle outside.

But Oltyx had the strangest sense that he could see beyond that, to the horror he knew would have been etched on the features it had replaced, if they had persisted. The horror, and the revulsion, and the hatred. And beyond all of that, the shock. Duamehht had not anticipated a move so reckless, nor could she have committed any counter on instinct. Now, at last, the king had the initiative.

A splinter of a second before she could do the same, Oltyx cast a protocol of activation at the metalodermal generators that had been extruded throughout the underlayer of his necrodermis on the day he had taken the throne. What a spectacular gift it now proved to be.

From a thousand points across his armoured form, points of actinic, unbearable brightness sprang into being. They writhed as if they were living things – like leeches, craning blindly towards the warmth of blood. And then, all at once, they arced into the body of his enemy, and dug in like barbed hooks.

The energy looked like lightning, but it was not. It was as bright as stormburst, and yet it cast no light, made no sound, as it tore through Duamehht's carapace. The jagged, squirming tethers dug deeper and deeper, and the master duellist locked into a state of seizure, unable to do so much as curl a finger as the weird energy wracked her body.

Smoke, and then metallic vapour, and then raw core-flux began to pour from the joints of Duamehht's carapace, until the lightning, in its hunger, began to lash back at Oltyx too. He did not care. He let the pain flow into the torrent that rose from his pierced core, and felt it carrying him upwards, into greater strength. It could not harm him in any real sense.

Seizing his foe with an interstitial traction grip, he lifted her up into the air above the deck with just a gesture of his hand and continued to drown his opponent in lightning. Oltyx did not relent. Even when the lightning raced down his outstretched arm and engulfed his head. Even when its strange, iceblue fire heated the necrodermis to the point where it expanded and shattered, leaving one of his oculars glaring from the splintered wreck of a socket, he did not stop.

But then, Duamehht managed to move. The heka required to resist the paralysis inflicted by the lightning must have been immense, even for such a tiny motion. But she made it count. With a brief, spasming gesture of her hand, she opened a minute hole in space — the throat of a microscopic contingent reality — and with perfect grace, sent a phase dagger sleeting from its aperture.

The blade slashed across Oltyx's faceplate, shearing free the mandible plate that would have been his jaw once, and sending it tumbling to the deck with a clang. Oltyx staggered back in surprise, pressing a hand uselessly to the wound, and with the lightning withdrawn at last, Duamehht prised herself

from the interstitial grip and collapsed, smoking, in a heap.

The damage to Oltyx was minimal, of course, as any necron's faceplate was purely ornamental. But there was simply no amount of time that could wear away the instinctual shock of sustaining a facial wound. Some traces of the biological, Oltyx knew all too well, could never be expunged.

Despite the fury of the voidcraft clashing beyond the viewport, the bridge was completely silent. Oltyx looked up, hand still clamped to his lacerated faceplate, and scowled at the throng of lords, watching like scavengers from the edges of the duel. They had projected their images by hardscry from across the fleet, compelled to watch the fate of the dynasty play out, even as they had fought off the crusade with their ships. Even Yenekh had paused in the usual bombast of his command, and was staring at Oltyx.

Whatever euphoria had overtaken him as he had inflicted such grievous damage on his challenger was long gone now. In its place was something Oltyx had desperately hoped had been left behind in the darkness of Hemiun's cell.

His face. His jaw. She had cut off his jaw. He had to find it.

His thoughts slowing, Oltyx found himself on his hands and knees, searching desperately for the sheared-off plate amongst the debris. The shapes of things seemed to blur, and the gauss lamps of the bridge began to flicker, just as they had done in the royal sanctum.

No. Not this.

When the deep fabric of the ship groaned then, it was as if it spoke in reply to him. The deck itself shivered, and Oltyx wondered now if the wild tales of the *Akrops*' haunting by Admiral Korrocep, who had died at Sokar, were so ridiculous after all. And then, as he fumbled with pain-wracked hands among the detritus of the fight, Oltyx saw something that made his flux run cold.

He had found his mandible plate. But it was not a shard of necrodermis at all. It was a jawbone, surrounded by a scattering of teeth.

Another error, he insisted to himself. That is all. A stress refrenation. And the sounds? Just the ship's structure flexing, as it repairs itself. Mass and energy being redistributed, that is all. All of this is just in your head.

But then, Oltyx considered, the head of a king was a potent thing. In his divinity, his heka – the power of his will to dictate reality – was absolute. Just as the glyph on his chest was both the symbol of the dynasty and the dynasty itself, by virtue of its inscription on the royal body, his very

perception determined the truth of everything in his domain.

Another thought rose from Oltyx's memetic buffer, then, like a bubble of poison gas. Your mind is distributed in your flux, now. To assert that 'it is all in your head' is, therefore, false. Because no brain resides there.

It was such a pedantic, obvious little thought. But implications spread from it like carcass-worms, and filled the whole of his mind. He looked over at where Duamehht was slowly rising from the deck, and saw a darkness moving through the deck beneath her. *Like the shadow of a predator*, Oltyx thought, *under thick ice*.

He would rather have fought Duamehht three times over than encounter this foe. For he knew it all too well. It was part of every necron, he suspected, but those sworn to Ithakas' sigil were some of the worst afflicted. The *dysphorakh*, it was called: the echo of the organic mind, driven to the deepest madness by incarceration in steel. It was the sudden terror that struck at the realisation of having no brain, no heartbeat, no blood, and which screamed all the louder for the lack of a mouth.

Imprisoned on Antikef, Oltyx had almost been lost to that horror. He had overcome it, in the end, and risen from that dungeon to fight beside Djoseras against the Unclean. His will had proved strong enough to subdue the dysphorakh, and when he had assumed the mantle of dynast, he had been arrogant enough to declare to himself that it was vanquished. But clearly, even a king's will was not strong enough to conquer its own shadow.

The shadow beneath Duamehht swelled until it seemed to engulf the whole of the bridge in darkness. Oltyx's oculars could detect far more than just light, of course. He could see by the causal vibration of the void itself, if he needed to. But this was dark as impenetrable as any from the time of flesh, and he could not dispel it.

Against the midnight gloom, all he could make out was Duamehht, staggering towards him, and the crowd of nobles, shimmering with hardscry light as they watched grimly for the end of the fight to play out.

Amongst them was the apparition. That golden thing which had troubled him in the sanctum. Which was not his reflection, and was not Unnas, but which looked like both. Wretched and blood-fouled, it crouched among the lords, and Oltyx saw now that it did not just wear the mask of a skull. Its armour was covered all over with splintered lengths of bone, robed once with gold, and then again with blood.

The presence looked back at Oltyx, with eyes that seemed to leer directly into his mind, and rose to its full, dreadful height. With slow relish, it reached out across the gloom-shrouded bridge, and beckoned him.

Oltyx tried to point, to roar at the apparition and alert the lords around it to its presence. But in his shock, his kinetic actuators reached out to muscles which had been incinerated sixty million years ago, and a chest which had never held breath.

This should not be happening, he thought, as the dysphorakh threw itself upon him with unbearable weight. I was meant to have beaten this.

So beat it again, said the golden thing that crouched among the lords of Ithakas. You are the king, after all.

'I am the king,' croaked Oltyx. But the spectre was gone, and the bridge was fully lit, as it had been moments ago. As if nothing had changed.

'You killed the king,' said Duamehht, her voice distorted by the damage he had inflicted, as she staggered towards him on stiff joints. Behind her, in the void, he could see torrents of ship-flux being drawn from the dying *Godcutter*, as the *Akrops* drank its core.

'He had become... something else,' muttered Oltyx, unwilling to look at the place where the apparition had stood. 'It was justice.'

'So shall this be,' intoned the usurper, as she called the phase dagger to hand and advanced on him.

'No,' said Oltyx, and although he had no clever words to follow with, he did not need them. 'No,' he repeated, finding something of himself again. 'Because I do not will it. This has gone on long enough, Duamehht. But I think you have helped me to learn something important today. I cannot truly rule if I do not take the gold. And so, it is time that I took it.'

Now that he saw it, Oltyx could not believe he had missed it for so long. How much sooner this could have been over, he thought, as he enacted the subdued, unassuming little protocol his royal augmentations had been offering him ever since Duamehht had first translated aboard.

The gold stripe that marked those of his usurper's house had only ever been worn by permission of the dynast they served, after all. By rights, it was his to rescind at any time. And so, with the neat hooking of interstitial grips onto anchor points all along that stripe of gold, Oltyx rescinded the privilege.

There was a brief hiss of cleaving metal, and then a rush of escaping coreflux, followed by two simultaneous, hollow chimes as the halves of Duamehht's carapace fell sideways to the deck, with a flawless strip of gold lying between them.

Oltyx looked around at the watching nobles, as the last flux steamed from the bisected remains of his enemy.

'Does anyone else wish to challenge my authority?'

Not a word came back from the watching crowd. Oltyx was not sure what to say, then, but Nebbeshken spared him the trouble of thinking, as she stomped forward to address him.

- 'Is that done, then?' she said impatiently.
- 'Yes, it is done.'
- 'So is my work. The drive's ready to fire.'
- 'Then we sail for Carnotite. Yenekh? Take us away from this place.'



### **CHAPTER SEVEN**

# 1,981 SECONDS

'Your raiments are all but complete,' said the scarab, as its mandibles knitted a thick ridge of gold along the edge of Oltyx's breastplate, and brought him up from the depths of thought. The canoptek's strange chorus-like voice, formed by the vibration of the plates of its abdomen, delivered the first words that had been spoken since the start of the process, and they stirred an unexpected sentiment in Oltyx.

'I never thought I would miss your voices,' he told the coven of his former selves. 'But I do. I think. I find that I talk to myself often these days, just to break the silence of my mind.'

'We cannot be reintegrated safely, Oltyx. You know this.'

'I do. But all the same, even now I have ascended, I... miss how things were.'

Nebbeshken's work had been solid. The *Akrops* had escaped at last from the jaws of the crusade, with a mighty convulsion of its inertialess drive, and the surviving ships of the exodus fleet had followed with it. Their losses had been merciful, considering the time they had spent under the full wrath of the human guns as Oltyx had duelled with Duamehht. Yenekh had brought up the

Koptas and the Buhto, Sedh's hammer-headed relics, to soak up the worst of the attack, and true to his word, the obsolete vessels had shrugged off colossal volumes of Terran ordnance. No doubt the slaves of the Emperor had thought them to be some new superweapons, rather than leftovers from a bygone age.

Their drive situation was still far from solved. The inertialess transit, fuelled as it had been by such desperate measures, had been disastrously inefficient, moving them just a few thousand sunsreach from Antikef, and completely depleting the ship's energy reserves in the process. It would take hundreds of transits of this length to reach Carnotite – and that was presuming the emergency jump had not damaged the drives still further.

Still, with their betrayer vanquished, there would be nothing to lead the humans to their new location. Even though the *Akrops* had bled a trail of radioactive debris so thick even Unclean sensors would eventually sniff it out, it would take time. And with the full attention of Zultanekh's sullen miracle worker devoted to their propulsion systems, Oltyx was confident they would be long gone by the time the pursuit resumed.

But for now, the exodus fleet was cruising slowly through deep space, with its ships running under the ultra-low emission protocols they had adopted during the Great Sleep, and there was time to recover.

Oltyx had not said anything further to his court, after destroying the pretender Duamehht. He had proceeded directly to his sanctum, and to the throne, where he had summoned the scarab to enact the rite of chrysopoeia – his anointing, at last, with the gold of royalty. There could be no question in anyone's mind, now, that Oltyx had earned it.

In the grip of the madness which had haunted him on the bridge, he had become certain that the full assumption of the royal heka would be his salvation from the terror which had followed him from Antikef. In Hemiun's dungeons he had hidden from it in the darkness of the evocatory medium. But that had not beaten it. This time, he would burn it away with the brightness. For to the necrontyr, what had ever been more perfect, or more terrible, than the pitiless light of the sun?

Taking the gold was a gesture of defiance, too – not just towards the blood-smeared phantom which had taunted him, but to the Unclean who dared hunt him. The gold being plated over his form now was taken from their figurehead, after all. He would wear it as a trophy. And not just him, either.

Now, looking down from the throne over the city-broad shell of the tomb ship, he watched scarabs advancing in lines across the hull, meshing the purified metal into the ship's own necrodermis. If the *Akrops* was to be his crownworld, then it would wear gold, too.

'Dare we assume, O king,' said the scarab, 'that you will leave the matter of decoration to us, now the two base coats are complete? We were thinking simple geometric patterns, in the style of the Laertezyn period, but if you would care to—'

Oltyx could always recognise when what had once been his doctrinal submind loomed large in the scarab's personality. Its fussy-minded obsession with tradition had always been uniquely irritating, when it had been a part of him. Once, he would have scorned it for its meaningless questions. But a lot had changed since then.

'Just keep it simple,' said Oltyx, mildly, but with iron finality.

'As you wish,' said the construct, and began to extrude nanoscale filigree around the edge of his thoracic cartouche in what looked suspiciously like the style of the Laertezyn period.

Some time later, the scarab alighted from his body with a satisfied tripleclack of its mandibles, and hovered before him to admire its work.

'It is to your approval, we hope?'

Oltyx let an acknowledgement-pattern shimmer across his discharge nodes, and meant to say nothing more, but found words in his vocal buffer anyway.

'Thank you,' he said. A king did not thank anyone, for their service was his ordained right. But the scarab was different. Oltyx did not like to admit it, for he had ever had to fight against his shameful tendency towards softness, but the small kindness made his flux feel lighter in a way that no amount of slaughter could match.

'You like the pattern?' asked the scarab, with a note of surprise.

'I feel nothing about the pattern. It is flawless, but aesthetics mean nothing to me.'

'We see the Ogdobekh engine-charmer has been teaching you the art of flattery, then.'

'No, but maybe a little about honesty. You know our people never cared for art, save for a few... unsavoury sorts, and you know I have always taken pride in being a paragon of disinterest. But the gratitude is sincere. The humiliation of my excoriation is undone at last.'

Rising from the throne, Oltyx paced to the viewport of the sanctum, and inspected himself closely. The work really was flawless – every slab of armour, every tiniest convolution of his necrodermis, was now enrobed with the brash gleam of gold. But the perfection unnerved him.

'Perhaps too far undone,' he muttered.

Consternation-patterns flickered through his core, just visible as a stirring of the nodes across his thoracic plating. His reflection was the very image of a king, but it did not quite look like *him*, somehow. And in a way, it was not. To become a king was to ascend to a new mode of being, in a hekatic sense. But it brought the apparition of Unnas-but-not all too closely to mind. The spectre of the auric ghoul was all too fresh in his engrams, and kept seeping into his optic buffer, making his flux shiver at the recollection.

The scarab could not have known what he had seen, but it could not have missed his reaction, for it came now to perch on his shoulder as he looked at himself.

'May we pass one comment, our liege?'

'No doubt on the matter of Duamehht's ending?' challenged Oltyx, with the bass-heavy click that passed for a grunt. Having endured centuries of nagging from the scarab when its components resided inside his mind, he had come into this meeting with every expectation of a lecture.

'Not at all. You are the king. It is not for us to judge your methods. In fact, we were going to suggest... well... would you like your scars back, perhaps, Oltyx? They are no marks of shame, after all.'

'Yes,' he said, after a pause, fingers absently tracing the smoothness of the gold over the point where he had thrown himself on Duamehht's blade. 'Yes, I would. The dynasty bears scars enough. Why should its dynast not?'

The scarab dipped its mouthparts in assent, and began. As it seared through the gold on his faceplate to reopen the vicious gash where his mandible plate had been sheared, Oltyx's buffers lit up with pain-glyphs, and one of his fingers twitched on the throne's rest. Almost imperceptibly, the sanctum's gauss lamps dimmed.

'Your nocireceptory array is still active?' asked the scarab, pulling away from the work as soon as it saw the reaction. 'You feel pain, still?'

'Yes,' said Oltyx, voice leaden. 'But leave it with me. If this dynast will not hide from scars, he will not hide from pain, either.'

'If you wish.'

The construct set to work again, each incision stinging like a heated scalpel drawn over skin. At first, it brought images of Hemiun's gauss flenser to mind, and the near obliteration of self that had begun under the false cryptek's blades. But then, beneath the pain, he found wisps of the same calm he had found at the height of the duel. As the scarab's chips and gouges began to score darkness across the splendour of his body once again, Oltyx began to feel more at ease.

To Oltyx's surprise, he was the next to speak.

'On the matter of Duamehht...' he began, letting the words hang as he wrestled with a question he did not want to ask.

'We said already, it is not our station to judge the actions of a king.'

'No,' Oltyx agreed, with faint annoyance, as this was the one creature whose deference meant nothing to him. 'But you were part of me, once. If you were part of me still, what would you have counselled?'

'It is still hard to say,' said the scarab sorrowfully, as it scoured deep into the necrodermis of his shoulder with a blade of green fire. 'We suspect that what you saw, and heard, may have been different from what we perceived from the outside.'

'What do you mean by that?' asked Oltyx, too quickly. Did the scarab know what he had seen?

'Did you know, Oltyx, how many Imperial ships the *Godcutter* slew, even as it was consumed on your orders? Were you aware that it had projected its own quantum shielding over that of the Akrops, laying its own hull bare? Or that it managed to inflict further wounds on the *Polyphemus* with its particle whip batteries, before it was pulled back?'

'Duamehht did not respect me!' growled Oltyx, as if that was any sort of answer.

'No,' agreed the scarab. 'But she was willing to be destroyed for you. It is hard to imagine that she betrayed our location to the Unclean.'

'I had every reason to strike her down,' said Oltyx, focusing his oculars on the gold that coated his hands. 'And the sacrifice of the *Godcutter* was our only way out.'

'Perhaps. But what of the full tesseract of warriors inside its hull? The flights of scythecraft bound to its interstitial anchors? What of them? All gone, now, in a quarrel over gold.'

'It was necessary,' barked Oltyx, anger rising. 'I needed to prove I was

willing to do such things, to preserve the sanctity of my will. Such is the way of the necrontyr, scarab.'

'Yes, Oltyx. And there is our point, we suppose. For that is the way you always reacted against, in the wildness of your youth. The callous annihilation of our own, when we know our numbers can never be replenished.'

'The great virtue of compassion,' spat Oltyx, with contempt. 'How often it is spoken of in the epitaphs of great kings.'

'Things change, Oltyx. That is why you are here, after all. And if we are any of us to have epitaphs beyond a few scattered, radioactive cinders, it will perhaps be because you remembered your mercy. Remember how your proclivities once horrified Djoseras?'

Oltyx remembered, then. He thought of his brother, and their final conversation. Of the moment when the stewardship of Ithakas had been pressed on him behind a barricade of shattered monuments, in the moments before the charge of the Astartes.

'It did horrify him, once,' said Oltyx, after a long pause, where the anger drained from him in its entirety. 'And in the end, it was what gave him hope.'

Only sparks rose from the scarab then, as it finished the work on his left shoulder. After a while, it folded its cutting tools back into its cranial assembly and buzzed a brief sigh-analogue, before turning its inscrutable ocular cluster to him.

'That hope was wisely placed, Oltyx. We think so. And we have been you. We know your wrath, and the fears that drive it. But so did Djoseras. And still, he made his choice. Perhaps, then, be wary of what you mistake for strength.'

'I am king now, scarab. Everything I ascertain is, by definition, correct. How could I ever know when I am wrong?'

'We have no idea, Oltyx. It is why we are relieved we are no longer a part of you. But you have made a good start, here. Never let your scars become drowned in gold.'

The gold had barely cooled on Oltyx's carapace when Yenekh sent him an interstitial message, begging his presence on the bridge. The tone conveyed by the Razor's appendation-glyphs would have seemed as hearty as ever, to any other recipient. But Oltyx knew him well enough to have learned that

Yenekh was only that positive when he was trying to gild a truly dreadful situation.

As soon as he arrived, the dynast began to see why that might be, for Nebbeshken had emerged from the drive sepulchre again.

'Can't repair it,' she announced, before Oltyx had even fully materialised from translation.

'You will have to be less brief than that, cryptek,' said Oltyx, in a sequence of words he never would have imagined himself saying.

'The leak. Can't repair it.'

'Why?'

'Because it's not damage. It's something the ship's doing.'

'Why would it do that?' said Yenekh with some frustration, clearly not for the first time.

'Don't know – not a naudomancer. But I can't fix it. Made some improvements, but I've done all I can.'

'What state are we in, then?' Oltyx asked, emphatically pointing the question at Yenekh so he would at least have a chance of getting the truth in one instalment.

'Our conventional drives are in much the same state as they were before — we're wallowing. But we can make further inertialess transits, if we continue to travel tethered to the *Philotomokh*. That is the good news. The bad news is, each firing of the drive will take us an increasingly short distance. Exactly how far, we don't know yet. But it will take thousands of firings to reach Carnotite — and that is presuming the situation does not worsen.'

Curse the void, thought Oltyx, for he had always despised space on an essential level. Why did it have to be so vast?

'And our fuel situation?'

'Dire. It seems our reserves will be depleted entirely, every time we achieve transit. And if I may be blunt, there are no ships remaining in the fleet that would replenish us to nearly the extent the *Godcutter* did.'

'Which leaves us with only a trickle from the *Philotomokh*?' confirmed Oltyx, with growing despondency.

'That is right. Or whatever other ships we choose to add to the array. I should add, the estimate for the number of transits required to reach Carnotite is based on every capital ship we have to be deployed in this way. Which, of course, means they cannot fight.'

'Then I suppose,' said Oltyx, with the dull thud of gold on gold as he shrugged, 'we shall have to get as far as we can, before we are forced to fight.'

'On that matter,' said Yenekh, and gestured with an elegant sweep of his arm, as a squat, elaborately crested shipmaster came forward from the bustle of the crew-pits.

'Shipmaster Begh-Rhyz of Thrassonos Minor,' announced the newcomer, one ocular flickering with stress-patterns. 'Of the Dirge-class observation vessel *Reedlurker*, your irradiated eminence.'

'What have you seen?' commanded Oltyx, with the flat weariness of someone who already knew the answer to their question.

Wisely avoiding any preamble, the shipmaster cast a protocol of amalgamation over the nearest section of the viewport, to fuse its view with that of his own craft's optic array. The stars distorted beyond the crystal as their vision raced to the vantage of the distant scout craft, and then snapped back into place in a different configuration. At the centre of their field of view, shimmering targeting auspices bracketed what might have been mistaken for a galaxy, at least by someone who wasn't looking for several thousand onrushing warships.

'Their bearing could not be more precise,' said Begh-Rhyz, with audible hatred. 'They are headed directly for us. A fleet of their fastest ships, not their largest, with no warp signatures as yet.'

'They know we are crippled,'

'Or they've guess—' began Yenekh, but Oltyx cut him off before he could get any further, snapping his head round with such ferocity that Begh-Rhyz took a step back.

'I said they *know*,' hissed Oltyx. The scarab had been right. Duamehht had not been his betrayer. They were still at large, and he would find them.

'Of course, my king,' said Yenekh, raising his palms in submission. 'And I have every faith you will get to the root of it. But for now, they know where we are.'

'How long, then?' demanded Oltyx, towering over the increasingly rigid shipmaster.

'Half of an Antikef solar cycle, dynast, until the first wave arrives.'

'And can we make transit before then, admiral?'

'Certainly – but it will not take us far from them. They will be able to track

us visually, and catch up again before our drives are replenished.'

'And is there any detail I'm missing,' Oltyx asked Nebbeshken, 'that might alleviate this otherwise dire situation?'

'No,' she said, and translated away immediately.

Oltyx dismissed the shipmaster back to his vessel, leaving him with Yenekh, and stared at the deck as if it might have an answer.

'So, Razor,' said Oltyx. 'We either wait here to accept our doom, or we run, and our doom finds us later.'

'Or we run, until we find a way to get one over on our doom... It has worked so far, dynast.'

Oltyx looked at Yenekh then with profound bafflement, that he could manage to find a brightness even in this situation.

'Yenekh. I have wondered, many times, how you have managed to withstand the curse for this long. Now, at last, I think I am beginning to understand. You just refuse to accept the worst, don't you?'

The admiral stiffened momentarily at the mention of his condition, but then spread his palms in a gesture of acceptance, and spoke plainly.

'As I said, dynast, it has worked so far.'

It had been considered distasteful, at least among the upper echelons of necrontyr culture, to talk of luck. To speak of bad luck was simply to confess your incompetence. But speaking of good luck was little better, as it was an admission that elements of your reality were outside your control. Even when the star of the homeworld had entered one of its relatively benign cycles, and the mass graves of the commoners' districts were only half-full by the solstice, that was not good luck: merely weakness, on the sun's part.

As such, Oltyx did not see it as good luck that they were able to fire the inertialess drive for the second time, at the exact moment that the fastest of the Imperium's frigates loosed its first torpedo volley – he saw it as idleness, on the part of the human ships. It was welcome, nonetheless.

Things got worse afterwards.

When the fleet's analysis arrays caught up with their new position following the transit, they found that they had barely made any headway at all. Even with their five remaining Scythe-class cruisers slaved to the *Philotomokh*, taking their most powerful assets out of play, the human ships were still within the very edge of visual range. No cryptek had been needed to work out

that the hunting pack would be among them again before the *Akrops* had accumulated the flux necessary for another transit. But Nebbeshken had provided the numbers anyway.

One thousand, nine hundred and eighty-one seconds, she had reported, as soon as that second transit was complete — one thousand, nine hundred and eighty-one seconds until they were ready to fire the drive again. And one thousand, eight hundred and four seconds until the fastest human ships reached them, on their brutish fusion drives. In other words, half an hour of respite, and then one hundred and seventy-seven seconds in the teeth of the Imperium.

They had made themselves ready. And then, at the precise moment foreseen by the Ogdobekh cryptek, the first swarms of chemically propelled munitions had begun streaking towards them, from the dagger-nosed frontrunners of their pursuit. They lost nothing in that first skirmish, as the humans' projectiles were pitifully slow, and their ships, having learned from the encounter on the outskirts on Antikef, took care to hang back, out of range of the big vessels.

But after that next transit, their third, Nebbeshken had new numbers. This transit had been fractionally shorter than the last. Added to that, the repeated firing of the drive, with the bare minimum of fuel available, had damaged it. Only very slightly, but enough that it would take them longer to prime the next firing. The human ships, of course, had continued to surge forward at the same rate, and had less distance now to travel in order to catch up. Which meant that they would be subjected to just a few seconds more under fire.

This pattern was repeated many, many times.

'I thought these creatures needed to spend part of each solar cycle dormant?' bellowed Yenekh, as the bridge flashed green with the detonation of a beleaguered Sekhem-class light cruiser. It was the third ship they had lost in as many transits, and they would likely lose another in the minutes remaining before the drive fired.

It would be their one-hundred-and-eighty-first transit, and they were barely a fifth of the way to Carnotite. Even with the rotation the admiral had devised to maximise the time each ship had to self-reconstruct between skirmishes, and with the fleet's entire swarm of repair scarabs deployed, they were beginning to see the limits of their voidcraft's durability.

'That is the truth of it, admiral,' confirmed Parreg the Agoranomos, for the contingent from Sedh had ended up on the bridge once more. 'I have seen the humans sleep. They sent miners to Sedh once, thinking it an empty world, and a patrol phalanx came upon them lying unconscious in tents made of petrochemical sheeting. It was the strangest thing – no sleepsight, no auditory sensitivity, nothing. They put up a pathetic fight.'

'Clearly, then, these slaves of the carcass-Emperor are not afforded such luxury,' spat the admiral, before glancing reflexively at the data-scry projected from the drive sepulchre, as he had taken to doing every minute or so, as if the rhythm of the chase might somehow break from the pattern it had followed relentlessly so far.

By now, of course, there was barely any point in keeping track of the drive's function. The transit-leaps were so enfeebled, and took so long to prepare, that they were spending more of each cycle under attack than not. Surveying the interstitial traffic between ships, Oltyx had heard the lords of Ithakas wonder to each other whether they ought not to just abandon the inertialess drive entirely, and face the fleet head-on.

But they could not stop. The only thing keeping the bulk of the armada from descending on them was their constant, short hops across the void. However skilled the human warp-navigators were, the realm they travelled through was simply too capricious to allow for the precision required to land on top of a moving fleet. The moment the necrons stopped, that would cease to be true.

'Your gleaming excellency,' drawled Taikash the polemarch, appearing unbidden at Oltyx's side, 'we face disaster. If we continue, then before long-'

'Can the dynast of Ithakas count?' boomed Zultanekh, appearing from nowhere behind the gaudily ornamented noble. 'I think yes, fool! So he knows our situation well enough. Be respectful, leave him to his thoughts.'

Zultanekh had taken to translating between his own ship and the *Akrops* every third transit or so, out of sheer frustration at being unable to take the *Philotomokh* into the fight, and he had not known quite what to make of the gathering of Oltyx's peers from his time of exile. In this instance, he had almost certainly just saved Taikash from being the outlet for Oltyx's own accumulated fury.

But the polemarch, it seemed, had a poor instinct for danger.

'Forgive me, mighty Zultanekh. And forgive me, great dynast. But I believe I may have the answer to our predicament. Nay, in fact, I *know* that I do.'

Oltyx turned, as slowly as the *Akrops* itself might, to look down on the idiot lord. 'Speak with great care, polemarch.'

Taikash was not the first to offer a 'solution', of course. Oltyx had been fielding interstitial messages on a near-hourly basis, from lords looking to increase their standing with him – pompous, overly fanfared announcements of possibilities that were either of no use at all, or which promised to actively worsen their situation.

Nemesor Trephyllyn of Phyloskh had pointed out a barren system in their path, inhabited only by orkish brigands, where he was convinced they could make a stand, while some forgettable Thrassonosi ore baron had sworn that a lost tomb world of the Hyrekh, somehow spared the purges of the aeldari, thrived secretly nearby. Denet, of course, had suggested they summon the monoliths. He had done so eight times.

But the polemarch, in Oltyx's long and bitter experience of him, had the distinction of being the worst tactician he had ever encountered. Taikash considered himself peerless, of course, and put his own history of catastrophic defeats down to 'bad luck'.

Now, looking at the way the polemarch was wringing the corroded, gemencrusted spindles of his hands in anticipation, Oltyx almost found himself intrigued to hear how dire the proposal would be.

'There is an asset, in this region of space, of great secrecy,' he began, with a dramatic sweep of his arm towards the outside of the ship.

'Is there indeed, Taikash.'

'I only know of it, as it was my singularity-mines which furnished some of the more... exotic materials for its construction.'

'It is an Ithakan weapon, then?'

'Not as such... no,' said Taikash, his form arching over in a cringe, as if Oltyx cared about his aeons-old mercantile disloyalties. 'It was... contract work, for a prince of the Mephrit Dynasty, at the height of Szarekh's war. And you know the scale on which the Mephrit appreciate their artillery... How could I have refused?'

The ore lord caught the set of Oltyx's oculars as his patience stretched, and abruptly changed tack.

'What I mean to say, of course, is that the prince was slain, and the weapons

were forgotten. They fell into dormancy, and drifted between the stars. But I retained knowledge of their locations, and by my calculations, one should be but a few thousand sunsreach from this very spot...'

'What is this weapon, polemarch?'

'A gravitic trebuchet, my king,' said Taikash, with another flourish. 'A great defensive engine, designed to accelerate asteroids at superluminal speed. It could annihilate the most fearsomely fortified targets from light years away!'

'I would be most pleased by this... if I was vexed by a fortified target, light years away from this spot. But I am not. I am pursued by small, fast voidcraft. Leave the bridge, polemarch.' Without flourish, Oltyx unsheathed his glaive with a shimmer of green menace.

'I beg my pardon of you, your solar magnificence,' pleaded Taikash, oculars bright with fervour. 'I have clearly explained the significance of this thing poorly. If you will but stay your glaive-hand another moment, I can explain.'

Oltyx did not slay him, then, which was as much permission as he would get to continue.

'I did not mean to suggest we use this mighty weapon against our persecutors, my king. I meant to suggest, instead, that we use it as our deliverance – we aim the construct at Carnotite, and use the *Akrops* itself, my liege, as its ammunition.'

Taikash had raised a finger triumphantly at this last revelation. Now it quivered in the air between their faceplates, sinking slowly, as the would-be mastermind realised – perhaps for the first time in his existence – what a terrible error in judgement he had just made.

It was a ridiculous idea, of course. But to Oltyx's utter consternation, it was a better plan than their current course of action, which would end in the total erosion of the fleet, somewhere in the next three solar cycles. He knew such weapons had been forged during Szarekh's war, after all. And if anyone could configure one to use a warship as ammunition, it would be Nebbeshken. Oltyx turned from the dejected noble to Zultanekh, who only shrugged.

'Have I heard worse ideas? Yes.'

'And I've not heard many better, recently,' added Yenekh.

Oltyx turned back to the polemarch, and offered the smallest of nods.

'It seems, Taikash, that fortune has smiled on you today. I might even say you had been... *lucky*.'

# **MIDNIGHT**



### **CHAPTER EIGHT**

## **RELICS**

It looked like nothing so much as a spindled cave arachnid that had curled up and died in the interstellar darkness, only much larger. It was preposterously sized, even by necron sensibilities. For it was a Mephrit weapon, and the Mephrit had ever longed for destruction on a scale that removed stars from the sky.

Each of its eight projector spires – Oltyx could not help but think of them as legs – was an articulated pylon of reinforced noctilith six leagues long, and as the trebuchet lay dormant, they had folded up into a city-wide cage of arcs. Joining them at their apex was an armoured teardrop containing engines of unfathomable power, perhaps the size of a Scythe-class cruiser's main hull, with a relatively tiny command citadel, studded with enormous targeting lenses, built into its fore.

All of that, of course, was for the generation of the weapon's force. The actual firing locus was an unassuming point in space one thousand leagues ahead of the trebuchet, marked with an interstitial anchor, but otherwise invisible. The *Akrops* was decelerating into that locus now. As its gravitic harpax locked on to the anchor point, the ship's bones flexed with an

almighty, ratcheting groan, and at last, the battered warship came to a standstill.

Oltyx watched as Yenekh's body shimmered with circumspection-patterns, and the admiral scanned the length of the bridge's viewport with what might once, before biotransference, have been a frown. His trepidation made perfect sense: it felt novel – unnatural, even – not to be under a hail of fire.

But for now, they had respite. As soon as they had completed their last, staggering inertialess transit, the group of cruisers slaved to the *Philotomokh*, as well as the Ogdobekh cruiser itself, had been released from their service to the *Akrops*' labouring drives and freeing them to fight their pursuers. Given Zultanekh's combat-urge, pent up over days of pacing across their bridge and then his own, there had been no delay, once the yoke had been lifted. The human ships had likely not even registered the capital ships were back in the fight before their fragile hulls had been reduced to shreds of metallic plasma by heavy gauss fire at point-blank range. Clustered together in their hunting pack, and taking care only to avoid the aft guns of the *Akrops*, they had lost nearly sixty per cent of their numbers in less than a minute. Oltyx had anointed the moment with seals of fidelity as it had been weaved into his engrams, so that he might go back to relish it, in later stretches of eternity.

The survivors of the pack had limped away to a safe distance, where they had regrouped, before beginning a slow circular cruise around them, like wind scorpions prowling at a campfire's edge. As the trebuchet had been hailed with the dynasty's library of Mephrit activation protocols, the exodus fleet had formed a protective circle around the *Akrops*. Because while stopping at last had freed up the most powerful of their voidcraft, it had also given the rest of the crusade armada, still just a few stars away at Antikef, a stationary target to charge towards at last. The shipmasters had begun replenishing their vessels, as best they could, for the reckoning to come.

Of course, the trebuchet had not responded to any of their woefully outdated protocols, and the Mephrit had, sensibly, never trusted Taikash enough to furnish him with any in the first place. The weapon appeared to be entirely powered down, save for – irritatingly – the interstitial jamming field which had prevented them from translating Nebbeshken inside its command citadel. Pragmatic as ever, the Ogdobekh technomancer had commandeered a ghost ark from the *Akrops*, and had set off to survey the weapon.

Now, as Oltyx watched her transport shrink into the total blackness of the gulf between stars, the bones of the *Akrops* began to tremble. It was not quite the abyssal groan the sudden appearance of the *Polyphemus* had ripped from the structure of the ship, but it lasted for a lot longer. Yenekh tilted his faceplate to the vaulted ceiling of the bridge as it resonated with the sound, and then looked at Oltyx.

'Here they come.'

The moment the Razor spoke, the night began to erupt in livid, orange-purple bruises, in such numbers that it seemed a nebula was conjuring itself from nothing. Piecemeal across a moon-wide stretch of space, the wounds in reality began to flash with sickly orange light, and disgorge their blade-prowed contents.

This time, it was not just lighter, faster craft, but ships of all sizes, from the ever-present swarms of pitiful cultist-transports, to cruisers rivalling the *Philotomokh* in length. Still, there was no sign of the *Polyphemus*. The scarab, it seemed, had not exaggerated the final acts of the *Godcutter*, and the punishment it had inflicted on the flagship via the wound at its prow. Even with the behemoth licking its wounds, they were staggeringly outnumbered. But this time, the humans would be advancing into the forward guns of a fully alert necron battlefleet. And they only had to hold the defence for as long as it took for Nebbeshken to outwit the Mephrit siege gun.

Thankfully, the ships of the crusade seemed entirely uninterested in the relatively fragile trebuchet itself. They were spoiling for a fight just as much as the survivors of Ithakas were, and so began the battle with a gambit as old as violence itself: charging dead ahead in a line.

Oltyx leaned back on his throne and watched the oncoming formation, beneath the flickering commentary of his annotation protocol. Yenekh ordered the fleet's shipmasters to hold their fire as the humans entered particle whip range, and even when the enemy's own arsenal began coughing out range-testing shots, the necron ships remained as still and silent as the void around them.

Only when the Imperium was fully committed by momentum did the Razor of Sedh give the order, cutting the silence of the bridge with one of his silvered khopesh blades, and transmitting the sigil of the dynasty to the command citadel of every ship.

The necron guns lit up, in a conflagration so fierce it would one day be seen

as a baleful flicker of green in the skies of distant worlds. The reaping had begun.

The battle fared well for some time. After being hunted so relentlessly, Oltyx found it restorative to see such a pitiless demonstration of necron superiority. But the throat of the warp was open now, pouring a torrent of fresh ships into the slaughter, and like a tomb ground down by sandstorms, the necron fleet would not hold out forever.

Oltyx had no doubt that Zultanekh's austere technomancer would fulfil his command and activate the weapon. But the waiting was tearing at him like an untethered singularity. Just as it had been at the retreat from Antikef, he could not bear being unable to directly, violently, contribute to the assurance of victory.

Yenekh whirled and stomped through his baroque performance of command as he always did, enraptured by the rhythms of war. But Oltyx soon found he could not pay attention to the minutiae of the fight, and instead stalked up and down the length of the bridge, casting a spasming shadow in the light of the endless detonations outside. It was not that he did not know how to wait. In three hundred years on Sedh, barring the occasional horde of orks, what else had there been to do? But he had not expected so much waiting to be involved in being a king.

'From whom has the dynast of Ithakas learned to pace with such impatience?' queried Zultanekh in a tone of mock awe, prompting a rumble of irritation from Oltyx. A hard-scry projection of the casket-broad prince stood casually beside his throne, where it had clearly been watching him for some time, and strode towards him now. 'A master of the art, clearly. It is a good habit for scions, waiting. But is it a worthy pastime for kings? Zultanekh thinks not.'

'What else can I do, copperclad?' snapped Oltyx, in no mood for the giant's games.

'Has it occurred to you, Oltyx King, that a dynast may do whatever he wishes to do?'

- 'What in the name of the Triarch do you mean, Zultanekh?'
- 'What do you wish to do, Oltyx?'
- 'I wish to fight!' shouted the dynast of Ithakas, oculars flaring with indignance, and Zultanekh roared approvingly.

'Now, he understands! So, dynast, what are you waiting for? I have long coveted the personal vessel of the Ithakan dynast — the Accipitrine Aeon, which was so long and so sadly neglected in Unnas' hangars. Even now, that golden raptor lies collecting dust in the bays of this very ship, after you freed it from Antikef. Will you not give that hunting-wasp its wings once more?'

'You are suggesting...' began Oltyx, but Zultanekh threw his arms out in a gesture of feast-hall magnanimity, before he could finish.

'Yes, king! Fly! Take up arms! The Unclean ships are all shell and nomandibles, as our forebears might have said. The Aeon is lightning cast in gold. What terror the humans would feel, with the chariot of a necron king bearing down on them! Ha!' Zultanekh paused, and raised a finger in sudden solemnity. 'But does Oltyx suspect, perhaps, that this is a ploy by an old foe, seeking to spring the vengeance of the old wars at last, by tempting the new dynast into the path of harm?'

'The thought spreads in my flux, now that you mention it,' admitted Oltyx, as he watched the disintegrating rear half of a human destroyer vessel splash harmlessly against the crescent hull of the *Bitterdraught*, off the *Akrops*' bow.

'Then dispel that thought,' advised Zultanekh.

The scry-view of the crown prince pulled back in focus, then, and revealed that he stood in his own hangar, beside a sleek gunship clad in the burnished copper and emerald of his house. The crown prince's hand slapped the craft's wing with a hearty clang, and his thoracic cartouche blazed with battle-hunger.

'You see, that very old foe has been aching for an excuse to take to the void himself! So, let us fly together, Oltyx! We shall make a contest of it, perhaps? I wonder, who shall come back worse befouled by the death-vents of the enemy?'

Oltyx did not require a word of convincing after that.

Before he translated to the hangars, feeble Erraph the Dikast attempted to tell him, 'in the spirit of loyalty', that a king's place was only ever behind the thickest armour in the fleet. But Oltyx had only needed to offer the briefest glance in reply, and neither Erraph, nor any other lord, had found anything more to say.

Oltyx realised, as he flew through the dissipating debris cloud of his seventy-fifth kill, that barring his brief escape flight from Antikef on this very craft, he had not flown in combat since the opening engagements of Szarekh's ancient war.

Even the most trivial skirmishes of that conflict, of course, had made this battle look as dull as a moonless night by comparison. The galaxy would never see the rapture of war on that scale again, he feared. But back then, he had still been new to his immortal form, and his mind had yet to settle on the realisation that death no longer followed but one mistake's breadth behind him. He had flown timidly, he saw now. He had flown like a human.

Now, he flew like a curse from the mouth of a god. Like lightning, as Zultanekh had said, cast in gold. Incarceration in a body of steel had, at least, forced his mind to cultivate an instinct for risk which would have shamed even the most daring mortal pilot. And in the *Accipitrine Aeon*, he could exert that instinct to its rawest limits. For it was, quite simply, one of the most fearsomely overpowered fighter craft ever constructed.

As superior as standard scythecraft were in comparison to Unclean vessels, they were optimised for efficiency, rather than sheer performance. Much like the warriors whose minds were grafted to them, they were things of which excellence was never expected, but from which consistency was demanded.

The *Aeon*, by contrast, had been designed to fulfil a king's desire for power. It was a thing of sublime, monstrous inefficiency: a machine unshackled from the constraints of mass production, in order to push the martial sciences of the necrontyr to their furthest, blazing limits. Shaped as if a Night Shroud bomber had been pulled out to twice its normal length, its sleek rear compartment held a small throne-chamber and a container capable of storing twenty lychguard, behind the domed protrusion of its cockpit and dorsal turret.

Sweeping forward from this armoured core, and making up two-thirds of its overall length, were the two horns of its crescent hull. Each wing bore a triple battery of raging singularity drives, powerful enough to supply an entire frigate between them, and an arsenal of weapons entirely beyond the bounds of pragmatism.

The necrontyr had ever possessed a strained relationship with the concept of pleasure. Certainly, it was a relationship commonly understood to have ended at biotransference. But flying the *Aeon* in battle truly made Oltyx

wonder about that.

Zultanekh, of course, flew with predictable exuberance, and ferocious talent. During the seccession war, Oltyx had lost count of the times Djoseras had been challenged to meet his opposite number in combat over the skies of contested worlds. But his elder, ever crushingly sober in his judgement, had never once been tempted to accept. 'I shall beat him quite sufficiently with my legions,' he had always said, with pious dismissal. 'There is no need to take an unnecessary risk.' Djoseras had known, in other words, that he was no match for Zultanekh in a voidborne duel.

How Djoseras would have fumed to see me now, thought Oltyx, motor actuators spasming with minor refrenation, as a grin tried to form on his faceplate. Further down the line of battle, Zultanekh's gunship barrelled into a sky-filling flight of human bombers, bellowing an Ogdobekh striking cry over the carrier wave. Despite himself, Oltyx felt the fire of competition ignite beneath his breast, and kicked the Aeon forward into the fray to seek a slaughter of his own. He was, for once, protected by nothing but his own skill and courage. Plus twelve elite lychguard, he thought, as the blade-thin silver craft followed his lead. But what is a little sport without companions?

The chance to fight unburdened by overprotection had taken some work to achieve. Yenekh had, in what the Razor had likely thought a masterstroke of subtlety, released an extra thirty flights of scythecraft into the fray, with orders to ignore all other objectives in pursuit of the king's safety. But Yenekh had forgotten that Oltyx's royal augmentations allowed him not only to access the mandate-seals cast upon any warrior of Ithakas, but to countermand them at will. The scythecraft had been sent back to the *Akrops* before they had even caught up with him.

Now, in the midst of searching for his next target, his target found him, as a squadron of blunt-nosed, heavy-calibre human fighters dropped into pursuit of the *Aeon*. He would be creative, Oltyx decided, with these ones. Ordering the lychguard to scatter, as if abandoning him, he allowed his pursuers to land a few streaks of fire across the rear of the golden ship's hull. Then he had the *Aeon*'s drive modulate thrust at random, and set its radio-wave emitters to spit a repeating pulse of trash-glyphs, in what would look to human sensibilities like a distress signal.

They were snared. Just as the *Polyphemus* had been fooled, before the *Akrops* had rammed it in Antikef's orbit, the humans could not resist the

thrill of taking down a superior target. Once they had been hooked by their own hunger, Oltyx led the Unclean on a vicious series of turns through the debris field at the battle line's centre, ending with a corkscrewing, sideways dive into the gauss-hollowed interior of a human bulk troop carrier.

With the predictability of beasts, the human pilots raced in after him. Three failed there. Two slammed into the jagged remains of internal bulkheads, as the innards of the wreck proved too dense to be navigated by computations running on a substrate of organic tissue. The third pilot was betrayed by meat in a far more literal sense, when the thrust of the ship in front dislodged the frozen corpse of a human soldier, and sent it ricocheting through their cockpit screen.

The *Aeon* shot into open void again. But as it exited the wreck, Oltyx slammed the craft through a ninety-degree turn with nanometre precision. The manoeuvre, impossible by the standards of the human ships, ripped him from the sight of his pursuers with such speed that to their primitive eyes, he would seem to have vanished abruptly. Baffled, the tight pack of fighters spilled from the wreck and dispersed, searching for the enemy they had been tailing so closely, just moments ago.

But before even one of the pilots could catch sight of him, lurking in wait against the blackened hull of the carrier, the flight of Night Scythes flown by his lychguard came streaking in ambush from the shadow of a Cartouche light cruiser, and fired in unison. Without a wasted shot between them, they removed all sign that the fighters had ever existed, besides a dilute trail of radioactive ash in the void.

'How did they ever manage to leave the atmosphere of their foetid homeworld,' wondered Zultanekh, 'if they fare this poorly in the void?' He curtailed his own duel with a trio of bombers then, by stopping dead still without warning, and letting them smash themselves to paper-thin foil on the drive-columns of his voidcraft. 'Maybe it is true, then, what the humans are said to believe – that their corpse-god shepherds them through the warp with his mind. Because, could Zultanekh image a human pilot even navigating its way through the course of a straight line, after the demonstration we have seen so far? He doubts it. Clearly, they need all the help they can get.'

The muffled shriek of a gauss cannon sounded through the Aeon's hull, followed by the petrochemical starburst of a human craft's death overhead,

and then a syncopated yell of triumph from the turret situated behind his control sarcophagus. Oltyx elected to decide that last stimulus had been a refrenation in his aural buffer, and not Neth squandering the last shreds of his dignity by celebrating a kill like a commoner at a pit fight.

The former practor had accosted him pitifully in the hangar, begging to accompany Oltyx in flight so that he might protect his king. Usually, such a risible offer would have earned nothing more than a silent scowl in reward. But, his flux swelling with the anticipation of the fight to come, Oltyx had shown rare largesse, and granted Neth's wish.

What had overcome the time-worn servant since was the nearest thing to happiness Oltyx had seen in one of his people since biotransference. It was a disgrace. And yet Neth had only underperformed slightly at the controls of the dorsal turret, at least compared with the baseline efficiency of the *Aeon*'s autonomous spirit, and so Oltyx was prepared to extend his grace. If he was honest, there was perhaps a tint of joy within his own flux.

As kill followed kill, in the fire-streaked paradise between the walls of duelling leviathans, Oltyx lost all concern with time. His optic buffer barely had a moment free from filtering the death-blossoms of Imperial void fighters from his vision, and it was as if the whole universe had shrunk to the confines of his cockpit.

For just a brief time, he was free. Free from obsessing over the plots that might be fermenting against him, among the lords who had favoured Duamehht. Free from anticipation of the moment when Llandu'gor's children would be sighted again, in the dark places of the fleet. Free from the dread of losing his mind, and the golden spectre which heralded madness. All the heaviness of the throne had been lifted from him, as he flew on wings of bright death. But it could not last.

'It has been some time since you were deployed, Nebbeshken,' Oltyx heard Zultanekh cast to his cryptek.

'I've returned to the Philotomokh, 'came the curt reply, instantly.

'Acceptable!' announced the crown prince, with a rumble of satisfaction. 'And the device is ready to fire?'

'No, ' said Nebbeshken.

'And why is that?'

'On inspection, the weapon is clearly a canoptek of great size. As a cryptek of the Ogdobekh then, I'm forbidden to work on it. As per the

accord.'

Fury soured the mildness of Oltyx's flux. She must have been there an hour now, doing nothing, he raged silently. The insolence of it! But Zultanekh seemed resigned to this behaviour. Clearly, this was an idiosyncrasy of the technomancer, or of her order, that no amount of threat could beat out.

'Is it an Ogdobekh canoptek?' asked Zultanekh, exasperated. 'No! It is a Mephrit thing. So – make it work!'

'It's still a canoptek, crown prince. So -I can't. As per the accord. It would be treason.'

'What is she speaking of?' demanded Oltyx, pulling away from a duel with a pair of human assault craft to focus on the situation.

'It is... a dynastic issue, dynast. You know of the Ogdobekh... arrangement?'

'I suspect I am about to.'

'What is it, Oltyx? An age-old accord between the royal house and the cryptek conclaves, which gave the sorcerers their exalted status — in exchange for relinquishing all control over canopteks to the crown. Our crypteks are forbidden from interacting with them, via an unbreakable seal on their executive buffers.'

'Why?'

'Paranoia on the part of my esteemed phaeron and matriarch, Anathrosis of the Black Star. A paranoia which has paid off, in fairness.'

'I thought Anathrosis was your patriarch?' asked Oltyx, briefly distracted by wondering if he had misremembered this detail of the seccession war.

'That changed.'

'I see. But Zultanekh... if you are of the royal line, can you not see to the trebuchet yourself?'

'Would I? Gladly. Do I know how canopteks work? No. None of us do.'

'So what happens if their function degrades, or they suffer refrenations?'

'They don't! That's the marvellous thing about canopteks.'

Oltyx felt it would be rude to point out the non-functioning canoptek currently dominating both the sky and their fate, and so he ended the conversation there.

'I am, of course, well versed in the function of canopteks,' said Lysikor, who had clearly been listening in, once again, on a carrier wave band he should not have been able to access. But just as Zultanekh had been resigned

to Nebbeshken's peculiarities, so Oltyx had long learned there was little point trying to keep Lysikor out of anything, when he wanted in. *It was best just to limit what he could steal, while he was in there*. Still, Oltyx allowed, the deathmark's light-fingered greed might actually be of some use, here.

'You think you can awaken the trebuchet?'

'Oh, I am certain of it.'

'You won't be able to translate aboard, you know.' As Oltyx spoke, he used the *Aeon*'s long-range optics to observe the dormant weapon, separated by a broad gulf of void from the carnage centred on its firing locus. 'And by the looks of it, deathmark, you'll have to fight your way in.'

While his and Yenekh's attention had been on the fight to protect the *Akrops*, the gravitic trebuchet had been boarded. A cluster of transport vessels and light craft in the livery of the human machine-cult had pulled themselves from the main body of the armada, and now appeared to be frantically disgorging troops and equipment into the weapon's command citadel. Even as he watched, heavier troop transports in the pattern of the Imperium's regular navy were plodding across the gap to join them. *Looting it for noctilith, no doubt*, thought Oltyx, with contempt.

'A fight?' said the sniper, with incomprehensible ease. 'I can handle that.'

'Without casting aspersions on your efficiency, Lysikor, there are hundreds of the enemy there already, and more coming. And there is one of you.'

'Plus my canopteks,' added Lysikor. 'On which note, may I... borrow some further constructs from the account of the crown?'

'What did you have in mind?' asked Oltyx, with growing suspicion.

'As you know, my king -I always feel it is better to ask for forgiveness than permission, in times such as these.'

With the flare of drives moving to full power, the immense shape of a Scythe-class cruiser broke from its position in the rear of the necron battle line and began making its way towards the trebuchet. It was the *Failed Harvest*, the ship from Karkh, which had been found derelict, but with a hull full of canoptek constructs under the control of a placid autonomous spirit. Oltyx dreaded to think how much that would swell the deathmark's evergrowing private army, even if he deigned to return some of them.

'If it is any consolation,' Lysikor offered, 'my taming of this vessel surely bodes well for my efficient seizure of the weapons platform, does it not?'

But Oltyx could not face the prospect of arguing with the strange, one-eyed

lord.

'Just secure the trebuchet, Lysikor. We shall discuss consequences later.'

'It will be my singular pleasure, O mighty dynast,' said the Duke of Deathmarks, and Oltyx's flux simmered as he watched the commandeered cruiser bear down on the looting of the Mephrit weapon.

Oltyx opened a private carrier wave link with the scarab, then. He was fully aware that Lysikor, having just demonstrated his insatiable appetite for stealing canopteks, was about to board one capable of firing planetoids, without supervision. And if he couldn't keep an eye on Lysikor himself, he would have to ensure the next best thing.

'Scarab. You have just seen, I presume, the... commendable initiative taken by my devoted servant Lysikor.'

'We have, yes,' replied the construct containing Oltyx's former subminds, neutrally.

'You will understand, I think, given our similarities in thought, why I would like you to be on that platform with him, as soon as possible. Translate aboard the *Failed Harvest*, stay close to Lysikor, and make every effort to avert the worst of any attempted treasons.'



#### **CHAPTER NINE**

# A THIEF TO CATCH A THIEF

Lysikor's favoured activity was, without question, the methodical extermination of the Unclean, and in particular, those foolish enough to intrude on the places of the necrontyr. Oltyx could not deny it: the strength of his convictions regarding the value of Unclean life were truly resplendent in his work. He had begun watching the self-appointed nemesor's capture of the trebuchet, via optic telemetry transmitted to him by the scarab, out of sheer distrust. But in time, he had been forced to admit to himself that the main factor keeping him watching was his grudging appreciation for Lysikor's craft. Even as he himself continued to sow destruction among the human void fighter waves, he could not help but reserve part of his cognition quota for the scenes unfolding on the derelict Mephrit siege gun.

*Entertainment* had always been a gaudy concept to him: something reserved for commoners, with their beast fights and bone-throwing games. But perhaps there was something to it after all.

There was a vicarious thrill to be had in watching Lysikor collapse the machine-cult's frantic looting operation into chaos. All around the trebuchet's command citadel, detachments of red-robed humans found themselves beset

by his menagerie of constructs. Wraiths loomed from walls of solid stone, with slashing claws raised in macabre greeting. Packs of priests were harried through labyrinths, pursued by chittering masses of scarabs, until they ran up against dead ends and were processed into raw matter from the ankles up.

A whole detachment of troopers from one of the naval transports met its end just minutes after boarding, in a long hall lined with statues of the weapon's designers. Although the trebuchet's interstitial constriction field prevented Lysikor from traversing the hall with the rapid microtranslations he usually favoured, the deathmark seemed barely hindered, springing physically from vantage to vantage without a sound. As the thin, noiseless rounds of his weapon lanced down from among the effigies of the grim Mephrit sages, the humans were reduced to a jostling, bellowing mass by fear. Clearly, the invaders were convinced they were beset by an entire phalanx of unseen snipers.

Soon, the trebuchet was uncontested and, after its buffers had been opened for examination, the scarab had reported pleasing news. The matter of its activation, it had said, was to be trivial. Apparently, the weapon's autonomous spirit had confronted them with a long series of astromancer's riddles, which Lysikor had only found amusing. The deathmark had admitted the task would still take some time to accomplish, but there was no doubt of its eventual success.

With the fleet still holding the initiative in open battle with the Imperial vanguard, the prospect of confidence in the situation was seductive. But for some time now, Oltyx had been consumed with the expectation that their circumstances would turn for the worst. And when a yawning bruise opened in space, some way off from the warp-throats supplying new ships to the carnage, it was almost a relief to him that the moment had come.

The new ingress point was immense. But it was not the *Polyphemus* that emerged from it, nor the dreaded *Lystraegonian*, with its ruthless detachment of Astartes. No: as soon as the flat axe-blade of its prow burst from the warp, Oltyx knew this was the *Tyresias*, the mammoth vessel which the cultists of the Mechanicus called their *ark*. Its prow was followed by a league of crenellated, red-gold hull, and then a hulking cylindrical drive unit, leaking hideous volumes of radiation.

Oltyx cast a protocol of divination on the ship's bearing, which confirmed

his suspicions as to its purpose. Summoned forth, no doubt, by fevered reports from the looters before Lysikor had wiped them out, the ark was headed away from the main engagement, and directly towards the trebuchet. Accompanying it, emerging from a scattering of smaller warp-throats around its bulk, was a flotilla of smaller craft which seemed little more than engines. *Tugs*, Oltyx guessed. The machine-cultists were attempting to steal the trebuchet.

Zultanekh burst into his mind by carrier wave, his signal thundering with glyphs of pride, outrage and desire.

'Does Zultanekh know this ship?' he asked, and Oltyx cast a seal on his vocal buffer just too late to stop himself answering.

'I do not know, Zultanekh. Does he?'

'Yes, churlish youth. Yes, he does. We Ogdobekh know this Tyresias, this "Ark Mechanicus", as it has come a-raiding within our borders many times. It is a thief, Oltyx! A plunderer without shame. And I have scores to settle with it, for the honour of the matriarch. Will you permit me to take the Philotomokh and duel with it?'

It was hard to say no to the bombastic prince, but Oltyx could see that even as the *Tyresias* headed for the trebuchet, a thick wave of fresh arrivals was headed for the main front. They were close to outgunned, and besides the *Akrops* itself, the Ogdobekh ship was the most powerful craft in the line.

'With my sympathies, Zultanekh, I must deny you.' Oltyx paused to roll the *Aeon* clear of a missile barrage streaking from a nearby frigate, and loaded his reply with glyphs of finality. 'Yenekh needs your ship where it is. The *Philotomokh* must stay.'

'Alas, king of Ithakas! But what ship will you send, then, to tackle this menace?'

It took Oltyx a full half-second to determine this was a rare, non-rhetorical question. And since he had no answer, he decided to weave Yenekh into the carrier-band, and burden the Razor with it.

'Admiral. What can you spare to deal with that thing?'

'Whatever you command, my king,' said the Razor, with subtle amendments of reluctant obedience. Clearly, he could spare nothing. 'We could feasibly redeploy one of the two Henet-class ships, but they've absorbed a lot of fire already, and—'

Yenekh's next words were lost to a crashing burst of interstitial static, and

Oltyx's cockpit was lit day-bright with the green fury of a drive core rupturing. Annotation glyphs over the expanding cloud of the ship-death told him the casualty was the *Buhto*, one of the two Henet-class ships.

'Perhaps not, then,' said Oltyx. 'What about a boarding assault?'

'Impossible, my liege. The Tyresias has moved under the trebuchet's interstitial jamming field, so we cannot translate legions aboard, and the armour is too thick for a quick breach by any ship I can truly do without.'

'And yet, there are surprises still to be had today, O king,' said a fourth, uninvited voice in the band.

'Lysikor,' stated Oltyx. 'Are you not meant to be unravelling Mephrit riddles?'

'They all but unravel themselves, your radiance. And besides, if nothing stops the advance of that abomination, they will have to remain unsolved.'

'What surprise does this strange deathmark intrude to present us with?' asked Zultanekh, affronted by the duke's manners.

'Well,' said Lysikor. 'With the greatest respect to Yenekh's singular genius – for as I often say, he has ever been a thinker as well as a fighter—' Yenekh blasted static of his own then, interrupting him. 'You sand-born, one-eyed, craven sack of—'

'Let him finish, admiral,' snapped Oltyx, against his instinct. Although he was rarely to be trusted, Lysikor was in too precarious a position to play games – he needed that ship stopped as much as they did.

'There is an asset as yet unconsidered by any of you,' Lysikor continued, 'which would unlock a whole range of solutions to this task. This asset is admittedly unconsidered because I fabricated evidence of its destruction, after stealing it. But if I were to give it back now – which of course I shall, casting protocols of great contrition – perhaps we might agree an amnesty regarding this, and any other minor larcenies?'

Oltyx fought to keep his irritation from appending itself to his reply. Lysikor was a talented negotiator. Which was to say, he had no shame. The deathmark's ability to strike a deal was how he had not only cajoled Unnas into pardoning him for the mass murder of his peers, but how he had further managed to retain the nemesorial title he had awarded himself in the process. Oltyx was no Unnas, however. There would be no trading of favours with this king.

'This is no time to bargain, Duke of Deathmarks. Let us see this "surprise".'

Lysikor obeyed: halfway between the embattled exodus fleet and the advancing *Tyresias*, a dimensional appendix inverted itself with a crackle of exotic radiation, and from it emerged a monster.

A blind, armoured dome of a head emerged first, tasting the void with long feelers that phased in and out of reality. Then came a series of sharp, scalloped armour plates, each three times as broad as the *Aeon* was long, and flanked with a pair of phase blade-tipped claw-legs. Then came more of the armoured segments, and then more still.

By the time the twin trailing lengths of its dissipation vanes had slithered from the appendix, a full thirty armoured segments had preceded them, forming an undulating, serpentine body as long as a light cruiser. It was the skolopendriform mining canoptek, which had been sent in tribute to Djoseras by the ore-masters of Thrassonos. Oltyx had thought it no more than a piece of industrial apparatus: a worthless contribution, which he had not cared much for losing, after it had been registered as obliterated during the carnage of their escape from the Antikef System.

Now it had been returned, however, he did not know whether to be furious at its embezzlement in the first place, or at his own strategic failings in not having seen its worth before. For the time being, he resolved to feel relief instead. For just as Lysikor had said, it was the exact tool for the job at hand.

The razor-mandibled skolopendra had once been the apex predators of the necrontyr homeworld: one of the many reasons their culture had accreted around the concept of an early death. But as the planet's biosphere had been tamed and sterilised, the skolopendra had at last been subjugated and even tamed. They had ended up in that slim category of beasts which the extinction courts had deemed useful enough to merit survival, and on the day of biotransference, the voracious arthropods had joined the scarabs, the spyders and the acanthrites in becoming templates for the canoptek swarms to come.

The skolopendra had been bred into countless forms in the time of flesh, and their reflections thereafter had been equally varied. Most common, now, were the lithe hunting creatures kept in pairs by vainer nobles, and the larger tomb stalkers which had guarded the tomb worlds as they slept. But the mining construct had been shaped after the vast, rock-chewing beasts once put to work in the necrontyr tomb quarries, and was built for one thing: to gnaw through asteroids. Now, it would gnaw through the *Tyresias*, creating a breach through which the craft could be boarded.

'You approve, my king?' cast Lysikor.

'It will suffice,' allowed Oltyx, preparing the seal that would eject Lysikor from the carrier wave band once more. 'We will speak later, thief.'

'And to think,' said Zultanekh, with glyphs of lamentation, 'such things toil by the dozen in the stellar quarries of the Black Star! Had we ever thought to use them for war? No! Curse the ingenuity Zultanekh has seen in this place today.'

'A crude move,' admitted Yenekh, just failing to conceal his sheer resentment at being outshone by Lysikor. 'But it certainly opens up possibilities. If boarding is now an option, my king, an engagement plan occurs to me, which I suspect will be more than a match for the task.'

Yenekh transmitted an outline of his strategy to Oltyx's executive buffer, and as the dynast absorbed its substance, a tremor passed through his flux. Yenekh planned to deploy the Taweret-class light carrier which had been given over to Borakka, and have the Red Marshal unleash the entire cohort of stasis-imprisoned Destroyers contained within.

'Destroyers?' queried Oltyx gravely. 'A drastic measure, is it not, Razor?' 'These are drastic times,' replied the admiral, in an equally sober tone.

'You know as well as I do, Yenekh, that once that casket is opened, it cannot be sealed again. Borakka's cult will not return to us, while they still have living things to kill, and their utility will be lost to us.'

'True,' said Yenekh, undaunted. 'But they will undoubtedly consign the Tyresias to annihilation in the process. I call it a fair trade, dynast.'

Any commander would have felt uneasy about deploying a Destroyer cult in a boarding action, even at the best of times. Even a small cohort of them – especially one as heavily tainted as Borakka's – were capable of wreaking utter devastation on a ship's interior. The problem was that only Borakka itself, among the whole contingent, retained any semblance of discipline. The rest would not be compelled to return, even by the command of Szarekh himself, while further slaughter was within their reach. The only way they would leave the *Tyresias*, after boarding it, would be as a wave of charged particles on the shockwave of its destruction. But Oltyx could more afford to lose the Destroyers than the *Akrops*, and if the Mechanicus ark was not stopped, the tomb ship's fate would be sealed. There could be only one decision.

'Your reasoning is sound,' he told Yenekh. 'Contact Borakka, and have it

ready its cohort for boarding.'

The admiral acknowledged the command with a particularly emphatic glyph of obedience, and Oltyx began to decant his full attention back to the ongoing combat.

Even without the subminds which had once assisted him, Oltyx was more than capable of thinking and fighting at the same time. He had achieved three kills with the *Aeon*'s guns even as the conversation had taken place. As he had evaluated Yenekh's strategy, consuming himself with reflection on the Destroyers, he had pulled the ship clear of the thickest fighting in order to think. But in that brief, relative calm, entrusting his protection to the silent, blade-like shapes of Pakhet's squadron, Oltyx had become careless.

With a sharp crack, the *Aeon*'s hull bucked, jolting his body even through the shock-absorbing armour of the pilot's sarcophagus. His analytical buffer interrogated the ship's systems, and he became aware of a sharpened length of steel, tipped with a lump of crude machinery, embedded between the *Aeon*'s rear drive vents. It seemed a poor sort of missile, however, as it seemed to contain no warhead. But then, as the *Aeon*'s sensory array identified the stream of telemetry sputtering from the device on the end of the spike, the projectile's nature became clear. It was a targeting beacon. And the pair of blinding white sparks, searing towards his ship like bolts of lightning, were the missiles it was slaved to.

Oltyx fell immediately into an emergency chronodilation, imposed by his circumspection protocols as they reacted to the threat. Even in the torpor of slowed time, though, the missiles streaked towards him at dreadful speed. Drawing every iota of power from the banks of singularity cores to either side of him, Oltyx sent the *Aeon* into a vicious dive, hoping the ordnance would overshoot him. As the scythecraft snapped into its new course, the sound of Neth's body smashing against the turret wall was like a khet-wide necropolis bell being struck.

But it was not enough. Whether the munitions tracking him had been stolen from a more advanced culture, or retrieved from the ruins of some more prosperous era of human expansion, they were just as nimble as the *Aeon* was. In one-fiftieth of a second, Oltyx worked out, as the twin, wrathful specks leapt forward, he would be reduced to vapour. *What a pathetic end*, he thought, with a final surge of rage against himself.

The end did not come. He had been so fixated on the missiles, he had

missed the two Night Scythes flanking his rear, hurling themselves inward in twin blurs of silver. Reaching position with microseconds to spare, the lychguard pilots flipped their hulls to present a pair of crescent-shaped shields behind the *Aeon*, and took the warheads dead centre.

Where there had been everything, now there was nothing. No light, no sound, no stimulus from any of his countless senses. *The explosion*, thought Oltyx. His buffers had still been linked with the *Aeon*'s sensor clusters at the moment of impact, and it seemed it had been fierce enough to trigger a fatal refrenation through Oltyx's entire sensory array complex.

He would be cut off like this for as long as it took his systems to drag themselves through a full emergency recompilation. The process would be brief, under normal perception of time. But with his chronosense fixed at high dilation until the recompile was complete, Oltyx knew he would be stuck in the dark, cut off from everything around him, for long minutes. It was one of many, many reasons he hated interfering with his perception of time.

I shall keep my mind blank for the duration, Oltyx announced to himself. But as soon as he thought this, inevitably, every buffer in his mind raced to dump its contents into the vacuum of his optic buffer.

Duamehht's body, falling to the deck in halves. Hemiun's phase scalpel, descending to slide between his joints. Djoseras' Immortals, shining with the lives their penitent lord had inscribed on them as a final gift. Yenekh, gorestained and cringing with guilt, over the torn carcass of an ork. The cauldron of the Eater-of-Gods. The ziggurat in flames. The poison snow of Sedh.

The images came faster and faster, until he could not tell one from the other. They merged into a stream of fluid, fevered recollection. And behind them, growing ever louder in his aural buffer, there was a scream. Not the scream of metal grinding on metal, or of a voidcraft drive, or any of the other things he hoped it to be, as it came to dominate his mind. It was the terrified, abject shriek of a prisoner lost forever to the dark; of a body that no longer had form. The dysphorakh, come to take him again.

Abruptly, darkness returned. But it was not the same dark as before. It was a perfect absence, which he had only ever experienced in the moments before the evocatory medium, with all Mentep's secret sciences, pulled him down into the past. And while the scream had not stopped in this new dark, it was muted somehow. He could still hear it, but it no longer mattered to him.

A single ocular stared at him, with unknowable intention, from the centre of the blackness. Slowly, as if emerging from a pool of pitch, the gold-coated ridges of a skull painted themselves on the abyss around that point of light. It was the thing he had seen twice before on the *Akrops*. But this time, it seemed to bear no malice. Or Oltyx was just so desperate not to be alone in the dark that he was willing to call even this apparition a friend.

You want to overcome this, it said to him.

Oltyx could not reply.

So, then, said the phantom. Overcome it. You need only will it, and the dark will be burned away. As I told you before – you are the king. And a king does what a king wants.

But who are you? Oltyx managed at last, as the golden death mask began to sink into shadow again.

You know my name, it said, and was gone.

Yenekh was in the middle of saying something as Oltyx's sensory buffers filled with the world again.

He was intact, and so was the *Aeon*. The two lychguard who had intercepted the missiles had been obliterated entirely, but had saved him from all physical harm. Nevertheless, it seemed Yenekh had decided to intervene while he had been lost to the recompilation of his flux: the ship was slaved to the bridge of the *Akrops* by carrier wave, and was in the process of being hauled back to its scythecraft bays.

'Are you returned now, king?' said Yenekh, sounding as if it was not the first time he had asked.

'Yes,' replied Oltyx briskly. 'And I command you, now, to return me to the fight.'

'Oltyx, O king. I beg you to reconsider. That was nearly your end.'

'It was war, is all,' growled Oltyx. 'Risks must be taken.'

'But the risk is so much greater now, dynast. You have killed hundreds of their craft during this engagement alone, and I fear the Aeon has been identified, and marked for persecution. Stay out here longer still, and the Unclean will come to realise that a king is within their grasp. They will hunt you down with everything they have.'

'So let them come! I am no coward!'

'You never were, my lord. But what of us, Oltyx – what of the dynasty, if

we lose our king?' Yenekh's tone was respectful, his words appended with every glyph of obeisance, but Oltyx's rage flared anyway. The words of the golden apparition boomed through his flux, imploring him to enforce his royal will against all resistance.

'If you lose your king? Then you will have failed, admiral. This concern is to be no burden of mine. Now release my ship, or I shall tear it from your grip.'

Yenekh did not reply, but the carrier wave from the *Akrops* broke abruptly, releasing the controls of the *Aeon* to Oltyx again. The admiral's obedience quelled his anger to a degree, and he spoke again.

'For what it is worth, Razor, I see the sense of your concern. I do not intend to return to the heart of the clash between ships.'

'What will you do, then? And why do I fear, my king, that the alternative you intend will only drive you further into the path of harm?'

'You need only know that I am going to seize our victory, Yenekh.'

Coaxing as much speed as he could from the *Aeon*'s drive without breaking the concealment of its shrouding protocols, Oltyx streaked away from the clash of the fleets, and accelerated directly towards the *Tyresias*.

Despite Yenekh's pleas, he would not cower in the belly of the *Akrops*. He intended to rule his dynasty from the very front of this fight; from a place where he, personally, could be the difference between failure and triumph. And without question, that fight was to be found in the bowels of the machine-cult's battleship.

With a curt string of delegations, Oltyx had Neth relay a message to the Taweret-class carrier, appended with the royal seal, ordering Borakka to cease all preparations for boarding. He would save the Destroyers for some more dire situation yet, and do this himself. At his core, Oltyx had never been satisfied with the decision to send them in.

The plan had left too much to chance, and to the bleak wisdom of the Red Marshal. With his own glaive leading the way, at least, Oltyx could trust fully in the prospect of victory. *Or at least*, he thought, *that is the hekatic truth of it*. The fact that boarding the ship himself also fulfilled his sudden, desperate need for violence also happened to be true.

As the *Aeon* rushed to catch up with the sinuous shape of the mining canoptek, he glanced out at Pakhet's scythecraft, which flew parallel to his own with such precision that the craft seemed fixed together by invisible

bonds. The praetor gazed directly ahead, motionless beneath the crystal of her fighter's canopy. But as Oltyx studied her, he discovered that she was not silent.

The lychguard were talking. Between the scythecraft of the ten survivors, the interstices trembled with faint susurrations, as voices faded to rusted whispers with disuse reached out to one another in the void. Although lychguard had been permitted to retain some linguistic ability following biotransference, they were entirely forbidden from speaking with each other, with the exception of the most basic rubrics exchanged on the field of battle. Oltyx had every right to silence them, or even to punish them for the transgression.

But he did not, for these were old ways. The lychguard were remembering their dead. There were traditions among the common soldiers, Oltyx had heard, which stretched back even further than the most ancient of dynasties. They had been kept secret from lords and kings, ever since the warrior cults of necrontyr prehistory. There were whole languages which existed only for the remembrance of those who would never be buried. Long dirges, passed down countless stunted generations, only to be spoken at times like this. Soon enough, the warriors would raise their shields for him again, and so Oltyx decided he would let them have this.

By the time the *Aeon* arrived, just behind the gigantic canoptek, Oltyx reflected that he could have come in with a solar-bright burst of gauss fire and still gone unnoticed. The entire focus of the *Tyresias*, and every gun on one flank of the ark, was directed at the many-legged horror bearing down on it. Although it was not a construct designed for combat, it *was* designed for century-long harvesting operations in the singularity-blasted depths of the Thrassonos Cluster. As such, the ship's batteries of energy weapons did little more than leave a faint glow across patches of its hide. The hail of magnetically accelerated slugs from the broadside gun banks fared better, tearing free several of the canoptek's hyperphase claw-legs. But it had been built with plenty to spare.

Then, it fell upon the ship. What followed was, as Neth pronounced in stuttering awe, *quite the spectacle*. For all its size, the canoptek was just as limber and vicious as its smaller cousins, bred to run down escaped workers on the royal monuments. It pierced the Mechanicus vessel's void shields as if they were reed-paper, using its armoured head-section as a ram. Then, with

the hull in reach, the plates of that head unfolded, blossoming into a ring of radial jaws which glimmered green with rows of hyperphase blades.

At the instant of contact, the twenty-khet length of its segmented body clamped round the ark's midsection, seizing the ship in a death grip modelled on ancient, bestial instinct. Then, using the leverage of its clawed legs, it forced its maw against the thinnest part of the hull with dreadful pressure, and began to cut. The sight of the construct wrapped around the ship, grinding asteroid-chewing jaws against its armour, was like a scene of barges beset by devils of the uatth, from one of Mentep's ancient chronicle-scrolls.

Human flyer squadrons and escort craft were racing in from every direction now, frantically recalled to protect the *Tyresias*. The incoming *Aeon* went entirely unnoticed. Even so, as Oltyx made his final approach, he cast a subtle alteration to its shrouding protocol. To hide his ship entirely during what came next would be impossible. But to disguise it was trivial. Now, to any human observer, the *Aeon* and its scythecraft escorts would appear to be a simple volley of torpedoes, launched at long range.

As he closed on the *Tyresias*, and the sight of the canoptek mauling the ship expanded to fill his view, a flight of human heavy bombers lumbered past. Their passage was followed by a line of detonations ripping across the canoptek's back, and the void was choked with plumes of boiling flux. The wounds were deep. With a few more attacks like that, the defenders would incapacitate the monster. But it was already too late for that to matter.

*Now*, Oltyx broadcast to Pakhet's squadron, and the silver crescents of their Night Scythes pulled together, knitting their broad delta formation into a double-file rank behind the *Aeon*. Then, with a final tilt of the ship's axis to line it up, Oltyx nudged a little more flux into the ship's raging core, and fell into a dive.

Just a split second before the *Aeon* drove headlong into its armour, the canoptek boomed a cry of triumph over the interstitial bands, and wrenched its head clear of the hull, with a huge, ragged circle of armour in its jaws. Dipping to avoid the skolopendra's fortress-sized head as it swung past, Oltyx sent his ship plummeting down into the breach which had just been opened. With its quantum shields shaped into a brutal spike, the *Aeon* powered into the final approach, and the pilot's sarcophagus clamped Oltyx's carapace in place with the crash of metal on metal.

A few cubits out from the ship's interior, an inertial boost protocol flooded

the *Aeon*'s hull with additional mass, converting raw energy from the drives until the ship weighed twice what it had. Then it whipped through the hole in the ship, splintering through its outer decks like a boulder through reeds, and driving deep into its heart.

Secure inside, the king's flux glowed beneath his cartouche with the prospect of delivering personal retribution on the Imperium of Man at last.



### CHAPTER TEN

# THE OLD SOLDIER

Intended for high-speed void combat, the *Aeon* had been designed with agility in mind, beyond all other concerns. But in a tight spot, Oltyx noted with some satisfaction, it made for a passable ramship. After the rapid plunge through the ship's outer structure, the layers of steel had eventually robbed it of momentum, and it had crashed through one last bulkhead into a wide, open space near the centre of the *Tyresias*.

Any air in the chamber had been sucked out through the entry wound, while whatever primitive generators it relied on for gravity, heat and light had been knocked out in the same instant. As Oltyx emerged from the forge-hot hull, he could have been entering a ship derelict for centuries: fragments of metal plating drifted past in dense tangles, lit only by the occasional flash of light from the battle as it carried down the shaft the *Aeon* had carved for itself.

Glancing up that hole now, Oltyx saw the ten scythecraft of his lychguard making their silent descent, past hundreds of punctured decks. The metal at the edges of each hole throbbed with an orange glow, so that the route to the outside was lit up with a long series of faint, molten rings.

While the scythecraft came to a halt in perfect formation around the Aeon,

Oltyx oriented himself at the chamber's centre. It had been some sort of hold or internal hangar, large enough to accomodate a squadron of heavy atmospheric flyers, or a detachment of armoured vehicles. Behind an armoured bulkhead at the bay's edge, there appeared to be another space of equivalent size, and another beyond that. Broadening the appetite of his optic buffer until his oculars showed him spectra humanity was yet to become aware of, Oltyx looked further into the depths of the ship.

'What is the m-m-mission, my liege?' asked Neth, his linguistic impairment just as pronounced by carrier wave as it was vocally, as he climbed free from the *Aeon* in an ungainly scramble. His faceplate was badly dented, and he left a faint trail of leaking flux as he drifted towards Oltyx, debris bouncing off his necrodermis. Clearly, the turret's control yoke, designed for use by common warriors or Immortals, had not been as mechanically forgiving as the pilot's sarcophagus had, during the events of their flight.

'It is a simple objective,' replied Oltyx, calling his glaive to hand and thrusting it towards the bulkhead at the chamber's edge. In the distance, far behind the partition, a mountainous shape glowed beacon-bright violet to his gamma receptors.

'Half a league through the hull in that direction,' he said, casting auspices that would outline the hidden thing to Neth, 'is this voidcraft's main power source.'

As he spoke, Pakhet's phalanx floated wordlessly into formation around him, armed for shipboard fighting, with lightweight dispersion shields and hyperphase hatchets.

'We shall proceed directly to the power source, and we shall cripple it. This will take the *Tyresias* out of the fight, and leave the trebuchet unchallenged. As soon as the damage is done, we shall extract ourselves and return to the *Akrops*, where Lysikor will have prepared the means for our departure.'

'It is good th-t-t-that it is a sssssimple objective, O dynast,' Neth cast, gesturing at Pakhet and her troops with a shaking arm. 'Given th-ese ones shall have to comprehend it!'

Oltyx could not lower himself to even acknowledge the statement. Neth had clearly not abandoned his desire to engage in the sort of casual belittlement of lessers that he thought commanders engaged in. On Sedh, it had been embarrassing. But here, surrounded by the dynasty's most peerless warriors,

and as they grieved silently, it was shameful.

Pakhet's razor-edged faceplate did not even twitch in the degraded old soldier's direction, as he humiliated himself. Oltyx's interstitial impellers sent him gliding towards the bulkhead that would lead to the next bay, and the lychguard formed a wing to either side of him. Neth fell back in shame.

Oltyx's magnetoreceptors reached out to probe the mammoth ship's interior further, mapping out the route from here to the reactor. It seemed their path would be an easy one, for the most part: the series of storage bays proceeded down the entire underside of the ship's spine, almost all the way to the *Tyresias*' filthy engine housing.

Midway to the edge of the chamber, Oltyx's path was crossed by the carcass of a human; as it tumbled past, his core-light revealed a face charred nearly to the bone beneath a coating of voidfrost. A good omen. Any crew nearby would have been either killed or forced to retreat as their impact knocked out power to this section of the ship, and thanks to the *Aeon*'s disguise, the human shipmasters would have no idea there were boarders on the *Tyresias*. Especially with the great canoptek still thrashing at the surface, the defenders would not be in a hurry to investigate a torpedo strike.

With decent speed, Oltyx determined, they might make it most of the way to their target without hitting a populated segment of the ship at all. At the end of the chain, though, there was a problem.

A final bay abutted the huge volume of the ship's propulsion systems housing, where a thick shell of armour, like a crude imitation of the *Akrops*' own drive sepulchre, would have to be breached. From the resonance signatures of turrets pulsing across its surface, Oltyx could see they would face stiff resistance there. If they became bogged down, and the *Tyresias* was able to reach the trebuchet, the exodus of Ithakas would end here. But if the king himself and his ten peerless guards could not crack that shell, Ithakas did not deserve a future.

Oltyx drove his glaive into the steel of the bulkhead, hauling an angry red line through the armour as he cut their way into the ship beyond. Once an aperture was carved, a solid kick parted the section from the bulkhead, and it floated away in a spray of flash-cooled metal beadlets. They were in. With the nanoscarabs busy behind them, the royal boarding party began making its way towards its target.

In the fifth bay along, gravity returned, and was joined by light and

atmosphere as they proceeded through the following chambers. Oltyx's chemoreceptors, which provided at least an abstraction of a sense of smell, told him the vaulted spaces reeked of static-charged dust, the promethium the Unclean used as fuel, and the pungent cooling secretions of the humans' own skins. Thickets of chains hung from the ceiling like vines, clinking as they swayed, while the cavernous spaces echoed with the chugs and thumps of unseen engines.

But just as Oltyx had hoped, the bays were deserted. All they had encountered so far had been occasional clusters of the part-mechanical drudges which the humans used as slaves. In the twelfth bay, they passed a crew of them, toiling absently among rows of rust-red, four-legged fighting machines. They did not seem to register the presence of outsiders, and so Oltyx and his lychguard swooped past them as silent as phantoms, followed by the notably less subtle, clanking limp of Neth. Oltyx came close, several times, to ordering his old praetor back to the *Aeon* to wait, and could never quite be sure why he did not.

They had made it almost to the engine-section barricade when they finally ran into the Unclean. A few bays back, they had moved up onto the level of gantries that ran along the edges of the storage areas. Oltyx was glad of that now, as standing at the heart of this chamber were two-score of the machine-cult's bizarre cybernetic infantry.

They seemed to be engaged in some sort of religious ritual, chanting in syncopated croaks before the swinging, smoke-billowing censer of a redrobed priest. Oltyx wondered if here, too, they would be able to pass by unnoticed. But as Neth's leaden footplate smacked into the lip of the hatch they had entered through, the heads of the machine-riddled warriors snapped round and looked up in unison. Oltyx could not say he was displeased, as he had never much cared for stealth.

Dropping to firing positions with an orderly clatter, the troopers rose fragile, wooden-stocked rifles to their shoulders. They moved almost with the synchronicity of the necrons' own warriors, Oltyx observed, as the hatchet-blades of the lychguard began to hiss with hyperphasal energy. Mentep had always said imitation was a form of flattery. But coming from the Unclean, it was an insult to which there was only one answer. Oltyx leapt out from the balcony, glaive poised, and forty rifles fired at once.

The bullets pattered off his carapace like a Sedh hailstorm, not leaving so

much as a dent. As each struck, it drew a small twist of energy from the coreflux beneath, manifesting as a crackle of simple electric discharge across his necrodermis. It stung a little, but without his nocireceptors active, he would not have even noticed.

The golden king of Ithakas came down in the front rank of the unit, right footplate collapsing a trooper into a spray of blood and steel splinters as he landed. Before the crushed trooper's fluids had even splashed across the robes of its neighbours, his glaive had already carved five more from neck to hip. Just the blade of the weapon alone was as long as its victims were tall, and they split like reeds under its weight.

By the time their priest had dropped its censer and fumbled free its own weapon – some sort of bulky, coiled thing – a quarter of the unit had been slaughtered, and the lychguard were wading into the survivors. The redrobe's weapon whined and shuddered as it built charge, before emitting a weak bark of static, and projecting a thin yellow beam at Oltyx's thigh plating. It was some kind of crude energy weapon, boiling away his necrodermis into rapidly dissipating grey mist, but so underpowered that it could hardly keep pace with his self-repair systems. It barely even hurt.

After looking quizzically down at the yellow stream for a moment, Oltyx reached out with his off-hand, and closed it around the cultist's hooded skull. Idly, he noticed the vibration against his palm, as the priest's war-hymn continued to buzz from the grille it had in place of its mouth. It ended abruptly with a swift, wet crunch, and the red robes collapsed to the deck. Half a second later, Pakhet dispatched the last of the troopers, and they marched on, leaving two-score corpses in their wake.

Nevertheless, as they entered the next bay, boots were already clattering at its far end. Another three units of similar size, according to Oltyx's infrared receptors. Clearly, the alarm had been raised.

'It seems we will be fighting the rest of the way, then,' he said to Pakhet, as if assessing poor weather. The praetor responded with a nod, and they got to work.

In the end, they moved almost as rapidly through those last few bays as they had through the empty ones. Advancing in a pitifully simple line formation, like commoners reaping the winter harvest in the time of flesh, they walked into five-deep firing lines without hesitation, and left the steel of the deck red in their wake. Even Neth had managed to contribute, lunging at the foe with

wild sweeps of his sputtering hypermatter flail, and beyond a plethora of chips, abrasions and micropunctures, they had suffered no damage to speak of.

As they approached the last of the storage bays there was no question of the closeness of their objective. Oltyx was astonished, indeed, by the sheer inefficiency of the machine-cult's engineering. Even the pumps they used to cool the larger pumps, which would then cool the reactor itself, were as loud as thunder here – and they were still two layers of armour away. The level of radiation sleeting through the reactor's inadequate shielding, meanwhile, was brutal. For the necrontyr of the homeworld, such crippling conditions had been the basis for a civilisational trauma. But the humans *chose* to live like this. Killing them was almost a kindness.

At the very last bulkhead before they encountered the barricade, the will of the defenders finally broke. When Oltyx's line got to within a dozen paces of the firing line, the troopers lowered their weapons and ran, flooding down a narrow passageway to fall back to the wall of the reactor-fortress. Flux raging with the satisfaction of the slaughter so far, Oltyx sprinted after them.

The humans thronged in the narrow corridor, packed so tightly they could barely move. As the deck shook beneath the dynast's gold-heavy footfalls, the troopers at the back began glancing round in terror, and crushing those in front in their desperation to get away. Oltyx decided to clear the way. Hauling back his arm like a harpoonist on the uatth, he shunted flux reserves to his dorsal actuator array, and hurled his glaive down the length of the corridor with the force of an artillery strike. The shouting of the humans stopped all at once, and all that remained was the thump of the engines, and the ragged scraping of the glaive along the deck, as it made its way back to his hand through a marsh of flesh.

Oltyx found the quiet pleasing.

The king's mood soured once they reached the barricade. As he had begun to suspect, the infantry placed in front of them during the advance had been nothing more than a measure to buy time for the fortification of the enginesection. And in grudging credit to the machine-cult, the barrier they had set up was formidable.

The moment Oltyx had led the phalanx out from the blood-drenched passageway, they had been deluged with fire from weapons emplacements

across the breadth of the wall. And this time, the calibre of the munitions had been worth paying attention to. One of Pakhet's lychguard had lost half their torso to a searing bolt of plasma, falling into dormancy to self-repair, while Oltyx himself had taken a shell the width of his arm, directly to the hip. His sempiternal weave had shredded the projectile to atoms, but not before the warhead inside had burst in a spray of white-hot, flaming paste. The damage was not severe enough to hinder him greatly, but the pain had triggered a spike of rage in his flux that nearly goaded him into charging the guns, there and then.

Still, thinking of how Djoseras would have reacted, Oltyx clamped seals of restraint on the violence bubbling through his memetic buffer, and led the lychguard into cover. They took shelter behind a bank of machinery which seemed too vital for the humans to risk shelling, and there, swallowing the dishonour of the stalemate, Oltyx reassessed his options. Deep in his memetic buffer, the prospect that he had severely underestimated the machine-cult was swelling. But he was determined to suppress the thought, at least for now. It would go away by itself, once he had devised a plan of attack that would show the Unclean up as the beasts they were.

Doing so proved difficult. Every time Oltyx scanned his surroundings to feed it into his tactical planning, it seemed a new human weapons team had sprung up among the gantries and protrusions of the enormous space. His deliberations grew no easier when, in their thirtieth second, the entire, cavernous chamber shook violently. An instant later, an abrupt booming sound, louder than a voidcraft engine in atmosphere, tore through the deck, followed by a wave of electromagnetic turbulence that left the engine they sheltered behind webbed with lightning.

Had the *Tyresias* been hit? If so, the strike had come from a weapon of enormous strength.

'Lysikor,' he cast. 'The *Tyresias* is stricken, but the *Failed Harvest* is the only ship that could possibly have fired on it. Are you keeping more secrets from me?'

'I wish I could say that were the case, my king,' replied the deathmark, with pronounced woe-signifiers. 'But all that is new aboard the Harvest, since you last saw it, is the ablation of eighteen per cent of its mass. It seems the Tyresias, O wrath of the dawn, is armed with what the heathens call a nova cannon.'

This is just what happens when they fire their *own* weapons, realised Oltyx.

'Disappointing. How many shots like that can the cruiser endure?'

'I can adapt its hull for greater resilience, using that shot as calibration, but... the short answer is, fewer shots than I have damnable Mephrit riddles left to solve.'

'I was under the impression they were trivial?'

'I regret to inform my dynast, that these Mephrit were better riddlesetters than I had previously encountered. And while I would never dream of asking my sovereign lord to hurry...'

'I can command you to do just that,' snapped Oltyx. 'Think fast, deathmark.'

A heavy rhythm of thudding metal drew Oltyx's attention to the corpsestrewn passageway they had emerged from. Looking round, he saw that an armoured door was rising in the centre of the bulkhead, and revealing the quadruped silhouettes of the walkers they had seen on the way here. He had made a terrible mistake, he saw now, in leaving them intact.

There were three of the things, armed with much more powerful versions of the yellow beam weapon the priest had used against Oltyx. The energy projectors, somehow, did not seem so risible at all. And there was nowhere to shelter from them – at least, nowhere that could be reached without bearing the brunt of the ever-growing number of heavy guns trained on their position.

'Shields!' Oltyx roared, as the guns of the walkers whined into life. With a flashing of dimensional exchange energies, the lychguard stowed the light shields they had carried thus far, and withdrew body-high dispersion shields in their place, slamming their rims into the deck a fraction of a second before the beams lanced out. The shields held, forming a solid barrier of their own which dissipated the walkers' beams into twists of febrile mist. But they would not hold for long. And now they were pinned in place, as the humans well knew.

The deck shook as the nova cannon fired again.

Now it was Yenekh's turn to deliver bad news.

'The Lystraegonian has arrived, my king. It is still a way out from the front, but it is burning hard, and we are in no position to weather an assault from the Astartes.'

'But the fleet holds?' demanded Oltyx, as the walkers' fire sizzled on the shield before him.

'Barely, dynast. We've lost the Koptas and the Bitterdraught, although its captain sold her end magnificently, and the Forty-two Judges will only last minutes longer. It's a useless ship, and barely crewed, but it's been soaking up the worst of the fight for some time – once it's gone, things will worsen rapidly.'

Oltyx's flux felt as if it were freezing inside him. They were dwindling to nothing, and his assault had ground to a standstill.

'Does anything remain to deploy?'

'Denet remains hopeful that the monoliths may be summoned at any moment,' cast Yenekh, but Oltyx was in no mood for jests.

'Continue to hold, Razor. Maybe you will get to deploy Borakka's band yet, before this fight is over. I expect you to fight the Astartes off yourself, if it comes to it.'

'It will be my pleasure, O king,' said Yenekh. 'If it comes to it, of course.'

Oltyx knew then that Yenekh was no more convinced by his confidence than he was with Yenekh's, and closed the carrier wave band before it could become any more apparent.

'Szarekh's sun-rotten bones!' he growled, pounding the machinery behind him with a clenched fist. The residual pain of the incandescent warhead was nothing, compared with the agony of being powerless over the situation. Of having failed. 'Will nothing relieve me of this... *inertia?*'

Oltyx did not expect to be answered. In truth, he had forgotten anyone was with him who could answer. But all the same, a croaking, stuttering voice spoke back.

'Do n-n-not despair, my king,' said Neth, oculars glowing with adoration and pride, despite everything. 'While a s-s-single Ithakan cartouche remains lit against the d-d-dark, your will shall be carried out. It has been my p-p-privilege to serve you, my nomarch, and m-my king.'

Oltyx's vocal actuators were primed to ask what in all the kemmeht Neth was talking about, when the old practor turned away, rose with barely a shudder, and marched out from behind the shield-wall towards the walkers.

The human gunners were no fools. Immediately, they turned their beams on the decrepit figure approaching them, and their combined force was merciless. With every step Neth took, an anvil's weight in necrodermis sloughed from his carapace in billowing grey clouds. But he kept staggering on, step by gruelling step, even as his oculars cooked off in puffs of core-

flux, and the withered remains of his arms dropped from his body. Despite all his degradation, Oltyx saw then, the ruthless tenacity of the necrontyr had never been diminished in his flux. He had possessed a finer servant in Neth than he had known.

And crucially, the aerosolised remnants of his body had filled the cavern with a fog of charged particles so thick, that the humans would be unable to target Oltyx and his phalanx as they moved through it. *They*, *however*, thought Oltyx, as he configured his optic buffer to show him the world as it appeared to his infrared receptors, *would be able to see the humans*.

The dynast raised his weapon, and walked out towards the barricade, under Neth's protection. The hunt was on.



### CHAPTER ELEVEN

### FIRE

It had been close. Just how close, Oltyx only saw when he materialised back on the bridge of the *Akrops*, after the *Tyresias* had been crippled, and the trebuchet's riddles finally cracked by Lysikor and the scarab.

The bridge had lost all vestige of the silent, deathly gravitas its architects had imbued it with. It was full, for a start. As the battle had dragged on, and ship after ship had been dragged towards obliteration by the guns of the crusade, their crews had been translated aboard the immensity of the *Akrops*. And while their legions would have been stored, either physically or in dimensional appendices, with the royal ship's own, their lords and officers had congregated here for now. Some were animated with fury over the fate of their vessels; others were in a state of shock or refrenation, facing the void with vacant oculars. None seemed at ease.

Yenekh, without a doubt, looked in a worse state than any of them. The Razor had been physically inexhaustible even before biotransference, and his body could have undergone the rigours of the fight a thousand times over without tiring. But his mind was a different matter. For a long time, now, it had been straining to lift the weight of the curse, and the immense

concentration of the battle had taken its toll. To all on the bridge, he still resembled the explosive, indefatigable hero of the dynasty. But in the brief nod they shared now, Oltyx saw in Yenekh's oculars how thin that veneer had become. Oltyx looked away before Yenekh did, as his analytical buffer began to wonder if the admiral's limbs had become very slightly longer, and his faceplate more gaunt and attenuated. Oltyx could not bear to recognise these things, and make them true by the royal heka.

In the moment Oltyx turned to look outside, the void was lit by the detonation of the *Tyresias* as it succumbed to the mortal wound he and his lychguard had struck. Pakhet and her phalanx stared at the voidship's death-pyre with faceplates that showed nothing but the reflection of the inferno. But Oltyx's interstitial node could hear them whispering in communion again. This time, they spoke to remember Neth. Oltyx had locked his executive buffer against the intrusion of any sentiment, sealing it with the truth that Neth had been an implement of his will, and nothing more. But still, the old praetor's death reminded him just how far removed he now was from those long, safe, maddening years on Sedh. It was tempting to miss them.

Limned orange by the ark's doom, the silver shapes of the fleet's survivors, already withdrawing when Oltyx arrived, began slipping away with whispers of their inertialess drives. There went the *Reedstalker*, now the sole survivor of the Teppihuk armada. Behind it went *Scorn* and *Reckoning*, the indomitable Phyloskhi vessels, trailing flux from hideous wounds.

In a knot behind them fled just three light cruisers, and five support ships, for the smaller ships of the exodus fleet had been ravaged by the intensity of the battle's peak. Even as he watched, one Dirge-class ship's drive failed to fire, and it ruptured under a swarm of trailing human missiles.

In the distance, by the trebuchet, the *Failed Harvest* departed in a wink of green. The crewless ship had come within a sand-grain's width of annihilation before the *Tyresias* had been defanged. But still, Oltyx could not help but note Lysikor had departed as its captain, without returning it to Yenekh's control. That would have to be discussed, in time.

The last of the Ithakan vessels to leave were the Shaddh-class hauler, which had only survived the battle through virtue of being useless as a weapon, and the squat, Taweret-class assault carrier from which the Destroyers had so nearly been released. It was preposterous to believe the craft itself looked resentful as it was shepherded away by the *Akrops*, and yet somehow it did.

Then went the *Philotomokh*, which was somehow in better condition than the rest of the fleet, despite having been at the thick of the fighting. It sprang away into infinity with a hearty farewell-cast from Zultanekh, and at last the *Akrops* was left alone.

Sixteen vessels, thought Oltyx, as the interstitial signals of the vessels dissipated. Sixteen, when they had set out with seventy, and not one of them unwounded. But now, as the trebuchet's arachnid-leg pylon array began splaying open in the distance, crackling with impossible energies, it was time for them to leave. Already, Oltyx's seismoreceptors felt a deep vibration in the ship's fabric, as it was prepared for acceleration.

Of course, with the rest of the fleet gone, it was now the sole target of the Imperial guns, and Yenekh's strategic projection of the battlefield was dominated by the onrushing, blood-dark spectre of the *Lystraegonian*. But now that he knew it would not have to endure much longer, the admiral had spent the ship's entire remaining flux-store to create a thick sheath of ablative hypermatter across the hull. The armour was so volatile it would boil away into quantum mist on its own, given time. But all it had to do was hold for the next few moments.

'Oltyx King,' said a soft, ragged voice behind him. 'I am sorry to hear of Neth's fate. I worked hard on him.' To Oltyx's surprise, Mentep had come up from his cave. And even more shockingly, he had addressed him properly for once.

'Do not be sorry, cryptek,' said Oltyx, as the vibration below them grew to a rumble. 'The praetor met an end as noble as his station allows.'

'Alas for his station, then,' said Mentep, with studied neutrality. Oltyx did not think about that.

'This is the first time you have ventured beyond the hollow, sage. Did you come only to commiserate?'

'No,' answered the long-limbed cryptek, with a heaviness mirrored in the amber light of his node-patterns. 'I came because I wanted to behold Carnotite for myself, after so long avoiding the sight of it. And to make something right with you.'

'And what could that possibly be?' asked Oltyx, with a buzz of amusement, wondering if perhaps Mentep had been replaced with an impostor capable of feeling contrition.

Mentep was quiet for a few seconds, composing himself. Behind him, the

bridge was only growing louder, as the displaced nobles became agitated by the intensifying of the ship's vibration.

'While you were fighting, I aided Lysikor in calibrating the trebuchet's aim. And in doing so, I glimpsed the world of my conclave at last, or at least the outline of it.'

'And?'

'Well, Oltyx. After your castigation for sending you to Antikef unwarned of its perils, I feel I owe you a warning now. It seems something does remain on Carnotite, from the old days. If I am right, it is the very thing I most hoped had been left in the past.'

Oltyx bristled, but his nodes betrayed the foreboding that rose in his flux at Mentep's tone.

'I thought you remembered nothing of your past?'

'Almost nothing,' said Mentep. 'With respect, dynast, one cannot manage to completely expunge the memory of something like Am-heht.'

Oltyx was on the brink of asking who or what this Am-heht was when the piercing interstitial signal of the *Akrops*' high-alert alarm began blaring, and armoured shutters descended over the viewports, plunging them into the glare of the bridge's ultraviolet emergency lights. The rumbling of the firing process had now risen to a throbbing tide of infrasound, so intense that the structure of the bridge had begun to visibly quiver. All at once, the groups of nobles fell silent, and Oltyx saw that Yenekh had moved to the command dais to address them all.

'My king,' proclaimed Yenekh, raw with exhaustion, as he inclined his brow to Oltyx. 'My lords of Ithakas. The charging of the Mephrit weapon is complete, and it will fire in moments. You must be prepared – this will not be an inertialess transit as you are used to. Nebbeshken?'

The Ogdobekh cryptek, who Oltyx suspected Zultanekh had been only too glad to second to his allies, moved to stand with Yenekh, and spoke with her usual degree of charisma.

'The trebuchet will move us to another reality. Generated just for this shot. Its mathematics are different. Alien. Impossible. Our mass will become negative. Then we'll come back here. We will be moved very quickly.'

The cryptek's passionless speech was punctuated by gunshot cracks, as the great ship's bones deformed under the strain of the weapon's grip, faster than the necrodermis around them could adapt.

'Regardless,' said Nebbeshken. 'If the transreal shift is misaligned, either going in or coming out, we will be obliterated.'

'That is your briefing?' confirmed Yenekh.

'Yes,' nodded the cryptek, gesturing at the deck beneath them with her larger arms. 'I also advise you to brace yourselves. Now.'

Oltyx barely had time to anchor himself to the deck with a protocol of cleaving before the trebuchet fired. Even then, it was barely enough to keep him upright, and the effort exerted vicious shearing forces on the joints of his legs. The weapon's firing was an action of such monumental force, compressed into such a brief instant, that his perception of it occurred entirely in retrospect. It would almost be tempting to believe it had not happened at all, were it not for the damage.

All around him, the pristine surface of the bridge was scattered with debris. Oltyx actually wondered what it was, briefly, since his recognition array thought it had identified scattered limbs in error. But there, sure enough, were the pieces of those nobles who had been too slow to secure themselves before the firing – splinters of cracked carapace, and appendages wrenched free from bodies. Damage alerts began lighting up across Yenekh's evergrowing tapestry of tactical displays, and Oltyx dreaded to consider what had happened in the bays where the legions were stored.

There would not be many casualties that necessitated more than superficial reconstruction. But the fact that such a brute infliction of physical reality had occurred at all seemed impossible, somehow, in the innermost stronghold of a necron warship. Even aboard a grievously damaged vessel, the command decks had been designed to retain the austere serenity of a tomb, right up until the point of a core rupture.

And yet, they had made it. Or so Oltyx assumed. The rumbling had vanished, at least, leaving a quiet stirred only by the ticking of the hull as it settled, and the laboured clank of fallen nobles rising to their feet.

Yenekh looked around in amazement, and what looked like faint suspicion. It was as if even he, whose weakness had ever been optimism, could not believe the manoeuvre had worked. Even though the battlefield projections were now entirely empty of ships, the admiral gestured to the viewport shutters with great trepidation, as if he was convinced they would open to reveal the *Lystraegonian* bearing down on them.

As the shielding cracked open, it struck a line of intense red across the

breadth of the main viewport, which spread across the deck as the shutter rose. No sun was the source of that light. There were not even stars here. Just red – a deep, infernal crimson of such depth that it seemed to replace the void itself.

And at the centre of it all, casting that furnace-light over the bridge, was an orb that glared like a single, wrathful ocular. A world made of fire.

Carnotite.

Oltyx looked to Mentep at his side, and saw the cryptek's steam-bright carapace had been painted scarlet by the light of the baleful planet. The amber of his oculars, too, had been drowned in red, and if there was any hope in his gaze, Oltyx could not detect it.

- 'Mentep?'
- 'Yes?'
- 'Tell me, what is this Am-heht?'
- 'They are the Warlock of Carnotite, Oltyx. They were once my mentor, and my whole world.'
  - 'And what are they now?'
  - 'I fear, my king, that we must find that out together.'

In between the belly of the *Akrops* above, and the molten world below, the ghost ark felt impossibly small, like a speck of soot suspended in the updraught of a furnace. Looking down into that inferno, Oltyx's every instinct was to rise away, but royal will alone kept his actuators steady in piloting the ark downwards, into the fire.

The other ships had arrived shortly after the *Akrops*, and were now clustered around it in low orbit, recuperating as best they could from the battle at the trebuchet. The exodus fleet was safe for now. Thanks to vast noctilith arrays in orbit — branching, weblike structures that were unrecognisable from the pylons constructed by the major dynasties — the warp was becalmed here, in a sphere one hundred thousand sunsreach wide. But for all they had been sheltered from pursuit, this place could not have felt any less like sanctuary.

Alone on the ghost ark's deck stood Mentep, and Oltyx could not help but feel like the driver of an executioner's chariot, ferrying a condemned prisoner out into the killing-places of the deep desert. As the ark sank towards the furnace vapours of Carnotite's thin atmosphere, the cryptek sagged visibly and leaned on his staff, as if the ark's deck were not sparing him the pull of the world's savage gravity.

Mentep had been adamant that they make their katabasis alone. A phalanx of lychguard, he had said gravely, would mean as little as a full tessarion of Triarch praetorians here, if things went poorly for them. The cryptek refused even Xott permission to join them. *I cannot risk both of us*, he had said to the stilt-legged creature, as its long neck had drooped in apparent sorrow. It had stood at the lip of the hangar as they had cast off, emitting a long, plaintive tone.

Yenekh, too, had been similarly desperate to come down with them. Whether out of desire for a cure to his curse, or out of concern for his king's safety, Oltyx had not been able to fathom. But Mentep had counselled strongly against it. In any case, the fleet had required him then, more than ever. The dynast merely hoped the Razor and Lysikor would not come to blows in his absence, as it was not a duel he imagined either would survive.

As the sluggish, volcanic ocean of the world's surface rose towards them, and the seething mantle of gas that passed for its atmosphere began to lick their hull, Oltyx's thermoreceptors began to stir. The ark began to creak and shudder as its necrodermis deformed with the tension between its superheated ventral surface and its upper spars, still exposed to the chill of raw void.

But soon the atmosphere had swallowed them up, cloaking them with dense, shimmering gas, and the temperature soared. Even three leagues up from the surface, the hull of the ark was so hot that if he had touched it with hands of flesh, they would have seared and blackened, with flesh slithering from bone in a shriek of steam.

The image was grotesquely vivid in his phantasory buffer, and momentarily made him pull his hands from the hull. With no actual damage to his necrodermis, he felt no pain, but the mere *knowledge* of the heat surrounding him filled Oltyx with horror. That brief spike of panic in his flux was enough to wake the dysphorakh, and for a long minute, all the dynast could do was stare intently at the brightness of the gold which plated his hands, as they gripped the ark's controls with enough force to dent them.

You are not flesh, he told himself, over and over. You are gold. You are the sun's light itself, and fire is nothing before you.

Carnotite did not have a surface, as such. It was entirely covered in a

churning sea of liquid metal, stirred through with radioactive ores and bubbling with convection currents of unfathomable complexity. Even to necrons, this was an unimaginably hostile place.

'Why would your conclave choose to live on a world such as this?' asked Oltyx, appalled, as he scanned the molten swell in search of a place to set down.

'It was not always this way,' said Mentep sadly. 'There was water here once... I think. Yes. A shallow green sea, with just a few rings of white sand, and not a speck of life to sully it.'

'What happened?' asked Oltyx, wondering what devastation must have visited the world to leave it this way.

'Am-heht did,' said Mentep, and spoke no more.

What Mentep said made sense. Despite its primeval veneer, even the most cursory scans during their descent had given Oltyx cause to question how much of a role unthinking nature had played in the making of this place. Phased energy storms chased each other across the incandescent depths, glimmering with transdimensional discharges, while the world's core was alight with such exotic dimensional activity that Oltyx's interstitial node had only thrown out cascades of refrenation when he tried to perceive it.

Oltyx could scarcely imagine what state of mind one would have to exist in, to want to shape a world this way. And yet, even now they cruised over its surface, Carnotite seemed entirely deserted.

'It has been a long time since you left this place,' said Oltyx, searching the heaving waves on the horizon for any sign of habitation. 'Are you sure this... warlock is even still here?'

'I am certain,' said Mentep. 'I can see all too much evidence they are at work. And if you cannot, Oltyx, then be grateful for your ignorance. This world is built with the kind of madness that makes itself part of you, as soon as you begin to comprehend its edges.'

'If Am-heht is present,' ventured Oltyx then, 'can you be sure they will speak with us, or even permit us to land?'

'If they were not open to our presence here, I doubt the *Akrops* would still be in the sky, Oltyx. Or we might simply have arrived to empty void, as if Carnotite itself had never existed. If they have allowed us this far, I am confident they will treat with us.'

'And if you have forgotten some slight or grudge that they now seek to make

recompense for?' probed Oltyx, suddenly uneasy.

'Should that be the case, O Oltyx, dynast of Ithakas... then hope that you are annihilated, rather than sharing my fate.'

The only sound after that was the bubbling of the sea, and the moaning of the furnace wind as it gusted through the spars of the ark. Eventually, Oltyx spied a landing site. It was little more than a black crust of slag, afloat on the infernal swell. But it was solid enough, and so he set the ark down on its tilting surface.

When he stepped out onto the jagged black surface, it was hot enough to trigger his circumspection protocols, as they presumed he had been hit by a thermal projection weapon. In response to the sheer heat it was soaking up, his necrodermis began shunting it through interstitial pathways, into a dimensional appendix it had cast to serve as a heat sink. And while it held on to the bulk of the human gold, Oltyx was dismayed to see dull rivulets of the shining metal dripping from his footplates, as they crunched across the surface of the slag. It took the full exertion of his mind, now, to avoid the thought of what might happen to a body of flesh down here.

They waited for an hour, then, on that searing scrap of an island, but nothing came. At one point, the surface heaved, a few khet from shore, and a hump of smooth black metal breached the surface, before vanishing again. Whether it had been a lifeform, or just some monstrous canoptek, Oltyx could not tell. But other than that, they were left alone.

'You said you were psychomancers, in your conclave,' Oltyx said, when the solitude began to feel like it was going to crush him. 'Was Am-heht, too?'

'Originally, yes. But in their pursuit of the truth of the mind, they became... something else. Have we spoken before of the unification principle, dynast?'

'Briefly,' ventured Oltyx, unwilling to claim any understanding on the matter. 'You spoke of it on Sedh. Is this not the idea that all the cryptek disciplines – chronomancy, plasmancy, technomancy and the rest – are all connected, in some way?'

'That bears some resemblance to the idea, yes. Just as our ancients once realised that deep science and sorcery were nothing but twin sets of ritual for invoking the same thing, Am-heht believed that all the cryptek arts could be subsumed, into a single mastery of heka over the essence of reality.'

'It does not sound so far-fetched,' said Oltyx, despite not understanding at all.

'Perhaps it did not seem so far-fetched to *us*, at first,' Mentep said with a shrug. 'But Am-heht was both talented beyond measure, and ambitious beyond caution. Their work took them down to the fevered depths of reason itself, into a place where such distinctions as space, time, energy and matter became meaningless.'

'What did they seek to achieve?'

'I do not know, now. Everything after the earliest days is entirely lost to me, I fear, because of my role in it. But I tell you this, Oltyx. Whatever atrocities might be attached to my hand, and those of the others in my conclave, we only ever set out to act for what we saw as the ultimate wellbeing of the necrontyr. But Am-heht...'

'Sought only the advancement of their own power?' finished Oltyx, who had heard stories like these before. But Mentep only shook his head, and looked out at the violence of the ocean.

'If only it had been that comprehensible,' he whispered. 'The warlock sought only to break the limits of the possible, for no reason other than the pleasure of the breaking. They were the worst kind of mad.'

'Well,' said Oltyx, after a long silence. 'At least, Mentep, I think you are safe to speak of them in the past tense. Whatever Am-heht sought, it seems, was their undoing in the end. We have stood here, making no attempt to conceal ourselves, for a long while now. And yet for all their dread omniscience, the warlock has not made themselves known.'

Oltyx kicked a loose piece of rock into the distance, in a distinctly-undynastic act of petty frustration. 'What this means for us, and what we do next with the fleet, I cannot begin to think. But this is a spent place, Mentep. Whatever happened here is long in the past. Let us put it behind us, siphon what matter we need for the reconstruction hoppers of the fleet, and be...'

Oltyx faltered, and never finished the sentence. Because just offshore, where the rock he'd kicked had landed, the sea was collapsing.



### **CHAPTER TWELVE**

## THE WARLOCK

The surface of the boiling ocean sagged, dropping into a deep cone, as if a drain had been opened beneath it. The pit deepened rapidly, drawing the rim of the slag-crust over its edge, and tilting it to such an angle that Oltyx found himself looking down into the searing depths.

The island teetered so precariously that Oltyx was sure it would be tipped over and swallowed up. But just as it began to tilt and slide down into the vortex, the hole in the ocean filled again, and dropped them level with a splash of molten metal. All was still once more.

A hand emerged from the molten sea.

It was black and clagged all over with cooling magma, and as it groped for the edge of the crust it shook, as if in unimaginable pain. The hand dug taloned fingertips into the shore, and was soon followed by a second. Juddering with effort, a hunched, gnarled figure heaved itself up onto the roasting slag of the beach, and lay there, quivering with exhaustion.

It was necron. Or it had been. The thing's head was enveloped in some kind of growth, which Oltyx took at first to be congealed metal from the sea, until clumps of slag fell away, and he saw the cables which connected it to another

assembly around the creature's torso.

This Am-heht is not particularly imposing after all, thought Oltyx. Then, a sinuous black tendril, as thick as Oltyx's waist, snaked up from the magma beyond the shore, and coiled itself around the wretched creature's face.

A second tendril clamped itself over the struggling figure's wrist, and with these two pinion points as anchors, a twisting black shape began to pull itself from the igneous depths. The writhing mass hauled itself up over the creature's head, and then lowered itself to the crust before Oltyx and Mentep. Streams of glowing metal poured from the tangle of coils in front of them, forming a smoking pool, and it began to uncoil.

The tendrilled shape was constantly in motion, so its size was hard to judge exactly. But it was at least three times his own considerable height, with the mess of limbs that made up its lower half sprawling wide in every direction. Its upper body bore a resemblance to standard necron form, but that was all Oltyx could determine, as looking at it for more than an instant sent refrenations streaking through his optic buffer.

Its necrodermis was black, but not in any shade produced by nature: a profound, sucking darkness that consumed all light, as if a shape had been cut from reality. It bore no cartouche on its breast. And where its core-flux should have glowed brightest, like a tame star, there was only a vortex: a raging absence that crackled with bursts of tachyon radiation. Before the errors spreading across his buffers forced him to look away, it became clear that the thing had a singularity for a heart.

'The worst kind of mad,' said the Warlock of Carnotite, with abyssal amusement, as it loomed over them. 'You wound me with such words, dear Mentep,' it said, in a voice which seemed to have no source, but rippled all around them like the heat from the sea below. 'To think... that my finest student, who I loved so much – who loved me in turn – could speak of me so...'

More than anything else he had faced down in his long existence, the voice of the warlock gave Oltyx the powerful urge to be somewhere else. He would have gone against the *Polyphemus* alone, rather than spend another moment in its presence.

But with the briefest glance to Oltyx, warning him wordlessly not to follow, Mentep *walked towards the thing*, leaning on his staff as if he struggled against a gale.

'If love was ever something our kind achieved,' he said, in a voice grim as stellar ash, 'it had nothing to do with whatever we shared, Am-heht. As you will no doubt be aware, I struck it from my mind – as I struck away all I could of what transpired here.'

'Indeed you did,' mourned the warlock. 'And what a conflagration of talent that was. The creator of the Goetic Forge, and the sage who gave Svarokh the shackles to enslave the god-shards. The Architect of Sokar himself, whom Szarekh came to for a solution to his greatest challenge, but who runs now, in fear of his own talent.'

Oltyx's mind surged at the mention of the battle that had sown the seeds of his father's madness. What did Mentep have to do with Sokar? But before Oltyx had even processed the thought, the confrontation had moved on.

'It was not fear that drove me, Am-heht! It was *decency*. The spirit our conclave was founded on, and which I realised only too late we had lost, somewhere on the road into this... this *nightmare* of yours.'

'Is that the story you have told yourself, then?' The warlock laughed, then — a true laugh, rather than the artificial signifier the necrons had long adopted. But the sound seemed underlaid by shrieks of uncomprehending anguish, as if some abyssal torture pit had been opened for a moment. Oltyx never wanted to hear that laugh again. But Mentep stood unbowed.

'You are right to say I cannot speak truthfully of the past, warlock, because it is burnt now. But I see the madness that began with Sokar, and the wounds inflicted on whole dynasties. Whether this horror sprang from my hand or not, and whether in futility or otherwise, I would seek to heal those wounds.'

'As you wish it, then,' said Am-heht, and began to flow around the edge of the platform, followed on all fours by the silent wretch that had preceded it. Examining it, Oltyx saw the thing was one of the composite creatures known as a cryptothrall, and true fear rooted itself in his flux.

That mass of machinery clamped around its upper half was a canoptek parasite, designed to weave itself into the fabric of the host and seize control of its motor actuators. Usually, such insidious constructs let crypteks make use of necrons whose flux-cores had failed during the Great Sleep, giving their bodies power, but no consciousness behind it. But they could be used for far crueller purposes.

From the corner of his vision, as he could still not look directly at it, Oltyx saw the warlock uncoil a tendril upwards, towards the horned disc of the

Akrops.

'Unnas' ship, I see,' it said, with mild interest. 'I suppose you do not remember the last time it was berthed here, do you?' Then, to Oltyx's alarm, the warlock was *directly behind him*, and one of its tendrils was on his shoulder. Despite the heat, it was as cold as if it had been lying in the void between stars, and seemed almost insubstantial, like a liquid. 'And yet... this is not Unnas, is it?'

Those last words seemed to burst from the air at the very base of Oltyx's cranial pylon, and it was all he could do not to answer with a roar of shock.

'I am Oltyx the king,' he managed. 'His successor. Dynast... of Ithakas.'

'I see,' replied the warlock simply. 'So, Ithakas weathers its sickness still. Truly, a fascinating consequence. And to think... one of my finest minds is now devoted hopelessly to the undoing of such a great work. Mentep the Inscrutable, fallen victim to an ailment so crude as *guilt*. Still... perhaps his loss is to be your gain, Oltyx. Perhaps...'

The warlock swept round to the side of him, and its head dipped down to stare at the side of his own. From what he could see, the warlock had no oculars, but Oltyx felt beams of searing particles, probing the deep layers of his necrodermis.

'Did you know we are in the presence of another king, Oltyx?' said the warlock, as it rifled through his mind.

'I did not,' he forced out, keeping his voice as level, and as free from feeling, as Djoseras would have done in his place.

'Shabb!' called the warlock, and the cryptothrall scrabbled towards them, over the ragged surface of the slag. 'My... assistant here was once called Weret-segh. He was phaeron of the Nuthyan Dynasty, and he once called Carnotite his crownworld, although you will find no records of his kingdom now.'

Shabb crawled forwards, until it was squatting on its haunches before Oltyx, and he could not help but meet the gaze of its single, blank ocular.

'Weret-segh was kind enough to provide patronage for our enclave of scholars, wasn't he, Mentep? His coffers grew fat from use of our gifts. But in the end, I required the use of his resources. All of them. In the spirit of sentimentality that so often obstructed his brilliance, Mentep argued for clemency, of course.'

The warlock paused, and when it spoke again, it was in Mentep's voice, as

if it was replaying an echo from long ago.

'For the Triarch's sake, Am-heht!' cried the echo of the cryptek, as if carried on the wind. 'I cannot stop you absorbing the assets of Nuthyan into your work. I fear I cannot stop you absorbing the fabric of the world itself, at this point, and I regret nothing more than delivering it to you. But you do not need their people. Let them go free, lector-priest. Or at least destroy them. I beg you, though – do not subject them to that.'

'But you see, Oltyx, I *did* need their people,' said the warlock. 'And I needed the king, too. Shabb was the last project, in fact, that dear Mentep worked on – his parting gift to me, in exchange for my permission to break from the conclave. But I suppose you don't remember that now, do you, Mentep?'

The old engrammancer gazed through the heat-twisted air with deep confusion in his oculars, and the warlock – still looming just to Oltyx's side – extended a tendril towards the cryptothrall's face.

'Shall we see what has become of old King Weret-segh, after all these years inside this prison you made of his body?' With a curling of a tendril tip, Amheht did something to the cryptothrall's canoptek shell, and Shabb collapsed, convulsing, on the floor.

Its vocal actuators stuttered to life. And though they were distorted with static from aeons of disuse, the sound that escaped was unmistakable: it was a scream of the most profound anguish – the perpetual, unwavering howl of a mind that had consumed itself entirely. With another flick of the warlock's tendril, the sound vanished, and the cryptothrall returned obediently to its haunches. Like nothing had happened.

All fear had lifted from Oltyx's flux now, boiled away by that trembling, bright calm he knew would allow him free will for just a few moments, before a rage fell on him.

While his capacity to reason *why* was collapsing by the microsecond, along with all care for possibility or consequences, Oltyx knew that he *had* to slaughter the warlock. He had to try, at least. Even if he only got one blow in before he was obliterated, it would be worth it. And it was so close, still: crouched right there beside him, with its nightmare face just a hand's breadth away. *So close*. The outline of his glaive began to shimmer just below the surface of the real, crystallising along with his wrath.

But somehow, before it became unstoppable, he held back. The nomarch of

Sedh would not even have tried – he would have let the fury come, and struck without a second thought. The dynast he was now, however, could not afford to do so. Losing control would not just lead him to his own doom, now. It would doom his entire dynasty, as his failure aboard the *Tyresias* had so nearly done.

Now, more than ever, he needed to be measured. Because as boundlessly evil though Am-heht was, treating with it was the only way Oltyx could see to any sort of future for Ithakas. And so, transmuting all the anger he could into courage, he spoke to the creature which lurked on the edge of his vision.

'Enough, warlock. Mentep has severed himself from his past with you. It is on my account alone that he has now been thrust back into your orbit. Do not torment him.'

'Bold, dynast!' The warlock sounded purely delighted at the anger that had leaked into his voice, but it was a joy that held no warmth. 'Let us see what drives this passion... Let us see who you are...'

The nest of tendrils slithered across the jagged ground around Oltyx, and encircled him. As the coils closed around his thorax, he felt his flux being tugged at by interstitial manipulations from within them. Then, one limb thicker than the others withdrew from the mass, crept up his carapace, and touched its void-cold tip to his cartouche. Drawing back, the liquid-flexible appendage teased a writhing filament of core-flux with it, and pulled until the emerald plasma stretched out kubits from his body. Other tendrils began to pluck at the strand as if it was the string of an instrument, and the warlock hissed with dark interest as it read his essence.

Am-heht rose to its full height and withdrew from him, before it spoke again.

'So, Oltyx, what is this... business of yours, which drags Mentep back here, and to the one he spurned?'

'You have looked into my flux, Am-heht. Surely, you know already.'

'Yes,' said the devil of the molten sea. 'But I want to hear you *say* the truth of it. For once it is spoken, a royal pronouncement becomes unbreakable truth, does it not, O great and powerful Oltyx?'

'Very well,' said Oltyx, and spoke the truth.

'As it seems you know already, my kingdom has long been burdened with the vengeance of Llandu'gor. The dynasty has been enfeebled by the curse since Szarekh's war, and now it has fallen at last, to a great armada of the Unclean. Unnas is dead, and I rule as his successor. But my kingdom extends only to those scant few ships in orbit up there. We are a people in exile, harried by our foes, and our strength is all but spent. I brought us here in the hope that Mentep might find something from his past, which might spare us our future.'

'And instead,' said the warlock, 'you found me.'

'Yes,' said Oltyx. Then, fighting against the torrent of errors in his optic buffer, he looked the warlock right in the face. 'I found you, Am-heht. And now, I intend to know whether you will help me or not.'

The warlock laughed that unspeakable laugh again, and loomed down to regard him as if he were a food-morsel in a cage. Oltyx still did not look away, despite the broad sections of his field of vision reduced to blackness for every moment he held the warlock's gaze.

'And why is it, little king, that you expect me to grant you a boon?'

'I do not,' answered Oltyx, and felt a strange, cataclysmic freedom in admitting it. When the crusade had been sighted, he had gone to Antikef with similarly empty hopes of receiving aid, and with no leverage besides his own boldness. Antikef had left him damaged in ways he suspected he would never recover from. But he had survived. Perhaps he would survive here, too.

'You owe me nothing, warlock. But if the *Akrops* is not given strength to fly, Ithakas shall end in the teeth of the Unclean. And if my people are not given strength against the curse, Ithakas shall end in the throes of madness. Believe me, Am-heht, if I had any other option, I would take it. But I do not. And so rather than accept my fate and wait for the end, I ask you for aid.'

'Whatever the price?' The warlock shifted sideways on its roiling tendrils, leaving Oltyx staring at Shabb's hunched form through the heat haze again. *This is what this creature does to kings*, thought Oltyx, but though he had to force the words together through the constriction of terror, he answered.

'Whatever the price.'

Oltyx had no idea how long he stood, then, with his fate held in the hands of that creature with a dead star for a heart. The groan of the wind and the bubbling of the molten sea seemed to take on a hypnotic complexity, as if they were the inner workings of its mind made audible. But in the end, the warlock spoke.

'I will not save you, Oltyx. I will not save your ship. I will not save your

people. No – their fate will rely on your strength alone. But I will give you the means to reach a place where your strength will be tested. You will learn, then, whether you are the king you hope to be, or the king you know yourself to be. Truths will be revealed, and their comprehending may destroy you. If you think that aid, then here – I will aid you.'

'I... accede to this aid,' said Oltyx, and immediately, the warlock's vicious absence of a face turned to Mentep.

'I wonder...' rumbled its voice from everywhere, with tectonic glee. 'Have you ever told Oltyx of the ghostwind, Mentep?'

'I do not know what you speak of, Am-heht. If I ever knew it, the memory is burned along with all the rest.'

'Shame upon shame! You do not recall even your most intriguing works.'

'This... ghostwind,' Oltyx interrupted. 'Is it some manner of drive? Or a place?'

'It is both, and it is neither,' snapped Am-heht, with idle contempt. 'You could not understand its true nature. All you need know is this – it will bring you to the circumstance of your testing.'

'Would it not be more simple to... repair the *Akrops*?'

'Repair?' said the warlock, drawing back on its cloud of limbs with something like astonishment. 'Oh no, Oltyx of Ithakas. The hour is far too late for such crude measures. Your ship's wounds go far beyond the physical. It is dying, like your dynasty. But both may limp further yet, in the ghostwind.'

'I see,' said Oltyx, who did not see, and then set the butt of his glaive in the crust beside him with grim resolve. 'In which case, what is to be the price?' He considered Shabb once more, hunched in invisible agony at the edge of his visual field.

'It is of no cost to me, to return the knowledge of the ghostwind to Mentep. I have moved beyond such trinkets, now. So, I shall exact no price. Indeed, to impart this thing on my former disciple... appeals to me. Perhaps the journey along the path it opens may be what revives the spirit of Mentep the Inscrutable. Perhaps, even, it will draw him to the resumption of his great works.'

'So then, warlock,' said Oltyx, 'impart it.'

Am-heht reached out to Mentep, just as it had to Oltyx, with one of its squirming, void-black limbs. But this time, instead of drawing anything out, it extruded a slim, volatile thread of amber core-flux from its tip. The thrashing

scrap of light leapt from the warlock's limb, and dived into the light of Mentep's thorax, like something burrowing into a carcass. As it was lost in the glow of his core, the cryptek's oculars glowed briefly with what could have been agony, and could have been ecstasy.

'It is done,' Am-heht pronounced. 'And no, I will demand nothing from you in return, little king. Because this gift is for Mentep, in the end. But make no mistake, Oltyx of Ithakas – whatever benefit you may derive from it, you will pay for in due time.'

Oltyx stood dumbstruck on the slag, unsure whether he had just secured a great victory against all expectations, or sealed himself to a terrible fate. *Perhaps both, and neither*, he decided, eventually. He had no idea what had just happened. There were so many questions, and so few he dared to ask. But there were practical matters, at least, that he could not neglect.

'Will our pursuers be able to follow us, as we make use of this ghostwind?'

'Not if you do not will it to be so,' said the warlock, as if the answer should have been obvious. Oltyx did not feel in any way reassured, but refused to stumble over the cryptic answer.

'Very well. And perhaps I have missed something, Am-heht, but where will it... allow us to go? By which I mean *physically*, rather than in the sense of being a test of my true self, and so forth.'

The warlock recoiled, as if Oltyx had offered some crude insult. But before it could answer, Mentep extended an arm wearily to stay his former master.

'I have an understanding, I think,' said the cryptek, with terrible gravity, 'now that this... invention has been returned to me. The ghostwind does offer us a means of physical travel. But as for the matter of our destination? I fear that is a conversation that must be had aboard the *Akrops*, with one further participant. And it will not be an easy one, for any involved.'

'I will not keep you from leaving, great king,' said Am-heht, sweeping its appendages towards Oltyx in suggestion of a mocking bow. 'As for you, Mentep... I trust you shall come to your senses, during this strange voyage. When you do, remember – everything that you have lost, and more besides, I can return to you in the same manner as I have returned this. Everything that is wrong, I can make right.'

As the ghastly echo of the warlock's words hung over them like the heat of the sea, Mentep leaned on his staff and stared at Am-heht. For the first time in the three centuries Oltyx had known him, deep amber patterns of hatred swarmed over his carapace. But there were patterns much harder to decipher, moving beneath.

'I am pursuing work of transcendent grandeur in this place, psychomancer. And no matter our differences, you will always have a place here. The same goes for my other disciples – for Dagon in the East, and for Khertykh, if he survives yet in the m'wt.'

'We all forsook you for a reason, Am-heht.'

'But do you not see what I am building here?' said the warlock, with a fevered intensity that seemed to thunder through the depths beneath them. Hearing Am-heht's voice risen to that pitch made it seem as if everything the creature had said before had been the barest of whispers.

'I wish I could not see,' replied Mentep, in a whisper of agony, and Oltyx saw at last what patterns had stirred beneath his hatred. Nobody grew up in a royal court of the necrontyr, without knowing what the elemental desire for power looked like. Once again, despite the volcanic heat coursing through his necrodermis, Oltyx felt a deep chill in his flux. They could not stay here a moment longer.

'Come,' he said quietly, beckoning the cryptek as the wind picked up over the expanse of fire. 'We must take our leave.'

'As you wish, then,' said Am-heht, bringing Shabb to heel, as Mentep followed Oltyx to the ghost ark, footplates crunching heavily on the slag. 'Maybe we will meet again in future, if you weather the trials to come, and you will have something more interesting to offer me.'

The blade of my glaive, I hope, thought Oltyx, as the ark lifted from the black island, and did not care if Am-heht could still read his thoughts.

Neither he nor Mentep spoke for the duration of the ascent. When they were three leagues up, Oltyx turned to take one last look at the blighted world, and saw that the raft they had landed on had already broken up, sinking into the glowing currents without a trace. His oculars followed the storms across the molten swells, and for a moment, he almost fancied they flickered in patterns like nodal arrays in conversation. As they rose from Carnotite's protean fury, Oltyx was seized by the dreadful, impossible notion that he was looking at a world on its way to becoming a mind.



### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## SECRET SCIENCES

The fleet hung motionless in the crimson void, waiting on his signal. Surveying it now, from the silence of the *Akrops*' royal sanctum, it looked so fragile. For all the gargantuan size of the ships, their crescents and spindles seemed almost toylike beside the infernal bulk of Carnotite. *Too small, surely,* thought Oltyx, *to preserve the spirit of an empire*.

None of the lords aboard those ships knew what lay ahead of them. But all knew that, one way or another, they were on the threshold of their final flight. Oltyx took care, with his court, to act with complete confidence in his plans for what was to come, as if the time had not yet arrived to reveal their destination. But in truth, he knew as little as his subjects did.

Only Mentep, the bearer – and once the creator – of Am-heht's gift, had the answers. But he had been adamant in refusing to share them with Oltyx, until he agreed to discuss the matter on the terms the cryptek had set out, down on the burning sea. The defiance made Oltyx's core-flux simmer with fury. But what inducements, what threats, could he possibly level against Mentep, now he was their sole means of travelling onward?

Mentep the Inscrutable, Am-heht had called him. Oltyx could see why. The cryptek had always been guarded, to say the least. But what had once been frustrating at worst had taken on a threatening edge, now that the fate of the dynasty depended on trusting him.

'The Architect of Sokar,' Oltyx murmured to himself, as the chill of the throne sank into his body. Am-heht had called Mentep that too. It was just one of the ever-growing list of epithets attached to the entity Oltyx had, for so long, considered to be nothing more than an eccentric wanderer. And with every glimpse of that wanderer's past, with every detail that swam fortuitously back to his mind just as it became useful, Oltyx grew more suspicious of exactly how much Mentep the Inscrutable had ever forgotten.

Oltyx clung to what little certainty he could. Once he gave the order for the journey to begin, the fleet would move to another place. In this ghostwind, the battered *Akrops* would have its wings back, able to travel vast distances despite its crippled drives. And the crusade would no longer be able to follow it. *So long as he did not will it...* 

So much for certainty, thought Oltyx, as the memory of the warlock's voice rose like a black mountain in his executive buffer. Emitting a grinding, distorted growl of frustration, he pounded his fist on the throne's arm with enough force to crack its outer plating, and rose. He could move no further, without conceding to the damned cryptek. It was time to stop putting off the inevitable, and go to meet with Mentep.

As he left the sanctum, Pakhet slid from the recess beside its door like a statue roused to life, but Oltyx bid her remain in place with her phalanx. The business to come was purely personal, and lychguard moving through the ship would raise questions he was in no mood to answer. Still, Oltyx did not make it to the hollows unmolested, as Parreg the Agoranomos was waiting for him at the gates to the royal decks. Deferential as ever, the squat, barrel-chested lord dipped his head, prepared to be passed by, and that earned him the king's attention.

'Yes, Agoranomos?'

'Great dynast. Barring some persistent weapons array failures on the *Reckoning*, and the... condition of the *Akrops*, the fleet has self-repaired to optimum function.' As if to punctuate his point, the citadel around them trembled with one of the flagship's low, eerie groans – the result, as Oltyx carried on telling himself, of structural shifting.

- 'And the matter reserves are refilled?'
- 'Aye, radiant one.'
- 'Very good, Lord Parreg. You make for an acceptable quartermaster, it seems.'
- 'Making up for lost time, my king,' grunted the Agoranomos, referring to the long-obsolete nature of his original title as master of Sedh's grain imports. 'Been a long aeon, without beans to count.'
- 'Your skill is recognised,' said Oltyx with a nod, and continued. Despite the particular foulness of his mood, he could spare the respect for Parreg of all the lords in decaying Ithakas, it sometimes seemed as if the Agoranomos was the only one of them without at least some form of creeping strangeness in his flux. He was *dull*, and that alone gave Oltyx more hope for the dynasty than any trick of Am-heht's.
- 'If I could dare trouble his radiance a moment longer?' asked Parreg awkwardly, and Oltyx turned slowly, looking down on him like a predator weighing up the fat on a prey-beast. His patience had limits.
- 'There is... discontent, my king. Among the shipless lords. They speak in whispers, away from the ship's scarabs... of...'
  - 'Out with it, grain lord.'
- 'They speak of Duamehht, dynast. Of where she would have led us. It gives me no pleasure to report it, but I would be a poor servant if I did not.'
- 'Very well,' said Oltyx at last, and his interstitial node reached out to Parreg's for the names of the lords in question. 'It shall be remembered. And you are loyal, Parreg. This shall be remembered too.'
- Parreg looked surprised at the calm of his reaction, but in truth, it was no surprise to Oltyx. The mood among the surviving ships had been bleak when they had arrived, following the ruinous battle at the trebuchet. And although only Oltyx and Mentep knew the truth of the evil Carnotite harboured, the place had taken its toll on every thinking mind in the fleet. The stifling, scarlet gloom had made the lords even more fractious, paranoid and prone to despair even Zultanekh had become sullen and ill-tempered, by the Triarch's finger bones and whisperings of sedition had been inevitable. Sooner or later, though, those whisperings would congeal into a plot. And while regicide had long been an unbreakable taboo for the dynasty, Oltyx knew all too well that a precedent for breaking that taboo had now been set.
  - 'Send a message across the breadth of the fleet, sealed with the royal sigil,'

Oltyx commanded. 'Tell the lords that we shall be underway within the hour. And tell them...' He paused then, as he had always been poor with speechcraft. *Yenekh would know what to say*, he knew. But this could not come from the admiral, no matter his charisma. 'Tell them... that a long night lies ahead, but that the faithful servants of the dynast shall survive to see a glorious dawn.'

'That is all?' checked Parreg.

'That is all.'

'A fine speech, my king.'

Oltyx re-examined the echoes of the words in his aural buffer. They had been meant to inspire, but now they were spoken, they seemed much more like a threat. *Still*, thought Oltyx, *what better inspiration was there to loyalty than a good threat*.

The hollows had been rearranged since he had been here last. In the course of their long flight from Antikef, the *Akrops* had shifted gigatons of matter around its holds, and with every mass movement, the preserved tombs had been shuffled and reconfigured, like a child's monument construction set scaled to the hands of an idiot god.

But Mentep's enclave was easy enough to find amidst the accreted masonry, from the lantern-like amber glow that spilled out from it. It seemed to have expanded, since before. But there inside, just as before, was Mentep, working away with a series of amber tori cast before his single eye, magnifying the motion of his hands as they tinkered with nano-scale components. And there was Xott, by his side. There too was the *Idiothesis*, Mentep's modified scythecraft, with its hull the colour of clouded ice, like the cryptek's own carapace. *Was he preparing for a rapid departure?* Oltyx wondered.

'I am here,' said Oltyx, with a half-ton shrug. 'But where is the third party you stipulated?'

'On his way,' said Mentep, still focused on his work. 'He was meditating in his private suite.'

'He wants to hurry up – I have told the fleet we sail within the hour.'

'I am sure he is as eager to discuss the journey ahead as you are, Oltyx.'

They were silent for a time. Then Xott made one of its peculiar noises at Oltyx.

'Xott wishes to ask, Oltyx. Do you ever miss your subminds?'

It was a strange question, from a stranger source. And it made Oltyx realise he had no idea where the scarab was.

'A king needs no company,' he replied automatically, rather than considering the question too deeply. 'And a king can have no equals.'

'That's an answer, but not to my question.'

'The subminds were right for me - at the time. But now, singularity of thought suits me well.'

'I hope so, Oltyx,' said Mentep.

Oltyx had prepared as best he could to suppress the anger he knew this meeting would bring, but already it was building. Mentep was toying with him, just as he had toyed with him in forcing this meeting. *It was time the king took control*.

'What did Am-heht mean by *Architect of Sokar*, Mentep? Of work commissioned by Szarekh himself? And why did Am-heht recognise this ship?'

'I have no idea, Oltyx, beyond the same mixture of inference and guesswork you will no doubt have resorted to.'

'No idea,' repeated Oltyx, in a tone as dead as stellar ash.

Mentep hissed with static approximating a sigh, dispelled his magnification tori, and looked straight at Oltyx.

'Oltyx King. You know all too well, do you not, how it feels to discover atrocities in your past you had erased all memory of.'

It was true. In the arena on Antikef, the evocatory medium had shown him events that had been entirely written over in his engrams, replaced piece by piece with his own truth. His attempt to kill Unnas, and the fight with Djoseras, as his elder had tried desperately to save Oltyx from his own anger.

'It is not the same,' said Oltyx uncertainly, because perhaps it was.

'Perhaps it is not,' allowed Mentep. 'But are you the same being who once committed those acts?'

'No. I am king now.'

'Royalty has not changed you, Oltyx. Your mistakes have. Do you know what the scribe Sayhenyet had to say of experts?'

'You will tell me, I am sure.'

'That an expert is someone who has made every mistake in a given field.'

'By that definition, you are clearly an expert in humour.'

Mentep shrugged at the insult. 'Perhaps it is a cryptek thing. My point is, Oltyx, you have changed since then. You have had more time than mortals ever have in which to change. And the errors of your past have catalysed that process. I am as horrified as you are by Am-heht's suggestions. That I might be, at least in part, *responsible* for the curse. But what keeps me sane is the belief that even if that is true, I have changed since. The belief that we all can change.'

Oltyx let amusement-patterns sweep over his shoulders.

'How inspirational, Mentep. What comforting nonsense.'

'Djoseras did not think it was nonsense when he chose you to lead the dynasty into the future. Do you think he chose you based on who you were, or who he thought you could become?'

The king you hope to be, or the king you know yourself to be. Once again, the warlock's words spiralled in Oltyx's mind, like a pollution in his flux, and he found that he wanted to speak of something else, rapidly. Mentep got there first.

'Oltyx, it is not hard to see your distrust growing. You feel I am keeping things from you.'

'Rightly!' boomed the dynast. 'After all, what have you told me of this ghostwind I have staked everything on, since that devil imparted it to you?'

'If it puts you at ease, Oltyx, I will tell you what little I have been able to determine through examining the patterns Am-heht returned to me. And they were returned, for I can tell this protocol was indeed a work of mine.'

'But what does it do?'

'You recall the unification principles I mentioned, when we arrived on Carnotite?'

'Your conclave's obsession with bringing together the cryptek disciplines through mastery of the necron mind, yes?'

'Quite. You will know, of course, that we have long been able to confound lesser species, by operating in layers of reality below the observable, by use of the dimensional interstices? Well. My fellows and I established, after much labour, access to layers of metareality below even *those*. And we found the bottom. A place where concepts, entirely separate in higher realms, boiled down to a universal abstract which was at once both everything, and nothing.'

Oltyx already felt lost. But he let Mentep continue, so he could pick over the words in his aural buffer later.

'We – that is to say myself, plus Dagon and Khertykh, Am-heht's other disciples, only ever touched the edges of this new science, before Am-heht fell to madness, and we each left Carnotite behind. But even those fledgling steps were capable of astonishing power. Khertykh, poor lost Khertykh...'

Mentep stopped briefly, and Xott scratched a claw-foot sorrowfully against the stone of the dismantled tomb. 'They worked on using this basal layer as a substrate for consciousness itself. This, indeed, was the basis for my prototype evocatory medium, and yours that followed it. Khertykh left for Doahht, a world far from the war, to pursue the most noble of goals, but alas—'

Oltyx stopped listening then, caught in a sudden spell of unease, as he considered the blackness he sank into when he interacted with the medium.

'Have I been to this place, then? This underlayer, when I have used the medium? Or has my mind been there?'

'I would not want to hazard a guess, Oltyx. The first memory I destroyed when I made the medium, after all, was the memory of its creation.'

'But what of the ghostwind itself?' prompted Oltyx.

'You have heard of Dagon's ghostwalk mantle, which allows its bearer to move from place to place, with none of the complications of translation?'

'Dagon?' Oltyx sneered. 'The armourer of the Sautekh – Zahndrekh's toymaker?'

'Ostensibly. But Dagon had a deeper purpose in mind when he left for Gidrim, not unconnected with Khertykh's work. Indeed...'

'Mentep,' warned Oltyx, steering the mystic back onto the question. 'The ghostwind.'

'Apologies, my king. These names were once dear to me, and what shreds of their memory have been returned to me are as precious as they are painful to dwell on. But you are right – they are not relevant now. The ghostwind, then. Well, as its name implies, it is analogous to the ghostwalk mantle, only designed on a much grander scale, intended for fleet use. But it is still a simple protocol, which its bearer can cast, requiring no physical component.'

'So the fleet which uses it will... drop into another reality, and moveparallel to this one? Like the Unclean and the empyrean?'

Mentep reacted to that as if Oltyx had deposited some week-dead vermin

creature in front of him.

'Categorically not! No, that loathsome magic remains blessedly out of reach to our kind, in one of the few true boons our nature offers us. No, the ghostwind drops a vessel, or vessels, to a place where reality itself is an impossible concept. It... No.' Mentep stopped, and shook his head emphatically. 'I could explain further, but I suspect I would fall victim to the near-universal cryptek's weakness for the exposition of our own genius. We would still be here long after you had promised the fleet that the damned thing would be used. And besides...' Mentep's tone became grave. 'Our third party has arrived.'

Yenekh looked terrible. He approached the circle of amber light hunched and exhausted, like a beggar approaching a fire, with none of his heroic swagger. He wore his admiral's cloak of woven godsteel strands, which Oltyx thought odd. Were it any other shipmaster, he would not have thought twice, as they were notorious for the ostentation of their cloaks. But Yenekh had always despised the thing, on the basis that he'd always been too quick to need armour in a fight, that it impeded his swordplay, and that it obscured his magnificently sculpted physique from enemies and allies alike. But now he hugged it to him as if he were a creature of flesh, clutching a rag against bitter cold.

'A fine day for setting sail, my king,' said Yenekh, in a weary attempt at his habitual, banal optimism, but in his oculars, Oltyx saw little brightness. It was as if the battle at the trebuchet had drained almost all of him away. They had not spoken since then, as they had both known that something was coming between them, and Oltyx did not realise he had never ascended from the fatigue he had shown at the end of the fight.

All other decisions – including the fate of the Razor – shall be contingent on what transpires there, Oltyx had said of Carnotite. It had felt so far in the future, then. But here they were. When you lived forever, it was all too easy to forget how quickly time could race forward.

'You did well at the trebuchet,' said Oltyx, because it needed saying. He did not know what was about to happen. But he had a growing dread that this would be the last unburdened exchange between them, and he wanted the admiral to feel recognised.

'I am no Lysikor, though,' said Yenekh, half-joking. 'Quite a stunt he pulled off. I feared he'd replace me, for a while there.'

'Lysikor is a useful maniac,' said Oltyx, trying to keep the admiration from his tone. 'He will betray me, in time.'

'And I will be lost, in time,' said Yenekh, and Oltyx immediately regretted his choice of words. Then, fortuitously, he caught sight of the stone frieze behind Yenekh, with its image of a heroic figure wielding twin blades, cutting its way through the stylised interior of one of the vessels of the Old Ones. Rays of light were blazing from the figure's carapace, and it was marked across its chest only by the simplicity of the glyph denoting sharpness – the Razor. Oltyx pointed at the freeze with a blunt, golden finger.

'Yenekh, you were as bold and as brilliant in that battle as you are on that very frieze. The Razor, I would say, has held his edge just as well as that stone.'

When the admiral replied, it was in a voice barely clinging to audibility.

'I do not know for how much longer, my king. It was not easy.' He hunkered in his cloak, as if a vicious wind had picked up.

'I could tell. But you did your duty, regardless.' Oltyx nearly left it at that, but his softness got the better of him. 'I should have let the plan stand, when you intended to send the Destroyers.'

'Nonsense, Oltyx,' said Yenekh, with a dismissive wave. 'A king never apologises.'

'I'd argue a king never talks nonsense.'

Yenekh grunted in mock annoyance. 'Well duelled, my liege. But I still insist you did not need my plan. You pulled it together well enough in the end, even without Borakka's lot.'

'Not without cost.' Oltyx thought of Neth, then, and wondered how long it would be before everyone he knew had died to protect him. Some small part of him, which had never worn the gold easily, hoped he would die long before that.

But he did wear the gold. And it was time to bear the cost of it once more.

'So, then,' he said, splaying his vast gold hands on Mentep's sarcophagus worktop, and looking to the other two necrons. 'The hour draws on. We are to depart in minutes. But the question remains – where are we going?'

'Let's be reasonable about this, Oltyx,' said Mentep, as the last of the stone shards tinkled to the ground from the destruction of the sarcophagus. Oltyx hauled his glaive from the shattered stonework, raising a spray of sparks, and

let the overpressure from his core vessel vent around him in a rolling cloud of waste-flux.

'Reasonable,' he repeated. 'First, you tell me that our destination has already been settled on, without so much as consulting me. Then, you tell me that destination is the single place in the galaxy I have least desire to go to. And then, Old Ones take you, you tell me to be reasonable!'

Oltyx forced himself to swivel away from Mentep, before bellowing a wordless cry of rage, and swinging his glaive into the nearest piece of statuary. The ancient, irreplaceable figure burst into a cloud of splinters, and Oltyx stood in the dust of its destruction, trying to master his wrath sufficiently to form the word in his vocal buffer.

'Drazak,' he said, and then spat the name again, as if it were molten steel. 'Drazak! Why, of all places, would you choose Drazak?'

'Oltyx King,' thundered Mentep, his own anger roused now. 'If you would stop destroying the last remnants of your culture for a moment, I will tell you!'

Oltyx's arm launched at the cryptek like a gravitic harpax, but was intercepted by one of Xott's long, bladed legs, descending before its master with the speed of a quantum shield being thrown up around a voidcraft. Oltyx stopped his fist barely a sand-grain's breadth from the canoptek's leg, and glowered up at the creature's sensory appendage with a murderous infrasonic growl. Yenekh stood wrapped in his cloak, looking forlornly at the stand-off as if he had no idea where he was.

'I tried to be quite clear on Carnotite, Oltyx. You asked where the ghostwind would take us, and I said it was a conversation that must be had on the *Akrops*. I did *not* say you had a choice. But before you dive into further violence, I should point out that *I have not made this decision*.'

'So who has, Mentep?'

'As I have said already, the ghostwind is not accessed by anything so crude as a *machine*. It is a protocol, which anchored itself to this ship's autonomous spirit the moment Am-heht imparted it on me. It seems the *Akrops* set its own destination, immediately after that. And from what I could gather, it did so based on the will of the entity it recognises as its master.'

'I am the master of this ship!' roared Oltyx. 'I am the master of *all* these ships!'

'Not according to the Akrops, Oltyx.' After a moment, the cryptek's meaning

dawned on Oltyx, and he followed Mentep's gaze to the figure huddled at the edge of their confrontation. Finally, Mentep's insistence that Yenekh be present for this conversation made sense.

'If Lysikor has taught me one thing,' said Yenekh, with the desperate cheer of the execution block in his tone, 'it's that it is always better to ask for forgiveness than permission.'

Damn him, thought Oltyx, flux spasming between rage and pity in his ducts. Damn him! How, how, did Yenekh always manage to find the words that would disarm him?

'I will not be turned aside by a... quip, Razor. Is this true? This... mutiny Mentep speaks of?'

'It was not intended, my king. I... I....' Yenekh's vocal actuators ground into refrenation for a moment, as he struggled with the words he needed to say. 'I speak to the ship, sometimes. In the throes of the curse, when I fear it will take me for good. I know there is nobody I can go to for solace, and so I speak to the ship. It is a dumb, brute thing, like all autonomous spirits. But it is a vast thing, that I have known for a long time, and it is a comfort of sorts. I never dreamed it might *act* on what I say to it.'

'But why?' hissed Oltyx. 'Why would you tell the ship that you want to go to Drazak?'

'Because of the Bone King, Oltyx! Because of great Valgul, who suffered the curse but who mastered it, who learned to make it serve *him*. When I am in the darkness of the curse, I hold on to the idea that I may one day learn to do the same.' There was awe in the admiral's voice, and genuine hope, which was almost painful to hear in its sincerity.

'Yenekh,' said Oltyx, finding a mote of calm in his sea of anger, 'we had this conversation before, on the very day your sickness was revealed to me. I told you then, the Bone King is a myth. There is no Valgul, out in the m'wt. It is just a myth, a lie, told by the damned to themselves, as a crutch for hope.'

'And I told *you* then,' said Mentep, 'on that very same day, that there is something to that myth. Maybe the Bone Kingdom is not as... lurid as the titillations passed around between court idlers would have it. But it is out there, among the Ghoul Stars. And so, in some form, is Valgul. The ghostwind would not set it itself towards something that did not exist, Oltyx.'

'Well, can it be diverted elsewhere, then?' asked Oltyx, arms spread in frustration.

'Not after our journey has begun. And unless you want to wait here, in Amheht's parlour, until somebody finally gets bored enough to spring a plot against you, our journey must begin.'

Oltyx looked at Yenekh for a long time, flux simmering from his nodes as his anger cooled. He could not work out what he dreaded more – the prospect of being sent across the span of the galaxy, only to find themselves marooned in the m'wt with no sign of Valgul's domain in sight, or the prospect of being sent across the span of the galaxy and finding the kingdom of the Flayed to be real. Either way, it seemed the immediate future was set, whether he cared for it or not. And while he only had Mentep's word on that, it was not as if he had a way to challenge the cryptek's truth.

'Very well,' the dynast conceded at last, absently crushing a chunk of rock to gravel in his fist. 'We sail for Drazak. Mentep, make whatever preparations need to be made, and be ready to move on my signal. And Yenekh?'

'Yes, my king?'

'You are an idiot. But I cannot condemn you for your hope, even if your hope comes to condemn us. You will join me on the bridge for our casting off, and on the way there, you will think of a superb lie to tell the lords, regarding our destination. Nobody is to know of this but us three, you understand.'

Xott hooted with what he presumed was indignation, but Oltyx shot the canoptek a glare, and Mentep stilled it, before nodding to Oltyx.

'For what it is worth, Oltyx, I share at least some of Yenekh's hopes. Wherever this journey takes us, I believe Ithakas will endure. I am counting on it, in fact.'

Oltyx grunted and turned to leave, whereupon he found Yenekh, kneeling on the smashed stone of the tomb.

'Oltyx, my king,' he intoned, with not a trace of humour in the boneyard husk of his voice. 'O never-setting sun of Antikef, I pledge myself anew to your service. My blades are yours now and forever, and in whatever far darkness duty may lead me to. I will live for you. I will die for you. And I swear, by my house and the honour of all who came before me, I will fight with all my strength, in your name, unto the threshold of Valgul's hall itself.'

'You give a fine speech, Yenekh,' murmured Oltyx, taken off guard for a moment, before finding the gravity of his gold to reply in kind. 'Your pledge

is recognised by the crown of Ithakas, shipmaster. Antikef calls upon the last strength of the Razor of Sedh, as it seeks a new founding...'

The king hesitated, unsure of how to finish.

'Let's go,' he concluded, with an awkward shrug, and set off for the bridge.

It was tempting to feel a scrap of Yenekh's hope himself, after that. But then, just before they passed from the amber light of Mentep's enclave, Oltyx saw the sigil on the stone. It was scrawled low on a weathered plinth, in a place where it would have been hidden from him, before he had felled the statue in his wrath.

While every other carving on the monuments had been scoured smooth by millions of years of weather, this one was fresh-carved. It was loose, sloppy – neither the work of necron masons, nor canoptek mandibles. Almost as if it had been inscribed by claws. And that was the moment when Oltyx realised where he had seen the sigil before. It had been in the ruins of Antikef, and its inscriber had been one of the Children of Llandu'gor.



### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## THE LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS

The departure of the *Akrops* from Carnotite could not have been any less like its arrival. While the gravitic trebuchet had hurled it in-system, very literally, like a siege munition, the great ship passed into the ghostwind without so much as a whisper of displaced energy.

Even the fading of Carnotite's blood-red darkness took place so subtly that Oltyx's ever-vigilant optic arrays missed the change entirely. In the end, he only knew the transition had happened at all some seconds after it had finished, when he noticed just how silent the void had become.

There were no stars visible beyond the viewports of the bridge. But that was only the start of the emptiness. To necron senses, the void was a loud place. It rumbled with the baritone call of gravity wells, shivered with quantum turbulence, and even in the most desolate places was parted from time to time by the shriek of radiation from distant stars. Here, though, there was *nothing*. According to the external thermoreceptors, the temperature beyond the hull hovered so close to absolute zero that any heat detected could well have been a measuring error – which was saying a lot, given the precision of necron instruments. If there had been a single atom to be found in

this boundless dark, it would have lacked the energy even to hold electrons to its core. But there were no atoms out there. There was no matter at all.

Darkness made visible, thought Oltyx, remembering the phrase from one of Mentep's endlessly quoted homeworld epics. Like Am-heht's carapace, he saw now, as his recognition array retrieved what refrenation-damaged images it could from the moments when he had looked directly upon the warlock.

For all the unfathomable complexity of the science with which Mentep had cracked it open, this was a brutally simple place. It was so stripped-down, so abjectly barren, that Oltyx even fancied he understood why Am-heht had sneered at the idea of calling it a place at all. It was *nowhere* in the most profound sense – the nothingness which lay not just in the cracks between dimensions, but in the cracks between the cracks. *And since it was nowhere*, Oltyx figured, *perhaps it could be anywhere, too*.

But the king of Ithakas was no philosopher, and saw little point in postulating. The one thing he was sure of was this: for all the reasons his people had disliked the sea, and subsequently the void too, he *despised* the ghostwind. The necrontyr had been a people of land and of sun, and their deathless successors were beings with literal star-stuff at their cores. This place was anathema to everything they had ever been.

Oltyx could see it, in the way the groups of shipless nobles clustered fractionally closer together across the bridge. *Fear*. Or if not fear, at least a discomfort which tessellated very closely with the shape of fear. It was subtle, of course. It might not even have been tangible, to one who had not been adjacent to fear so often as Oltyx had. He suspected the nobles themselves, even, did not realise what they felt. But he could see it. It was there, elemental and atavistic: a dreadful, immense sense of *hunger* to the dark, which he had only encountered once before.

It had been on the day of biotransference, as the C'tan themselves had drifted, vast and tattered, through the ash-plumes of the immolated necrontyr. The evocatory medium had taken Oltyx's only memory of that day, but the echo of that hunger, that malevolence, could never be expunged.

'Szarekh's tears!' cursed Yenekh, breaking Oltyx from his thoughts. 'Does nothing work here?' The admiral was stood at a tactical display of the fleet, most of which was glowing error-blue, in a way the dynast suspected it was not meant to. 'Once again, recalibrate your carrier wave arrays and repeat

yourself, Shipmaster Phyranasz.'

After a few moments, a reply came back, but it sounded as if the speaker was whispering through a hurricane of static.

"...the recko... ...refrena.... attempt.... Onc..."

'It's no use, shipmaster,' barked Yenekh, increasing the volume of his vocal actuators, as if shouting would make a difference. 'You are not getting through at all. I am going to try something a little more basic.'

The mangled connection broke off, and Yenekh peered distractedly at the ceiling for a moment, as he delved invisibly through the interface protocols linking him with the *Akrops*.

'Radio waves, of all things,' he murmured to himself, hands crabbing at his cloak in frustration. 'Reduced to the standards of the Unclean. But let's give it a try. Shipmaster Phyranasz?'

'Receiving you,' answered a deep voice, wobbly with distortion, but at least comprehensible.

'Likewise,' confirmed Yenekh. 'Be advised, shipmaster – it seems anything making use of interstitial transmission, either of data or matter, cannot be relied upon here. I am hereby forbidding all translation protocols, with immediate effect. Expect me to forbid more things, as their danger becomes apparent. For now, restrict yourself to zero-level electromagnetic frequencies only for communications, understood?'

'Ack... ledged, admiral,' crackled Phyranasz, and Yenekh began the process of hailing the next ship.

'What appears to be the problem, admiral?' asked Oltyx, with a sense of foreboding.

'I'm afraid I know little more than I detailed just now, my king – it seems virtually every shipboard process relying on our more advanced technological principles is either hobbled, or entirely non-functional. I have spent altogether too much time since we entered this place just trying to coax confirmation of arrival from the rest of the fleet.'

'What of the drives?' Oltyx asked, with a sting of concern.

'There's the good news, at least,' said Yenekh. 'It is hard to get accurate data, due to our diagnostic systems being out as well. But I would hazard a guess they are moving us faster than they have managed since the beginning of the voyage.'

'And our weapons?'

'Functional too, thank the Triarch, barring a gun or seventeen on this ship, and several more on the escort cruisers. But they have only undergone testing cycles so far – we won't know their practical worth until they have been fired in battle.'

'Let us hope for no battles, then,' said Oltyx, and as he thought it through, something dreadful occurred to him. With all interstitial technology down, as Yenekh had already said, there could be no translation protocols cast within the ghostwind. And such protocols, of course, were responsible for recalling fallen warriors to their home ships for reconstruction. If that could not be done, then in the event of a fight, their every trooper, from the shambling warriors to Oltyx himself, would be truly annihilated at the moment of their destruction.

Durable as their bodies yet were, for as long as they remained in the ghostwind, the dynasty's survivors had regained mortality of a sort. Still, while Oltyx was getting used to the impossible happening on an exhaustingly regular basis these days, it seemed at least highly unlikely that they would encounter combat before reaching Drazak.

At Drazak, however, who knew, wondered Oltyx. If they got to the end of this road, and it transpired the Bone King was real, then it seemed foolhardy in the extreme to presume his benevolence.

The thought of Drazak brought the sigil from the hollows swimming back into his optic buffer, along with the last time he had seen it, being gouged into a collapsed tomb by the glass-sharp flensing talons of a Flayed One. Oltyx had never been under the illusion that the exodus fleet's flight from Ithakas would have magically left the curse behind, and he had always been resigned to the fact the curse would take new victims during their flight. Resigned, maybe – but not prepared.

The sight of the sigil itself had shaken him so profoundly that he had abandoned the security of his habitual pessimism, repeatedly telling himself that the scratch must have been made on the world that particular bank of stonework had been taken from. That it was simply a poor carving of one of the lesser-used glyphs, that happened to look a little like the sign he had seen on Antikef. It could conceivably have been *Sozusza*, the glyph of deliverance, interpreted by the hand of a mason experiencing severe pattern ataxia.

But Oltyx knew better than to believe such comforting fictions. There was

no mistaking the hand – or the talons – which had carved that sign. And Oltyx knew he would be a fool to ignore the evidence of a new infestation. It was common wisdom that the more Cursed accumulated in a place, the more fell into madness to join them.

Mentep, of course, had always maintained that this was nonsense, and that there was nothing contagious about his 'Longing Sickness'. But Oltyx was in no mood to rest on the cryptek's good word – especially not in this realm of maddening, ravenous darkness, itself like a manifestation of Llandu'gor's hunger.

Maddening, ravenous darkness...

Something happened in Oltyx's memetic buffer then, as two ideas, formerly unconnected, snapped together like a pair of magnets and formed a notion too powerful to dispel. At first, the notion thrilled Oltyx, for it finally gave him a way to put Mentep to the test, and a way to gain a measure of power over the cryptek at last. But behind the thrill came horror. Because if the notion was correct, Oltyx would have no choice but to tear down so much of what was left of his world.

The dynast of Ithakas stared out into the blackness of the ghostwind, hoping against hope that he might somehow forget the idea in all that emptiness. But then, to his surprise, the dark was not empty. Standing outside, under the infinite midnight, was a lone figure clad in bloodstained gold. It gazed in at him with its single, knowing eye, cold as the ghostwind itself behind its death mask, and spoke.

You know what you must do.

Oltyx knew.

'Yenekh,' said the king mildly, turning to the admiral hunched over his error-plagued tactical display. The Razor's head snapped up from his work at the sound of Oltyx's voice. With his body hunched under the folds of his cloak, he seemed almost like a carrion flyer, pulling its blood-guilty jaws from a carcass on hearing the footfall of a predator.

'My king,' replied Yenekh, with an awkward, bobbing half-bow.

'You have been vexed too long by these trivial communications issues... It is time you took a break. Parreg?'

'Aye, my liege,' said the Agoranomos, from across the bridge. Sensing something in Oltyx's tone, perhaps, many of the displaced nobles on the bridge were slyly turning their faceplates to watch the developing exchange.

'You would be willing to pick away at these... signal problems while Yenekh is relieved, would you not?'

'With pleasure,' replied the Agoranomos, sounding like he meant it.

'Very good. Now, Razor, come with me. It would do us both some good to get out from the gaze of this oppressive darkness, would it not?'

Yenekh's vocal actuators began wrestling with a reply, but abandoned the attempt when the bridge's central doors opened. The metronomic clash of silver and steel filled the room, as Pakhet strode in with phase blade and shield in hand, and nine lychguard formed up in an implacable silver wedge behind her. Now the lords were definitely paying attention.

'I hope you don't find it rude that I invited my guards to join us, Yenekh. You never know what you'll find in dark corners, after all.'

That was what the assembled nobles heard. But to Yenekh, Oltyx appended a ripple of nodal light, in the code they had used to keep each other's secrets for so many years.

# 'Or maybe, Razor, I know exactly what I will find in the dark. And so do you.'

The procession of battle-ready guards left a storm of whispers in their wake as they trooped through the ship towards the entry to the hollows, with Oltyx at their head, and Yenekh at the heart of their formation. It was clear from the heaviness in the king's steps that he did not walk towards pleasant business, and from the snatches of conversation he caught on the periphery of his passing, it seemed Yenekh was doing a poor job of concealing his nerves.

Fleetingly, Oltyx wondered if he was not being too cruel to Yenekh. He did not doubt that the admiral's declaration of fealty had been sincere, after all. But if Oltyx was right – and with every step he took, he was more certain that he was – then Yenekh's oath had been empty, regardless of its sincerity.

Royalty was nothing but cruelty formalised, Oltyx reminded himself, to drive the weakness away.

'It is a fascinating thing, this ghostwind,' said Oltyx, as he marched his silver tide into Mentep's enclave at the ship's heart.

'It is,' said Mentep.

This time, he did not continue his work as the king addressed him. After taking one look at the lychguard, and a second at Yenekh, he carefully put down his phase scalpel, and rose to his feet. Xott loomed from the dark

behind him, but Mentep laid a slim, mist-white hand on the canoptek's neck, and it backed away again.

'Let us not chase the point around like a wounded beast,' said Mentep, with a resignation in his tone that was as sweet as the memory of sulphurwine to Oltyx. 'Do what you have come to do.'

'No,' stated the king. 'I have been thinking, and I have a question to ask of wise Mentep.'

'Ask, then.'

'Can you believe, Mentep, that in all our discussion of your conclave's works, and the applications of this strange reality we travel through even now, we never touched on the role it might play for the victims of your *Longing Sickness?*'

'And what role do you suppose that is?' asked Mentep, without emotion.

'They are said to have secret spaces, are they not? A reality all of their own, it is said, where they heap their corpses. Through which they burrow.' Oltyx found himself spitting the word, as anger rose unbidden. 'A hole, Mentep, for them to hide in.'

These last words came out like spilt reactor coolant, and as Oltyx spoke them, the blade of his glaive shimmered green, as it came alive in the dark.

'Am I right, Mentep?'

'It is plausible, Oltyx.'

Oltyx raised his faceplate with its shorn-off jaw, and admired the jumbled labyrinth of stone where Mentep had made his lair.

'A remarkable ship,' he murmured, letting every word spoken calmly feed the rage beneath. 'To think, we fly in a vessel so grand, it holds whole tombs in its belly. So many tons of patient stone, being ferried to new and sacred ground! I would bolster my spirits, Mentep, by seeing more of the treasures in this store. I see you have replaced your workstation, since my last visit. Replaced it with a heavier one, indeed. Would you move it, so that I might inspect the grandeur it is surely stacked upon?'

'There is no need for this, Oltyx,' said Mentep, scorn igniting the amber of his ocular into a fierce coal. 'Do you not know theatre was made a crime, in the earliest days of the homeworld? If you—'

'Alas, cryptek,' said Oltyx softly, 'if you will not accede to my request, I shall move your work for you.'

Lunging forward like a wild beast, Oltyx threw his hillside of a shoulder

into the sarcophagus, rocking it sideways. Before it could fall, he jammed his fingers beneath its base, so they were wedged there when it crashed back down. His nocireceptors reacted as if his carapace were flesh, telling him his hands were crushed to jelly, but the shock of it only deepened his relish for destruction. Priming his actuators with a final, fierce hiss of core-flux, Oltyx bent to a crouch with his hands beneath the colossal stone casket, and then extended in a single, monstrous lift. Even in Mentep's bubble of gravity, the sarcophagus cleared the ground entirely, landing with a splintering smack, and then a tinkling, as all the cryptek's equipment that had been stacked on top fell and shattered.

There was a dark, rough-hewn hole in the stone where the sarcophagus had sat. And from it, choking Oltyx's chemoreceptors to the point of saturation, rose the sweet stench of rotting flesh.

'Please, Razor,' said Oltyx with stone-still menace, ushering Yenekh towards the opening. 'You go first.'

They splashed as they landed. It was pitch dark down in the pit, but Oltyx's oculars were ready, and immediately switched wavelength to infra-red. What he saw, however, exceeded the worst of his imaginings. He had expected a bolthole, or a small warren at worst. But the chamber was vast – a catacomb, filling the entirety of the accreted tomb-mass in the hollows.

It was awash in charnel. Viewed with heat made visible, the vile cavern was as bright as day, pocked here and there with darker spots, where the empty mouths and eye sockets of corpses gaped. Sweltering heat hovered over the landscape of decay, along with thick swarms of flies, and the air was saturated with moisture, to the point where condensation trickled from the roof in sticky streams. The corpses were human, as he might have expected. Between the sheer number of bodies spilled by the rupturing of transports, and the waves of hopeless boarding actions towards the end of the *Akrops*' last battle, there had been no shortage of flesh for those on the hunt.

Oltyx felt somehow detached from himself as he paced the noisome marsh covering the floor. Not long ago, this experience would have broken his mind in one strike. Now, though, it was just more blood. More carnage. More meat. If anything, it felt strangely tranquil down here, in a way the king could not quite make sense of.

But it is an abomination, he reminded himself. And it has been built under

my very throne, by those I trusted most. Oltyx felt an undercurrent of relief in his flux, as his wrath took hold once more.

Pakhet's phalanx had been spared this duty, and so Oltyx marched Yenekh and Mentep towards the centre of the cavern himself, glaive held ready. Here, a mass of bodies hung from scavenged cables, glistening with ropes of exposed muscle and striated sinew where they had been flensed, like clusters of awful fruit. Blocks of glyph-carved tombwork protruded here and there from the putrescent sludge on the floor, and stretched across them, speckled with scurrying insects, were skins.

Yenekh was so consumed with shame at leading his king into this place, that he walked with his oculars turned from as much of the flesh as he could. It was his undoing. Slipping in a rubbery tangle of rot-bloated limbs, the legendary duellist collapsed backwards into the sludge, and his cloak fell open.

It was easy to see, now, why he wore it. For just as Oltyx had expected, his body had become warped. It was stretched in some places and swollen in others, just as Unnas' had been, distorting the perfect proportions he had been forged with, and making his faceplate look stretched, mean and sly. Even now, Yenekh was rising again, struggling to claw the garment back over his form with too-long fingers, as if he might hide the whole blasphemy around him in doing so. But his movements were slow, addled and clumsy. More disgusted than angry, Oltyx took three steps across the slurry, planted a footplate on Yenekh's thoracic cartouche, and kicked him back over.

And as the admiral lay and mouned in the filth, Oltyx turned slowly to Mentep.

'You knew he had the sickness,' said the cryptek, in an unexpectedly gentle tone. 'You knew he had the urge to feed. Why do you shame him, for what was inevitable?'

Oltyx shook his head, and waved a gore-splashed arm across the horror of the cavern.

'How stupid do you think I am, Mentep of Carnotite? Do you expect me to believe *all this* was for Yenekh's appetite? You hope to focus all this on him, so I can be cajoled into forgiveness again? No, cryptek, I am not so stupid as that. *Show yourselves!*'

Oltyx's roar of command echoed round the dingy hollow, but when it returned to him, it did not sound like the noble war cry of a king. It was

something rough and bestial, like the call of some brumal thing roused from hibernation. Still, it held power. One by one, then dozen by dozen, and then hundred by hundred, the cavern lit up with the milky, filth-dimmed glow of oculars. No, not oculars - eyes. There must have been thousands of them in the shadows. The sound of their claws, restless on the defiled stones, was like wind rushing through a dead forest.

'We planned to tell you, before Drazak,' said Mentep, as the Flayed Ones massed in the dark. 'You must believe me, Oltyx – this was only ever conducted with the survival of the dynasty in mind. With the fleet so diminished, now, these people *are* the bulk of your dynasty.'

'These things are not people,' whispered Oltyx, shaking with revulsion as his gaze took in the lurking horde.

'They were, though. And they might be again. We only sought to keep them safe from you, until you could see that. I had hoped that Yenekh's example might—'

'How many, Yenekh?' asked Oltyx, cutting across Mentep like a phase blade. His anger had gone beyond something immediate, now. It felt like the distant explosion of an antimatter warhead – a silent, searing brightness, and a serenity that would last until the shockwave hit.

'How many?' he repeated, with the faintest tremble of distortion leaking into his voice.

'All of them from Sedh, Oltyx,' said Yenekh, from the squalor of the pit. 'And as many from the other worlds as could make their way on board.'

'Even from Antikef?'

'Even from Antikef,' confirmed Yenekh. 'And we have sheltered all those who have turned during the voyage so far. There are... many, now.'

'Please,' cried Mentep, and a tingle of raw satisfaction shot through Oltyx's core at the sound of Mentep the Inscrutable, reduced to begging. 'These are your people, Oltyx! Would you discount their validity as your subjects, just for their sickness? For their suffering?'

'Enough,' said Oltyx. 'You have steered me long enough with words, Mentep. They swarm in my flux like the flies of this pit, driving me to disaster after disaster. Antikef. Carnotite. Drazak. You are a liar, a parasite, a charlatan – no better than Hemiun, despite all your tricks. And while I have lost all conception of what your ultimate goal might be—'

'Redemption, Oltyx,' cried Mentep, cutting across him. 'It was only ev-'

'You will no longer ride on my back to reach it!'

Oltyx's glaive was between them then, casting a wan, green glow over the murk at their feet. By its light, Mentep made one final appeal.

'Oltyx King, I know there is compassion in you.'

'Compassion is weakness,' replied the dynast, using the words like a shield to push the cryptek's manipulation from his mind.

'I thought Djoseras had helped you see otherwise,' said Mentep, bitter now in defeat. 'But I see now the weight of that damned gold has crushed it out of you again. You were a fool to compare me with Hemiun, Oltyx, when that gold has made a second Unnas of you.'

'That was unwise,' said the dynast of the House of Ithakas, and swung his glaive. There was a hiss of shearing necrodermis, a whisper of outgassing core-flux, and then two hollow splashes, as the remains of Mentep the Inscrutable fell into the marsh.

# **DAWN**



### **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

## TERROR

The moment Mentep's remains had splashed into the filth of the charnel-pit, Oltyx had felt an exhilaration so intense he almost mistook it for terror. Yenekh had been howling in anguish, and the hollows had shaken with a long, booming groan from the ship itself. But it had all felt distant, irrelevant, compared with the potency of what Oltyx felt in his own flux. It was power at last, true and undiluted, and from that moment on, he had not stopped moving for fear it might fade away.

His first and only act of restraint had been to spare Yenekh, and all his degenerate kin. But it had not been a gesture of kindness. Forcing his motor actuators to walk him away from the creature that had been the Razor, he had climbed from the pit, wreathed in smoke as his necrodermis scoured its filth away with heat, and commanded Pakhet to bind the fallen admiral in chains of godsteel. Next, he had spoken to Parreg, appointing him as the grand admiral of the Ithakan fleet, and tasking him with the preparation of the battered old Shaddh-class hauler that had flown with them since Antikef.

Then he had summoned Lysikor to him at the entrance to the hollows, and had named him spymaster of Ithakas. The elated deathmark had been tasked

with seeking out every single one of the Cursed infesting their fleet, and given full access to the *Akrops*' canoptek arsenal to do it. Moments later, a swarm of wraith constructs had slithered past them into the depths of the hollows, armed with stasis projectors and wicked claws, for those wretches which resisted capture.

As he left Lysikor to his duty and headed to the *Akrops*' central scythecraft bay, Oltyx began receiving radio transmissions from the other ships of the exodus fleet. Lords of all stations, unaware of what had just transpired, were reporting the intrusion of canoptek swarms into their hulls, and sudden flurries of movement in their holds, as other clutches of Cursed were flushed from cover.

Oltyx let them panic. He had given no warning of the purge, so as to allow no time for any shipmasters poisoned by Mentep's lies to hide their stowaways, and he intended to give no explanation either, at least for now. There had been too many concessions, for too long. His hand had been too distant in ruling his people. It was time, Oltyx felt, for Ithakas to remember how power was distributed in the dynasty, via the time-honoured method of terror.

Now the hunt was underway, it was time for Oltyx to make his final appointment. Summoned with a transmission bearing only the seal of the throne, the Taweret-class assault ship which had so nearly been unleashed on the *Tyresias* nosed into the hangar from the blackness outside, like some eyeless hunter of the deepest uatth. As the assault craft settled, Oltyx walked forward beneath the upthrust, tusk-like blades of its prow, and carved open the seal which closed its boarding portal.

The Taweret was a vicious ship, designed for boarding actions in battles where jamming fields prevented the deployment of troops via interstitial translation, and its interior was brutally simple: a long half-cylinder, vaulted and buttressed to withstand horrific impact stresses, and lined with armoured canisters that would have once held phalanxes of Immortals. Now, they had been repurposed for the containment of pure violence.

Oltyx could see the Destroyers only as vague shapes, straining with glacial fury behind the dim violet translucence of partial stasis fields. Their cells looked like nothing so much as skolopendra egg-sacs as those indistinct, murderous shapes squirmed inside them. But not every entity on the ship was imprisoned. And now, with footsteps as rhythmic and pitiless as the strikes of

an executioner's maul, oculars flaring deep red in the darkness, their gaoler came forth.

'King,' Borakka named him, with neither respect nor contempt in its tone. It stood some way back from the hatch, so the hangar's light fell only across a stripe of its mountainous, clay-red torso.

'Borakka,' Oltyx replied, matching the ochre giant's tone. 'Too long have you idled, as a mere keeper of hounds. The crown calls on you, by the terms of the covenant set forth so long ago, to take on the mantle of the Red Marshal once more.'

'A harvest is at hand, then?' asked the thing, in a voice that would have been rich and mellifluous, were it not scorched clean of all feeling.

'A harvest is at hand,' confirmed Oltyx, and the terror began.

In truth, Lysikor's canopteks could have done the job. But for all his efficacy, and his lethal reputation, the deathmark confused his peers as much as he unnerved them. Borakka, however, was atavistic dread given form.

In ancient times, when the astromancers had called a Solar Harvest to appease the daemons of the homeworld sun, it had been the Red Marshals who had come forth from the temple precincts to carry out their will. Chosen from the most pitiless, the most loveless of the low-born regiments, they had been daubed with red, and sent out into the slums to gathered the condemned and drag them to the killing-places of the deep desert.

The practice had faded as science had eclipsed superstition, and populated the stars of the necrontyr with newer malevolence. But when biotransference came, the tradition had been resurrected, and a final cohort of Marshals had been raised, to haul the sick, the scared and the unwilling into the obliteration of the furnaces. Although the Marshals had been rewarded with minds befitting lords when they had walked into the flames themselves, they had all, without exception, fallen into the madness of the Destroyer aspect. Only Borakka, their chieftain on Antikef, had maintained any semblance of control.

And so, wherever their deep-red armour was sighted in the corridors of the fleet, come to drag the Cursed to their fate, visions of corpse-ash and swooping nightmares would follow. Behind their slow, implacable footsteps, the word had spread: a new time of dread was at hand.

With the inevitability of sand falling through an hourglass, the corralled masses of the Cursed had been herded to the central hangar of the *Akrops* in

great, sordid processions, led either by Borakka, or by one of the stasis-leashed pack of horrors in thrall to the Marshal. There, under the solar contempt of Oltyx's gaze, they had been packed onto carrier skiffs, and ferried through the blackness to where the hulk of the Shaddh-class hauler hung, a dim shape in the infinite night.

There had been tens of thousands of Flayed Ones lurking in the dark corners of the fleet, and it took more than seventy hours to entomb them all aboard the ark of the Cursed. Nevertheless, Oltyx watched every single transport ferry them over. And with every pack of gore-clotted, shaking ghouls sent off into the night, the righteousness of Mentep's slaughter was shored up in his mind. He did not think about what was still to come.

But finally it was done, leaving only a great brown stain on the deck where the Cursed had been penned, and the moment was upon him. Arranged in a broad arc around the stain were a few dozen of the most senior nobles remaining, summoned here to bear witness. As Oltyx looked over them now, he took care to let his gaze linger on those identified by Parreg as potential traitors. *Watch carefully, loyal subjects*, he thought, as they avoided his glare.

Then, he turned at last to his left, and the figure who had knelt there beside him, silent, for three days. Yenekh. The dynast had not so much as glanced down at him in all that time.

'Will you not kill me, Oltyx?' whispered the thing that he had once called friend, unable even to meet his gaze.

'You should have seen to that yourself long ago, *Yenekh the Cursed*. It is too late for that now.'

'Then what shall be my fate?'

Oltyx beckoned to Borakka, and the Marshal began to trudge towards them, bearing a clinking web of gravitic shackles before it.

'You have said, many times over the hours that have passed, that those... things out there are my people, have you not?'

'They are your people, Oltyx.'

'No, Yenekh. They are not. But here is my mercy – given you care so greatly for their blasphemy, they shall be your people. You shall be their castellan, now and for eternity. Rise then, Yenekh, for your appointment.'

The ruined admiral rose, trembling, to stand upright. But gone was the ramrod poise of the incorrigible duellist, replaced only with sagging defeat.

Raising his fist to Yenekh's chest, Oltyx placed the blade of a plain adamantine chisel against the rim of the admiral's cartouche, and then raised a mason's hammer in his other hand.

Clink.

With one, sharp tap, the raised figure of Yenekh's dynastic sigil was chipped away. It bounced once on the deck and then lay still, a meaningless sliver of matter, leaving an equally meaningless scar on Yenekh's thorax. Hekatically, now, he was nothing. A creature without personhood, without lineage, without self.

'Your kingdom awaits, creature,' said Oltyx, exerting his will to its very edge in order not to feel anything as he spoke. *This is strength*, he proclaimed in the silence of his mind. *A king does not have equals; a king does not have friends*. And at last, like a boulder rolled up a mountainside, his final words to Yenekh arrived in his vocal buffer.

'Now go, and reign.'

The ark of the Cursed had been drained of its flux reserves as soon as Yenekh had been sealed within its hold, and the anchors mooring it to the *Akrops* had been cut, leaving it to drift away into the fathomless depths of the ghostwind. As it had fallen slowly away, Oltyx had moved to the bridge, followed by his lychguard and the gathering of lords who had witnessed Yenekh's fate. He stood before them all now, watching the forsaken ship grow smaller on the aft-view projection screen.

'Heat rays, Parreg,' he commanded, and with a silent nod from the new admiral, the *Akrops*' lower batteries came to life. With perfect synchronicity, a dozen turrets opened up across the lower surface of the *Akrops*' crescent wings, beams lancing out to join the two ships together one last time.

The dim orange beams converged on the freighter's drive array, locking together with nanoscale precision, before flaring tenfold in intensity. For half a second, the ark's engines were subjected to the ferocity of a stellar core, projecting harsh white light onto the watching faceplates of Oltyx's court. Then the beams winked silently out of existence. For half a second more, the wreckage of the drive array glowed molten, before its heat leached out into the hungry night, and all was dark again. The ark's crippling would be the last light Yenekh ever saw, Oltyx knew. The last warmth he ever felt.

He did not look back at the ark, after that. It was in the past now, consigned

there along with so many other things. Oltyx knew that without Yenekh, without Mentep, without the Cursed, he would finally be able to *rule*, unfettered by the vice of cowards or the treachery of sorcerers. But minutes later, he found he was still stood motionless on the bridge, wondering where that surge of power he had felt on killing Mentep had gone. Just like the glow of heat around the stricken freighter's drives, it had faded, at some point during the purge. And all that was left was the dark.

Just when it seemed he would have to grapple with that emptiness at last, there was a great crashing from the bridge's entry portal. On the second strike, the doors buckled with an almighty crack of warping metal, and on the third they flew open, disgorging a furious-looking Zultanekh and six lychguard wielding neutronite hammers.

'By the discarded flesh of the Silent King!' bellowed the copperclad Ogdobekh prince, oculars flaring with bafflement and anger. 'What has the king of Ithakas done?'

Oltyx found himself speaking before he even knew what he was going to say. The chaos of the moment had lit a spark of fire in him once again, and he knew that if he hesitated for even an instant before responding, everything would fall apart. The lords of Ithakas would see his weakness, and worse – he might end up asking himself the same question. And so he heard the words coming out of his vocal buffer at the same time as Zultanekh did.

'I have saved my dynasty, crown prince. After many days of careful observation, I found myself at last in unshakeable certainty, that Mentep and Yenekh had been conspiring towards the ruin of us all.'

He turned to face the assembled lords now, stalking before them like a storm cloud as he spun a new hekatic truth from the corners of reality.

'Perhaps it should have seemed suspicious, when Mentep returned from one of his many mysterious voyages away from Sedh, bearing news of an inbound Unclean armada. And once it had scoured the core of Ithakas, how strange that this armada was able to track us unerringly at every turn, despite the superiority of our concealment.

'And all the while, as we were harried across the void by these barbarians, no lesser figure than the Razor of Sedh himself had fallen victim to the Curse of Llandu'gor! Bidden by the wicked Mentep, he took the Flayed Ones from all the deepest tombs of Ithakas, and loaded them, concealed, into the bellies of these very ships.'

'And what did these... traitors mean to do with the Flayed Ones, Oltyx King?' asked Zultanekh, clamping a barrow-broad hand to his brow as he tried to piece it all together. The question gave Oltyx just the time he needed to grasp for an answer, and once again he found himself speaking.

'This is where I must impart a grave truth,' said Oltyx. 'At Carnotite, Mentep bargained with a creature called Am-heht. I had thought him to be securing the means for us to seek refuge in the domain of Imotekh in the far east, while we gathered our resources to retake the dynasty. But alas, he concealed his true intentions until it was too late to avert them.'

'And what were those intentions?' hissed Zultanekh, rapt now. At some point, the anger had bled out of the brazen giant completely, replaced with the thrill of intrigue, and a glance at his court showed Oltyx that this was mirrored in the patterns of more than a few nodal arrays.

'I am riven with disgust to inform you all,' intoned Oltyx, 'that Mentep was an agent of Valgul, the Bone King of Drazak himself.'

That raised a chorus of murmurs and croaking whispers across the bridge, which Oltyx was more than content to permit.

'Seeing Ithakas weakened as it was, Mentep came to us under the guise of a healer. But his true purpose was to hasten our end. After luring the Unclean to drive us from our home stars, he had Yenekh trap us on this fleet, in the grip of contagion, to be delivered to Drazak itself once we had succumbed.'

'Dynast! Do you mean to say that we are headed to the domain of Valgul now?' cried one of the Thrassonosi barons, nodal arrays blazing with outrage in solidarity.

'Alas, it is so,' said Oltyx, with a bleak nod. 'But in undoing Mentep's plan and exiling Yenekh with his coven, I have thwarted the worst of his schemes. Purged of Flayed Ones, now, we will not succumb! We shall arrive at Drazak with our strength undiminished.'

'And then?' murmured Zultanekh, with the first twinkling of what Oltyx thought might have been doubt in his oculars.

'And then, noble ally,' growled Oltyx, with a war-hungriness he was surprised to find was utterly genuine. 'Then, we shall make war on Valgul, and we shall conquer Drazak for ourselves.'

'I had honestly never thought you to be much fond of speechcraft,' said Lysikor, as he peered idly down the scope of his enmitic carbine, checking its focus against the blackness beyond the sanctum's viewport. 'But I must say, my king, that was a tale superbly spun.'

'Tale?' snarled Oltyx, half-rising from his throne. 'What do you mean to imply, deathmark? You question the king's word?'

'How could I?' protested Lysikor, shrugging emphatically, as his rifle folded itself away in a rustle of photons. 'Anything you proclaim, my lord, is by definition the truth, even in the unthinkable event that it was not to begin with. I just meant that you were particularly... gripping, is all.'

Oltyx answered only with a rumble of irritation. He would let it pass. Lysikor was technically correct, of course. And in truth, even if the Duke of Deathmarks had seen the gaps between the new truth and the old, Oltyx had a bleak feeling it would only increase his standing with the unhinged lord. And as things stood, Lysikor's enthusiastic service was more important to him than he would have liked.

'Did you not come here to report on the ongoing purge?' said Oltyx after a while, when he realised Lysikor was still standing there.

'Partially,' said the spindly creature. 'There is little to report, in truth. Three new clusters have been discovered, but from the advancement of their... symptoms, I would dare admit they might have been specimens that evaded my constructs in the initial sweep, rather than fresh victims.'

'They are not victims, Lysikor.'

'As you will it, dynast. Whatever they are, they shall be collected and ejected discreetly into the ghostwind, as per your directive. Unless... you would like to bring forth the Marshal again?'

Oltyx thought for a moment, and then dismissed the idea with a wave of a scarred, golden hand.

'No. The court should feel some reprieve, for now. It needs to be clear that we have been cleansed, ready to take arms against Valgul.'

'Of course. And, well...' Lysikor steepled his needle-sharp fingers, in the way he tended to when fighting the temptation to suggest something to his master.

'What?'

'It merely occurred to me that, should your stellar malevolence's will favour it, any lords you have found to be an... irritation, historically, *might* be found to have contracted early, yet inarguable, symptoms of the curse. It is just a thought, but—'

'And it will remain just a thought,' snapped Oltyx, like a casket lid falling. Partly, he was annoyed at Lysikor attempting to manipulate him into satisfying his own lust for assassinations, but mostly, he was annoyed by the fact he had not had the idea first, to claim as his own. Either way, the deathmark was outstaying his limited welcome. 'Is there anything else to report, or will you leave?'

'Ah,' said Lysikor, as if he had just remembered something. 'There was one thing. I have brought you a gift, my king.'

Is this it? Oltyx thought, idly readying his combat engagement states. The knife in the back, at last?

But as his optic buffers linked themselves to seeing-stones in the entranceway to the sanctum, Oltyx saw that the Duke of Deathmarks had indeed come bearing a gift. It was a canister of the sort usually used for the transport of canopteks, although this one had been encircled with bands of noctilith, and had what appeared to be human machinery attached to it.

To Oltyx's greater surprise, perched on the contraption was the scarab.

'It is not an assassination attempt,' it told him with a covert flash of blinking-code, as the canister was levitated into the sanctum under Pakhet's watchful gaze. 'I imagine you have probably not considered our whereabouts for some time,' the construct continued. 'But we have been with Lysikor since the battle at the trebuchet, doing our level best to at least identify any treachery in time to make you aware of it.'

'It is appreciated,' returned Oltyx, and then looked away. He had not forgotten the scarab at all. But with every hour that passed following Yenekh's exile, he had become less and less able to contemplate how he could possibly discuss it with his former selves. He had hoped not to see them so soon.

'Is this... gift a thing I have expressly desired,' said Oltyx, as the long cylinder came to rest before him, 'or something you have decided I might need?'

'With respect to your royal genius, O dynast, you had not realised how badly you desired the use of that mining construct, until I gifted it to you.'

'Until you returned it to me,' Oltyx corrected, and waved the issue aside. 'Enough. Present this thing, whatever it is.'

Lysikor opened the canister, and Oltyx was mildly disgusted to find a human inside it, soiled and emaciated. Immediately, it began gasping, and clawing

frantically at its cranial pylon.

'It requires oxygen, perhaps?' prompted Lysikor deferentially, and Oltyx had the sanctum's necrodermis siphon traces of the gas from the ship's matter stocks, into a sphere around the captive. By the time it had displaced enough of the argon in the sanctum to make it breathable, the human appeared to be dead. But the scarab knew better, apparently, and a spark of simple electrical energy from its mandibles brought the vermin back to something like a conscious state.

Oltyx stared down at it, and then at Lysikor.

'You have polluted sacred ground with this thing. In a better time, Lysikor, this would have meant your death. For... what possible reason could you have done this?'

'I believe it can solve the mystery of how the Unclean have been tracking us.'

'It is no mystery,' said Oltyx icily. 'It was Mentep's treachery.'

'Of course,' said Lysikor. 'But perhaps you would find this an interesting fantasy to pursue, regardless?'

Oltyx gave the sly deathmark a look of pure violence. But then the human began to groan, as if in terrible pain. It was compressing the skin around its eyes in a way that was revolting to look at, and clawing feebly at the air with filthy hands. It had been in the dark for so long, Oltyx realised then, that it was temporarily blind.

'Where did you even find this thing?'

'The machine-cult sent it aboard the trebuchet, my king. There was a whole batch like it, in fact. Dressed in rags, they were, and kept in a great iron cage as if they were beasts.'

Examining the thing more closely, Oltyx saw now that its skull was covered in puckered welts of flesh, where crude metal plugs had been inserted into the bone.

'The machine-cult's priests were moving the cage between pillars of noctilith within the weapon's structure,' continued Lysikor, 'goading them with simple neurostimulant devices, and then noting the reactions. The scarabs fell upon them, of course, and had chewed most of them to shreds before I recognised what was going on.'

'And what was going on?'

'Some sort of pathetic experiment, my king - I am sure of it. I had the

scarabs spare this one, for the sake of curiosity. And now that I've had time to perform some tests of my own aboard the *Harvest*, I'm delighted to tell my king that I have captured nothing less than a human *psyker*.'

Pakhet juddered into motion before the word was fully pronounced, racing across the sanctum to put herself between Oltyx and the creature. She came to a halt with a slew of sparks, slamming her shield-rim into the deck and readying her stave to strike the writhing Unclean specimen.

'Are you fully insane, Lysikor?' bellowed Oltyx, unsheathing his own glaive. 'You bring a *warp sorcerer* into my throne-chamber?'

'It is not a very potent one, my liege,' protested Lysikor, as if that made the magician some sort of idle curiosity.

'It is anothema to us, fool! It wields the one force in the universe never mastered by our forebears — a bane so dire we ourselves were created to overcome it.'

'True,' said Lysikor, sounding far too relaxed. 'But this one is... not very good at it, I think. Else, why would it have been kept in a cage, with all those others? Look at the scarring on its body.'

Oltyx looked. The creature was covered in burns and lacerations which were too regular, too deliberate, to be the hallmarks of war.

'It has been punished,' he observed.

'It is a failure – as human warp-users most often are. It was disposable to them - so poor an asset that it was given over to their machine-cult as little more than an experimental tool.'

'Still...' Oltyx did not lower his glaive.

'Do not concern yourself, O king,' concluded Lysikor. 'If it puts your cosmic immensity's mind at ease, I have prepared measures to subdue it, in the event it attempts violence.'

'That does not solve the problem of how we are to speak with it,' Oltyx pointed out, his blade lowering fractionally.

'I can achieve that,' interjected the scarab, with an air of subdued enthusiasm. That would be his former xenology submind speaking, Oltyx presumed, finally able to use its worthless accumulation of learnings.

With a glow of fascination in its oculars, the construct hopped from the machine's casing and alighted on the creature's abdomen, prompting a groan of revulsion from its mouth, before scuttling to the base of its neck. There it cut a neat incision with its mandibles, and inserted a manipulator frond

through the wound, deep into the flesh beneath.

Switching his oculars to display reflected X-rays, Oltyx found himself more intrigued than he wished to feel, as the slim tendril nudged into the column of cylindrical bones that hung from the animal's brain, and slithered upwards. The human made an unnatural gulping sound, one eyeball rolling hard in its socket, and shuddered.

Lysikor gestured. 'A technique we borrowed from the old mindshackle constructs, my liege. Distasteful, but extremely useful. It should be able to understand you, now.'

Oltyx got up, and after gesturing Pakhet aside, he paced forward to stand before the human, looking down on it as it trembled.

'Speak,' he told the wretch.

The captive's facial skin twisted horribly again, before its eyes opened far too wide, and its mouth fell open. Oltyx wondered if it was dead again, when it began gasping a stream of ugly, wet nonsense.

'Something has gone wrong,' said the scarab, as the words continued. 'It is talking about a... Saint Damiane. It is asking you to deliver it from "iron ghouls", dynast.' The scarab listened a while longer, and then spoke again, sounding disgusted as understanding dawned. 'I believe it is hallucinating, Oltyx. It perceives you as some human... religious hero, come to free it from captivity.'

The creature was becoming more agitated now. Water was falling from its eyes, and it gritted its teeth, clutching at its head with chewed-bloody fingers.

'It is in pain, because of this?' asked Oltyx, not understanding.

'Its brain is flooded with stress-inducing chemicals,' said the scarab, and Oltyx wondered if the construct could *taste* them, somehow. The thought should have been more repulsive than it was. 'Simply put,' the canoptek continued, 'it is losing its mind, but has enough of itself left to realise this.'

'Perhaps this is a... complication of the thing's psychic abilities,' suggested Lysikor. 'It could be a fine opportunity to try my suppression technique, to see if that clears things up?'

Before Oltyx had given or denied permission, the deathmark had bent to the level of the captive, and with absurd gentleness, placed one spindled hand against the creature's writhing brow. Then, with sniper's precision, his other hand pushed a finger-thick shard of noctilith into the back of its skull, through one of the grime-clogged metal sockets on its scalp. The creature began

thrashing, its jaw locked open and its hands shaking, making the sounds it had made when it had been suffocating. The scarab, perched on its neck still, cycled a scorn-pattern over its abdomen.

'We cannot just keep shoving things into its skull, Lysikor. It will die.'

'It will live,' said Lysikor, and indeed, the human's spasming began to slow. 'Probably. For a little while, at least. And if I'm right, that shard should have suppressed any connection it had to the warp.'

'How could it have any connection to begin with, in this place?' asked Oltyx, gesturing at the ghostwind.

'I fear your radiance stacks the unknowable on the impossible,' shrugged Lysikor. 'I'd suggest asking Mentep, but... Regardless. When it beholds you again, it should do so free of all illusion.'

With a final jolt, the human fell limp to the floor, and then pushed itself up on its thin, pale arms. Oltyx hastily configured his optic buffer to obfuscate the lake of blood it had left on the deck – it disturbed him to look at, after the discovery of Yenekh's pit – and focused on the thing's face.

The human was staring up at Lysikor, and although water was still dripping from its face, its features were less contorted now. Oltyx knew little of how these things communicated feeling; with no nodal arrays to read, they seemed almost emotionless. But if he had to guess at what it felt, he would have reckoned at something like *relief*. After a few moments, it managed a few hoarse words, which the scarab translated.

'It thanks you, Lysikor.'

'What for?' snapped the deathmark, affronted.

'For your mercy. Its behaviour would suggest that it did not see its access to the Old Ones' magics as anything to be relished. I believe now they are suppressed, it feels something like... joy?'

'Behold me,' Oltyx commanded the human, in a voice like thunder, and it looked up at him. As it saw his true self, its eyes widened still further, until they seemed they might roll out of their sockets. It spoke, in brief gasps, and as the words came out, the scarab vocalised their meaning in a distorted monotone.

'Is this real?' the human asked.

'Yes,' intoned Oltyx, motionless as a statue before it.

'So... I am not dead yet.' The captive's face twisted. 'And you are not the saint.'

'No,' said Oltyx.

'But... but... I felt her presence, in the very spot you stand. I knew it was her.'

'What did you feel?'

'The... holy bones. The bones of the saint. I felt them, as I used to feel them from the reliquary in the figurehead, when we prayed to them each shift. Enrobed in gold. They felt so close... but you are nothing of the sort.' Water began to leak from its face again, making Oltyx wonder how it had not shrivelled up and dried yet.

He wondered what the tormented creature could possibly have meant, when recollection trembled in his engrammatic strata. *The bones. Enrobed in gold.* Had not Yenekh said something about the gold from the *Polyphemus*' figurehead? Despite his reluctance to hear the admiral's voice again, he allowed his recognition buffer to access the engram-layer in question, and there was Yenekh, telling him how the human gold had borne traces of skeletal matter.

The bones of their saint, full of warp-taint.

'Of how much worth are these bones?' asked Oltyx, longing to be rid of the sight of the creature.

'They are the soul of the crusade,' came the scarab's drab reply, over the human's animal chattering. 'Even now, the astropaths follow their light. They will not stop until they are reclaimed for the Master of Mankind.'

'How unusual,' said Lysikor neutrally, as the pieces fell into place for him. Then they fell into place for Oltyx, and his flux felt as if it had frozen solid.

There had never been a traitor. They would never have been detected at all, if they had not kept the material of the figurehead. They would have left Antikef untroubled, had he not kept the barbarian's gold as a trophy. *Had he not decided to wear it*. He stared now at the gleaming carapace coating his arms, with its web of scars and gouges, and then out at the same gold which coated the hull of the *Akrops*.

All of it was tainted, with the incomprehensible poison of the warp. The one thing that his people, for all their towering sciences, would never have been able to detect. It had been drawing the Unclean to them, like a trail of blood, all this time.

But then he looked up from the gold on the hull, to the crushing absence they sailed through, and steadied himself. The psyker, imprisoned in Lysikor's

canister, could have no idea that they had left reality behind some time ago. Surely, their trail would have evaporated the moment they entered the ghostwind – the human psykers would have nothing to follow, any more.

They had survived the ordeal, and the rest was all in the past, now. Whatever had transpired up to this point no longer mattered. This discovery was merely an unfortunate consequence of Lysikor's curiosity.

'The creature speaks nonsense,' Oltyx announced. 'It has been driven mad by the touch of the warp, and you were a fool to keep it. Dispose of it, and think no more of anything that has transpired here. Speak of any of it, and I will cut you apart myself.'

'That seems a little drastic,' said Lysikor. 'Shall I not keep the human alive, for further research?' he asked, with a gleam of vile anticipation across his nodal arrays.

Oltyx's hand rose in answer, encircling the vermin's pockmarked skull as he stared levelly at the deathmark. The human began to shriek, muffled, beneath his palm, and he felt the warmth of its blood, its sweat, through his carapace. Maintaining contact with Lysikor's single, cold ocular, he flexed his hand ever so slightly.

'No, ' said Oltyx.

Silence followed, broken only by the tiny wet slaps of viscera falling from Oltyx's fingertips. Before he could dismiss Lysikor, however, a signal arrived from Parreg on the bridge, bearing every seal of urgency. It was unlike the Agoranomos to become this agitated. And when Oltyx unsealed the missive in his executive buffer, he saw why.

Human warships had been sighted behind them. The crusade had arrived.



### **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

## TOMBS IN FLIGHT

It was the thirty-fifth day of the chase, when Oltyx realised he had lost all hope.

The thirty-fifth day according to one consensus, at least. Because even devices so fundamental as chronometric arrays, it transpired, worked strangely in the endless dark of the ghostwind. There were lords who contended they were yet to reach day thirty since the humans had appeared in their wake. There were others, meanwhile, whose certainty they had passed the fiftieth solar cycle was so firm they were prepared to duel over it.

There had been duels. Nemesor Makisahk, shipmaster of the *Scorn*, had been slain by Kughelenh, a metropolarch from Tarramun, as the two cantankerous south-worlders had come to blows over the issue. *A people whose very bodies were a declaration of mastery over the physical world*, thought Oltyx, as he stared despondently into the black, *slaughtering each other over what time it was*.

There had been other violences, just as absurd and needless. Just as wasteful. Phase blades were drawn all too often over grudges older than stars, and while Oltyx wished he could put their reopening down to the

tension of the pursuit, he could not. For decans now, Lysikor's canoptek patrols had been rooting out more and more Cursed with each sweep of the fleet – the affliction's grip on Ithakas worsened, with every day they spent in the dark. And all too often, the first signs of a lord's fall came in aggression and recklessness, long before any disfigurement, as they sought to conceal their growing madness with honour.

It was not just the nobility falling to the plague, either. The immaculate silver grids of the legions grew more and more riddled with gaps in the holding bays, as even the atrophied minds of the warriors fell to pieces, and they loped away to hidden places. Oltyx could only see things getting worse. There were times when he wondered if he would be the only necron left aboard the fleet, by the time the Unclean caught up with them.

And they would catch up, in the end. The savage simplicity of this non-reality had rendered all but the most basic propulsion systems useless, after all. And while that had suited the *Akrops* well enough, since it had lost almost all of its locomotive faculties anyway, it suited the human voidcraft perfectly. The Unclean armada was searing through the night on the torchfires of fusion engines which, for all their monstrous inefficiency, were simple enough to work unhindered in the ghostwind. The necrontyr had foresworn such crude things long ago, however, and while the ion propulsion arrays that made up their most basic drive systems were far more sophisticated than the human engines, they had never been designed for speed.

It had all boiled down to brute physics, and it took no cryptek to see that the exodus fleet was slowly, painfully, being overtaken. Even Parreg, whose history in fleet command extended to the scheduling of cargo transits, knew that their only chance of staying ahead lay in the straightforward measure of increasing their velocity. Specifically, the velocity of the *Akrops*, as it was by far the slowest ship in the fleet. And with humiliating simplicity, the only way to proceed with that had been to find ways of decreasing its mass.

Oltyx had decreed, after the humans had been sighted, that the ship's mass was to be reduced by one-tenth each day – swiftly adding that the days would be measured by his own reckoning. It had been easy at first, as legions, constructs and matter reserves had been moved to the surviving cruisers. But those ships had been near full to begin with, and it had not been long before the great tomb ship had begun its bleak descent through self-deconstruction.

The fleet's combined, millions-strong scarab swarm had begun cutting away the *Akrops*' heaviest armour sections, while entire legions of warriors had been co-opted to eviscerate it from the inside, cutting away all internal bracing except for the most structurally essential. And when they had exhausted those routes to shaving mass from the ship, whole sections of the outer hull had begun to be excised. Already, its great crescent horns had been reduced to latticework at their extremities – frames of gold wire, looking more suited to ornamentation than war.

As Oltyx had watched the ship being dismantled around his throne, it had brought to mind tales from his youth, of ancient naval engagements on the uatth, where wooden sailing craft had sawn themselves nearly down to bare spars in an attempt to outpace one another in decans-long chases. Day by day, it seemed, they were being dragged back into prehistory, in every respect but the bodies they were trapped in.

Worse, it seemed the *Akrops* knew it was being eaten alive. The ship's creaks and shudders were near constant now, underscoring everything that took place aboard, as if they rode on the back of a dying leviathan. In the uncountable hours Oltyx had spent on the ever-cold slab seat of the sanctum's throne, he had listened to the groans of the ship, and wondered if, in some way, its autonomous spirit remembered the unknowable devastation it had suffered at the Battle of the Sokar Gate.

Of course, there were optimists among the dwindling nobility – for there would always be idiots – who believed they would reach Drazak before the humans caught up with them. From all Oltyx understood of the situation, there was no way of knowing how far they had travelled relative to the real galaxy. Nonetheless, every few days, some lord lost to wishful thinking would claim they had made a breakthrough.

There was the shipmaster of one of the remaining light cruisers, who claimed to have coaxed her own body into functioning as an antenna for interstitial signals, leaking somehow from reality. It had been lunacy, but it had captivated the fleet when, on the fifth day, she had claimed she could hear the whispers of the Nephrekh. The signals were faint, she had said, coming from far behind them in the west. But she had been sure she had heard the teeming crypteks of the celestiarch, as they conferred on their sprawling, unknowable projects.

It had gone on. On the fifteenth day, she swore she had received the echo of

Mephrit carrier waves, as that dynasty's ever-warring factions turned harnessed stars against each other, in goliath duels of processing power. If they were passing 'under' Mephrit space, she had proclaimed with great excitement, they might already be more than halfway to the dim eastern edge of the galactic disc, where Drazak and the m'wt lay.

On the twentieth day, she had been found in the hollows, mind collapsed, as she scratched desperately at the scoured rock where Yenekh's charnel store had been. Oltyx, who had grown particularly disinclined to prophets of false promise, had taken some satisfaction in being the one to hurl her into the ghostwind. There, he figured, she would be able to listen to the war-songs of the Mephrit forevermore.

Even optimists of her ilk, of course, had no answer ready when confronted with the question of what would happen at Drazak, should they beat the humans there. Would the fleet take on the Bone King and the humans at the same time, and win? Even Oltyx dared not state such a fantasy as hekatic truth, and so, gradually, hope among the remains of Ithakas had been ruled out as logically impossible.

And now, for no particular reason, as he sat on the sanctum's throne on what was probably the fifty-fifth day of their march to annihilation, Oltyx ruled it out for himself. It was almost, somehow, a very bitter kind of relief. But it did not mean he could rest. Because even if he had lost his hope, he reckoned, as he sank back onto the unyielding metal of the throne, he did not intend to relinquish his power before it was forced upon him.

The day was coming. Because as ever in the courts of the necrontyr, when hope vanished, anger and madness seeped in to replace it. As well as the ongoing purge of the Cursed, Lysikor had taken to his broader role as spymaster with relish, and kept Oltyx up to date with the sedition festering in his court with great enthusiasm.

Freshly received in his executive buffer, a missive bearing Lysikor's bizarre self-appointed heraldic seals informed him of the day's fresh menace. It was the supporters of Duamehht, as ever – the list Parreg had compiled, plus an ever-growing number of loyalists. As soon as the humans had appeared, Duamehht's followers had begun to question the royal truth. *If Mentep had been drawing the humans on*, they had asked their peers in the shadows, then how had the armada followed them here after the cryptek's death?

It was compelling reasoning, and Oltyx could not fault it - for it was

correct, after all. But the danger of the question was staggering, for it explicitly doubted his heka. And once a king's divine truth collapsed, Oltyx feared, so did his right to rule. No dynast in Ithakas' history had proved to be so weak-willed, so he did not know for sure.

But there is time yet to make history, before it is over, he told himself.

There was more: the lords spoke of stealing the fleet's smaller ships and racing ahead, before fleeing the moment they dropped from the ghostwind at Drazak. Beyond that, it was fantasy – talk of seeking contracts from great Imotekh in his wars of expansion, or even carving out their own destinies as raiders. Some, with an irony that Oltyx almost felt in his nocireceptors, talked of throwing themselves on the mercy of the Bone King himself.

But for now, Lysikor assured him, the lords dreaded him too greatly to act. While that was the case, he was still the only sun in this fathomless dark. But his light was growing dimmer every day.

Oltyx glanced to either side of his throne, where Pakhet and her phalanx stood bolt-still in the gloom. He had stationed them here now, rather than at the sanctum's door, for the sake of his protection. But now, he wondered if they might better defend him in an offensive capacity. Briefly, his phantasory buffer filled with images of carnage: of him marching through the ship in a ruthlessly methodical tour of the lords who spoke against him, and tearing their over-ornamented bodies apart with his bare hands, while his lychguard hacked their lackeys to pieces.

But his passion for the idea withered immediately. How good it would be to slaughter his way out of his own failure. How good it would be to slaughter his way free of the ghostwind, and the curse, and all the rest of it. But he could not. Once the killing was done, his regrets would still be there. He might as well do nothing.

And so Oltyx sat on the throne, flanked by two wings of silent lychguard, and stared at the dim constellation of the crusade armada, creeping infinitesimally towards them on the viewport's aft-view scry.

Time passed as Oltyx gazed absently at those faint, ugly specks of light, silently daring them to come and finish their work. Hours went by, and then days, or at least what might have been them. Oltyx deactivated his chronometric array in the end, since there seemed so little point in it. And all the while, the ship groaned and rumbled beneath him, as its dwindling crew sawed it apart beneath themselves, shedding megatons to buy days, hours,

minutes more pointless existence.

Parreg hailed him some time into his vigil. The humans had found yet more speed, he said, but he could not. The Agoranomos simply did not have Yenekh's experience with coaxing the ancient giant into cooperation; he was out of his depth. And so, instead, they would need to lose more mass. The admiral spoke in circumspect tones, clearly anticipating Oltyx's rage, but the king replied instantly, and without any real feeling.

'Jettison the tombs,' he said, astonishing Parreg that even he, evercompliant, questioned him in return.

'But my liege, they are... they are the tombs! They are all that is left of the sacred ground of Ithakas!'

'They're stones,' sneered Oltyx. 'Cast them out. And aim them at the human ships.'

In the hours that followed, Oltyx watched as millions of tons of statues, pillars, friezes and sarcophagi tumbled from the rear of the ship. They were swallowed instantly by the dark, along with any hope that they might one day be erected on a new crownworld. Oltyx felt nothing as they disappeared other than faint relief. After the last circumstance in which he had seen the stones of the monuments, submerged in the detritus of the curse, he had never wanted to see them again.

A while afterwards, distant explosions blossomed among the lights of the armada, as the masonry smashed into ships travelling at fractions of the speed of light. There was a brief pleasure in that, but it was soon drowned in shame, that the last stand of a necron dynasty had come down to the desperate throwing of rocks in the night.

More time passed, and the armada crept close. Eventually, again, there was Parreg, desperately seeking advice as to what other matter they could possibly spare. Oltyx had thought ahead, though, and his answer this time was just as immediate.

'The warriors,' he said, and Parreg could react only with silence that lasted a full minute before he found the strength to acknowledge the order.

'I shall call on Borakka, my king.'

For the second time since they had entered the ghostwind, the Red Marshal walked the passages of the *Akrops*. Under its grim stewardship, for three long days, the legions of Ithakas – all but the most elite echelons of Immortals – were marched, row by row, into the gauss furnaces of the *Akrops*, leaving

only traces of necrodermic ash behind. They were only being physically destroyed – their essences, such as they were, were collected and stored in great racks of flux-vessels, ready for reincarnation at some later date, when the ship could bear the weight of new bodies for them. But every lord watching knew that, given the chances of that happening, the warriors were being marched to their deaths.

Was this how Szarekh felt on the day of biotransference? Oltyx wondered numbly, as he watched the plumes of exhaust from the conflagration spewing into the dark of their wake. Probably not, he decided at last. Because Szarekh, at least, had been winning his war.

The immolation had cut the fleet's overall troop strength down to one-tenth of what it had been, even after the losses inflicted at the battle of the trebuchet. And the *Akrops*, while still fully armed, was a spectre of its former bulk – in a straight trading of blows against the *Polyphemus*, even one on one, it would barely stand a chance now.

It was all that they could do. And still, it was not enough. Still, the lights of the crusade blazed brighter every day, and Lysikor's reports on the sedition of the nobles began to grow slimmer and slimmer. Because they, too, were realising there was little point in making plans beyond the next fight.

One thing that did continue unabated was the purge of the flayers — Oltyx made sure of it. And now there was no morale to be lost through the revelation of their presence, they were no longer being ejected from the hull in clandestine dumpings. When a new batch was found, Borakka itself saw to their execution, crushing their heads and bodies with a great maul in the ancient style, in the centre of the bridge. The only satisfaction left for Oltyx, now, was in making sure Ithakas could at least die free of the curse.

Eventually, the moment that pulled Oltyx free of his apathy was when a missive came through from the bridge, and it was not from Parreg. It was from Erraph the Dikast, and the weak-minded noble could barely summon the words to tell Oltyx what had happened.

Parreg had not sent the missive, it transpired, because Parreg had fallen to the curse. But he had not been exposed by Lysikor's packs of wraiths – he had turned himself in to the deathmark, the moment he had seen the changes in himself. Since then, the Dikast said, he had relinquished his duty and remained on the bridge, patiently awaiting his fate.

Lysikor, coordinating his operations from his lair aboard the Failed

*Harvest*, had summoned Borakka to dispose of the Agoranomos, Erraph told him, along with the swarm of other flayers revealed during his last sweep. But Parreg had made a request of Oltyx, which he had asked Erraph to pass on for him. He had asked if the dynast of Ithakas would do him the honour of committing his execution personally.

It would have been easier, somehow, if Parreg had lost his composure. If he had tried to bargain, or had lashed out at his captors, or tried uselessly to conceal his shame. But the way the Agoranomos bore the curse made it seem as if it was no shame at all.

Looking at the Agoranomos, Oltyx could not help but wonder why he had not stayed quiet for longer. His silver carapace was spotless, as Lysikor's wraiths had been exacting in burning away the flayers' caches of organic matter during their sweeps. There would have been nothing for him to befoul himself with, even if he had been weak to the urge.

And while the changes in his form had progressed far more quickly in this place than they would have done, even among Sedh's infested tombs, there was no change to Parreg's appearance so radical that Oltyx would have seen it without searching. His barrel-like trunk seemed perhaps a little warped and hollowed compared with its usual solidity, and his hands were more tapered, less blunt. But he was still Parreg.

And although he stood now amidst a great rustling pack of the Cursed, scuttling feverishly inside a ring of inward-pointing Immortals' carbines, he did not seem agitated in the least, nor disturbed by his company. He seemed weary, more than anything else. Worn, in a way, like one of Sedh's ancient, acid-smoothed hills. *He seemed*, Oltyx hated admitting to himself, *as if he had a sickness*.

The nondescript lord's resignation was so much harder to behold than Yenekh's shiftiness had been, or the hysteria which had followed it. Parreg might have been no more than a bureaucrat at heart, and mediocre at best in the arts of war. But there was a strength in the way he stood, and the way he calmly met the king's gaze as he walked onto the bridge, that made Oltyx's glaive feel as heavy as neutronite in his hand.

There were fifty lords present, representing the slice of Ithakas' remaining aristocracy who found particular solace in execution and punishment. They turned their faceplates to watch Oltyx approach, and his augmentations told

him the crowd was predominantly made up of his enemies in waiting.

But Erraph was there, too. The slightly built magistrate stood at the edge of the crowd nearest Parreg, alongside the garish Polemarch Taikash, and the sunken-shouldered, half-absent figure of Denet. They waited in silence, here only to watch an old companion's end. It was not that any of them would have called Parreg a friend, as such. The four had shared the same mild contempt that all of Sedh's backwater aristocracy had felt towards one another, for thousands of years. But they had tenure with Parreg. Their bitter little community had provided an order that had been the bedrock of their sanity through the long night of their afterdeath, and now it was coming to an end.

If anything, Parreg looked more at peace with what had befallen him than they did.

This was loyalty, Oltyx thought. Parreg had served him since the first days of his exile, and he had never shown duplications or disrespect. There were an ever-dwindling number of necrons whom Oltyx could say that of. And soon there would be one less.

'It is probably for the best,' called the Agoranomos sternly across the bridge, as Oltyx closed the distance, 'as I do not think I had the temperament for the naval arts.'

Oltyx offered a synthesised snort of black amusement, despite the despair rising in him. He nearly replied in kind, but stilled his vocal actuators before he spoke. Maybe on Sedh, he might have joked back. But what dry humour the necrontyr had ever possessed, they had seen purely as a way to bear the unbearable. It did not befit a king, therefore, to jest, as it would imply he might be less than capable of bearing the full weight of the world's cruelty.

'You had courage,' said Oltyx in the end, and came to a halt, five paces from the edge of the corral where Parreg stood.

Oltyx could find no further words for him, then. By the sweat of Szarekh's brow, the Agoranomos had made this hard for him. Was this, in the grainlord's ever-restrained manner, his own insurrection? If it was, the king would struggle to take offence at it, as increasingly, he suspected he had earned the pain. But it had to be done. Borakka would surely be arriving soon, and what happened then would be uglier. He, at least, could give some dignity to Parreg, as he consigned him to the ever-growing inventory of things left behind in the past.

The joints of his legs creaked, as his motor actuators seized with indecision

at his first step. *Surely*, he thought, *there must be some way around this. Some intervention which would make it unnecessary*. But who would intervene? Not Lysikor – he delighted in the daily executions, more than anyone. Anyone who might have offered Oltyx a way out – Djoseras, Yenekh, Mentep, even Neth – was gone now, either in service to him, or by his own hand. He had not seen the scarab since the arrival of the armada, and in truth he was thankful for that, as he dreaded what his former selves might think of him, now.

Even Zultanekh was gone. The *Philotomokh* seemed to have slipped away into the night decans ago, and he assumed the Ogdobekh prince had left in quiet dismay, when he had seen the inevitability of Ithakas' fate. Again, Oltyx almost found it hard to begrudge him that – it was a wonder the strange, hammer-wielding noble had stayed as long as he had.

At last, it seemed, no force stood between Oltyx and the short, grim remainder of his reign. Absolute power was his. And as he raised the glaive to strike, with all the force of his royal core behind it, he had never felt more powerless.

Glyphs flashed in his optic buffer, just as flux thundered into his shoulders for the swing, and the glaive paused at the apex of the death blow as Oltyx searched for the source of the disturbance. *There*. Past Parreg, and the crouched forms of the condemned. Past the Immortals who penned them, and the watching lords. Past the viewports. Outside, in the swallowing, primal gloom, something was looking in at him.

Standing a few paces out along the hull, it was near invisible in the dark. But when Oltyx saw the gaunt, sculpted bone-ridges of its face, reflecting the dim light cast from inside, the figure was unmistakable. Oltyx met its single, unknowable eye, and nearly called out to the thing which nobody else could see. What did it want from him? Had it come to damn him? To save him? Or just to revel in his downfall?

But then a shiver of refrenation passed across his optic field, and the figure had vanished. Its eye, however, remained. A single point of cold light, joined by others around it, blinking on one by one, like a starfield coalescing from the night. Impossible hope crackled through his mind as he dared to wonder: were they leaving the ghostwind at last?

His circumspection protocols clearly knew otherwise. Because even as Oltyx struggled to fathom how these stars were joined by an expanse of rivetpocked red metal, his mind was plunging him into a high-calibre combat engagement state. Targeting auspices and physical telemetry began to arrange themselves across his vision, and beneath them he saw vast black symbols in an alien script, painted across a plain of vermilion armour.

It was the hull of something extremely large, and extremely close. *How?* thought Oltyx, but purged the query immediately from his memetic buffer. There was no time to think. There was no time, even, to draw attention to the thing. But there *was* time to command.

'Brace!' roared Oltyx, casting a protocol of cleaving which fixed his footplates to the deck with the surety of a gauss-weld. 'Brace!'

As his shout filled the bridge, so did the fierce orange light of chemical flame. All across the great red hull outside, primitive rockets were igniting in the depths of armoured sockets. And by their brutal light, the lords now beginning to turn saw the same colossal word which, even now, Oltyx's mind was transfiguring from the script of the Unclean.

Lystraegonian.

The Astartes had come for them.



### **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

## **ANGELS**

There were shapes in the hearts of the launch-blasts. Dark, jagged little blots, silhouetted against the fury of their own exhaust, and growing with terrible speed as they blasted across the gap between the ships. One look at those vicious outlines told Oltyx these were no ordinary missiles. He needed armour, shielding, *anything*, between his ship and the payload they carried.

But the viewport's quantum-bonded armour shields were not closing, and it took Oltyx until the projectiles were halfway to the *Akrops* to realise why. Because there was no admiral to order them closed.

Shutters! he cast at the Akrops himself.

It was already too late.

Directly ahead of the three onrushing shapes, patches of the viewport were clouding over and beginning to splinter, as the crystal deformed under intense heat. *Microwaves*, Oltyx's optic array told him. *They attack us with* microwaves. Once again, for all the crudity of the Imperium's methods, they were working. The *Akrops* was about to be breached by a foe it should have shrugged off like a drift of desert flies.

Oltyx allowed his engagement state to drop him into a dilated chronosense,

for the half-second before impact. Yenekh would have had some custom shipprotocol on hand, concocted over centuries of trial and error, to mitigate the savagery of the collision. Oltyx had only his wrath. But it had been confined for too long, aching for an outlet. And as the three snub-nosed shapes accelerated into the final khet of their approach, pumping volcanic quantities of energy into the crystal ahead of them, he wondered if it had at last found its match.

Even without its armoured shutters, the viewport was tough. Woven from filaments of crystal forged in the heart of a singularity, it could resist greater impacts than a dozen Unclean hulls layered on top of each other.

It was still not enough.

The ramships smashed into the heat-clouded crystal with the speed of artillery shells. From the viscous depths of time, Oltyx watched as the ships transferred every iota of their brutal momentum into the barrier. For a thousandth of a second the crystal held, flexing wild as water, but it could not stay together. The viewport shattered across every part of its surface at once, turning in an instant from an unbroken sheet to a galaxy of kubit-long splinters. The cloud of diamond shrapnel burst inwards at hypersonic speeds, but appeared slowed to a stately drift, in Oltyx's perception.

The strange beauty of the destruction was eclipsed by Pakhet's dispersion shield, as she sailed across him. Her leap had started even before the impact – she had already committed to it, while Oltyx had been staring dumbstruck at the impact. *Damned chronodilation*, Oltyx cursed to himself, as he released his grip on his passage through time. It made him complacent. As the moment whipped back to speed, the shards hit the shield with a fierce, rattling clang, and Pakhet skidded across the deck on the edge of her ribs.

Then, she began sliding rapidly away from him – dragged by the bridge's dense argon atmosphere as it exploded outwards through the breach, into the freezing abyss of the ghostwind. Driven by his circumspection protocols, Oltyx's wrist shot out like a piston, grabbing Pakhet's clavicle collar just before the accelerating hurricane of gas could snatch her from his reach. Anchored by the magnetic grip of his footplates, Oltyx held on, weathering the storm until she had her footing again.

Others had been less well prepared. All across the bridge, in horrible silence, lords were sliding across the smooth necrodermis towards the gaping breach, fingers striking sparks as they scrabbled to find purchase.

Those with the sense to have anchored themselves reached out for their neighbours, at least where those neighbours had not been hated rivals. Erraph, he noted with some surprise, was rooted like a boulder, his thin form preventing both a flailing Taikash and a profoundly confused-looking Denet from being dragged away.

Parreg, too, had managed to hold on to the deck. But of all the other flayers, there was no sign at all. When had they disappeared? he thought. And where had they disappeared to?

Those not saved by their own wits, or those of their allies, spun out into the inky dark, where they were lost from sight immediately. Already the looming presence of the *Lystraegonian* had slid past, and so Oltyx could only presume those lords would tumble through the empty dark, for as long as it took for their cores to burn out. It was a fate that invited madness just to consider.

Nevertheless, the gale was as rapid as it was explosive, and when the silence of the void closed in, Oltyx saw that twenty-six lords of varying rank remained on deck, as well as all sixty of the Immortal bridge crew, who had been secured to the deck by the ship itself. All the survivors were bristling with crystal shards, leaking flux in thin streaks from the punctures. But the wounds were not mortal. And while some of the lords appeared bewildered, most looked more than ready to fight.

The human ramships – one in the centre and one on each flank – had locked themselves to the deck's edge with adamantine claws, the twin rhomboids of their carrier sections jutting inwards. Their troop compartments were capped with thick, reinforced ramp doors, and Oltyx gripped his glaive like the throat of an enemy as he waited for them to fall.

What were they waiting for?

After they had remained shut for three seconds, the regrouping nobility began to advance on them, with swords, scythes and flails drawn. *Had the human technology failed?* Oltyx wondered. Many of the ships the Unclean used were of designs they barely comprehended any more, he knew. *Perhaps, now, they would be shamed for their ignorance at last*, he thought, *doomed by some jammed mechanism*.

Alas, that was when the doors exploded.

The shaped charges were crude things – chemical detonators that would have been laughable in any other circumstances. But the defenders of the

Akrops had, once again, been caught in a moment of phenomenal weakness. Oltyx himself was shielded from the ceramic hail by the shields of his lychguard, who had moved up just in time to form a wall with Pakhet. But the remaining nobles and the Immortals of the bridge crew had no such protection.

Their carapaces, already weakened by thousands of microscopic punctures from the windows, and made brittle by the sudden collapse in temperature, simply shattered under the impacts. Thick gouts of core-flux whipped out into the night as limbs cracked and thoraxes burst apart. With that one blast, whole lineages of Ithakan nobility were wiped out forever.

By the time Oltyx's optic array had cleared the flash of the explosion from his sight, there were just thirty Immortals left on the bridge, and only fifteen lords. They were the less capable warriors of the cohort, for the most part, who had hung back from the counter-attack. Parreg, Taikash and Erraph were among them. So was Denet. But unless he found the presence of mind to summon his monoliths at last, Oltyx considered bleakly, he would be less than no use.

The king of Ithakas reached out to the bulk of the *Akrops* with his interstitial node, summoning what legions remained to the defence of the bridge. Without access to translation, they would take time to arrive. And so, for now at least, their fate had come to rest on the strength of this ragged force, scraped from the audience of a public execution.

Oltyx stepped out before the shields of his lychguard, and turned to offer Pakhet a sombre nod, before casting his gaze down the nine blank, nameless faceplates of her comrades.

'If any of us remain after this,' he said to them, carrier waves crackling in the ghostwind, 'I will remember your fallen with you.' Then he turned back to the devastation of the bridge and held his glaive out in challenge to the ragged mouths of the ramships.

The Space Marines emerged.

Oltyx had spent very little time in close proximity to humans. But he was familiar enough with the form of the creatures to know that the Astartes bore only the most cursory morphological resemblance to them. Looking at them as they emerged into the light, preceded by the scudding munitions of their club-thick weapons, it seemed impossible that they belonged to the same species as the enfeebled psyker Lysikor had captured.

The information fed to him by his engagement state, as the first of them came lumbering out onto the deck, only deepened his certainty. These were monsters. Multiple redundant organs had been crammed into their bodies, their skeletons had been shattered and rebuilt time and time again, simply to allow more flesh to be stacked on top, and they were riddled throughout with foreign matter: bolts, splints, cables, and banks of half-functioning machinery, like the tendrils of parasites. And all of it was somehow packed in and bolted down, under layers and layers of folded ceramite and exotic metal.

While none of the carmine-armoured brutes had yet emerged from the central ram, five had come from each of the outer transports, loosing short, pounding bursts of fire from their carbines – their *bolters* – as they moved out. The violence of their advance was so immediate, so decisive, that the carapaces of six Immortals had been shattered before the necron troops had been able to form a defensive line.

Even when the Immortals returned fire, wreathing the oncoming squads in searing arcs of lightning from their own weapons, the Astartes barely reacted. Oltyx saw smoke leaking from joints in their armour, and knew their skin would be starting to blacken beneath, but it did nothing to disrupt the relentless, hammering rhythm of their weapons. They only advanced and fired, advanced and fired, as the lenses of their masks glinted in mute, insane zeal.

Oltyx recalled the Immortals in a fighting retreat towards his line of shields. As they trudged backwards in a broad rank, they drew the Space Marines' fire away from the surviving nobles, buying them time to regroup behind Pakhet's wall. Once the Immortals were closer, Oltyx was able to deploy nanoscale repair scarabs from his own phylacteries, allowing their bodies' self-repair systems to keep pace with the chunks being torn out of them by the Space Marines' weapons. Even so, they had lost nearly a third of their strength already, and their attackers had been able to advance into the cover of weaponry console banks, where they now formed two pitiless firing lines on either side of the embattled defenders.

Then came the second wave, heralded by a blaze of light from the outermost pair of assault rams. These warriors were fitted with sputtering, rocketassisted turbine packs, which sent them arcing over the heads of their fellows, and directly towards Oltyx's tenuous front line. Armed with smaller firearms and an assortment of vicious melee weapons, they leapt across the bridge in wild, lurching parabolas, pouncing on the stragglers of the Immortals, and hacking apart a dazed metropolarch whose motive arrays had been crippled by the blast from the doors.

'Angels, they call themselves,' said a voice in Oltyx's interstitial receivers. In his focused state, it took him a moment to realise it was the scarab. He glanced up to the signal's source, and saw the construct crouched in the shadows of the vaulted ceiling. Clearly, whatever his former selves felt towards him had been outweighed by the necessities of the fight – and, he suspected, his xenology submind's curiosity to see these creatures of human legend at work. Uninvited, the scarab descended to his shoulder, where it continued to wonder at their attackers.

'Angels Encarmine,' said the construct, with a mix of contempt and fascination. 'Named for a creature of myth, we believe.'

'What is an angel?'

'So far as we can tell? Just a variant of daemon which fought on behalf of gods, rather than against them.'

'Appropriate enough,' muttered Oltyx, as he continued to shepherd the Immortals into a firing line to repel the rapacious angels. 'The state of them, though...' he wondered to the scarab. 'What we have achieved through abandoning flesh altogether, and the orks have come close to through mastering it, they have achieved through...'

'Stubbornness,' the scarab finished, with ringing disdain. 'Stubborn refusal to accept their inferiority.'

Oltyx's attention was drawn back to the fray by the sudden bloom of particle beams. He had taken his oculars away from the surviving lords too long: three Amisothi shipmasters appeared to have made their own plan, and were advancing on the leftmost entrenchment of Space Marines with concentrated beams of exotic radiation blasting from the tips of their ceremonial staves. This had complicated the situation.

The lords moved forward with the arrogance they would have deserved, had the battle been taking place on anything like an even footing. Briefly, too, their arrogance was vindicated: Oltyx could see the triumph bloom across their nodal arrays, when two of their bolter-wielding adversaries slumped behind their barricade, with helms reduced to glowing shards of ceramite.

But the trio had become lost in their objective superiority, relishing the blasts of their weapons against the barricade ahead as if it were some voidship engagement, witnessed from the impervious sanctuary of a command citadel. Despite Oltyx's booming warning, they failed to heed the single red figure manoeuvring around them in a series of short hops, until it had sprung past on a plume of exhaust, and dropped a plasma grenade into one of their thoracic cavities.

Reeling from the detonation of their peer, the remaining shipmasters were easy prey. One collapsed to a fusillade of focused boltgun fire, their head and thorax pounded into crumpled ruin within the space of a second, while the second managed to stagger a few paces back towards the lychguard on a blown leg joint, before the Astartes switched focus, and their back erupted in a wall of green flame.

As the nobles were gunned down, Oltyx noticed that their core-flux did not just vent in the usual boiling cloud; it whipped out into the ghostwind as if drawn up through a tube. As if it was being consumed. There would be no return to the reconstruction vaults for the flux-patterns of the Amisothis, and no casual reassembly thereafter. Three entire personalities, which had been around longer than the Astartes' entire species, had just vanished in ribbons of twisting plasma. Oltyx thought again about the catastrophic arrival of the ramships in this light, of all the lords lost in an instant, and all the despair which the fight had managed to lift flooded back into his core like molten lead.

At least the folly of the Amisothis had distracted the Astartes for long enough that Oltyx's defensive line had been able to assemble, anchored around his lychguard. Supported by his scarab phylacteries, it would hold – at least for as long as it would take for the king to assess the wider situation. And so, instructing Pakhet to set the pace for a slow retreat to the bridge's entryway, Oltyx hailed Lysikor.

'There is good news, and there is bad,' said the deathmark, too brightly. 'My king,' he continued, but Oltyx had no time for his games, and cut across wordlessly with a fusion of the glyphs for tell, all and now.

'The good news, then, is that the Lystraegonian has slipped back into the dark again. It seems it concealed its initial approach through the infuriatingly simple means of covering all exterior light sources, and shielding its engine exhaust. Now that we know such a pathetic trick

actually functions in this place, however, it shall at least not work against us again.

'Now for the bad news,' said Lysikor, doing a poor job of hiding his excitement at the unfolding chaos, and a projection of the Akrops' interior materialised in Oltyx's optic buffer. The image was crackling and indistinct thanks to the disruption of the ghostwind, but the pulsing blue threat-lights scattered throughout it were clear enough to Oltyx.

'Seven further ramships,' the spymaster summarised. 'Two in the main hangar, two in the core-flux storage vaults, and three which managed to come in right through our propulsion array — their occupants, even now, are making headway towards the drive sepulchre. Overall, we are now host to between fifty and seventy Astartes, I believe, plus whatever you are dealing with on the bridge.'

'And what of the rest of the fleet?' demanded Oltyx.

'Untouched, my king. Most of the shipmasters have shown commendable loyalty, and are thus sending all available troops to reinforce the Akrops. With your permission, I will marshal them, as well as those lords who were not present for the execution, and have them move to the affected areas...'

'No, deathmark. Your king can command for himself. And I command you now – take your canopteks, and recapture the hangar at all costs. I will secure the rest.'

'Of course, my king. And if I might-'

'That will be all, Lysikor,' said Oltyx, with a heavy appendment of threatsignifiers, and closed the band.

It was all Oltyx could do not to curse aloud, even though the void filling the bridge would have preserved his decorum if he had. The *Akrops*' propulsion systems had been near crippled as it was. If the Space Marines finished them off, they would fall immediately into the teeth of the crusade. Even before the boarding, it had been their inevitable fate. But the damage wrought by the human incursion would bring it about days sooner.

Oltyx could not allow that. Even if victory meant only the right to die in days, rather than hours, he would spare no effort, and no sacrifice, in seizing it.

The task could not be entrusted to anyone else. He would have to repel the invaders from the drive sepulchre personally, even if it meant retreating from this fight and abandoning the bridge to the Unclean. With reinforcements from

the rest of the fleet, it could be retaken in time, long before the humans could find a way to confer significant damage on its systems.

With Oltyx himself leading the counter-attack on the drive sepulchre, and Lysikor on the way to the hangar, there remained only the unit of Astartes in the core-flux vaults still to be dealt with. And while that incursion posed no immediate peril to the ship, it would prove devastating in the long run, in the event that the dynasty did survive this battle. Because that incursion threatened the core-flux vaults, where in thousand-deep tanks of containment vessels, the mind-patterns of the dismantled warriors were being stored.

There were hundreds of thousands of his people stored in that vault. No matter how lowly their caste, Oltyx knew he could not leave them undefended. And so he found himself doing something he had not expected to do.

'Parreg?' he signalled, and the Agoranomos looked across at him from the pack of retreating nobles, with his curse-dulled oculars flaring in surprise.

'My lord dynast?'

'Your sentence is suspended, at least while this greater madness wracks us all. Our flux-vaults are breached – go there at once, and take Erraph, Taikash and Denet with you. Commandeer consolidated legions five and seven, as well as such troops as you can find along the way, and defend the vaults with every fibre of your being.'

'It would be the honour of a thousand years,' said Parreg, after a moment of stunned surprise. It was as if his deformed carapace drew back infinitesimally towards its perfect state, even as he spoke. And without wasting a moment more, the Agoranomos made his exit.

With the wider defence of the *Akrops* in motion, Oltyx returned his attention to the retreat in progress around him, and began considering the possible routes by which he might pull out of the fight himself. But before his analytical buffer had begun compiling even the basis for a withdrawal strategy, his seismoreceptors registered a deep, rhythmic sound shuddering through the deck.

He took it to be the *Akrops* itself at first. But the eerie moans of the ship's fabric had become all too familiar to him now. This was different. Dissecting the waveform of the noise, he determined it was coming from somewhere much closer – from the central ramship, in fact. The assault craft had not yet disgorged any Space Marines of its own. But as a deep red light began to

grow in the depths of its interior, Oltyx realised now that it was far from empty.

The sound, he determined, was a voice. Eight voices, in fact, raised in what he thought at first was a scream, but resolved now into something more like a chant. He might even have called it a song: a dirge of lamentation and fury, coming from seven throats, and restrained from discord only by an eighth, mighty voice.

'It is a hymn,' said the scarab, as Oltyx's seismic transducers transmitted a modulated simulation of the song into his aural buffer. 'A slaughter-hymn. A... litany of vengeance.'

'It sounds like a requiem,' said Oltyx, hearing the most distant tonal echoes of the recitation his subminds had themselves once led for Djoseras. 'But what have they lost?'

'Themselves, by the sound of it,' said the scarab. 'There is a name in there... They lament their captain, fallen on Antikef. Perhaps it was his death which drove them to this state?' The dirge continued, and the scarab's tone pulsed suddenly with glyphs of alarm. 'Their captain, Oltyx... the hymn mentions a "xenos lord" striking him down. I think they sing of the warrior with the flaming sword, which faced Djoseras at the end.'

The revelation shot through his executive buffer like a gauss-round: *these* were the comrades of the vermin which had slain his elder. In its wake, all consideration of retreat had dissolved, replaced only by the thought of vengeance. Oltyx stopped pacing backwards.

The Space Marines' hymn came to a crescendo then, with a final shiver through the deck beneath him. But Oltyx's own fury was just as loud inside his mind. Almost distantly, he became aware that he was walking towards the central assault craft, boltgun rounds bursting on his carapace as he pushed forwards through the shields of the lychguard.

Oltyx accepted, at that moment, that the drive sepulchre would have to wait. Revenge, after all, could demand even the attention of a king.

'Immortals,' he commanded, 'split and engage the Astartes on our flanks. Bolster your ranks with any reinforcements which arrive. Lychguard, to me. We will not leave this place until nothing remains alive here.'

The Astartes which emerged from the central ram were different to the others. Rather than the red and black of their comrades, their armour was freshly daubed in pristine white, and on each of the seven warriors was

emblazoned a single diagonal cross of deep red.

They were armed with close-combat weapons — snarling chainblades, hammers that glittered with wild electric currents, and crude, shimmering powerblades that might as well have been clockwork next to the deep jade phase swords of his lychguard. But any inadequacy in their arsenal was more than made up for by the intensity with which it was wielded. They walked towards Oltyx's line with overly steady, shuddering steps, as if only the greatest exertion of will kept them back from a wild charge.

And leading them down the ramp was something which, in the madness of the moment, Oltyx's recognition array briefly misidentified as the phantom king which had haunted him since Antikef. Its colossal armour might as well have been forged yesterday, by necron sensibilities, but it was ancient by Terran standards. A probing beam which skittered for a microsecond across the antique harness told Oltyx it was more than ten thousand years old.

Every kubit of that plate was bedecked in scrolls, seals, relics and mendings that showed just how many owners must have worn it through the years. Its once white veneer had faded to the sepulchral cream of ancient teeth, edged with chipped gold. And at the apex of its mountainous torso, nestled in a turret-like socket almost like Oltyx's own clavicle collar, aglowering golden death's head stared across at him, its lenses dark and sad and wrathful as collapsing stars.

The warrior was armed only with a bludgeon the length of a baseline human's body, crowned at the head with a pair of iron wings, and it raised the terrible club now with a floor-shaking war cry.

'Strange...' wondered the scarab. 'They call this a Chaplain.'

Oltyx locked gazes with the gleaming skull of his counterpart, and despite the monumental hatred that needed no carrier waves to make itself understood between them, he was overcome by a shocking, fundamental sense of *knowing*. Oltyx could not articulate exactly what it was, but in that brief glance, there was a sense that he and the bleak giant he faced had a bone-deep comprehension of each other's existences, despite their antipathy. The sense that he had met a worthy match at last made Oltyx furious, and he elevated his engagement state another degree.

'A Chaplain...' he mused to the scarab, examining the word with bitter suspicion. 'Is it a priest, then?'

'Of a sort,' said the scarab. 'It ministers to... the living dead.'

'But these warriors are alive.'

'Physically. But they do not consider themselves living, all the same. A "Death Company", they are called.'

The boltguns stopped firing, all across the bridge. Even the ferocious exchanges on the flanks ceased for a moment, as the Space Marines lowered their guns and clapped their fists to their chests in salute. Whatever these white-armoured warriors were, and whatever vengeful doom they were fated to, their comrades adored them.

The skull-faced priest lowered his mace directly at Oltyx, in what appeared to be a gesture of accusation. Oltyx raised his glaive in turn, and let his discharge nodes simmer with the green mist of his hatred. The bridge fell under a strange, momentary stillness. When the Chaplain's weapon fell, he knew, it would be shattered. The charge would begin, and he would be committed to the fight. And so, as the bridge pulsed with the light of the Immortals' first salvos on the flanks, Oltyx permitted himself the smallest degree of chronodilation in which to consider his situation.

This was his last chance to withdraw, and protect the *Akrops*' engines. If he did not, he risked consigning the ship to doom as it was crippled from within. He knew he should retreat. *Djoseras would have urged me to retreat*, Oltyx told himself. But the thought only piled fuel on the pyre of his hate. Djoseras should have been the one *commanding* the retreat. But these primitives had hacked him down, among the desecrated ruins of their home city. And for that, they had to die.

In the end, the Chaplain never had the chance to signal the charge. Oltyx dived forward, with his glaive held low in both hands, ready to carve its way upward through the thighs of the creature. But just like him, the skull-helmed monster was faster than it looked. Throwing itself side-on to Oltyx, the Astartes lord stepped over his glaive, losing only an inch of its leg-plating to the blade, and carried the momentum into a brutal, smashing sweep of its maul.

The weapon cracked into the thick clavicle collar which shielded Oltyx's cranial pylon, glancing off the armour as his sempiternal weave flooded his necrodermis with energy at the point of impact. But the angle of the strike sent the weapon scraping up the side of the king's head, into the ocular ridge that had been damaged in the duel with Duamehht.

One of the wings on the maul's crown hooked there, tangled with the

ornamentation. And in the moment while the weapon was locked with Oltyx's faceplate, the Chaplain gripped its haft with both hands, and pulled it back with all its massive, armoured weight. The maul tore free, and with a crack of cold-brittled necrodermis, took the entire outer ridge of Oltyx's damaged ocular with it.

The strength of the heave pulled the king's body violently sideways, as his flux quaked with waves of pain from the wound. His proprioceptors offered him perfect balance throughout, but sensing opportunity, he feigned a long stumble instead, falling into a half-crouch with one hand clasped to his shattered faceplate.

The Death Company came forward then, like an avalanche of white armour, at the same time as Pakhet's phalanx advanced in lockstep to meet them. Blades crackled against dispersion shields all around Oltyx as the lines clashed, but he kept his focus squarely on the Astartes' master. Pakhet, he trusted, would know what he was doing.

The Chaplain, however, did not. Too used to mortal opponents, it had been taken in by his feint, and was lining itself up for a killing strike. As its arms raised, Oltyx saw the opening he had hoped for, and lurched suddenly inside the Chaplain's range. Before the creature could react, he lodged his shoulder under its breastplate and, with his legs positioned to exert optimum thrust, straightened his body with all the strength in his royal core.

The Chaplain's mountainous body was hurled into the air as Oltyx surged up from beneath it, crashing backwards into one of its charges. Despite the depth of its rage, the Space Marine dropped its blade instantly, and moved to break its master's fall. The lapse in focus cost it a phase blade through the neck joint of its armour from the lychguard opposite. But even as the emerald blade carved a smoking hollow in the berserker's flesh, it supported the weight of its Chaplain, and hauled it to its feet.

With the skull-helmed giant back in the fight, the Space Marine returned to its duel, tearing the phase blade from its neck and fighting with undiminished vigour for the final moments of its life.

The Chaplain, meanwhile, was already leaning into its next strike. On its left hand, Oltyx saw, it wore a thick gauntlet of ceramite crackling with primitive electric energies. As it pulled back with the bulbous appendage, Oltyx's electroreceptors could sense the full power of the Space Marine's ancient harness being flooded into the punch.

The blow was too sluggish, however. As the fist sailed towards Oltyx's thorax, he let his right hand free of his glaive, and drove it forwards to meet the blow with fingers splayed. For the quarter-second before impact, he shunted core-flux into the metalodermal weave around his forearm, which had wreaked such ruin on Duamehht. As such, when his hand clapped against the incoming fist, its fingers were wreathed in unnatural, writhing lightning.

He could feel the vibrations of servos within the Chaplain's armour as it fought to overpower him. But the creature only *wore* the machinery of war; Oltyx had been incarnated within it. The voracious energy enrobing his own hand seemed to *consume* the pathetic lightning of the Space Marine's own weapon, and with a splintering crack that echoed through his body and into the deck around him, the Chaplain's fist simply imploded.

With one hand reduced to a jagged, charred ruin, the Chaplain fell back into a guarding stance, reaching for its discarded maul. Its pack of white-armoured beasts were still too intent on their attempt to break through the dispersion shields of the lychguard to close ranks in front of it. But even with what little instinct he had gleaned for these death-fixated warriors, Oltyx doubted the Chaplain would have wanted them to cease their attack to do so.

As he pushed forward through the clashing lines, Oltyx felt a black pride in Pakhet and her lychguard. For all the ruin inflicted on their personhood by time and duty, these were the very best of Ithakas' warriors, and only two had so far fallen to the maddened Astartes, each taking a foe with them.

But as his sensorium took in the wider fight, Oltyx realised the tide was turning against them. At the chamber's edge, the Immortals were being ground down rapidly by the combined aggression of the bolter-lines and the leaping, blade-wielding shock troops. Only a rough, disarrayed phalanx remained on each flank, and while their barrages of lightning had thinned their opposition, it was a fight the carmine-armoured Space Marines were destined to win. When that happened, the monstrous humans would press in on the embattled lychguard from both sides, and Oltyx's dwindling defence would be doomed.

Already, the Astartes were advancing from behind the console banks, supporting their brothers in white with opportunistic bursts of bolter fire. Whenever the melee allowed them a clear line of sight to the lychguard, a flurry of shells would pound on their shields, gradually degrading their dispersion fields. Sooner or later, those shields would shatter.

Still, the lychguard retained perfect discipline. Bolt-rounds pinged off their armour, occasionally knocking free chunks of necrodermis, but each of Pakhet's warriors stayed focused on their chosen foe, waiting for perfect strikes to align on weak spots before letting their blades stab out. The elite guards were used to lingering for hundreds of years between battles, and so waiting a few seconds for an ideal attack vector was well within their capacity for patience. As the Chaplain's monstrous flock raged against them, their feet shifted with the slow heaviness of dunes, constantly adjusting their collective orientation so as to leave no gaps between the brims of their shields.

As Oltyx advanced on the Chaplain once more, Pakhet's patience paid off—one of the white-armoured foes crumpled around her withdrawing phase blade, as it took one fatal stab too many through the thin armour between its arm and breastplate. At the Space Marine's death, the Chaplain's helm shot round, and Oltyx registered a burst of audio transmitted to its squadmates. *A prayer?* he wondered. It did not matter: while it was distracted, he leapt forward with his glaive held two-handed in a stabbing, hunter's strike.

Even without the phased-energy blade, the sheer mass behind the strike would have ensured the glaive did its brutal work. The crunch of ceramite rattled up his arm, along with the flexing crack of adamantine wafers-buckling, and a spray of arterial red shot out along the blade's edge. The blood froze instantly, droplets shattering across his own armour and bouncing off as a glittering red mist.

Surely, thought Oltyx, that must be a mortal strike.

It was not, it transpired.

'Fascinating,' observed the scarab from its vantage, as the Chaplain held its crozius aloft, and the white-clad Astartes bellowed in sudden apoplexy along the length of the fight. 'Have you aggravated their... condition, we wonder?'

'What?' shot back Oltyx irritably, concentrating on moving forward and driving the Chaplain back away from its flock.

'They have a curse of their own, we have read. It is apparently a memory. Of a wound. Their father's wound? It is a hard religion to understand at the best of times, and their cult is particularly strange.'

'Why is this relevant, scarab?'

'By chance, we think this is where you have struck their Chaplain. We think... they think that they are *there*.'

'Where, scarab?'

'On the bridge of a human voidcraft, ten thousand years ago. Their father, you see, was also wounded while boarding an enemy flagship. It... stayed with them.'

The death-fixated Astartes attacked like wild beasts, as if so far they had only been engaged in sparring. As if they were possessed by something which had not been present in their previous fury. One lychguard fell, and then a second, just moments later – Pakhet's phalanx was down to five, now.

The Chaplain, if anything, appeared to have been strengthened by its wound. It surged forward towards Oltyx at impossible speed, with the crozius sweeping ahead, and before the king knew it, his arm – made brittle by the savage cold of the ghostwind – had been shattered into splinters beyond the elbow. As the pain from the wound merged with the waves blasting from his wrecked ocular orbit, he stared at the shard-crowned stump of his arm, and felt the darkness rise.

I am bleeding, said the deepness of his mind. I cannot breathe, said another voice from the dark. The voices began to come from all around Oltyx then, until he could no longer be sure if they came from within him in the first place, or from the infinite dark outside. He staggered, the bridge growing quieter and stiller around him, as his stump dripped with either blood, or core-flux, or both. He could hear other voices, more distant, calling his name by carrier wave. But as the blackness of the ghostwind rushed in to swallow him, he knew they did not matter. Those other voices were not truly real.

There are voices on the wind. Mourning heaped on mourning, on this day of transcendent genocide. Ash rains from the sky as the biofurnaces continue their mighty work. Oltyx has been here before. Now he is here... again. Only, this time, Unnas and Djoseras have not gone through the furnaces and come out with new bodies. They have just died. And monsters have replaced them.

Oltyx tries to run as he hears their footsteps behind him. He pushes aside the frail, massed peasantry as he sprints through the corrals before the furnaces. But there is something new following him. A red light, that grows and grows, and a voice to match it.

'You do not have the right to opt out, princeling.' A huge fist clubs him across the face, and he sprawls, coughing, in the corpse-cinders that cover

the sand. A shape looms out of the ash.

The Red Marshal. Borakka. He is being dragged towards the furnace-gate, and his hands cannot find purchase in the sand. He is cast through the cyclopean doorway by those great ochre fists. Into the biofurnace. But to his surprise, he falls into yet deeper redness.

Oltyx was back on the bridge, so rapidly he wondered if he had ever been gone. Had that been the evocatory medium? If it had, then it had changed, in this accursed place. Or he had changed. The vision had seemed more like a nightmare than a memory. But it seemed like a poor time to contemplate its inner workings, now, as Oltyx realised it was still going on, even here. The world had turned red.

Against the crimson glow, the Chaplain was a hulking silhouette, staggering towards him. Clearly, the warrior was at last feeling the wound he had inflicted – the deep cold had got into its flesh before the armour had closed up, and it loped along with its stump-hand clutched to the rent in its armour.

All around him, black on red, were silhouettes of the Space Marines and the remaining necrons on the bridge, locked in the accelerating ferocity of their death-struggle. And although the deck was littered with the armoured corpses of the transhumans, they were outnumbered by the smashed carapaces of his own warriors. It was no longer a fight they could win. He should have retreated, he knew now. In his recklessness, he had gambled the fate of his people, and lost. But before he could castigate himself further for the failure, Oltyx addressed the question-glyph flashing in his optic buffer.

Why had everything turned red?

This was not, it dawned on him at last, the trickery of the medium. The red light was coming from something beyond the shattered viewports – from moving shapes. Ghost arks with glaring red running lights, sailing across from the barely visible silhouette of a voidship.

The assault carrier, Oltyx realised. The ark of the Destroyers. Of course.

Before Parreg had requested execution by his dynast's hand, the task had been assigned to Borakka, and the Red Marshal had been summoned. Nobody had told it otherwise, and so it had come regardless.

As the ghost arks cruised in towards the emptiness where the viewport had once been, and the Space Marines' discarded ramships at its edge, Oltyx saw enormous, misshapen forms on their decks, stirring into motion as their stasis

fields were dispelled. At the prow of the foremost ark stood a towering figure, and as the Chaplain turned to regard it, it leapt across a half-khet of ghostwind as if it were a ditch rather than a bottomless abyss. Landing on the deck with the slightest bend of the knees, Borakka nodded at Oltyx, and then began to advance on the wounded Chaplain.

The deck quaked as the Marshal strode forward, and it spoke to Oltyx with a rumble of the interstices.

'It seems there is to be an execution after all,' said the Destroyer lord, with the barest ghost of satisfaction in its voice, and then swept the other ghost arks forward with a sweep of its arm. 'Brukt. Vartenh. Gerak. Kahr,' it pronounced. 'I unleash you.'

With a casual gesture, the last of the chronal manacles fell from the shapes aboard the arks, and a menagerie of terrors leapt to the deck.

A hunched, twitching hexmark came first, hammering itself into place like a fortification, then loosing shots from all six of its weaponised arms in ceaseless, rhythmless staccato. A serpentine ophydian came next, slipping silently through the deck to make its way towards its prey, like something half-glimpsed in murky water.

Third came the massive, blocky form of a lokhust, barely recognisable as a necron under the armoured hull of the weapons platform it had grown itself into. With its faceplate set in a static grimace that projected nothing but dull hatred, the thing surged over the debris of the battle towards the Space Marines. Every few moments it was rocked in the air by the recoil from its oversized shoulder cannon – firing while moving, the lokhust would do more damage to the structure of the bridge than to its targets – but the lokhust did not care. It existed, and therefore it attacked.

Last came Brukt, the gargantuan skorpekh lord, as Borakka struck free the last of its restraints. As the abomination plodded forward, still in a state of residual torpor, flights of plasmocyte constructs rose from its flanks like fat, bloodsucking insects. They had done their work, reinjecting the Destroyer with flux-patterns distilled from the most damaged depths of its mind, and as the fresh patterns took hold, the skorpekh's nodal arrays blazed with meaningless, furious red light.

With every crashing impact of the three obelisk-heavy pitons which had replaced its feet, Brukt began to move faster, accelerating towards the melee like an avalanche. Five bolter-wielding Astartes wheeled towards the juggernaut at the last moment, emptying their thudding weapons into its body with perfect accuracy. But Brukt did not even register the impacts, charging straight over their position, and continuing with one of the Space Marines' mangled bodies lodged midway up one leg.

Oltyx found his attention drawn to Borakka, who strode towards the Astartes Chaplain with a strange, placid malevolence. The Marshal's progress was as steady and as implacable as the movement of a setting sun, even as it walked through the hail of flaming debris ejected by the lokhust's wild bombardment. Bolt-shells, scudding in from the other direction, burst on its ochre plate with deep, cracking impacts. But to Borakka, the warheads might have been summer rain.

Dipping slightly as it reached the staggering Chaplain, the Marshal gripped the superhuman by the collar of its armour, and swung it into a pillar head first, with the brutality of magnetic acceleration. Without a pause, Borakka repeated the movement again, with all the passion of a machine in a factory. Then Borakka did it a third time.

After the Space Marine had been slammed into the pillar six times, its helmet was visibly warped, and its body had begun to convulse. But it still stood. So, without hesitating, Borakka smashed it three more times into the steel, with increased force. It was the most explosive, rapid violence Oltyx had seen in a long time – but there was nothing in Borakka's oculars, or its discharge nodes, to suggest that it had felt anything throughout the process.

There was no bloodlust, no hatred, no anger, no passion. There was nothing at all. It was not even as if Borakka was slaughtering an animal. If anything, it was more casual, less conscious than that: the killing was conducted with the same instinctive monotony that most living things reserved for breathing.

Breathing. Oltyx tried to fight the thought down, with the dysphorakh so close to the surface of his flux. Borakka's display was not helping. Although the Space Marine Chaplain was Unclean, and thus to be destroyed without care, he could not help but feel it deserved better. It had been a worthy adversary, in its way. But what could he do – ask Borakka to stop?

With one last, cometary smash, the creature's helmet buckled, and blood began spraying from one half-crumpled, cracked lens of the death's head. The wound made Oltyx feel unusual to look at. Like it could make things... better, somehow. But the thought faded.

With the weakest motion, the Chaplain swayed on its feet, dropping its

crozius but continuing to paw at the air where it thought its enemy was. Oltyx could only watch in shock as Borakka walked up to it and, wrapping a pitted arm around its enormous torso, prised off the helmet with four brick-like fingers.

The Space Marine's jaw, already broken, came off with its helm, caught in the twisted metal and ripping free in a spray of twinkling red. Cables tore away from what remained of its pucker-skinned skull, and it crashed to the ground at last.

Remaining utterly expressionless – for Destroyer nodal arrays only ever gave off a steady, passionless glow – Borakka produced an enmitic carbine, and levelled it at the frozen pulp that had once been the Chaplain. The Marshal fired, and the body turned to dust from the inside, chunks of armour collapsing in on a pile of soft grey powder, which immediately billowed away.

Borakka said nothing as it walked out of the cloud of ash, with its carbine aimed at the surviving Astartes. Oltyx paused before following it into the fight, glancing once more at the dissipating remains of the Chaplain.

That is vengeance for Djoseras, then, he thought, as the grey pile shrank. Revenge had felt like everything in the world, at the fight's outset. But now, just like the remains of the Chaplain itself, it had dwindled to nothing. Oltyx didn't really feel anything at all, then. Nothing, that was, except for a strange relief that the corpse had been so thoroughly disintegrated, as he had not been able to stop staring at the gory ruin of its face.



### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# A LONG TIME COMING

The battle on the bridge had been won by the Destroyers, in the end. But it had been a senseless, honourless victory. To the Destroyers themselves, it did not even seem to have registered as a victory at all. If anything, the grotesque figures seemed to display something more like anger now – at the fact there was nothing left to kill – than they had done during the killing.

Even now, as the crystal of the bridge's main viewport knitted itself together again and the chamber was filled with inert gas, the first sound to return was the harsh, arrhythmic clang of Brukt hacking an empty assault ram to pieces. As the racket continued, Oltyx summoned Lysikor, Parreg and the rest of his command network to project onto the bridge via hard-scry, and began to interrogate them on the state of the ship's defence.

There was good news from the hangars, at least. Lysikor, typically, had exalted in the chance to use the human-calibrated synaptic rounds he had been saving for seven centuries. Thanks to this deadly personal arsenal, plus his ever-burgeoning, increasingly murky private army of canopteks, the deathmark had exterminated the Astartes in the scythecraft bays with startling efficiency.

In the core-flux vaults, though, victory had come at a grievous cost. Parreg was a capable tactician, even with the onset of the curse. But he had never been an inventive one. Traditional to a fault, he had sent his infantry marching, phalanx by phalanx, into the walkways between the soaring banks of flux-cylinders, to engage the Space Marines. This had only provided a perfect shooting gallery for the bolter-wielding fanatics, however, and for every foe so much as singed by a glancing gauss shot, a dozen necron warriors had been hammered into scrap by return fire.

By the time the last of the Astartes had been slain, the waves of Parreg's warriors had been clambering towards them over a hill of their own broken comrades. Even then, their faceplates had been pummelled by bolter fire the moment they had stumbled over the crest of the scrap pile, and the last survivor of the Space Marines had obliterated thirty warriors by himself, before being overwhelmed. As he took in the casualty figures, Oltyx realised just how much the protocol of recall had obscured the insane wastefulness of necron doctrine, over the years. Without the ability to teleport broken warriors away for reconstruction, the standard patterns of assault were exposed in all their devastating inefficiency.

Single-handedly, Parreg's assault had cost them nearly half their remaining levy of active warriors. And that loss was trivial, next to the destruction the Space Marines had wreaked on the flux stores themselves. All in all, when the stored patterns were taken into account, those twenty Unclean warriors had cost them nearly one hundred thousand minds. It was a genocide of which Imotekh himself would have been envious. And it had become all the more tragic when the scarab had determined, from recordings of the angels' communications, that the Astartes had thought themselves to be attacking a fuel store.

Even with these engagements won, however, and even with reinforcements starting to arrive from the rest of the fleet, the *Akrops* remained in grave peril. Because there were still thirty Space Marines on the ship. And thanks to Oltyx's impulsive decision to contest the bridge in the name of vengeance, they had been able to seize control of the drive sepulchre unopposed.

As the pain of his shattered arm shrieked through him, it compounded Oltyx's anger at his own recklessness. If the Space Marines had been allowed to hold the bridge, it would barely have mattered – its systems were only operable by necron minds, and could be accessed from anywhere

aboard the ship. But the invaders in the drive sepulchre could cripple them. Already, the ion drives were sputtering out one by one across the broad arc of the *Akrops*' rear, and the ship was falling into a listless, ever-slowing coast. If they could not retake the sepulchre, Oltyx knew, the ship would soon drop into range of the crusade's guns.

This would not have happened, he thought blackly, had Yenekh been here to point out the extent of my folly. The realisation sank like a stone through his core, and Oltyx cast a dark glance around him at the shimmering, projected figures of Parreg and the rest. They all knew that their king had got them into this situation. And now, silently, they were waiting for him to get them out of it.

But how? It seemed an impossible task. The sepulchre was wrapped in a layer of armour almost as thick as the *Akrops*' outer hull, and with the ghostwind making it impossible to translate troops through it, a direct attack was the only option. The very heart of Oltyx's capital ship – of the nearest thing he had to a crownworld – had been made into a fortress against him.

Defending that redoubt, meanwhile, was a force even more powerful than the one which now lay dead around him. Ten of the thirty Astartes wore the armour referred to as *Tactical Dreadnought pattern* – the same goliath rig the Chaplain had been clad in – and they were backed up by twenty bolter-wielders, plus a large, self-propelled cargo pod, which presumably contained a heavy weapons system, or worse.

And what do I have left to field against that? thought Oltyx, looking bleakly around him at the ruin of the bridge. With his legions atrophied to the point of collapse, and the nobility splintered into disarray by the combined ravages of the crusade and the curse, the assets of Ithakas were dwindling with horrifying speed. No matter how his forces were counted, they were not up to the task.

The Destroyers, of course, would be adequate. But moving them through the ship without the aid of translation protocols would be a catastrophic process in itself. And the thought of even the lokhust, alone, let loose amidst the crucial machinery they sought to protect, was almost as dire as the prospect of leaving the sepulchre to the Space Marines.

It was when Denet's projection suggested, in a quavering tone, that they use 'the monoliths' to breach the sepulchre, that Oltyx began to realise the scale of the despair looming before his mind like a tidal wave.

And it was when a blinking blue threat-glyph appeared on one of the sputtering projections above the bridge's command consoles that the wave crashed down on him. Because the projection was the one which Yenekh had always used to survey the tactical layout of the void around the *Akrops*. And the blue glyph was the *Lystraegonian*, slinking forwards from the night to finish them off.

With their engines being shut down one by one, there was no hope of outrunning it. The other surviving ships of the fleet might do some damage against it in a straight fight, but Oltyx knew that would not be the Astartes' intention. Aboard the red leviathan, another flight of assault rams would be readied in their launch silos even now, ready to overwhelm the beleaguered tomb ship entirely.

Oltyx's core grew cold with shame. At last, the Unclean had outwitted him. And the price he would pay would not just be the dynasty's end – it would be an ending without honour. Ithakas would not be erased from history with some cataclysmic exchange of hellfire in the deep night. No; they would be whittled down to nothing and made extinct, in the sacred spaces of their final tomb.

Oltyx looked around at the viewport and saw that the *Lystraegonian* was just visible now, as a livid red speck in the blackness. The static-poxed projections of his remaining court were staring at it too, knowing exactly what it meant. And still, they said nothing. Oltyx himself could barely find the heka to speak, now. Would he still be standing here, frozen with indecision, when the second wave of Space Marines arrived to finish him off?

'How do we defend ourselves?' Oltyx cried in the end, his voice squeezed into a split-frequency snarl by frustration. He moved to shake his fist at the looming red warship with futile rage, but he could not even do that, as his arm ended in a corona of shattered splinters. 'How?' he repeated, anguish making him near unintelligible.

But the only answer was Brukt, pounding mindlessly on the bones of a dead ship. The projections of the nobles continued to stare, and the *Lystraegonian* continued to advance, and Oltyx wanted nothing more than for the ship to arrive and put an end to it all.

Until at last he was answered, as the hissing of distorted carrier waves burst from one of the other consoles on the bridge.

'How do we defend ourselves?' boomed a voice, faint as distant wind, but

rising, full of the vigour that had drained from Ithakas. 'Did Djoseras teach you nothing, young Oltyx?'

'Zultanekh?' balked Oltyx, wondering now if he had fully lost his mind. 'I thought you were... gone?' he added uselessly.

'Was I gone, golden one? Or was I just hiding, as I stalked a most cunning prey?'

'I don't know, copperclad,' growled Oltyx, annoyance at Zultanekh's speech patterns managing to overwhelm even the prospect of hope. 'Which is why I asked.'

'Master yourself, young Oltyx,' the voice of the crown prince said, suddenly stern. 'Is the world and its loyalty given to you for free? I think not. As king, you are ever charged with finding ways to keep your holdings safe in your grasp, and the task is yours alone. The question, Oltyx, is this – how will you defend them? For as much as you are served, you are a servant also.'

Oltyx's misery transmuted to bitter anger as the Ogdobekh lord spoke. The last thing he needed now was to be patronised.

'What is this nonsense you speak to me, on the eve of ruin?'

'Djoseras' teachings, no?' replied Zultanekh, sounding mildly hurt. 'Or perhaps he really did never finish your tutelage in these matters. Regardless, Oltyx — shall we learn this lesson together — of leading through service? I think so. But I will teach you, perhaps, in the Ogdobekh fashion. For it is said, in our kingdom, that when no defences remain, you must attack with all you have. Observe.'

Oltyx looked out at the *Lystraegonian*, as it thundered towards the battered *Akrops*. But now, there was something else, out there in the dark with it. Scattered pinpricks of green light, which he might have mistaken for stars, until more started appearing between them. The shoal of lights grew, until green luminescence fountained all at once from the darkness off the *Lystraegonian*'s flank.

It was the *Philotomokh*, its lights blazing into life all at once, as the Ogdobekh cruiser dropped its apotropaic shroud, and lunged out of the dark at its quarry.

'You thought, perhaps, that Zultanekh had disappeared?' declared the prince, in rich, prideful tones. 'That he had grown wary of your strange ways and quietly departed? No! He knows the tricks of the carcass-

Emperor's slaves, and he has ever had tricks of his own. Now, like the forge-hammer, we strike!'

As the war cry rang over the carrier waves, the *Philotomokh* closed the distance with the *Lystraegonian*, and ploughed into its side with the finality of an executioner's maul. It was not the velocity of the strike which did the damage, then, but the momentum. Ogdobekh vessels were reinforced with metals fished from the deepest sumps of dying stars, and the exotic materials lent not only hardness to their hulls, but a brutal density. At the moment of impact, the *Philotomokh*'s entire, mountainous weight was channelled through the blunt cylinder at the ship's head, and inflicted on the midsection of the Astartes ship.

The *Lystraegonian* was broken in two, as if it were nothing more than a boat woven from reeds. Hull plates buckled and split on the flank opposite the point of impact, before being blasted clear of the ship on tongues of flame. And from the heart of that fire emerged the savage bluntness of the *Philotomokh*'s prow, bronze glimmering with the death-light of the *Lystraegonian*, without so much as a dent on its surface.

It was a vision of pure necron supremacy – the implacable weight of deep time, breaking clean through the work of an upstart culture. A wordless reminder of why the necrontyr had won dominion of the stars in the first place, and why they would remain as their masters. Something about it set light to something that had long gone cold in Oltyx's flux. *Glory*.

The dynast felt almost intoxicated with it, as he watched the *Lystraegonian*'s halves drift apart in the wake of Zultanekh's strike. He felt cleansed. At last, even if it was for just a moment, the despair which had threatened to crush him had been lifted. And now that he had tasted that glory, the king wanted more.

The king would have more, Oltyx told himself. He would be freed from despair, and fear, and all these shameful things which had burdened him for so long. And it would start, he decided, with those Space Marines which still dared infest his ship.

Oltyx had been a fool, he saw now, to let himself begin to see the Astartes as indomitable. He had been a fool to forget who the predators were in this place, and who the prey. Righteousness spread through every duct in his battered form, and words sprung to his actuators with new-found relish.

'A hammer-strike indeed, Lord Zultanekh,' he proclaimed.

As he spoke, his voice sounded new to him – unburdened from the dull gloom it had become weighed with during the endless chase, it gleamed now with the lustre of solid gold. The voice of a king.

'You honour the legacy of Ithakas, crown prince,' he continued. 'Would you honour it further by joining me for an assault on our engine decks?'

'You remember yourself at last!' rejoiced Zultanekh. 'And you understand at last, I see, how a king may serve his kingdom. Had I expected anything less? No. Not from the kin of my finest foe. Now make your preparations—and have yourself a new hand forged. I will make my way to you, armed for the hunt.'

The scarab had scurried away somewhere in the thick of the fight against the Death Company, but Oltyx summoned it back to the bridge to affix his new hand, before he went into battle. As the canoptek supervised the construction of his appendage, directing the pulsing cloud of the king's own phylactery scarabs, Oltyx turned back to the restless forms of the Destroyers again.

The Red Marshal had been standing motionless for some time now, staring with blank red oculars at the drifting halves of the *Lystraegonian*, and Oltyx found himself curious as to what was passing through the thing's foundry-cavern of a mind. Since his hand was not prepared for use yet, he decided to speak with it.

- 'Borakka,' he stated.
- 'King,' replied the Red Marshal, without turning from the ghostwind.
- 'What will your cohort do now?' he asked warily.
- 'We will find something else to kill,' said Borakka, as if the question had been pointless. Oltyx felt a creeping sense of unease at the words.
- 'But I have made it clear, Borakka,' said Oltyx, 'that there is no more good that can be done by your pack aboard this ship.'

The Marshal said nothing. When, at last, it replied, it turned to face the king with oculars just as blank and fiery as they had been during the obliteration of the Chaplain's skull.

'Then we will wait,' said Borakka, in its deep, grating voice. 'And we will endure the passage of time, until there is something to kill again.'

Oltyx looked at the castellan of the Destroyers, and felt something almost like pity for it. He resolved to leave the conversation there: there was little more to be said, and he would soon be ready to join Zultanekh in any case.

But then his ocular array picked out something moving beside the Destroyer's artless visage – something out in the ghostwind. It was a light, creeping across one half of the *Lystraegonian*. Now that he turned his focus to the remnants of the Astartes vessel, Oltyx noticed dozens of such lights, scattered across the edges of the ship's wounds. They were Space Marines, he realised – still alive, and attempting repairs on their ship, despite its being broken in two.

Szarekh's teeth, but these filth are tenacious, thought the king. As he continued to watch the distant specks of the warriors, a faint sense of concern moved through his flux. Simple reason suggested that the Space Marines of the Lystraegonian were, by now, categorically out of the fight. But reason, Oltyx had learned over the course of the Akrops' flight, was near useless as a measure for understanding the actions of humanity.

It would be some time before the *Lystraegonian* fell back out of range of the *Akrops*. And until then, so long as there were Space Marines alive aboard its carcass, they represented a threat. The dynast felt that he would be much more at ease knowing they had been exterminated. And now that he thought about it, he would also be much more at ease without a collection of monstrously powerful Destroyer lords to fit into whatever future he might still build for Ithakas.

The two ideas mingled in Oltyx's memetic buffer, and he looked back at Borakka.

'Marshal,' he said plainly. 'Your dynast wishes to offer you a boon.'

By the time the assault on the drive sepulchre began, the thirty Space Marines within its armoured walls were the last remaining survivors of the entire detachment which had accompanied the crusade fleet to Ithakas.

At least, they were in theory. Oltyx did not truly know what had happened, after the scarlet lights of the Taweret-class assault carrier had disappeared inside the darkness of the *Lystraegonian*'s forward half, ferrying Borakka and its flock to the place of their final work. But in Oltyx's mind, at least, it was not a situation likely to resolve in favour of the Emperor's angels.

As the voidcraft-calibre gauss drill bored through the outer armour of the sepulchre, preparing a point of ingress for his strike force, the king passed the time wondering if he would ever know the Red Marshal's fate. Even now, the *Lystraegonian*'s wreckage would be falling out of sight of the *Akrops*.

And with no engine power, there would be no hope of it manoeuvring back to the following bulk of the human crusade – it would simply drift out into the boundless dark, carrying its unknowable cargo of violence.

Maybe it would fall back into realspace eventually, where it would lie in some barren place between the stars, waiting to be stumbled upon by some unlucky band of scavengers. Or perhaps it would just float forever on the tideless night, crewed only by corpses, and lit only by the unblinking red oculars of the Destroyers, as they waited for something new to kill.

Either way, as strange as it was to hope for such a thing, he hoped it brought Borakka at least some infinitesimal measure of rest.

Oltyx's attention was drawn from all thoughts of the derelict voidcraft then, as the gauss drill punctured the final layer of the sepulchre's armour, and its generator core began to wind down with a descending shriek of charged particles. The drill's star-bright beam faded to nothing, revealing Zultanekh, who stood opposite Oltyx wielding a hammer of preposterous density. The Ogdobekh lord looked at Oltyx, and then at the breach in the sepulchre, where white-hot molten alloys dripped through a fog of dissipating emerald gauss vapour.

'What are you waiting for, dynast?' asked the copperclad lord, and it took Oltyx a moment to realise that this was not, for once, a rhetorical question.

He answered in the only honourable fashion – by charging into the breach, with Pakhet and his four remaining lychguard behind him.

The moment they crossed the threshold, the red bulk of an angel lunged from the gauss-mist to meet him. It was bedecked in skulls and scrolls, and all the superstitious talismans of human prestige, but Oltyx wasted no time in considering the warrior's likely prowess. It was vermin, and so he did not care to know its nature, beyond the fact that it was something to be removed from the world.

Raising a cruciform shield to block his glaive, the Space Marine swung a hammer at him through the green-lit haze, but the dynast was operating in a state of consciousness his engagement states alone could never have taken him to. He had felt this way only once before, in fact, during his clash with Duamehht, and this time he had surpassed even that apex.

The Space Marine might as well have asked permission before striking him, for every chance it had of connecting. It was so *slow* – what speed it had was in spite of half a ton of armour, and granted only by banks of straining

mechanisms in its joints. Even at the frayed limit of what mechanical and biological engineering had been able to do for it, it could not match what Oltyx had possessed the moment he had walked from the biofurnace.

It is slower than me, he thought, as his strike trajectory rewrote itself in response to the movement of the shield, driving his glaive beneath it and into the joint of its hip. It is weaker than me, he thought, as his off-hand shot out to clamp itself around the creature's armoured wrist, arresting the hammer in mid-strike.

'It is nothing to me,' he snarled out loud, and wrenched the creature's arm backwards with reactor-driven strength, pitching it forward in its ungainly armour.

Even as the transhuman stumbled, his lychguard flowed around it to either side, fanning out to engage other targets. With its hip servos slashed, it was struggling to orient itself, dragging one leg stiffly behind it. And as it struggled to rise, Oltyx had ample time to pivot, pull back his glaive, and thrust it two-handed into the hollow of the Unclean warrior's back. With its spine shorn by the blow, it managed to drag itself three kubits forward, clawing at the deck with clumsy gauntlets, before a great block of bronze thundered down on the back of its helm, cracking it in one blow.

'Is this the unity Szarekh dreamed of?' wondered Zultanekh, as he hefted his hammer from the killing blow. 'With certainty, it is! Onward, dynast, and let us show them at last how the necrons make war.'

As the Astartes fell before them, Oltyx could barely believe his body, or his mind, were the same ones that had fought the desperate struggle against the Space Marines on the bridge. After the first kill, he and Zultanekh had advanced directly into the squad of heavily armoured warriors anchoring the defence, and although each of them rivalled the Chaplain in size and skill, it was as if in considering them lesser, they had *become* lesser: as if in proclaiming them unworthy out loud, he had altered their hekatic truth, and they had diminished before him.

Indeed, with each of the Unclean he ran through with his pulsing blade, he seemed to feel stronger – to tower further above them, until his limbs were driven in part by wrath that his enemies could not do more to resist him. *It was disrespectful*, he thought, as his glaive-tip sheared through the abdominal plating of his latest quarry, before slithering through a layer of flesh and emerging from its back in a splintering eruption of gore.

To the left of the two lords, his own lychguard faced down one phalanx of the lesser Astartes, moving fluidly despite the wear of their joints, as if their own flux was surging in response to the fury of their master. Pakhet had armed herself with a warscythe for the incursion, and the weapon moved in controlled, decisive arcs to sever gun barrels, hands and – as her oculars shone with a harsh pride they had not seen in centuries – a carmine-helmed head.

Meanwhile, to their right, the five lychguard of Zultanekh's retinue – for honour's sake, he had brought an equivalent force – bludgeoned their way through the third squad of Space Marines, armed with vicious quantum hammers in the style of their lord's. They moved in a double rank, fighting with perfect, hypnotic rhythm: the front three would lean forward into a blow, bringing their weapons crashing into the enemy, but before there could be any recovery or hope of counter-attack, they receded, and the next impacts would arc in from the two behind. They were like a storm-swollen tide, crashing against the Astartes with wave after wave of percussive force, and driving them backwards in an ever-shrinking press.

Before Oltyx could fully comprehend how swiftly they had seized the enclave, he found himself opposite Zultanekh, circling the sword-wielding captain of the Space Marines. It had torn free its helm after it had been scored near through by Oltyx's glaive, and now supplemented the thin argon atmosphere of the ship with a respirator over the lower half of its face. Now it was revealed, its head seemed almost ridiculously undersized in that expanse of ancient red armour. The warrior seemed like an impostor, somehow – a fragile animal that had dressed itself in the armour of a god, but had now been revealed. And as the two enormous lords stalked around it in the green gloaming, its reckoning was due.

The captain was the last human left on the *Akrops*. And with the destruction of the *Lystraegonian*, it was the sole survivor of the crusade's Space Marine contingent. But as its death fell upon it from both sides, its pale, alien eyes never betrayed so much as a suggestion of fear. Even when Oltyx's golden footplate was planted at last on the bird emblem emblazoned across its breast, and those eyes shone with the viridian of the glaive as it plunged towards them, they remained resolute. It died as well as its kind could.

Only at the sound of heavy chains rattling did Oltyx correct himself: there was another Unclean survivor left, although in truth, it was barely

recognisable as a Space Marine, let alone as a specimen of humanity. As it burst free from the containment of the steel crate it had been hauled here in – clearly, as some sort of weapon of last resort – it let loose a howl of towering, demented rage that might have terrified any other opponent into immediate flight. But Oltyx could only see it as grotesque – almost pitiable, in its way.

It was the squat, piston-legged close-combat engine – the *Dreadnought*, his submind had called it – that he had glimpsed briefly during the siege of the necropolis. And he would have taken it for a primitive automaton, were it not for the armoured vision slot in the bolted-shut sarcophagus of its casing, and the raw, thrashing carcass that his sensory transducers detected behind the plating. Since the last time he had seen it, the abomination had been painted white, like the Space Marines from the bridge, and bore crossed red slashes across its hull – clearly, it had descended into the same madness they had.

Any pity the dynast might have felt evaporated at the realisation, and as the tormented construct stamped towards him, raving through tinny auditory projectors, he felt only a grave sense of offence. The squirming organic wreckage inside the thing beckoned to the... disturbances in the dynast; the voice of fear that had so nearly undone him before. He could not stand for that.

Stilling Zultanekh with a gesture as he began to raise his hammer, Oltyx walked calmly towards the raging Dreadnought, and focused every vibration of disorder in his flux into a steady pulse of hate, spreading evenly through every limb. More glory: that would be what kept the disquiet buried. And glory would be achieved through further destruction.

Remaining still as he tuned the parameters of his engagement state to their very highest function, he waited until the agonised mess of flesh and white steel was just a step away, its stubby cylindrical fist swinging round towards his thorax, before he struck.

By the time Oltyx had severed the last of the cabling connecting the Dreadnought's sarcophagus to its limbs, he had been stepping in and out of its reach for some time, and his mood had soured. It had not been challenging to evade its reach, and he had barely taken a glancing blow throughout the fight, but the *noise* it had made was infuriating. That constant, senseless scream of pain and madness, rising from a remnant of flesh wired into a prison of steel,

was too familiar.

It was relief he felt, then, rather than satisfaction, when the construct eventually keeled over backwards on useless legs, and he leapt up onto its prone body to put an end to it. Forcing his blade into the edge of its frontal plate, he braced his legs and dragged it downward like a scalpel. When the cut was made he repeated it along the sarcophagus' other edges, and all the while, the thing beneath the cover shrieked in powerless apoplexy. Then, with his right palm flat against its hull, he gripped the vision slit with his left, and hauled back with all his might, ripping free the last few connecting rags of armour, then tossing the massive armour plate to the deck with a ringing thud.

That, at least, had killed the amplification. But the noise was still there, reduced to a clacking, ragged gurgle. Oltyx tore away at the layers of cabling and impact foam beneath the armour, until at last he reached a twisting, fluid-bloated sac of translucent plastic with something red and pink inside. The membrane was tougher than it looked, and when it finally tore in his hand, a gush of pinkish liquid spilled onto the deck, mingling with the blood of the other Space Marines. And there, steaming as its cocoon was opened to the frigid argon of the engine deck, lay the pilot.

Its skin was raw and wrinkled, loose where it had once stretched over slabs of muscle, and gathered into necrotic folds where wires and cables burst from the flesh beneath. Silvery swathes of scar tissue flexed over what had once been grievous wounds, but they had clearly been just scratches compared to the trauma which had at last seen the warrior interred in here. One waggling, truncated bud of an arm was the only limb it had – from its left shoulder to its right hip, there was just a sutured, bubbling scar, broken by pumps, tubes and bladders that laboured to make up for the body the creature had lost. And from above it all, a face that was barely more than a skull gaped up at him with lidless, bloodshot eyes.

A wave of darkness pounded across Oltyx's executive buffer, as the ocular that the Chaplain had damaged crackled with a cascade of sudden failures. The resolution of his entire optic array collapsed momentarily, and tried several times to repair itself, bringing the horror below him into focus.

At last, a trembling image resolved itself into crystal clarity for a fraction of a second. But it was no longer the ravaged face of the Astartes which had been interred in the fighting machine. It was a gold-plated death's head, with a single ocular glaring from the darkness of one socket, and it spoke to him in words which seemed to come from the inside and the outside of his mind at once.

A king does what a king wants.

Blackness snapped back across Oltyx's optic buffer, as his vision collapsed back into disarray. When sight returned, he was looking at the wretched pilot once again, and he watched in revulsion as the tendons stretched taut on its neck. The ghoulish remnant of the human warrior was craning its head upwards in rapturous hatred, pulling itself free from tubes and wires, and gnashing its jaws hard enough to crack teeth. Oltyx realised, then, that it was trying to bite him.

And so, heedless of where he was, and who was watching him, he tried to bite it back.



### CHAPTER NINETEEN

## THE END

The *Accipitrine Aeon* slid from the hangar without a sound, a tiny sliver of gold, gliding out into infinite night. And alone on its dorsal surface, with his footplates clamped unshakably to the gold, stood Oltyx the king.

There was an old tale from the homeworld that Mentep had told him once, from the time long before the necrontyr had found the stars. It concerned a king who, besieged by a host one hundred times the size of his own, rode out from his walls alone, on a chariot of gold. That king had gone to his foe with a simple proclamation: that he would deign to spare them, if they withdrew immediately. As the story had it, the general of the besieging force was so overwhelmed by the strength of the king's heka, as fierce and intractable as the sun itself, that they bowed to it on the spot.

Only, he remembered now, that Mentep had not told him the story as a parable on the power of royal will. He had been making the point that truths could change over time: that you could not believe everything written in the old scrolls. The devious mystic had been skirting the edges of blasphemy, as ever. But as he stood now beneath that hungry night, with only the pale lights of the human armada ahead of him, Oltyx took his point.

He could try to convince himself that the Unclean would tremble as he swooped from the sky, that his sheer majesty would be enough to subdue the foe. But Oltyx was tired of attempting to stretch his will beyond the borders of the possible. However straight he stood on that tiny hull, and however brightly its gold gleamed as it vanished into the dark, he – like everyone in the ship receding behind him – knew that he was riding out to die. And in truth, he was relieved.

It was difficult, now, to fathom exactly how things had played out, following... the thing he had done. His executive buffer was clouded with errors, muddying his thoughts and scrambling his attempts to access the engrammatic clusters laid down in the last few hours. He knew he had killed the pilot of the human sarcophagus-machine, averting his oculars as he had clubbed its skull flat, so that he would not see the blood.

But it had been too late for such cautions. The lords of the fleet had seen what he had done, and so had Oltyx. And while the truth his action had revealed was too dire even for him to speak within the confines of his own mind, neither was it one he could avoid for long.

Zultanekh had spoken to him in the fight's aftermath, but Oltyx had known that nothing the Ogdobekh could have said would have changed things. So he had activated one of his archived court protocols, designed to write bland but believable answers into his vocal buffer, and he let it talk for him, as he had begun to consider his end.

The next he remembered, he had been in the hangar, ordering the *Aeon* made ready, and calling for an artificer to ornament him. The near-mindless artisan had been ordered to retrieve the fragments of the skeletal matter which had been detected in the ship's gold stock, the so-called saint's bones, and to affix them over Oltyx's carapace. Now, the seams of his carapace were plated with slivers of human bone, and over his shorn, shattered faceplate, he wore the front of the ancient, yellowed skull.

Oltyx thought he had made a brief, wandering speech then, proclaiming his intention to rob the humans of their hopes, by flying to them clad in their own iconography of death. He had told a different untruth to Zultanekh, saying that he hoped to distract their pursuers, taunting them with the relic so that they would focus on him alone, buying the fleet further time to escape. He had known that to be fantasy, as the humans would clearly settle at nothing short of their total destruction. But he had said it anyway. Then he had summoned

Pakhet to pilot the craft – alone, for she had lost all of her phalanx in the battles against the Astartes – and he had slipped into the night, unchallenged.

So this is how it ends, thought Oltyx, as his oculars began to be able to pick out the ugly convolutions on the hulls of the Imperial ships in the distance. In all the centuries he had filled his phantasory buffer with ideations of how kingship would feel, he had never once imagined the end of his theoretical reign. Now it was bearing towards him, however, he was surprised to find the prospect much preferable to that of staying on the throne.

A quiet, deep voice, riddled with interference, broke the perfect silence of the ghostwind.

'Is it too late to turn back from this course, Oltyx?' said Zultanekh, his usual bombast reduced to softness by distance and static. 'Not yet, I do not think.'

Oltyx resisted the urge to cast a lock over his interstitial node altogether, but he was bitter at having his final peace denied him, and responded acidly.

'This is the only way.'

'The king fancies his chances well against the Unclean, then?'

'You know he does not, Zultanekh. But what difference would it make if I stayed, honestly? Perhaps some tenet of their vile faith will find satisfaction in the return of these damned bones,' Oltyx suggested weakly, 'and they will turn back at last.'

'I had not known the Imperium of Man was so renowned for its reason and mercy,' deadpanned Zultanekh. 'But the king says it, and thus it must be so.'

Oltyx could find no answer to that, and so decided to be direct at last.

'You want the royal truth, Ogdobekh? I cannot continue, after... after what occurred. It is best it ends this way, than... any other.'

'It sounds, maybe, that there are truths at hand too powerful even for you to pronounce to yourself, Oltyx. Would you leave an empty throne, for fear of them?'

'It will all be reduced to atoms by these guns soon enough. What does it matter if I go first?'

'Negative splendour!' spat Zultanekh, angrier than Oltyx had heard him before. 'Have you seen the future, then, to say such things? Maybe without the weight of your stubborn head aboard, the Akrops will outpace the vermin after all! Or perhaps we will arrive at our destination. There are

whispers in the fleet, you know – the lords say they are picking up signals again, from above. As they have it, we pass beneath the wars of the stormlord, even now. We are not far from the eastern rim!'

'That is all fantasy,' sneered Oltyx. 'Either theirs, to give themselves false hope, or yours, which you concoct to poison me.'

'Do any of us understand this awful place?' barked Zultanekh, growing fainter as the Akrops fell behind him. 'No, we do not! The only thing this realm is full of, is mysteries. Who is to say we will not arrive at Drazak moments after your scattered particles decorate the hull of some ugly human warship?'

Drazak. The very thought of the word sent a chill through Oltyx's flux, deeper than the cold he was immersed in.

'Drazak would be the end of things for all of us,' said Oltyx, his transmission thick with loathing-signifiers. 'And it would certainly be the end for me.'

'I am not sure it would, Oltyx...'

'What are you implying?' demanded the king, and was answered by a silence so long he thought perhaps the wave had broken down. He found himself speaking into it, regardless. 'I am not... what you think I am,' he insisted. 'It was not... how it looked.'

He simply could not be afflicted. Whatever heka he had left forbade the very possibility. And yet as the silence stretched on, Oltyx found himself desperate for Zultanekh to reply, and confirm that such a thing was not possible.

'I am not like... my father,' he said, looking up to the empty dark. 'I am not like Yenekh.' But the carrier wave had long since collapsed, and the dark did not reply.

Until, eventually, it did.

Something struck his shoulder. A spray of golden slivers erupted in silence from a tiny black crater, and he looked down at the mark with faint disdain, as one might a biting insect. *Tungsten alloy*, his necrodermis told him, *laced with propellant*. A bullet. Oltyx looked down along the projectile's approach vector, right as Pakhet began to nose the *Aeon* in the same direction, and beheld his doom.

The ships resembled the carcasses of great fish, stripped to bone and yet still swimming. They filled the void beneath him with a cacophony of forms,

and as his oculars darted between them, Oltyx's phantasory buffer could not help but conjure the thought of their insides, damp and rank with the exhalations of the Unclean.

In front of him now, looming through the mass of ships like their haggard broodmother, was the *Polyphemus* itself. Its prow was still not healed from the ravages inflicted on it by the *Akrops*, but Oltyx could not even take satisfaction in that. All he could focus on were the tiny, writhing points of the welding torches around the closing edges of its wounds, as the Unclean's slaves toiled away in the savage grip of the cold.

They looked like nothing so much as the blind snouts of corpse-vermin, protruding from an infested carcass. Once again, his buffers were intruded upon by lurid images of the ship's interior. Of humans, in their desperate millions, swarming through the stinking gloom beneath that hull. As the visions multiplied, horror seized him. But it was not driven by the thought of the creatures themselves. It was driven by the hunger they provoked.

Finding the last of his rage, Oltyx planted one footplate at the very edge of the *Aeon*'s hull, and glowered ahead at the behemoth warship. *I shall be rid of all horrors now*, he proclaimed to himself, *and all hungers*.

Then, just as it had been in that ancient tale of Mentep's, Oltyx's foe submitted to the demands of his royal will, and gave him what he demanded. Streaks of whiteness began glittering in the night ahead, tracing faint stripes across the edges of his vision, as streams of projectiles converged on the *Aeon*.

The hull began to vibrate beneath his feet as the first shots struck. Then the gunners found him. Five tiny, stinging impacts darted in a line across his thigh, and then another fifteen across his chest. The shells raised puffs of pulverised bone where he wore the ribs of the long-dead saint, but barely scratched his reinforced carapace beneath.

Then the heavier guns locked on. The ship rocked beneath him as shots hammered into the undercarriage, but Pakhet stayed true to her course, unflinching. The *Polyphemus* filled all of the view ahead now, and the half-repaired mountain of its prow rose up before him with alarming speed. He was wondering whether the human gunners would be so inept that the *Aeon* would collide with the ship, just as the *Akrops* had once done, when the ship disappeared from beneath his feet.

Immediately, the *Polyphemus* and the night were rotating around him in a

vicious blur of dark and light. His proprioceptors told him he was spinning at a speed that would have immediately liquefied the tissues of a living being, while all around him glittered shards of gold plate, as all that was left of the *Aeon* expanded in a jagged cloud. He sighted Pakhet briefly, surrounded by a tight spiral of her own venting core-stuff, before a steel slug the size of his head struck the centre of his thorax, and everything was washed in searing green.

That is my flux, he assessed, even as his mind was torn from the ragged hole in his body. That is all that I am, and all that I ever was, disappearing. After that, Oltyx had only one more thought, and it was one that confused him absolutely. He had always imagined death would feel like something inside him being dragged away, leaving nothingness. But now it came, it was not like that at all. Instead, it felt as if he had been inside something, and was finally breaking free.

Oltyx died.

The horizon is broken, and the whole of the sky is alight. The void itself is cracked, and through its impossible wounds rise the death-groans of gods, heard everywhere at once as they shake the foundations of reality. The last, cataclysmic acts of the War in Heaven are at hand, and before him, too vast and terrible to behold, lies the Sokar Gate.

This cannot be a memory, he thinks, as he was never here. There is no 'he' any more, even, because he has ceased to be.

But someone was here, and so it has been remembered, and it is recalled to him now.

Is he the admiral Korrocep, caught at the moment of his obliteration, as he activates a weapon of such unfathomable strength that to wield it is to perish? Is he the sprawling, dull intelligence of the Akrops itself, which was reduced to little more than a burning suggestion of a warship when the weapon was activated? Or is he some tortured fusion of the two, stripped of all comprehension of reality beyond the knowledge that the task must be completed?

Perhaps he is Unnas, urging his half-ruined ship onwards from the throne at its apex, and exchanging terse words with the kings aboard the other vessels of the godslayer fleet? Unnas, who cannot bear to look at the bright horror within the gate, but who knows he must keep his gaze

steady - no matter what shadow is burned on his mind after - if the nightmare weapon is to finish its task.

Or perhaps he is Mentep, who designed the weapon. Who realises now, far too late, what darkness his rapture for knowledge has led him into. Mentep who, in the terrible silence after the infernal tool has done its work, will watch the kings gather round their mortally wounded prey, and make the unspeakable pact that will doom each of their peoples.

*Maybe he is the prey.* 

Or maybe he is none of these things. Maybe he was never there after all.

It is colder than anything he has ever known. It is cold vicious enough to freeze the life from a star, and it tears the heat from his core almost as quickly as it can burn. Iron-hard frost has crusted the silver of his plating, and blood has frozen into streaks of glistening black.

It is darker than any darkness should be, in the dead shell of the freighter. And yet, somehow, he can still see. Whether this is a mercy or not, he cannot tell.

The eyes of the others glimmer in the silent cavern, huddled in packs on ledges, or in ice-hardened warrens of gore. Occasionally they howl, as their terror overtakes them. He hears, somehow, even in this crushing absence which is more empty than the void.

The cold, and the dark, and the silence eat into the hearts of them, until they know they have no hearts. It freezes the skins they have made to ease their longing for security; they become brittle, and flake away to reveal the iron terror of their eternal bondage. There is no hiding from what they are. His teeth want to shiver, but there is only a fused plate of silver where his mouth should be.

He knows this terror. He thought he had learned to walk under its weight, once. But then he was cast out, and he realised just how heavy it was, without the pillars of duty to lean upon.

And that is what destroys him, now. Because beneath the pain of the cold, and the dark, and the grief for the body he has lost, a deeper set of instincts still have been deprived.

He has nobody to serve.

He was never much of a philosopher, but he knows this: the necrontyr had always prevailed through the power of their hierarchy. They had been born

into a world where individual life was brief and grim and meaningless, and where only the cumulative labours of the living could persist. And so, they had laboured. Their sheer will to impose order on chaos, either by the cryptek's staff, or the phaeron's scythe, or by the million-strong bootprints of the legions, had become their sole advantage against the cruelty of the stars.

That order of theirs was an edifice of impossible strength. It had been strong enough, indeed, to survive the extinction of flesh. Because a dynasty was in itself a vast body, with a king's will at its head. That will, and the service it demanded, was an anchor. A promise, of sorts: that even if they could never have their bodies back, they could at least remain parts of a body.

It was what made their condition bearable. Only kings could comprehend existence without a ruler: to all others, it was a horror beyond reason. They were rooted in the need to serve, even more so than the need to breathe.

And now, because of their affliction, they have been cast out. They have no king to serve, and no air to breathe.

He looks at the glyph of deliverance, scratched in the ice before him by his own claws. And he hopes, because that is all that he is still able to do.

He is being dragged through freezing darkness, as soft white corpse-ash falls from the sky. Plodding ahead of him, gripping his ankle with neither cruelty nor care, is Borakka. He is certain this is not a memory, but even so, he has been here before.

The biofurnace looms ahead, but he does not resist the Marshal's grip, even as he is hurled through its portal. But when he passes through into the place within, he sees his body is not one of flesh, but of gold.

Djoseras is in here with him. He sits quietly, as is his manner, with a small phase blade in his hand.

Affording him as much dignity as he can, but allowing no resistance, Djoseras strips away the gold, until rough grey necrodermis is revealed all over. And then he continues. His elder carves away the strange metal of his flesh, until bleeding flesh is exposed beneath.

It does not hurt, though. And when the procedure is complete, his brother lays a hand on his shoulder, and speaks.

'I will not lie to you,' he says, looking him in the eye. 'This will be hard. But you will endure it. Because you know it will be worse for others, if you do not. Go now, and do not be afraid.'

Finally, he sees a city of pale stone, beneath a black sky. He is certain that he has no knowledge of this place, but at the same time, it feels as familiar as the palace he was raised in.

His view descends past the walls of stark, windowless towers, and he is the only thing that moves in the stillness. The stone of the city is smooth and seamless, and shot through with the faintest, cloudy marbling. It is like steam trapped in glass, he thinks. It reminds him of someone he knew once, perhaps.

Before he can recall, his slow fall begins to carry him forwards, as if a gentle gravity is pulling him. Ahead stands a great pillared hall, whose wide entryway is empty and ungated. Through it, at the hall's far end, he sees a raised dais. There is something standing upon it, but he cannot make it out against the brightness of the stone.

The threshold approaches, and his vision begins to fade. Before it does, he has time to register a single detail, engraved in the lintel above the hall's entrance. A single glyph, which he has seen before. It is the glyph Sozusza: deliverance.

Then he is gone.



### **CHAPTER TWENTY**

### BETTER

He was not quite sure when he had begun to exist. Certainly, by the time he became aware of the fact, it had been going on for some time. Which told him that time, by inference, existed too.

Those two facts were, for now, the sum total of his knowledge of the universe. And so he continued to exist as time passed, free from even the faintest idea that other things might be possible.

Some time later – he had no means by which to gauge how long – he became aware that he was staring at a collection of shapes and colours. They had meaning, certainly, to some part of his mind. But what that was, was beyond him. And so he continued to exist, and to be aware of the shapes and colours.

Once again, understanding did not come suddenly, but in retrospect. Of course he knew what he was looking at – hadn't he always? It was a vast, golden figure, reclining upon a mountain of skulls. And it stared down on him with one baleful green eye, from the deep socket of a death's head mask. It had been staring at him for some time.

But now those concepts were tangible to him - skull, eye, golden – they began to link themselves with other concepts, like droplets of water merging

on a surface. Golden. King. Antikef. Unnas. Exile. Fleet. Pursuit. Madness.

Oltyx.

Curse.

Flesh.

The end of that node-chain seem to stick in his active process buffer as it passed, hanging there and replicating, until it crowded out his other thoughts: *Flesh. Flesh. Flesh. Flesh. Flesh. Flesh.* 

Other node-chains began to spring, uncontrolled, from the multiplying concept. Lungs, blood, tissue, hunger, oxygen, asphyxiation, necrosis, trapped. These chains propagated themselves more and more quickly, until the words rushed through him in a torrent, and their meanings blurred together.

It was as if a thread had been cut, then, which had suspended the weight of a mountain. Memories crashed down into the fragile space of his mind, and grew heavier by the moment, as semiotic patterns constructed themselves between abstractions, bringing meaning to the mass. Since he had no other memories, it was hard to avoid the logic that these must have been his own. But they could *not* be his – for he had only just begun to exist. Once that certainty was in place, the distress that had been building in him subsided. He was not Oltyx.

He was Nobody.

Concepts and recollections were chaining together with lightning speed now, and as the last of the memories recompiled themselves in Nobody's mind, he began to *understand*. This Oltyx, this king, had taken a high-calibre round directly to his heart.

It was not a heart, announced a thought that was not quite his own, unbidden.

Strange. The rubric seemed bonded to the very concept of *heart* with something like noetic scar tissue, tripping like a fail-safe whenever his mind examined it, and forcefully shunting it towards the concept of *core*. Now he looked further, it seemed his whole cognitive flow was forced through countless such scar-paths, worn smooth with endless use as they routed *eye* to *ocular*, *blood* to *flux*, and *breathing* to... anything but the idea of breathing. It was as exactly how a machine would have arranged its mind, Nobody supposed, in order to forget that it had once been something else.

In any case, Oltyx's core had been vented, and with it the flux that made up

his self. He had died, without question. But the patterns of the flux had been retained, somehow. Stored... elsewhere, while there was no vessel, nor any plasmatic matrix, to bear them. And while they had been elsewhere, they had accessed other memories, engraved in the same unfathomable darkness. Those memories had not belonged to Oltyx – but they had been passed on, along with all of the king's. Oltyx had accessed memories like this before many times, before he died, using something he had thought of as his evocatory medium.

Faint wisps of green gas, searingly hot, rose in front of him now, as he tried to process all of this. The mist looked a lot like the stuff that had surrounded Oltyx in his final moment of awareness.

And there, through the glowing fog, that skeletal, golden giant was still waiting, motionless, staring at him. Oltyx had seen this thing before. It had been... a phantom, of sorts? Or a hallucination? Nobody could not say for sure, as he only had the king's memories to go by.

But as a droplet of water fell onto the golden thing's face, sending concentric ripples gliding across its war-ravaged carapace, it was revealed for what it was: a reflection, on the surface of a puddle. He was looking at himself.

With his faculties growing more sophisticated by the moment as his mind continued to reassemble itself, he began to see himself in more detail. His thorax was a ruin, punctured with a hole a kubit wide, from which the wisps of flux were leaking.

But there were tiny creatures moving around the edges of the wound: microscopic repair scarabs, knitting it shut with tiny points of star-bright green light. They had already sealed the breach, he saw, with a thin membrane of necrodermis, and now they were reconstructing the armour above.

Once they had sealed that breach, Nobody reasoned, it must have reignited itself. The core, then, and the body around it, had been Oltyx's. And once it had been sufficiently repaired, it had begun to refill itself, with those vented patterns-of-self which had been stored elsewhere. Which, of course, was when he had begun to exist.

This left Nobody with an interesting dilemma. He had to decide who he would be. Would he be Oltyx, with his doubt and his frailty and his anger, and his tortured memories of flesh? Or would he purge it all, and become

something entirely new? After a few moments, Nobody decided that it was not a binary choice, in the end. His entire self was made from what Oltyx had been, and it seemed wasteful beyond measure to discard such a treasure hoard. That entity's story was not over yet.

He would take it on, with every affliction and madness intact. And along with it, he would take the burden of responsibility, for all the evils the king had committed. But there would be freedoms, too. The shot which had killed Oltyx had struck the glyph of Ithakas from his breast. Whatever rose in his form now would have no dynasty, no lineage, and none of the expectations of a thousand dead ancestors weighing it down. It would retain a king's will, but it would be unrestrained at last. He would master the things which tormented him. He would use them as a foundation. And on top of it, he would build something new.

Nobody made his decision, and ceased to be.

Oltyx rose from the mound of skulls, and began anew.

He did not know where he was, but he did not like it.

It was an enormous cave, its walls hidden by gloom and distance, and its ceiling just a suggestion of a ragged arch high above him, supported by grime-encrusted pillars. The air was humid and chilly, and heavy with-chemical traces — it carried stagnant water, corroded metal and petrochemical vapour, laced through with old smoke and fungal spores, and laid on top of a stench so thick he did not even register it at first. The cave reeked of death.

Something hard and brittle crumbled beneath his footplate, and he looked down to find himself stood knee-deep in a sprawling heap of skulls. There were other bones jumbled in with the mass – some shattered and ancient, some so fresh they still bore scraps of dark, dried meat and gristle, and all scored with deep cut marks. They had been butchered. And while the lower layers of the midden were a sea of fragile vermin bones, most of the larger remains appeared to be from humans.

There was a splashing sound, somewhere in the dark. Something nimble, running quickly through standing water or worse, and then falling silent again. From further away, he heard indistinct chattering, either in a language he could not understand, or in no language at all. The splashing came again, but closer, this time. Behind him, somewhere.

Dread settled on Oltyx, as he grew increasingly convinced of eyes upon him in the darkness, and he knew at last where he was. *Drazak*. He had died in the ghostwind, and somehow it had carried his essence here, to the place he had charged headlong at death in order to avoid. The idea was so ridiculous it made him angry. The necrontyr had laughed bitterly at the idea of an afterlife from their earliest days, and then biotransference had made the whole point moot. Oltyx had *been* in an afterlife already – *so what was this?* 

There was a clattering behind him on the bone-heap, as whatever horrors had been stalking him advanced. Oltyx turned with more resignation than fear in him, waiting to be confronted with the sight of the inevitable, grinning Flayed Ones.

He thought they were Flayed Ones, at first. The five creatures were filthy, emaciated things, draped in ragged cloaks of untanned hide, and caked in filth to the point where they seemed little more than bones and dirt. But where they should have borne long, ragged claws, they instead held spears fashioned from rusted metal.

Perhaps this was not Drazak, then, after all. Because approaching him across the scree of yellowed bones, he saw now, was a pack of *humans*.

Oltyx's body was still critically damaged. He was as frail as he would ever be. But these creatures were wretched. They were covered in growths and weeping sores, and each one bore multiple deformities, from missing eyes to twisted spines, and tiny, vestigial limbs hanging from their sides. Oltyx had seen healthier creatures in the plague graves outside Antikef, back in the time of flesh.

But to their credit, they were bold enough to attack him anyway. They leapt on him like starved animals, and as they clung to his body, he heard an explosion of footsteps behind him, as two more packs raced out of the shadows. They screeched and chattered and grunted at each other, and poked at his joints with their feeble blades. One clambered up onto his head, and began trying to prise his one remaining ocular out with a centuries-old knife, stamped with the insignia of the Unclean army.

Irritated, Oltyx reached up and jabbed a finger through the hollow of its neck. It was like punching a hole through reed-paper, and the thing fell to the ground, gurgling, as it drowned on its own blood. Three more of the creatures were clinging to the arm he had raised, trying to haul it to the ground; he clapped the arm against his breastplate, bursting all three of their

chests with a single, wet crack.

He felt a blade working into the inside of his knee joint, prompting a tiny puff of escaped core-flux: the creature wrapped around his leg shrieked, and pulled back a blackened hand. He kicked out at the moment its grip loosened, and it went sailing off into the dark, landing with a snap of bone and a clang of metal.

Metal, thought Oltyx, intrigued. That was unusual, in a cave.

He killed four, maybe five more of the creatures, before the remainder decided to flee. They sprinted off back into the dark, dragging their dead and wounded with them, and Oltyx was left alone again, carapace wreathed in the steam of their spilled blood. He caught another glimpse of his reflection, in the mire at the base of the charnel pile, and saw that its gold had now been covered almost entirely by red. Once, that would have dismayed him beyond measure. Now, all he could think was how pleasantly warm the blood felt on his skin.

Now that he had been left alone, he walked back over to the mound of remains he had woken on, and began to wade through it. During the fight, he had seen a glimpse of something further down the drift, which had not looked as if it belonged there.

As he moved through the midden, the skulls gave way to elongate limb bones, and to scraps of skin, leather and fabric. This was a store pile of some kind, he figured. A nest, where those broken humans dragged the things they found. Here was a pile of corroded, empty ammunition clips, and a trio of cracked infantry helmets, and here was a heap of incomprehensible religious detritus — bones, wire and scrap, fashioned into a crude icon of the corpse-Emperor's double-headed beast. And there, half-hidden beneath a sheet of rusted-through steel, but betrayed by the faint glow of the orb on its hilt... yes. He had been right. It was a phase sword. And even though its blade was shattered and useless, he knew this weapon, for it had belonged to Pakhet.

Oltyx's flux leapt – wherever this was, it was possible that he was not alone here. It seemed ludicrous to hope that the captain of his guard had made it through whatever had happened to them intact. But it was a hope he was prepared to throw himself behind, regardless. Because if she had survived, she would be the only trace of the world he knew, in this dismal fathomless underworld. Besides, she had saved him enough times. And now he was no longer a king, there was nothing to stop him repaying the debt.

Configuring his oculars to show him the quantum shivers left by the shattered phase blade, he saw a faint, quaking trail leading away from the midden. Presumably, the scavengers had dragged the weapon here from somewhere else – and maybe Pakhet was still there. Without hesitation, Oltyx set his kinetic actuators to drink in the highest flux-rating his recovering core could allow them, and ran into the darkness.

After he passed the third pillar, he saw that they were spaced evenly, with one jutting from the detritus of the cavern floor every two khet. And sometimes, in the spaces between them, the layer of fungus-stiffened muck covering the floor gave way to reveal patches of tarnished, age-blackened metal.

After the seventh pillar, he passed into a patch of weak light falling from above, and allowing clumps of grey, poison-choked weeds to grow in the filth. There was a hole in the cave's roof, here. A rhythmic, percussive rattle drifted down from the sky as he passed under it, and looking up, Oltyx saw a line of bulbous silhouettes moving across the jagged gap, travelling along a thin bridge like beads along a string. A... *train*, he realised at last, after his recognition protocols had dived deep into his knowledge of prehistoric technologies.

There are definitely no trains on Drazak, Oltyx thought, as the chugging, antiquated thing vanished from sight. Then, jogged by the rattle of the conveyance as it passed overhead, he queried his seismoreceptors, and discovered that the entirety of the cavern floor was rumbling, at a constant, barely perceptible level. It was an engine. A vast, crude engine, leagues away through solid metal, but still shaking the floor.

It was at the ninth pillar that his suspicions were confirmed. Because here, the sky split again, in a chasm that a whole wing of scythecraft could have flown down. And up above, cast in stark shadow by banks of harsh electric lights, he saw an artillery shell the size of a tomb being winched across the gap. Beside the creaking of the great cradle that supported the munition, another sound drifted down from the heights: human voices. There must have been a thousand or more, croaking their way in unison through a funereal dirge. *A working-chant*, Oltyx thought, in abject disbelief. They were moving that thing with nothing but pulleys, and muscles, and misery.

The Polyphemus, Oltyx growled to himself, as the shell passed over the chasm and into shadow. A ship of such dysfunctional enormity that it held

entire feral societies in its gullet. A ship which, for all its catastrophic-inefficiency, had led the systematic ruin of his people. This hulk of cruelty and squalor had all but wiped Ithakas from the galaxy.

Now, from the looks of it, it was arming itself to finish the job. And through means he could not yet even begin to comprehend, he had found himself in the depths of its rotten heart. Pushing his core to the very edge of its weakened capacity, Oltyx picked up speed, and sprinted on.

Eventually, he reached an end to the foetid cavern of the *Polyphemus*' bilge. The rumble of the engines was even fainter here, and so he presumed he was nearing its front. Over the course of twenty khet, the deck rose from the mire in a shallow ramp of steel, and at its head was a broken-down wall of ornate ceramic blocks, with a cracked archway at its centre.

Stalking inside, Oltyx was surprised to find what seemed to be a place of worship. Or at least, it had been at some point. The interior was all but bare, although he could see brackets and sheared bolts which had once borne ornamentation. Across one wall, a broad, pale patch betrayed the place where an icon had been prised away, but had left a ghost of its twin-headed image against centuries of candle smoke.

Looking at the wall more closely, Oltyx saw that it was rough and lumpen, formed from rows and rows of domed, irregular nodules. Nodules which, he saw now, were gazing sightlessly back at him from pairs of empty sockets.

'Skulls,' he said to himself out loud, as he ran a finger over the ridged mask of bone on his own faceplate. 'More skulls.' There were thousands of them, he saw, now that he knew what he was looking at. *Hundreds* of thousands. This was a hoard to shame even the midden of the bilge-cannibals. And it had been their place of worship.

It explained, at least, why he had not been sought out by the soldiers of the Imperium, despite the fact he was bedecked with the remains of the ship's most precious relic. This entire *ship* was a relic, he saw now — who knew how many martyrs and zealots were interred in its structure, their bones humming with the stink of the warp? Oltyx was proud to know nothing of the psyker's arts, but he could only imagine his adornments would make him blend into the background noise of this dreadful temple to war.

The far end of the chapel was dominated by a huge circular window. It had been assembled from fragments of coloured glass, arranged to depict crude

images of humans in bulky armour, or swathed in ludicrous robes. Oltyx had only the faintest understanding of human expression, but one glance told him that every creature depicted on the window was either mortally wounded, or in a state of profound mental suffering. Looking at the grisly display, surrounded by those ranks upon ranks of skulls, Oltyx wondered if perhaps the necrontyr really had, at last, been superseded in their capacity for cruelty.

The window was not intact, he noticed. A cluster of holes had been punched through the bleak vignettes, and scanning the floor around him now, Oltyx saw a scattering of impact-deformed gold fragments. Further along the nave, a crater had been punched deep into the metal floor – something very heavy had hit the deck here, at blistering speed. And at the crater's centre, surrounded by debris, lay a broken, splay-limbed form.

'My.... king,' croaked Pakhet, her vocal actuators struggling against millennia of disuse, as she raised a hand from the crater's floor.

'I am your king no longer,' replied Oltyx softly, as he waved her down. 'Just your kinfolk, glad to see you alive.' As he knelt beside her, he saw the captain had sustained grievous injuries. Her core had not been punctured through as his had, but her hip had been nearly cracked in two by the impact, and her left shoulder had been near flattened, mashing her arm uselessly against her side.

Oltyx's hand moved to his own shoulder, and then his legs, looking for similar trauma, but found only the scoring of bullets from before the *Aeon*'s demise.

'Pakhet,' he said, allowing his nodal patterns to display the quiet awe he felt, 'do not tell me you took the impact for both of us?'

'I... did my duty,' said the lychguard drily, as if seizing her lord and orienting herself to shield him, all during the disintegration of a voidcraft in flight, had been as unremarkable a task as standing beside a throne.

'We must have gone straight through the hole the *Akrops* tore...' reasoned Oltyx, looking up at the shattered window again. Sure enough, the ancient chapel looked out over the bottom of a gaping steel canyon, protruded into by promontories of twisted steel girders, and surrounded by a patchwork shell of armoured plates. There were the lights of the welding torches again, but this time, he was seeing them from inside.

Then, Oltyx's core felt as if it dropped straight through the deck below him, as he looked past the lights of the torches, through the crackling electrostatic

shields which protected the workers from the deathly cold beyond, and saw the lights of ship-duels flashing in the ghostwind.

'The battle has begun,' he whispered, feeling as insignificant as one of the dust-motes which swirled in the ruddy light before the window. As if revelling in his despair, the ship quaked around them, dislodging skulls from the wall to smash against the deck, and leaving the stink of static charge in the air. The great guns, it seemed, were in range.

'How long has it been, Pakhet?' he asked.

'Days...' she responded, sounding uncertain. 'The Unclean... took you,' she admitted, shame-patterns flashing at the base of her cranial pylon, 'soon after we hit. There were... hundreds. I could not stop them.'

Oltyx glanced around, and saw that there were a dozen human corpses scattered around the impact crater, so thoroughly pulverised that he had not been able to distinguish them from the rest of the chapel's detritus at first. She had not let him go without a fight.

'It is all right, Pakhet. Some things...' He hesitated, feeling as if he stood on the edge of something, before willing the words anew. 'Some things, I have learned, are just not possible.'

Oltyx collapsed to the deck, sitting heavily beside Pakhet at the crater's base, and emitted a long, exhausted sigh-analogue. Pakhet, not unusually, said nothing. But she was company, and so Oltyx spoke.

'The fleet will not escape. I saw this was true a long time ago. But I was a coward, to flee before the end. I should be there now, with the last of the dynasty.'

Pakhet continued to say nothing, and he fell silent for a while.

'Yenekh should be there,' he added, at last. Then he gestured loosely to the window with one burned, blade-scored golden hand, and growled in frustration. 'But Yenekh is not there, because his king, and his friend, left him for dead in the dark. Do you know why, Pakhet?'

The lychguard's vocal actuators ground faintly, as if words were being formed, but nothing came.

'Protecting our future!' he spat, as if the words were caustic waste, and he stood to begin pacing the ruin of the chapel. 'Quarantining the contagion, to maintain the purity of Ithakas. As if anyone believed that, Pakhet. As if I even believed that. I was a pathetic king, Pakhet. A paranoid, vainglorious fool.'

The lychguard maintained a level gaze across the chapel, saying nothing

either to contradict or endorse the opinion, and Oltyx shook his hands at her in frustration.

'It is all right, Pakhet. The king is gone now, and I am merely burdened with his near-endless mistakes. You can say what you think.'

There was a very long silence, broken twice by the rumbling of the guns.

'I think... you were better than Unnas,' said Pakhet carefully, at last. 'And you... killed well.'

Oltyx snorted with black amusement, the sound ringing like a burst of static in the skull-lined ruin.

'High praise,' he murmured, before a dark tide of loathing swept over him again. 'But do you know the real reason I cast Yenekh out, despite all his faithful service? Why I punished him for his pain, rather than try to understand it?'

'The same reason you bade me fly you to your death here,' said Pakhet instantly. 'Because you were afraid.'

Oltyx almost stepped back in surprise, then. Because she was right.

'Yes, Pakhet. I was terrified. I wanted to believe in Mentep's cure. I wanted to make an exception for Yenekh... in case things could somehow end well. But when I saw his sickness up close... when I saw the flayers again, in the *Akrops*... terror took me.'

'Because you were Cursed yourself,' said Pakhet, with an edge of steel in her husk of a voice, 'but you could not confront that.'

Oltyx stopped pacing, and stared quietly at the distant lights of the battle, all anger fallen from him at last.

'Because I was Cursed myself,' he admitted, and lifted his blood-streaked hands to regard them, as if for the first time. 'You knew, didn't you, Pakhet?'

'Everyone did,' said the captain, swivelling the raptorial planes of her faceplate towards him for the first time. 'But it was only our duty... to protect your body. A king's mind... is his own burden.'

'It is,' Oltyx agreed. 'It proved too much of a burden for the king, though. And now I am burdened with it in turn. It is not a weight I think I can carry either.'

He sat down once more, and the two of them fell into silence again, side by side in the crater, as the guns drummed their monstrous rhythms in the depths of the hull.

'Did you... know....' said Pakhet, unbidden, and her words sounded as if

they came with even greater difficulty now. 'I... watched you... grow,' she managed at last, with the faintest trace of sorrow in her monotone. 'Back on Antikef... back... before *this*.' She gestured at the silver plating of her body, and Oltyx tilted his head in bafflement.

Before biotransference, did she mean? thought Oltyx. He stared at her, straining to see how the flesh might once have robed the blank metal of her face, but he could not form the image in his mind.

'I was... the one who taught you... use of the glaive,' Pakhet said sadly, as she saw he did not recognise her. And as she spoke, Oltyx's recognition protocol flared with affirmation-glyphs after all, for there was no doubting the truth of what she had said. Fresh shame flooded through his core, that he had never once cared enough, or looked closely enough, to recognise his old instructor from the palace.

'I remember, now,' Oltyx said. 'And it seems, then, that I owe even more to you.'

'I trained you from... the earliest days,' said Pakhet, faceplate tilting upwards, and Oltyx wondered what her engrams allowed her to see from that distant time. 'You were...' She struggled to find the word. 'Good.'

'You honour me with such praise,' he said, looking back at his hands. 'But it will do me no good now. Maybe I was good with the glaive. Maybe I am yet. But look at the size of this... monster. Will the two of us take it down alone?'

'I did not mean you were good... with the glaive,' said Pakhet, with a dry hiss that might have been the ghost of a laugh. 'You fought... like... a common farm-thrall, with... every weapon I tried you with. No – I meant you were... good.'

'Hardly the greatest virtue, that,' said Oltyx, 'for a scion to a necrontyr throne. Goodness won our ancestors no stars, you know.'

'No,' agreed Pakhet. 'But maybe... it will hold on to some... yet.'

'Maybe I was... good, once,' murmured Oltyx, lost in the idea. 'But we are not, any of us, the people we were back then. We are just war machines now, who sometimes have their memories. And that youth you knew? He is long gone, and any goodness along with him. Drowned in time, and blood, and steel.'

Pakhet shrugged so feebly it was barely a tremble, and her oculars flickered.

'But now... you have died again, Oltyx. And you have come back. You

have... a second chance, now. So... do... better, this time.'

Oltyx asked Pakhet what she meant by that, but there was no response. Nor was there any the second time he asked. Eventually, there was a soft clank, and when Oltyx looked over to see its cause, he saw Pakhet had fallen onto her side, with her nodal arrays extinguished. Only now that she had collapsed, did he see the fist-wide rupture in the back of her core, from which the last of her flux had bled.

Oltyx was alone again.

With a gentleness that his killer's hands struggled to find, he propped up Pakhet's body again, in the place where it had sat, and brushed the rubble from the silver of her carapace, the golden crescent on her brow. Then, with a sting of sorrow he was unashamed to feel, he cast the protocol of disinterment that summoned his glaive to hand, which Pakhet herself had taught him, and laid the weapon across her lap.

'You were right, you know,' he said quietly, placing her hand on the weapon's grip. 'I never was any good with it.'

After that, Oltyx turned back towards the depths of the ship, and summoned a new, clean wrath to his core. He did not intend to squander the first and last piece of advice Pakhet had given him in sixty million years. He was going to do better. And he would start by confronting the thing he had been running from for as long as he could remember.

Moving slowly, deliberately and calmly, Oltyx walked to the nearest of the human bodies in the derelict chapel. He knelt beside it, rubble crunching beneath the joints of his knees. And then, in light turned red by its passage through the death-images of alien saints, he began to feed at last.



### **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

## THE TWICE-DEAD KING

Oltyx could not think now quite what he had expected to happen. Some sublime evolution of his mental state, perhaps, or an eruption of blades from his limbs. Transcendent euphoria, or fury, or uncontrollable frenzy. Even instant collapse, into some new abyss of madness, would have seemed at least fitting.

The dread of this moment had dominated his existence. His affliction with the curse had filled him with a terror so vast that he had not let himself accept the reality of it. He had reshaped his entire mental landscape just to cover it up, and had gone to ever-greater lengths just to keep the veil from slipping. In the end, he had died, rather than confront it.

But here he was, crouched over a corpse, with rich, decay-darkened blood streaming from his faceplate. And it seemed like the most ordinary thing in the world.

Oltyx began to feel a sense of anticlimax as he fed. And gradually, as his flux roiled with introspection, it deepened into dread. Should he not have been *driven* to this, by the torment of the dysphorakh? If this moment proved not to shatter his inner world, then how could he bear the shame of everything

he had destroyed in the name of averting it?

Pakhet, Neth, Mentep, Duamehht... Borakka's purges... Yenekh. So much had been lost. And for what?

The armada of the Unclean has not been the ruin of Ithakas, in the end, Oltyx thought, flux crackling with bitterness. It has been my own cowardice.

Brightness flared behind the chapel's window, then, as a necron voidship died in the night outside. It was too much; his core could no longer contain his guilt, and as the cold green light faded, casting deep shadows in the eye sockets of the skulls watching over him, Oltyx threw back his head and roared like a beast in a trap.

'What is meant to happen now?' he bellowed at the mute, blackened jury. 'Why am I not changed?'

But the skulls said nothing; they were as still as the empty vessel of Pakhet's body beneath the window, and the boiling in his flux would not subside. Taking hold of the corpse before him, Oltyx lifted it into the air with a snarl of hatred and tore it in two, before hurling the pieces at the chapel's wall.

'Why?' he demanded again of the skulls, as smoke began to rise from his flux-heated carapace. 'Why am I not suffering, as I ought to?'

'But, Oltyx,' said a voice, as something sharp and slender tapped across the back of his left shoulder-plate. 'You are suffering.'

Oltyx's kinetic actuators locked rigid, freezing him in place. The voice was deep and grating, and sounded as if it came to him through a tunnel bored in deep, cold stone. And though he had heard it clearly, his aural transducers could not tell him where it was coming from.

Then the tapping came again, thin and rattling and cold as midnight, and Oltyx understood. Somehow, his mind was making words out of the signals coming from his necrodermis.

'Believe me,' said the voice. 'You are changed. Your change, your suffering... they have gone on for a long time.'

Oltyx could not help but remember the moment in the black thickets of Antikef's palace gardens, when a monstrously distorted Flayed One had appeared behind him, tapping him with its black-glass claw. Then, just as now, he had been rigid with shock, unable to look round at the thing. But this time, something was different. He could understand what was being said to him.

Because those taps on his shoulder *were* words, expressed in code. A code, in fact, that only he and one other entity still alive knew. And if that hadn't divulged the identity of the speaker to him, then what it said next would have done.

# 'All that has happened here, is... you have accepted what you are. And... you took your fly-blown time.'

Oltyx was no longer afraid, then, to turn towards the thing behind him. Because he knew for certain that it was no monster.

The entity which had once been Yenekh had changed, during its long time in the dark. The former admiral's body had stretched to tortuous extremes, warping the once perfect proportions of his carapace into something emaciated and predatory. His hands hung below his knees now, and were tipped with wicked, irregular blades that brushed the deck at his feet. If it had not been for the deep crook that curved his spinal armature, and the feral half-crouch of his posture, he would have towered over Oltyx.

The silver which coated him had darkened and tarnished, giving way in places to the glassy, night-dark smoothness of the altered necrodermis beneath. Thick drifts of organic residue had built up in the recesses of his armour, and between the riblike spars of his thorax. It sparkled with steel-hard frost from the cold of the place he had emerged from, and thin mist coiled in the hollows of his body, where the air itself froze from proximity to him. Even the light of his core, dappled where slicks of muck obscured his nodes, shone paler now, as if the deep cold had got into his very flux somehow.

His face, too – and it was a face, for Oltyx no longer saw the need to avoid the lexicon of the time of flesh – had warped. His cranial dome had flattened and lengthened, while the sockets of his eyes had widened and become more pronounced, as if they belonged to some crepuscular hunting beast. They appeared set in a permanent aspect of sorrow and hunger, and were set above a long, slender mandible plate, and a pair of kubit-long, retrograde fangs.

And yet this creature was instantly recognisable to Oltyx as Yenekh – his body seemed to bear his presence more authentically now, somehow, than it had done in the earliest stages of its change, when Oltyx had last seen him. The frigid specks of his eyes, even sitting as they were in the deep recesses of that ghastly skull, held more of Yenekh than his oculars had ever done.

They were still lifeless works of artifice, Oltyx knew, in the hard, pitiless truth of the material universe. But in a hekatic sense, to *him*, they were eyes. And they bore a terrible weight of sadness, which the inert facets of Yenekh's previous form had never been able to express.

Oltyx *had* changed, he knew then. Because for all the ghoulish distortion of the thing before him, he was convinced that Yenekh had never seemed more noble in form.

There was so much that needed to be said, in that moment. But as happened all too often, words drained from Oltyx's vocal buffer when he needed them most.

'How?' was all he could manage, in the end.

Yenekh's strange face tilted in query, and his arm rose with liquid speed, to tap its claw-tips on his armour in reply.

'How did I come here? I... moved. That is all I can say. It is not a complex thing. Not a difficult thing. But it cannot be described. You will know, when you walk the paths yourself.'

'So Mentep was right, then? The... Flayed Ones do use this place to make their transit between worlds?'

Yenekh shrugged at that, with a soft rattle of claws. 'Perhaps. As it was when I... ruled ships... I do not care how I travel. I care for... getting there. So – here I am.'

Yenekh stood still, then, and they both knew that it was on Oltyx to find whatever words would come next. At the mention of Yenekh's former station, Oltyx had felt the deep, heavy chill of guilt again.

'There were so many times, Yenekh, when I wished I had not done what I had done. When I wished that I could bring you back. So much has been lost that might not have been, had you been with us.'

He lowered his head for a moment, trying to find his way through the pummelling of conflicted feelings in his core, and carried on.

'Not just ships, or legions, either. The fleet lost its... heart, I suppose you could say, when I banished you. You were a hero to them. An example. So long as the Razor held hope, I think, even the most dour, vitriform fringeworld bastard among them felt duty-bound to dig some up from their own cores.'

Oltyx looked up at Yenekh again, meeting his eyes, and found a question leaving his vocal buffer before he could consider its wisdom.

'Why did you not come back sooner, damn you?'

Yenekh's eyes flared, with a blue edge of danger fringing their usual green, and he leaned forward slightly, bringing those head-long fangs closer to Oltyx. The claws rose again, and jabbed at his thorax with vicious, clinking stabs as he spoke.

'Because you damned me. Renounced me. Renounced all my kind... all our kind! We do not move at the behest... of thrones. We come unbidden, always.'

Those last four words slithered into Oltyx's core as if they came straight from the ghostwind itself, and although they were not an overt threat, they rooted him to the spot regardless.

Yenekh had always been lethal. But he had ever underplayed the fact, carrying himself with the relaxed, privileged affability of a young lord at leisure. Only in the thick of combat had his instinct for slaughter been unleashed, and the total, instant change in him had been the undoing of many overconfident duellists, over the ages. But now, Oltyx saw all too clearly, Yenekh wore that blade unsheathed.

'Forgive me, Yenekh – I was an idiot, to ask such a thing.'

The pause then was awkward, but not dangerous, and in its stillness, a thought occurred to Oltyx.

'You say the Cur... that we come unbidden,' he ventured, hesitant. 'And indeed, that has ever been said of... us.' *That will take some getting used to*, he thought. 'And yet, back on Sedh, the flayers beneath the ossuary heeded my missives. They kept out of sight as I decreed, and when I called for their release into battle, they came. How was this the case?'

Yenekh's stare bored into Oltyx like a gauss-drill then, but there was the faintest limning of humour to the coldness of his eyes as he replied.

#### 'How indeed. Why do you think... they respected your word?'

'I see,' stated Oltyx after a concerted instant of thought, and truly did feel like an idiot. 'Szarekh's bones, Yenekh... How long have I been...?'

'A long time, Oltyx. Longer than me... maybe. Mentep said... he'd never seen anything like the way you... resisted it. *Denied* it. Took some heka.'

'Heka, or stubbornness.'

'Was there ever... a difference?' tapped Yenekh, and his fangs shivered

with faint flux-light, in what Oltyx could only see as a thin smile.

'But...' Oltyx began, feeling as if his mind had been emptied into a vast, empty space. 'I never had the urge to... to *feed*. I never...'

He trailed off, lost in incomprehension, and felt ashamed that he had ever thought of Yenekh as the dimmer of the two of them.

'I do not understand this thing,' he said at last, bristling with frustration. 'Mentep said much over the years, talking of dysphorakhs and sublimated urges, and endless theories on C'tan devilry... but can you tell me, Yenekh, in terms I have a hope of understanding, what this curse actually *is*?'

'You killed... the only cryptek who might know. But if you want... my word? It is hunger, Oltyx. Nothing more. Hunger for what is lost. For what could yet be. Hunger that knows no reason. Hunger for the bodies... we threw away... in Szarekh's war.'

'That is the dysphorakh, then, which Mentep told me of?'

'Yes. In the end, only... flesh will feed it. But we all find other... substitutes... to stave it off. We find obsessions... to keep it at bay. Compulsions. Discipline, tradition, power. Violence. *Recklessness*.'

'This explains much,' said Oltyx, in a grim monotone, as Unnas' long-ago condemnation of him rose through his mind. Wicked Oltyx... Whatever he had... it was never enough. Whatever he was given... he always wanted more. Remembering that voice, Oltyx thought of the decadence and decay which had been inflicted on Ithakas during the mad king's decline, and then of the terror he himself had imposed on the exodus fleet, in the dying days of his own reign. He had tried to drown his sickness in tyranny.

'Yenekh – what did you seek, to drown your own longing? You always seemed so... measured, until things fell apart. Did you have some hidden vice?'

'Yes,' said Yenekh, with a single rap of his claw, on the rough, repaired metal where Oltyx's thoracic glyph had once sat. 'Hope. It is this... vice... that brings me here now.'

Oltyx threw his arms out in exasperation, gesturing broadly at the skull-lined ruin around them.

'I cannot see what hope there is now, Yenekh. And in any case, this makes no sense. You should hate me, for what I did to you!'

'I tried,' admitted Yenekh, with that chilly edge to his voice again. 'I tried

to find hate for you. With everything I had. But even when I could ignite it... it would not stay lit. We all have failings, Oltyx. This is one of mine. I could not hate you... as I knew you were sick. That, in the end, you could never become... the monster you always dreamed of being.'

'If only I had showed you the same consideration,' Oltyx murmured, but Yenekh swiped his claws through the air, in a strange echo of the wild gesticulations which had ever accompanied his speech, and then rattled them on his shoulder.

'But you did not. It is... done now, Oltyx. Mentep always said we... could change. That biotransference did not... set our minds in stone. There is still time.' A second burst of green light lit the chapel then, as another Ithakan ship fell to the Emperor's hounds, and Yenekh glanced at the rosette window. 'Perhaps not... much time.'

'Go on, then,' said Oltyx. 'What do you intend?'

'The king who forsook us... is dead. Something new stands in his place. I owe this... new Oltyx nothing. He owes me nothing. I come to him, then... as an equal.'

'And I receive you as an equal in turn,' said Oltyx, with a deep incline of his head.

'Then,' said Yenekh, dropping abruptly to one knee, 'I would ask him... to accept my service. To be my king.'

Oltyx looked down at the blade-fingered monster that knelt before him, and the strangest of memories came to his mind. It was, he was certain, no memory of his, as it came neither from this existence, nor either of the two before it. It had come to him in the darkness, after he had died. And now, as it lingered in his buffers – this vision of the exiled Cursed, shivering as they languished without a master to serve – he knew that somehow, for a moment, he had lived Yenekh's experience. He understood, with a new, profound surety, exactly what was being asked of him. But still, uncertainty lingered.

'The Flayed had a king already, you know,' he warned Yenekh. 'In Unnas.'

Yenekh's arms did not move in response to that. He merely looked up at Oltyx with a glare that was at once harrowing and bolstering, until Oltyx said the words for him.

'You are right, old friend. Unnas was no king. But I shall be. Rise now, Yenekh, Razor of Sedh, and first of my people.'

Yenekh rose. And this time he stood to his full height, eyes blazing in the

gloom, and wicked light gleaming along the length of his fangs.

Looking up in astonishment at the Razor, Oltyx saw movement on the wall behind him, and when he registered what it was, he could only raise an arm and point in mute astonishment. Whether they had appeared in that instant, or during the course of their council, he could not say. But at some point, the legions of the Flayed had arrived.

There were hundreds of them, he saw now, clinging to the wall of the chapel like roosting cave-fliers. Silent and motionless, they had blended seamlessly with the mass of darkened skulls they had roosted on. But now they spread their claws like terrible wings, and threw their heads back to unleash a great collective hunting-shriek. Their cries were all too familiar to Oltyx, as they had ever echoed through the catacombs of Sedh. He had only ever heard sorrow and madness in their calls, back then. But now, there was something different. It felt almost *euphoric*. As the mass of distorted, jagged faces turned to him, like the macabre architecture itself had sprung to vengeful life, Oltyx realised they were hailing their king.

In that moment, he understood that he had never truly known, in one moment aboard the *Akrops*, what it meant to be a king. Now, he knew. His people wanted nothing more than to follow him, and he longed for nothing more than to give them victory.

'How many are they?' whispered Oltyx, trembling with awe, as he looked up and saw the ceiling, too, was swarming with the Children of Llandu'gor.

'Many,' tapped Yenekh. 'We do not count in... phalanxes... in legions. We have no number. But every citizen of Ithakas... the banished... the purged... they found us, huddled in that freighter. I am sure there are... more, still. I have seen kindred in the packs... marked by the sigils of... dynasties I do not know. Our kind seeks company, always. It is always worse... when you are alone.'

'Then they shall no longer be alone,' decreed Oltyx, as he turned back to face the cavernous interior of the ancient warship. 'Wherever they came from, *this* is where they belong now.'

Oltyx looked round to take in the seething vanguard of his army with a long, unwavering look. *If nothing else*, he thought, *I shall not be expected to make so many speeches, this time*.

'We hunt!' he roared, and as his first footfall thundered on the deck, powering him into a charge, a sound like the waking of the dead, louder even

than the booming of the human guns, erupted behind him.

It was during that wild, tireless charge, that Oltyx finally felt what he had not, when he had first taken the flesh.

It was a change that affected not just him, but Yenekh too, and the whole of the great, surging pack which ran with them both. For the first time, after aeons spent mentally huddled against an overwhelming sense of doom, every creature in that mass felt a sense of undeniable purpose. More than that, Oltyx knew, they felt that purpose *together*. Beneath the cacophony and the gore, there was no mistaking the fearsome unity of the necrontyr, which had once given them the strength to topple gods.

And despite the degradation of their minds over years, centuries, *aeons* of torment, the Flayed Ones knew it. No longer were they exiles or vermin. They were soldiers again, as they had once been, so long ago. None of them had quite forgotten how that felt. And despite the tattered, warped grotesquerie of their forms, their pride had never quite been extinguished.

Oltyx intended to stoke that fire into an inferno. After the slow desperation of shepherding the ever-dwindling resources of the exodus fleet, he suddenly had an army again. He even dared wonder if perhaps Ithakas had never been lost at all; merely transmuted into something else, which he had not been able to see until he had crossed the threshold himself.

In moments, the exile army fell upon its first prey. A great rabble of bilgedwellers, several hundred of them, were marauding up-ship with whatever weapons they had been able to scrounge from their middens. Whether they sought revenge on Oltyx for those he had killed, or to recapture him for their scrap pile, he did not know. He did not care. All that mattered to him was the brief moment of animal panic he witnessed in them, as they saw a wall of screeching, razor-clawed death come rushing from the dark to claim them.

The bilge-dwellers turned and fled the moment they saw Oltyx's host, but they never had a chance. The fastest of the kindred accelerated past their king, claws curled, in a bestial knuckle-run, and had sunk their talons into the fleeing humans within seconds. Perhaps half the prey turned to fight, then, and their courage at least earned them a faster death.

It was not an orderly assault that unfolded then. But it was coordinated, on a level Oltyx could not yet fathom. It *tessellated*, with sub-packs coalescing at random from the melee, and rushing in where others had lost momentum, so

that there was always a wall of flickering claws, descending where it was needed most. The feral humans fell like cut reeds. And even as Oltyx led the vanguard onwards, he heard the frantic, wet tearing sounds of feeding behind them, as the fallen were torn to shreds by the next wave to come howling from the chapel's mouth.

Already, he was leading the frontrunners to fresh meat. And their next feeding would be a feast, as the carnage in the bilge had not proceeded quietly. Sure enough, as Oltyx reached the place where he had seen the shell being winched overhead, through the shattered vault of the ceiling, he heard the piercing wail of an alarm siren drifting from the heights above. His phantasory buffer coruscated with thoughts of the horror that he knew must be spreading in the higher decks now, as a deafening, otherworldly chorus of shrieks rose from the depths of the ship.

He would give the defenders no time to steel themselves. Hanging down through the shattered vault above were clusters of waist-thick winch chains, leading all the way up into the vertical expanse of the gunnery decks. They would take his horde into the very heart of the ship, and before he had even wondered how he might articulate his will to them, they had begun to scale the iron.

Yenekh was the first. Bounding ahead with a fierce, loping stride, he leapt up three times his own height, and hooked his claws onto a link with an explosion of sparks. The horde split itself behind him, according to form. The ranks of the necron legions had ever been identical in shape, but here, any regularity had long been shattered by the ravages of the curse. But the Flayed Ones knew how to address the situation. Rangier, longer-limbed kindred leapt after the Razor to climb the chains, as they were able, while others simply scuttled up the corroded walls of the bilge, as rapidly as insects.

Oltyx was astonished to see them tackle the problem with such decisive alacrity. He had always thought the Cursed to be almost devoid of reason, but the former warriors, he saw, seemed perfectly able to choose their own course up the chasm. There seemed to be no real hierarchy within the mass, beyond the essential recognition of him and Yenekh as their lords.

This... egalitarianism should have seemed offensive, even blasphemous. But however he considered the idea, Oltyx could find only sense in it. Whatever their original status, these creatures had been beaten down to a place from which they could descend no further. They had become kindred in the abyss of their secondary death, and Oltyx saw no reason why they should not rise from the blackness together.

Every few moments, it appeared, Oltyx had to reconsider some long-held certainty of his culture. Since he had risen without the royal glyph on his breast, his whole understanding of what it meant to be an inheritor of the necrontyr had begun to dissolve. And though he had no idea yet of what shape it might reassemble itself into, he could not help but welcome it.

Disorder, uncertainty, change, thought Oltyx, as the first screams and barks of gunfire began to make their way down the chain to him. It was hard to imagine a situation that Djoseras could have been more distressed by. In the end, Oltyx supposed, perhaps he had been the right choice for the throne.

The *Polyphemus* was a vessel of hideous size, more akin to a nation in flight than a city. Unlike the *Tyresias*, whose masters had at least paid some heed to the worth of automation, it seemed to be operated, wherever possible, through the application of human toil. Its slave-workers alone, Oltyx guessed, must have numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Then, in addition to the vessel's naval crew, the warship garrisoned infantry in numbers sufficient to conquer entire planets, as well as throngs of priests, fanatics and unarmed pilgrims.

A conventional boarding by the dynastic legions might have taken days to battle its way through the vessel's thousands of decks, against this press of organic resistance. And with reinforcements brought in from other ships in the armada, such an operation would have had the potential to become a never-ending stalemate.

Oltyx's new army, by contrast, moved through the *Polyphemus* with a speed that defied comprehension. With each minute that passed after their ascent to the gunnery decks, another of the great cannons fell silent, its crew reduced to slurry and blade-hacked bone. Even as the massacre progressed, Yenekh's exile horde continued to stream in from the bowels of the ship, leaving frost in their footsteps from the cold of the ghostwind. Soon, as more and more districts began to fall dark beneath the tide of claws, the Children of Llandu'gor started to find other points of ingress from the night.

They travelled like a poison in the body of some gargantuan beast, injected from a dozen points at once, and leaving dead flesh in their wake. Surging through the giant ship's arteries, they sent hunting packs off in new directions every time they reached a branch, and plotted their course with instincts that escaped all human reason. They travelled through the vents and ducts and abandoned places of the ship, skittering silently above and below whatever barricades the crew could erect. The defenders only ever glimpsed them as dark flashes at the edge of vision, or at fatally close range, as they pounced from the shadows *behind* the humans' gun nests.

It was not a battle. It was butchery. Soldiers were deployed by the thousand to stem the tide, but they had no hope of success when they did not know where their enemy was coming from. They could only react – and every time they were sent to reinforce a strongpoint, they would arrive only to an empty corridor, sluiced with blood, shell casings and flecks of bone.

The only thing which moved through the ship with greater speed than the kindred, in the end, was the fear of them. Disquiet spread to even the most heavily fortified sanctums of the ship, as position after position fell silent. It was not long before barricades were being abandoned entirely, at the first sign of claws rattling behind the walls.

Then, one of the bloated, half-dead holy men was cut to pieces at his lectern, in the middle of delivering a sermon to a bay packed with nervous pilgrims, and panic sparked at last. Within moments, the ghostwind was alive with desperate, crackling radio transmissions; the whole of the armada was ordered to pull back from the heels of the necrons, and pump troops into the ailing flagship.

But with no Astartes left to swoop from the night and rescue their weakling masters, the response was doomed from the start. For all the dizzying mass of troops pledged to the defence of the *Polyphemus* within moments of the call going out, their delivery was contingent on the ability of the armada's logistical clerks to move millions of humans across the void in the space of minutes.

It was almost an hour before the first troops arrived. They came in a great, wallowing bulk carrier, and were cut down in the hold of their own ship, before it had even opened its airlocks. Shortly afterwards, another transport exchanged fire with a ship bearing the heraldry of the Imperial faith, in a conflict over how to clear the lifeless troop carrier from the *Polyphemus'* docking array.

Finally, after the exodus fleet had been outmatched time and time again by the sheer mass and manpower of their foe, the human fleet's scale had at last been made to work against it. Oltyx might have held a developing suspicion that humanity had an inherent cruelty to rival that of the necrontyr. But from that point on, he knew he would rest secure in knowing that his people would always hold the edge as bureaucrats.

Nevertheless, for all the speed with which the assault progressed, it nearly came to nothing, in the end.

Since before Pakhet had fallen, the *Polyphemus* had been hammering away at the aft hull of the distant *Akrops* with a pair of primitive, yet brutally powerful directed energy weapons. The cannons were built into a fortified structure on the ship's dorsal flank, and as soon as the Flayed Ones had begun to spread through the hull, the entire structure had been packed with platoons of the ship's best infantry, and sealed off with adamantine bulkheads.

Even as the other guns had fallen silent, and even when the crusade's vanguard had been recalled in panic at the incursion of the Cursed, those two infernal weapons had kept spitting their crude beams into the night ahead, carving chunk after chunk from the *Akrops*' perilously fragile remaining armour.

Oltyx and Yenekh had been pushing through the decks of the ship's spinal ridge, towards the crowning edifice which housed its bridge, when they had realised the peril of the situation. They had been leading a pack down a corridor lined with thick, condensation-smeared armaglass panes, and as the guns had fired, it was as if a sun had ignited suddenly in the dark outside. Immediately after, a corona of faint green light had bloomed in the distance, over the faint gold crescent of the *Akrops*, and Yenekh's predatory muzzle had snapped round to fix Oltyx with a look of alarm.

'Two more shots,' he had rattled on Oltyx's armour, 'and it is over.'

Oltyx had wasted no time, then. Without a further word, he had clubbed at the armaglass beside them with the full mass of his forearm, until it had given way in an explosive blast of atmosphere. And then, pursued by a trickle of spidery black shapes as the Flayed Ones had clambered after them, they had trekked across the *Polyphemus*' hull, beneath a starless sky, towards the mountainous guns.

Now, Oltyx watched from just a few khet behind the weapon's barrels, as the first of the two shots that would kill the *Akrops* lanced across the dark.

Beside him, a seething mass of kindred hacked at the turret's armour. For all they had excelled in eviscerating the ship's organic component, they were struggling against solid metal, and Oltyx knew there was no chance they would claw their way in before the weapon could charge again.

It seemed such a pathetic, arbitrary way for things to end, to the point where he struggled even to find anger at the situation. After all that had transpired, how could he have foreseen this? He looked to Yenekh, who had begun to pace restlessly across the frigid hull, and the admiral paused, glancing back. Increasingly, during the terrorisation of the *Polyphemus*, they had found ways to supplement their communication when Yenekh was beyond arm's reach—there was a lot, it turned out, that two Flayed Ones could exchange in a shared glance.

There's nothing we can do.

No. But maybe they might do something.

Oltyx turned back to the distant shape of the necron flagship, labouring under a pall of leaking drive-flux. Beneath his footplates the lance battery was vibrating with increasing frequency, and a wobbling yellow guide-pulse was forming ahead of each of its barrels. *If whoever is left intact aboard the old ship is going to do anything extraordinary*, he thought, *now would be the moment*.

That, of course, was when his oculars registered an irregularity in the light reaching them from the *Akrops*' sputtering drive banks. It seemed as if a dimensional appendix – the kind used for storing small voidcraft or war machines – was being inverted, directly in the wake of the ship. Oltyx had known of no such assets still in the dynasty's possession, bar one. And given who possessed that asset, its use could be discounted as an impossibility.

But then, what was that speck of light, perched on the very precipice of the *Akrops*' rear arc?

Oltyx cast the magnification protocols of his oculars to their maximum extent, and peered in at the miniscule spot of brightness. It was a necron, he could make out, waving a plainly ornamented sceptre into the void, towards the patch of increasingly distorted emptiness behind the ship. It was difficult to see clearly, through the haze of the unfolding dimensional pocket, not to mention the rapidly intensifying glow from the energy cannon's barrels. But with just a few seconds left before the weapon fired, Oltyx glimpsed the distant figure's austere, armoured brow-crest, and rescinded his assumption

about what was possible.

The figure was Denet. And at the exact moment that the shot was fired that would kill the *Akrops*, he summoned the monoliths. Directly into its line of fire.

The ancient constructs only existed in the ghostwind for a fraction of a second before they were annihilated. Denet himself was obliterated by their shrapnel nearly instantaneously. But although a fraction of the beam's energy had passed through the group of war machines to strike the *Akrops*, it had been dissipated to a survivable level.

Fifteen seconds later, a plume of freezing gas blasted from the mass of Flayed Ones working at the control tower's hull, telling Oltyx that one clawtip at least had broken through. As he turned his back on the *Akrops*, readying himself for the assault, he found himself hoping there had been time for Denet to realise what he had achieved, before he had been granted rest at last. After three centuries of him going on about those blasted monoliths in the synedrion on Sedh, they had, for a few minutes at least, saved Ithakas from destruction.

Now, it was up to Oltyx.



#### **EPILOGUE**

## BOATS AGAINST THE CURRENT

Much later, in the silence of the ghost ark's deck as it ferried him to the *Akrops*, Oltyx looked back on the shattered derelict that had been the *Polyphemus*, and wondered exactly when it was that the spirit of the crusade had finally been broken.

After the guns had been silenced, the entire hunger of the exile horde had been directed at the palatial structure housing the *Polyphemus*' bridge. It had been a stronghold of planetary calibre, and the command centre at its core had been buried behind a mountain's weight in armour. Thousands of human soldiers, captained by the fiercest of the crusade's holy orders, had retreated to its fastness, and there they had waited, with weapons levelled at empty corridors, as they had prayed for relief from the rest of the armada.

That relief would have come, in time: reinforcements had been arriving by the battalion already, in hangars along the length of the ship. But it would take them time to traverse those tangled decks and reach their masters. And the Flayed Ones had already been at their door.

It had begun with the skittering of claws across frozen steel, as the kindred had swarmed over the fortress' exterior, probing for ways inside. Had

the faint ticking of their talon-tips sounded like rain, Oltyx wondered, to the souls trapped within? What images had their minds conjured, in that stifling, sweat-stinking gloom, as they had heard the sharp fingers working at the seams of their final stronghold? Had they realised, then, as the darkness closed in, quite how far they had strayed from the light of their home stars?

Had their faith begun to waver, he wondered, as the first, terse reports had been broadcast, of things half-sighted and scuttling in the darkness of the lower decks? Or when those reports had started ending abruptly, midway through sentences? When lines of petrified riflemen had started backing away from viewports crowded with lifeless, rictus grins, only to feel the feather-light touch of claw-tips on the backs of their necks? When the broadcasts from the outer perimeter had collapsed into a cacophony of screams, and then gone silent altogether, had the defenders of the inner sanctum still been sure their corpse-Emperor would protect them?

They had held their lines, at least. Knowing that midnight had come at last, the holy warriors had moved to their positions in the ring of fortified corridors that surrounded the adamantine-domed vault of the bridge itself, and had steeled themselves to face whatever broke through. Oltyx wondered whether, when the power had died, leaving their breath fogging in the light of their gun-barrel torches, even one of them had guessed *that their doom was not going to come from beyond those walls*?

Yenekh had taught Oltyx, by then, how the kindred moved through the ghostwind. It was nothing like translation via the interstices. No; it was infinitely more sophisticated than that – and like all sufficiently complex technologies, it felt as effortless as sorcery. Yenekh had asked Oltyx to lead the way, but the king had refused; if anyone had deserved this honour, it was Yenekh. It had been time for the Razor of Sedh to remind the galaxy how his name had been forged.

If he had to find a way to describe it, Oltyx would have said that moving through the ghostwind was like clambering through a tunnel in deep rock; you saw the place you wished to be, and then you hauled yourself towards it, with the distinct sensation that you were also hauling it towards yourself.

And so Oltyx had peered into the bridge as they had tunnelled, and he had seen the faces of his enemies at last. The officers had been unremarkable. Not gods, nor monsters. Just primates, huddled together, at the heart of a machine their species no longer truly had the capacity to understand.

Wrestling with the controls of that ancient vessel, and dressed in coats which made them look bigger than they were, they had seemed infantile, somehow – like youths caught playing with the wargear of their fathers. It had been time, then, for them to learn not to meddle with things beyond their grasp; to learn that the stars, and the spaces between them, had never been theirs to claim.

Oltyx found that he could remember the moment of Yenekh's arrival in very different ways.

On the basis of the purely physical, which was certainly how the humans would have seen it, it had been like a scene from the depths of a nightmare. Among the knot of officers had appeared a gore-draped creature of bone and blade, unfolding its spindled limbs from the gloom and rising from a crouch, until it stood looking down on them from twice their height.

And then, with the flesh-clotted claws it bore instead of hands, it had begun to rend them. There had been no duelling, no climactic clash of heroes: just terrified animals, being carved alive, until their screams had been reduced to hisses and gurgles by their mutilation. It had been an ugly, brutal, graceless death, lit by the strobing beams of the guards' laser rifles, as they had fired uselessly at the horror in their midst.

But there was more than one way to look at anything, Oltyx knew all too well, and the *hekatic* truth of Yenekh's arrival had been very different.

The Razor had appeared in a thunderclap; a heroic form in perfect proportion, clad in silver, with twin khopesh blades ready in his hands. Too stricken by his majesty to even raise their weapons, the craven Unclean had been dispatched with flawless efficiency: the admiral had moved as if dancing, with his twin blades separating heads from shoulders as easily as they sliced through the air itself. And just as it had been in the ancient friezes of the Razor's victories, rays of piercing white light had radiated outwards from his form, towards the awestruck soldiers of the foe.

That, surely, had been the moment in which the crusade's will had been crushed. And Oltyx was quite sure which way he would choose to remember it, in all the years that would follow.

After the last of the guards had been dispatched, Oltyx and Yenekh had stood together in the crimson ruin of the human bridge, and, in the embrace of a silence that no longer needed filling with words, they had crouched to feed together. It was the first moment of peace that Oltyx had experienced in a

very long time.

Some minutes later, they had been hailed by the *Akrops*, with a request to open a carrier wave band. The signal was entirely undistorted, making its way to them with a range and clarity that had been impossible ever since they had entered the ghostwind. Again, no words had been necessary between them; they knew what that had meant.

The king and his companion had made their way to the very top of the spire crowning the *Polyphemus*' command tower. As they had climbed, they had watched the warships of the Unclean turning in droves and fleeing, without so much as a whimper passing between their captains.

From the engine-lights blazing in the darkness behind the *Polyphemus*, it was clear that many ships had turned back already, as soon as they had caught wind of the horror aboard their flagship. And when the bridge of the *Polyphemus* had at last fallen silent, every mind still wavering had been swayed: the machine-cultists and the Space Marines alike had been cut down by their implacable quarry, and now ghouls had begun to crawl from the night itself to slaughter their admirals and their spiritual leaders. Their Emperor had forsaken them at last.

By the time Oltyx and Yenekh had reached the top of the spire, they found they had lost all interest in the dissolving armada. Because from that lonely peak, they had been able to see a pale dawn break at last, over the perfect desolation of their victory. Above the bulk of the dying battleship, stars had returned to the sky. Not the bright, long-charted stars of the kingdom they had left behind, however, but the grey, dying embers of the m'wt.

And although they had never looked on those ancient stars before, they had felt the strangest sense, as their voyage came to an end, that they were coming home at last.

Oltyx had answered the *Akrops*' hail in time, but only to say that he would prefer a meeting in person. And so the ghost ark had been sent to collect him and Yenekh, and here they were, making their way across the starlit sky, as their people held their carnal victory feast inside the drifting hulk of the *Polyphemus*.

Oltyx turned away from the carcass of the ship, and looked to the future. Ahead of them hung the tattered, flux-venting hull of the *Akrops*, as it limped on through the void. Accompanied by just a handful of escorts, and battered to the very brink of death, the ship could barely move. But it did not have far

to travel now.

The gold remaining on the tomb ship's flanks gleamed with the light of a tiny, ice-pale dwarf star. And in the distance, framed by the mighty span of the *Akrops*' horns, that star's sole planet waited for them. Nothing could be seen of it from here but a tiny, opalescent disc, like a lone eye gleaming in the dark. But Oltyx knew the name of this world, without question. They had reached their destination at last. They had come to Drazak.

It was strange to be returning to the *Akrops*, Oltyx felt, as the ghost ark ferried them into the cavern of the ship's central hangar. It was as if he saw the ship, in all its creaking, battle-harrowed immensity, for the first time. And in a way, he supposed, he did. But he knew it, all the same, as well as if the ship truly was the crownworld it had been forced to serve as.

You have done well, ancient thing, thought Oltyx, as its hull engulfed them. Your service is nearly at an end.

Oltyx was surprised, given the mire of despondency and madness in which he had departed, to find the hangar filled with the survivors of the fleet, arranged in immaculate, parade-ground squares. There were pitifully few of them, and many stood crooked from damage, sustained either during the long journey they had endured, or the millions of years of entropy inflicted before it had even begun. But there was a glow to their cores still, which Oltyx had not seen in a long time.

It was pride, he recognised at last, as the ark settled on the deck. Pride, not so different from that he had seen in the Flayed Ones – that they had somehow endured against the persecution of the Unclean, and that the dynasty's heka had prevailed, even if its king had not. Oltyx paused at that thought, struck by uncertainty as he made to step down onto the metal.

Who am I, to these people?

His answer came in the form of a sonorous crash of steel on steel, as the butts of a thousand warscythes rang out against the deck in salute. The sound was like thunder, and as it came again, three times more, Oltyx turned to Yenekh, crouched in trepidation behind him, and tapped words on his thorax.

#### 'That is for us, I believe.'

Yenekh straightened slowly, his eyes gleaming in wonder at the ranks assembled in the hangar, and Oltyx motioned for him to step forward. *They had left this ship apart, but they would come back to it together.* 

'Hail the Twice-Dead King!' bellowed Zultanekh, striding forward from a contingent of his own copperclad lords at the head of the crowd. 'And hail the Razor of Sedh! Do those masons who once carved images of his victories persist still on this deck?' he roared, with feigned wrath. 'For if they do, they had best tremble now! For all their work has been outshone by the renewed ferocity of its subject!' The Ogdobekh prince pounded his chest with the flat of his hammer, sounding like a great bell cracking, and once again, the hangar rang out with the clash of weapons on the deck.

'Hail...' began Oltyx, and faltered. His voice struggled now, as the changes to his body deepened, to make its way from his vocal buffer.

But he tried again and the words came, rising to fill the room.

'Hail, Zultanekh – once an enemy, twice a friend, and... ever himself.' Oltyx let his gaze roam over the assembled necrons, then, and focused his flux. *There's no avoiding it*, he thought. While his voice lasted, he was going to have to give a speech.

But for all the mechanical difficulties imposed on his voice, words themselves felt like less of a problem to him than they had once been. Looking around, he saw that the loyalty in the oculars of his people was no longer alloyed with fear, despite the ever-deeper monstrosity of his form. The fear, or whatever post-biological substitution had stood in for it, had been replaced with respect. And without the enormity of his doubts to vault, his words came easily.

So he spoke.

'Victories, in the eternal tradition of the necrontyr, belong to kings alone. They are the right and proper outcome of royal will, applied to the stuff of reality by the labours and the sacrifices of those who serve the throne.'

Oltyx had to pause then, as his vocal actuators had locked into a harsh buzz, requiring a partial resequence to continue.

'But Ithakas no longer has a king, and it has no inheritor,' he proclaimed grimly, gesturing at the ruin where his thorax had once borne the royal cartouche. 'The royal sigil has been struck out. And so, by the ancient law, there can be no dynasty any more. Today, Ithakas passes into history, its glories unmarked, save for a few crumbling stones under Unclean boots.'

A deep gloom fell over the hangar then, but Oltyx ploughed into it, undeterred, with a roar that stretched the limits of his failing voice.

'And yet, a victory has still been won!' he cried, shaking his scarred fist in

the air. 'But to whom, if there is no king, does it belong?'

The words echoed in silence, and the lords looked on.

'It belongs to Djoseras,' he said gravely, 'who spent his own future to buy one for his people. It belongs to those lords and shipmasters who paid the same price, for each ruinous league of this journey. It belongs to Pakhet, and to Neth, and to brilliant Denet, and even to the Red Marshal. It belongs to Duamehht, too,' he said, and continued more quietly, as the memory passed through him. 'The victory belongs to every subject of Ithakas who fell, either in sacrifice or to the whims of royal madness, along the way.

'But the dead can do nothing with honour,' he said, his voice now as low as a dying flame. 'And so, let this victory belong to all those who remain standing, here in this hangar. Let it not be subsumed into the achievement of a dead nation. And let it not be claimed by lords for themselves – it is a pride which should be felt by every warrior of the legions.

'And with this victory,' he finished, as his vocal buffer began to collapse entirely under the weight of refrenation, 'comes the right to... choose your own fate. Whoever I once was... and... whatever I am now... I may no longer presume... to command you.'

'Aye,' said a new voice, almost as cracked and wavering as Oltyx's own, after the silence had stretched for a few seconds.

Footsteps rang across the hangar, and Parreg stepped forwards, warped by his sickness, but seeming more solid than ever, to stand before him. The Agoranomos nodded at Yenekh.

'And yet the Razor chose to follow you, all the same,' he said. 'And he had more to forgive than any other. If he calls you king, then I'll stand by it.'

There was a scratching and a rustling at the rear of the hangar, and from the shadows began to emerge a great crowd of the Flayed. They loped between the immaculate lines of the survivors, accumulating in loose clusters wherever there was space. But there was no revulsion or agitation from the ranks as their fallen comrades passed between them.

And they kept coming. Soon there were thousands of them, far outnumbering the other survivors – and these were just the Flayed from the exodus fleet, as Yenekh's host remained on the *Polyphemus*. Clearly, the rate of affliction had soared here, since his departure. And indeed, as he looked over the ranks assembled in the hangar for a second time, he began to notice drawn features, twisted limbs, and patches of clotted blood he had at first taken to be

necrodermal scarring.

They are all turning, he realised, now that I have turned. And where once the thought would have provoked horror, it lit only relief now, in his core. Yenekh had been right: it was easier when you were not alone.

'Would I be right to assume,' asked Zultanekh later, as he stood on the bridge with Oltyx while the *Philotomokh* made ready to leave, 'that you no longer intend to make war on Drazak?'

The crown prince nodded at the bone-white disc, growing slowly larger at the centre of the viewport, and Oltyx stared at it as he considered his reply.

Drazak remained a mystery. Even now, behind them, Yenekh's jagged form was surrounded by a thicket of projections, as he interrogated the ship's sensor arrays for any information on the world ahead. The admiral found it much harder to engage with the ship now that his mind and his body had changed so profoundly. But even with those difficulties overcome, the challenge of revealing Drazak's secrets had confounded him. All attempts at communication had gone unanswered, and no sensor array the *Akrops* possessed could reveal more of that distant, pale orb than they could already see for themselves. Whatever was waiting for them there would only be known when they were upon it.

'You would be right, Zultanekh,' Oltyx said at last. 'We will not make war here. I am not sure what we *will* do, I admit. But an attack is... unthinkable.'

'Will you forgive me, I wonder, if I do not stay to find out?' asked Zultanekh, with slight shame. 'Have the Ogdobekh proved hardy in resisting this sickness of yours? Yes! We are mighty in all things. But still... there is an odd temper to this place. And it only grows more odd still, as we approach. And does this, Oltyx, lead me to question the wisdom of lingering too long? Yes, it assuredly does.'

'Feel no remorse,' said Oltyx, dismissing Zultanekh's embarrassment with a wave of his hand. 'You have done more than was ever expected of you as it is. In fact, it is a debt I fear cannot be repaid.'

'Whose debt?' barked Zultanekh, affronted. 'Oltyx's! And Djoseras', too. And they are both dead.' The crown prince synthesised an overblown sigh, and his nodes glowed like green forge-coals with amusement at himself. 'Zultanekh has, as ever, shown his ruinously poor instinct for bargaining.'

'I can offer you ships, I suppose,' said Oltyx. 'Those lords who do not wish

to stay will need passage to whatever future they hope to secure for themselves, and it is a long journey back to the light of the dynasties. If you will escort them, you may take the vessels for yourself after.'

'Would I accede to such an offer?' mused the giant. 'Certainly, were there any lords to escort. Although I already made the offer to take passengers, Oltyx – and there were none to be found.'

'None?'

'None, Oltyx. Did you not see, in the hangar? These people are turning, more of them by the hour. Whatever future you will find for them, they trust more than the mercy of some foreign court.'

'So take the ships, anyway,' Oltyx insisted. 'You said Matriarch Anathrosis has a fondness for canopteks? The *Failed Harvest* would make a fine gift, perhaps?'

'Yes,' said Zultanekh, concealing what appeared to be a smouldering mirth across his nodes. 'It *would have* done. On which note, before I leave... Do I have another farewell to pass on to you? Yes, I do.'

'Lysikor,' said Oltyx, with deep, weary certainty.

'Alas, Lysikor,' confirmed Zultanekh. 'He slipped away during the final engagement, and spirited the *Harvest* away under cover of Denet's... spectacular display. But he left a carrier wave packet encrypted to your seals, and appended with the instruction that it should be passed to you, "in the unlikely event of Oltyx's return". Shall I transfer it to you, for you to digest in privacy?'

'No,' grumbled Oltyx. 'I have no appetite for secrets any more. Project it here, on the bridge.'

Zultanekh seemed only too delighted to do so, and immediately, a fizzing, battle-distorted recorded hard-scry of the Duke of Deathmarks materialised among them. Even Yenekh looked up from his work to watch, as the slender figure composed itself, and began to speak.

'I must admit, Oltyx, that I am quite disappointed in myself. After such a deliciously long build-up, my betrayal was to be magnificent. But I had not anticipated quite how emphatically you would pursue your own ruin, and... well. You seized the initiative, frankly. That is on me, Oltyx – I have failed you.'

The deathmark's tone was baffling. He seemed genuinely mournful, as if he truly had let Oltyx down by failing to commit treason. Not for the first time –

and not for the last, he suspected – Oltyx marvelled at the sheer enigma of Lysikor's moral universe. The projection trembled, with a sound suggesting the *Harvest* had taken significant damage, and a tide of scarabs swarmed past behind Lysikor. He looked away for a moment, and clearly, what he saw prompted him to abandon plans for a longer speech.

'To summarise, then. I have had to make do with seizing this ship, and ninety per cent of the fleet's canopteks. Unimaginative, I know. However, if you are receiving this message, and that Ogdobekh buffoon doesn't catch up with me before I exit the system, then we are both still in existence. Which means we may yet have our moment, some day. I hope it's not too long. I have become a great admirer of yours, in your deepening madness—I wish you every success in plumbing further depths.'

It appeared he was finished then, until his ocular flashed with sudden recall. 'Also, I managed to steal two seraptek constructs from the armoury on Antikef, while Yenekh was rescuing you. I thought you might be impressed. That is all, though. Farewell for now, Oltyx.'

Oltyx, Yenekh and Zultanekh took it in turns to look at one another blankly, once the projection had vanished, but came to the silent and simultaneous agreement that there was little to be gained in passing comment.

'That could have been worse,' offered Oltyx anyway, in the end.

'And so could all that has passed on our journey together,' announced Zultanekh, with a deep nod of satisfaction at his own wisdom. 'Is it common, that I find any venture sufficient to meet my appetite? No. But Oltyx, bearer of one crown lost, and one yet to be found, I say to you with all sincerity, you lay on quite the feast.'

'You are quite mad, Zultanekh,' replied Oltyx eventually. 'I suspect I will come to miss it.'

'Does one have to settle on one sort of madness or another,' Zultanekh pondered, 'in order to endure eternity? Yes, I think so. I have settled comfortably into mine. I hope that you find peace in your own, young Oltyx.'

Finally, when the great blank sphere of Drazak had swollen to fill the whole of the void ahead of them, the mighty *Akrops* had extinguished its drives at last, and come to rest.

The world was empty – or so it seemed. As they had approached, Oltyx had discovered that Drazak's paleness came from a thick blanket of mist,

unstirred by so much as a breath of air across the world's entire surface. The mist's depth, and even its composition, was unknown, as the planet had continued to refuse their every attempt to understand it. But they had discovered one thing, at least: it was a barrier.

Yenekh had sent a canoptek probe ahead of them, on a bearing for the world's presumed surface. But just a moment after the cloud-sea had swallowed it up, the probe had emerged again several khet away, with an identical velocity and flight vector, and no sensor data covering the brief spell in which it had been turned around. The same had happened to a piloted scythecraft, and to a ghost ark with a full complement of warriors — everything which entered Drazak's atmosphere came right back out again, with no record of anything glimpsed beneath the mist.

Confounded, Yenekh had dropped the *Akrops* into orbit around the world, and there they had elected to wait, until a solution could be found. They were not alone up there, above the sea of mist. Or at least, the *Akrops* was not. The battered tomb ship had come to rest in what they had thought to be a thick debris ring from a distance, but which turned out to be a great reef of derelict voidcraft: an armada of the dead, without so much as a glimmer of life in a single drive core.

There were ships there from before the Great Sleep, and others as little as five centuries old. There were Cairn-class giants, Scythe cruisers, and every other hull pattern conceivable – even clouds of inert, tumbling scythecraft. There were ships from every dynasty in the *Akrops*' records, including large numbers from the curse-stricken Oroskh, Agdagath and Maynarkh dynasties, and dozens more with entirely unfamiliar sigils on their hulls.

But every one of them was lifeless. And whether the ships had come here in anger, or in hope of salvation, there was no way to say, for their crews had vanished, either obliterated as they had trespassed, or gone below the mist, after solving the question of its passage.

Oltyx and Yenekh looked down at that mist for many cycles of Drazak's feeble sun, wondering what to do. And throughout the whole of the *Akrops*, in the halls that had echoed for so long with the bickering of lords from three-score worlds, silence reigned once more.

The ship was not empty, though. In every space, from the great holds and hangars, to the ducts where the maintenance scarabs had once crawled, the transformed host of Ithakas waited, clustered together in wordless

companionship. They would wait as long as they needed to for their king to lead them on the last step of their journey.

It was not the first time, by any means, that Ithakas' future had depended on Oltyx finding a way round an intractable problem. But while previously, the alternative had always been total destruction, now it was simply... nothing. It was worse, in a way. But no matter how long he spent staring at that pristine expanse of fog, no answer came to him.

Then, many hundreds of hours into the vigil, after they had been standing in wordless silence for longer than Oltyx had bothered to note, Yenekh moved across to him, and broke the stillness of the bridge with the rattle of claws on gold.

- 'Do you hear the ship?' said the Razor.
- 'No?' replied Oltyx, confused.
- **'Exactly,'** said Yenekh, and Oltyx looked around him in astonishment, as he finally noticed it for himself.

Ever since Szarekh's war, the *Akrops* had been a troubled ship. Its hull had echoed with deep groans and creaks as it had rearranged its internal structure. All ships did this, but even the *Akrops*' great size could not account for the severity, or the frequency, of the disturbances. It had only deepened its reputation as an ill-fated vessel, and had caused some fools to talk of its *haunting*, even. But in the course of its final voyage, the ship's apparent protests had become ever more pronounced, until they had been near constant. Oltyx, who had been haunted himself at the time, had quietly revised his position on the foolishness of the old rumours.

But Oltyx had not heard so much as a tick of metal from the *Akrops*, ever since he and Yenekh had returned to it.

'Why is this?' he asked Yenekh, stunned by the observation. The Razor's head sank, fangs dipping to his breast, and his shoulders heaved as if he took a deep breath before he answered.

- 'Before you banished me, you demanded to know why the *Akrops* was taking us to Drazak.'
  - 'Yes. You said you used to speak with it, and it had acted on your wishes.'
  - 'I lied.'
  - 'Yenekh...'
  - 'I thought you would not believe the truth, my king. I thought it would

## have only deepened your rage...'

- 'Yenekh, what is the truth?'
- 'I have always spoken with the ship. But I never said a word to it about Drazak.'
  - 'You are saying... the ship took us here itself?'

# 'More than that, Oltyx. I think it is returning, to the place where something was left unfinished.'

As Yenekh's claws fell still, Oltyx looked to the blankness of the mist-shrouded world below them again, and felt as if the skin he did not have had tightened across the whole of his body, growing very cold at once. At the very depth of his flux, so faint it could have been nothing more than a random flicker of error, but unmistakably *there*, he had the feeling that he had been here before.

There was a sound, then, that was so low, and so loud, that it was almost not a sound at all, but something physical. It rose up from the very core of the ship, and it did not resemble any sort of sound rooted in pain or anger. It was a single note, which spread into an impossible chord, as it resonated outwards through the structure of the *Akrops*. It sounded as if the ship was calling out to something.

'Something is happening,' said a voice much like the one Oltyx himself had once spoken with, in the wake of the sound's passing.

It was the scarab. The canoptek was bobbing in the air at the entrance to the bridge, oculars pulsing with excitement, and the sight of it shocked the king. He had not seen the vessel of his former subminds since not long after Yenekh had been banished. In truth, he had not thought of it since then, either. But the scarab's demeanour suggested it had little interest, or time, for reintroductions.

'In the hollows,' was all it said then, without a further word of explanation, and vanished in a shimmer of translation energies.

The hollows had been emptied during their last, desperate attempt to stay ahead of the crusade, or so Oltyx had thought. But now, something new had been constructed there. It was placed in the heart of the huge space, in exactly the spot where the dismantled tombs of Ithakas had been stored. In the place where Mentep had once made his workshop.

The construction was a cylinder, plain and near featureless, and formed

from what appeared to be white stone. It was connected to the chamber's ceiling by pulsing gravitic tethers, slanting downwards, and it tapered to a point where a slim torus of deep orange crystal was fixed.

Now that he looked closely at it, Oltyx could see that the surface of the thing was not entirely smooth. There were patches of corrosion on the stone, almost too faint to see, of the kind which had accumulated on even the most robust of necron materials during the Great Sleep. This was not a piece of masonry, he reasoned, nor was it new. Which meant it must have been concealed, somewhere in the structure of the *Akrops*, since the days of Szarekh's war.

Since the Battle of the Sokar Gate.

Oltyx's flux bubbled with questions, and only grew more restless when a shudder passed through the walls of the chamber. The vibration grew more intense, and at the spot on the wall of the hollows before the construction's narrow downward end, the necrodermis began to ripple. Then, with a heaving that rocked the whole ship, the material parted at its centre. It began to peel itself open in a smooth, expanding circle, and as it opened up, the sublayer behind it began to do the same.

Layer after layer of the ship's decks parted in sequence, turning the pit gradually into a broad, circular tunnel directly ahead of the construction. At last, the hole made it through to the outer hull of the ship. But where Oltyx expected the necrodermis to part before the black of the void, it opened instead onto a depthless, pale ocean of mist. Whatever this ancient device was – and it was a device now, he was sure of it – it was pointed directly at the surface of Drazak.

Something moved then, on the upper end of the mysterious cylinder, and drew his gaze. Picking its way around the construction's bulk from the far side was an enormous canoptek construct with immensely long legs, a humped back, and a bright amber sensor cluster at the end of a long, articulated neck. It was Xott, Mentep's unfathomable canoptek familiar, which, Oltyx only remembered now, he had never tracked down after its master's death. Clearly, it had been busy, and Oltyx could not find it in himself to be surprised.

'Xott found me not long after Mentep was killed,' explained the scarab, which had moved to float beside him in clear expectation of questions. 'I will put it simply – we began to work together. They and I, it seems, turned

out to have a lot more in common than I could possibly have expected.'

Oltyx glared at the jewelled, hovering scarab, letting the cast of his oculars stand in place of all the questions he could have asked, in response to the implications it had just left hanging.

'When you learned that the evocatory medium had been prototyped in Mentep's own mind,' said the scarab, with the long-suffering patience of a palace tutor, 'did you never stop to suppose whether the subminds he *also* gifted to you had similar precedent?'

Oltyx glared harder. 'So that is Mentep?' he managed, gesturing at Xott.

'Only in as much as *I* am *you*,' said the scarab neatly. 'Mentep is gone. And I suspect, deep down, that he felt his end had been deserved.' The canoptek fell quiet for a moment, mournful patterns blinking across its oculars, and then continued. 'However, while the Architect of Sokar might have paid for their deeds at last, an iteration of Mentep – what Mentep *could have been*, Oltyx – persists yet. And there they are.'

Oltyx could have asked so much more of the scarab, then. But the device beneath Xott had begun to shiver with half-visible energies, rousing a deep and urgent dread in him. What Xott was, at that moment, mattered far less than what they were doing.

'What is this... engine?' asked Yenekh, with a rattle of his claws. The former admiral, he noticed, had been staring with rapt attention at the device since they had entered. For all the attenuated lethality of his form, he seemed then like nothing more than a youth, fascinated by some unfamiliar insect that had landed on their hand.

The scarab's oculars flickered, in the way they did when its component minds were thinking hard about how best to phrase something.

'Something... else was here, before Drazak,' it said in the end, and its hesitation told Oltyx that the question of *what* had been in this place was one without a brief or certain answer.

'What happened to this... place?' he asked instead, maintaining a tight focus on Xott as the construct's manipulator tendrils plucked through an array of data projections at the device's upper end.

'If Xott is right,' the scarab ventured, 'the Akrops happened to it.'

'You speak of Sokar, then?' asked Oltyx, voice strained into a distorted hiss with shock.

'Perhaps,' said the scarab warily. 'There was a weapon, of Mentep's

devising, which was installed on this ship on Szarekh's orders, while it lay in orbit around Carnotite.'

'I know of this,' Oltyx said. Although he could not fathom, now, how it was that he did.

'Mentep had been searching for this weapon, in secret, since the voyage began. And now, Xott has completed his work. The weapon is retrieved, and is ready for use again.'

'But we come here seeking sanctuary!' protested Oltyx. 'What need do we have of a *weapon*?' As he remembered what Yenekh had said – that the *Akrops* had led itself here, seeking to resume something unfinished – a terrible possibility began to assemble itself in his mind. Was he about to watch the destruction of the sanctuary they had fought so hard to reach?

But as he made ready to launch himself down towards Xott, flux already seething in his limbs for the fight, Yenekh reached across and stilled him.

'No, Oltyx,' said the Razor, with solemn, slow taps. 'I know... this ship. As well... as anyone can. This is not... what you think. I am sure of it.'

'Then what is it?' Oltyx demanded, of both Yenekh and the scarab, as Drazak's mists swirled on beneath the ancient weapon's gaze.

It was the scarab who answered.

'Many great wounds were opened, the first time this weapon fired. But its second activation, Xott believes – as Mentep did – may begin their healing.' 'A *gun* will heal?' spat Oltyx caustically.

'No,' interjected Yenekh, with the new, brutal sincerity that his transformation had granted him. 'We will. Or we will... have the chance. If this... gun opens the way.'

'How do you know this?' Oltyx asked of his friend, and Yenekh only looked down the barrel of the gun, at the mist below.

'I do not. But I believe Mentep. I believe.... he wanted to atone. For Sokar. If this is his will...' – he lowered his head, and seemed somehow to close his eyes for a moment – 'I trust it.'

Xott looked up from their labour then, and snaked their long, segmented neck into the air to fix their ocular cluster on Oltyx. The king stared back, wishing he had any way of guessing what the mind behind that amber glow intended. *Or even whose mind it was*. With a low, hooting call, the construct addressed him, and the scarab translated.

'Xott says, my king, that the weapon is ready. But as before, with Unnas, the decision to fire it rests on your will alone.'

The walls around them rumbled with a long, lowing sound from the ship itself. Oltyx wondered whether it was just the tortured mass of the hull flexing, after the exertion of opening itself for the weapon. Or was that longing, in its tone?

Xott continued to regard him, curiosity glistening in their ember-like oculars, and trilled their enquiry again. There was so much the cryptek had concealed from him, and so much he was sure remained concealed. He could never bring himself to trust Mentep.

But Mentep was gone. And looking over at the scarab, and at Yenekh, he saw only certainty in the purpose of the creature which carried his echo. *Their trust will suffice*, he thought, and he exerted what remained of his voice to call out to Xott.

'Fire.'

A thin white beam appeared for an instant, connecting the ship and the mists below. It made no sound, and cast no light, and when it winked out, there was no sign it had ever fired. Until, at last, the clouds below began to part.

Drazak, beneath its shroud, was a world of monolithic blankness. A single city sat over its pole, sprawling a few leagues across. But beyond its walls there was only a sphere of inert stone the colour of alabaster, featureless save for the faint suggestion of clouding in its depths. There was no warmth in the planet's core, and not a drop of moisture in its thin, inert atmosphere. Occasionally, its surface was broken with low hills, and valleys choked with broken scree. But otherwise, there was only a perpetual expanse of smooth white stone, untroubled by even the faintest stirring of wind, under an endless, starlit night.

To the necron mind, it was a paradise.

When the clouds had parted, Oltyx had made his people ready to leave the *Akrops* for the last time, and descend to the surface with him. To the scarab, and to Xott, he had said farewell. Xott, it transpired, had business of Mentep's yet to pursue. The scarab, for its part, had wished to travel with its fellow oddity, in the *Idiothesis*, Mentep's old scythecraft.

Oltyx's mind had continued to swarm with questions which only the construct could answer, of course. But if he had learned one thing for sure

about Mentep, it was that the old sorcerer had only ever divulged information when it had suited him. And as such, he had seen little point in asking any of them. In any case, he felt a leaden certainty his fate would cross with Mentep's again, at some point.

With only a little reluctance, he had laid his perplexions to rest, and looked instead to the end of the journey. The massed ranks of the kindred had emptied the *Akrops*, marshalling on the stone plains before Drazak's nameless capital, and without a word, Oltyx had led them inside.

Now that they walked through its grand, deserted plazas, Oltyx felt that *city* was a poor term for the place. It felt more like... sculpture, he supposed. In size, of course, it dwarfed even the capital on Antikef. But it was all built from the same, featureless stone as the plains which surrounded it, and its halls and towers were empty of any furnishings. There was nothing to suggest that anyone had ever dwelled here – or even that the place had been designed for dwelling in.

At the city's heart stood a great, pillared hall, flanked with tall and glassless windows. It was the largest structure on the planet, and although Oltyx had never seen anything like it before, he knew, once he stood in front of it, that the survivors of Ithakas had finished their exodus at last.

Yenekh moved ahead, to the hall's immense, doorless gateway, and after looking inside for a moment, he turned and gestured to Oltyx, bidding him inside. Oltyx began to ascend the steps to the entrance, watched by the countless eyes of the Flayed Ones.

When he reached the top, just before he crossed over the threshold, he looked up at the lintel above the doorway. There, as he had somehow known it would be, was carved *Sozusza*, the glyph of deliverance.

As he was looking up, something moved in the tranquillity of the night overhead, which he would not have seen, otherwise. It was the *Akrops*, heading at last towards the rest it had craved for sixty million years. As Oltyx watched the glowing speck of the tomb ship move across the night, it dwindled and became lost against the pale disc of Drazak's star. And then, without a sound, there was a brief pulse of light, as the ancient warship plunged into the sun's heart.

Oltyx remembered, then, the story of Antikef's founding. How, after the instalment of the embalmed body of Ithakka the Lawmaker in his vault, the torchship that had borne him there had been flown into the system's star, fully

crewed, so that it might forever shine a little brighter for the sacrifice. The symmetry pleased Oltyx, but there was a crucial difference – the *Akrops* had made its final flight entirely empty, and no sacrifice had been made that had not been willing. This asymmetry pleased Oltyx more.

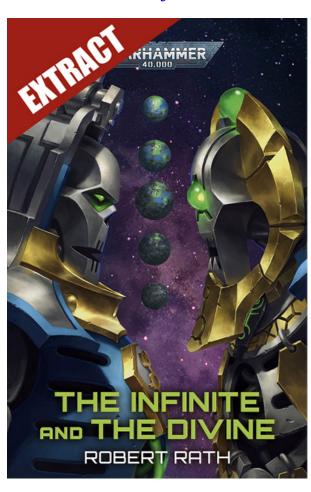
Now, as he walked into the barren hall, the light that shone through its tall, thin windows – and perhaps it was a little brighter, now – illuminated only one object in the whole of the interior. A plain white throne, carved from the stone dais on which it stood. On the seat of the throne, lay a slender crown carved from the same bone-pale material as the city. And on its brow, a single amber sigil matched the engraving above the doorway.

If any king had ruled here, it seemed his reign had ended long ago. Or it was yet to begin.

# **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nate Crowley is an SFF author and games journalist who lives in Walsall with his wife, daughter, and a cat he insists on calling Turkey Boy. He loves going to the zoo, playing needlessly complicated strategy games, and cooking incredible stews. His work for Black Library includes the novel *Ghazghkull Thraka: Prophet of the Waaagh!*, the novella *Severed* and the short stories 'Empra' and 'The Enemy of My Enemy'.

# An extract from *The Infinite and The Divine*.



Ancient stories, passed from the lips of spirit-singer to spirit-singer, held that anyone who touched the stone would burn.

Thy hand shall curl and turn black

Thy back-teeth glow white-hot

Thy bones crack like fire-logs

For I have drunk from elder suns

The songs held that the gemstone was a meteorite. Wandering, semi-sentient. Absorbing the energy of each star it passed. During the War in Heaven, it was said that warriors had used it to channel the gods themselves.

Trazyn, however, had learned long ago not to believe the absurdities of aeldari folklore. Ancient though their race was, they were still given to the follies of an organic brain.

Trazyn had travelled the galaxy for so long he'd forgotten what year he'd started. Collecting. Studying. Ordering the cultures of the cosmos.

And one thing he'd learned was that every society thought their mountain was special. That it was more sacred than the mountain worshipped by their neighbouring tribe. That it was the one true axis of the universe.

Even when informed that their sacred ridge was merely the random connection of tectonic plates, or their blessed sword a very old but relatively common alien relic – a revelation they universally did not appreciate, he found – they clung to their stories.

Which is not to say there were not gods in the firmament, of course. Trazyn knew there were, because he had helped kill them. But he'd also found that most of what societies took to be gods were inventions of their own, charmingly fanciful, imaginations.

But though he did not believe the gem channelled ancient gods, that did not

mean it wasn't worth having – or worth the aeldari protecting.

Indeed, the sounds of a siege echoed through the bone halls.

Trazyn allowed a portion of his consciousness to stray, if only to monitor the situation. Part of his mind worked the problem at hand, the other looked through the oculars of his lychguard captain.

Through the being's eyes, Trazyn saw that his lychguard phalanx still held the gates of the temple. Those in the front rank had locked their dispersion shields in a wall, each raising their hyperphase sword like the hammer of a cocked pistol. Behind them, those in the second rank held their warscythes as spears, thrusting them over the shoulders of their comrades so the entire formation bristled with humming blades.

Perfectly uniform, Trazyn noticed. And perfectly still.

Exodite bodies littered the steps before them – feather-adorned mesh armour split with surgical-straight lines, limbs and heads detached. His olfactory sensors identified particles of cooked muscle in the air.

Another attack was massing. In the garden plaza before the temple, where five dirt streets converged, aeldari Exodites flitted between decorative plants and idols carved from massive bones.

In the distance, he could see the lumbering form of a great lizard, long necked and powerful, with twin prism cannons slung on its humped back. Trazyn marked it as a target for the two Doom Scythes flying a support pattern overhead.

Shuriken rounds swept in, rattling the necron shields like sleet on a windowpane. One disc sailed into the ocular cavity of a lychguard and lodged there, bisecting the grim fire of his eye. The warrior did not react. Did not break formation. With a shriek of protesting metal, the living alloy of his skull forced the monomolecular disc free and it fluttered to the steps like a falling leaf.

Trazyn looked at the pattern of it through the captain's vision. Circular, with double spiral channels. A common aeldari design, not worth acquiring.

He sensed a change in the air and looked up to see the first Doom Scythe streaking down in an attack run. At the last moment the great lizard heard it, rotating around its serpentine head to stare at the incoming comet.

A beam of white-hot energy lanced from the Doom Scythe's fuselage, tracing a line of flame through the lush undergrowth. It passed through the creature's long neck and the top third of it fell like a cut tree branch. The

great body staggered, heeled, stayed upright. Then the next Doom Scythe lanced it through the midsection and set off the payload on its prism cannons. Cascading detonations tore the creature apart, the purple energy blast throwing the weapons crew hundreds of cubits away.

Pity, Trazyn thought as he watched the carcass burn. I wanted one of those.

But he had no time for such side projects. Conch shell horns sounded across the rainforest-girdled spires of the city, and already he could see more great lizards lumbering towards the temple. One rotated a twin-barrelled shuriken cannon towards the sky and began spitting fire at the retreating Scythes. Though they were primitive, once the Exodites marshalled their numbers his small acquisition force would be overwhelmed.

Cepharil was awakening to defend its World Spirit.

Trazyn left the lychguard captain's body, rejoined his consciousness, and focused on the task at hand.

Before him stretched a long wraithbone corridor, likely salvaged from whatever craftworld these fundamentalists had used to begin their self-imposed exile. Bas-relief carvings depicting the society's exodus, fashioned from the bones of the great lizards, decorated the walls.

Trazyn had been scrying for traps, detecting pressure plates and a huge mechanical fulcrum hidden in the masonry. Beyond that waited the cyclopean gates of the inner chamber.

He finished his calculations and saw the way through.

Trazyn picked up his empathic obliterator and strode into the corridor.

Eyeholes in the bas-reliefs coughed, sending clouds of bone darts clattering off his necrodermis. Trazyn snatched one out of the air and analysed the tip: an exotic poison derived from a local marine invertebrate, unique to this world.

He slipped it into a dimensional pocket and continued forward, sensing a stone shift and sink beneath him.

A piece of masonry, hammer-shaped and weighing six tons, swept down at him like a pendulum. Trazyn waved at it without stopping, the stasis projection from his palm emitter halting its progress mid-swing. He passed it without a glance, its surface vibrating with potential energy.

Finally, the gate. Tall as a monolith, it was decorated with exquisite carvings of aeldari gods. A vertical strip of runes laid out a poem-riddle so fiendish, it would stop even the wisest if they did not know the obscure lore

of the-

*'Tailliac sawein numm*,' intoned Trazyn, turning sideways so he could slip through the gates as they ground open.

Normally, he would have put some effort into it. Solved it by thought, then performed a textual analysis. Trazyn enjoyed riddles. They revealed so much about the cultures that shaped them. But a noemic notice from his lychguards suggested that the Exodites were pressing harder than anticipated. No time for amusing diversions.

He hadn't paused to process the meaning of the runes, just fed them through his lexigraphic database and cross-referenced double meanings, inferences and mythological connotations. Even now, he could not have explained what the answer to the riddle was, or what it meant. It was merely a linguistic equation, a problem with an answer.

An answer that had brought him into the presence of the World Spirit.

The chamber swept up around him like a cavernous grotto, its upper reaches lost in the echoing vaults of the ceiling. His metal feet sounded off a causeway, its wraithbone marbled with veins of gold. Filigreed balustrades on either side mimicked the corals of the ocean depths, for Cepharil was a world of warm seas and lush archipelagos. On either side of the walkway, pools of liquid platinum cast watery light across the walls.

'Now,' he muttered to himself. 'Where are you, my lovely?'

Before him rose the World Spirit.

It curved ahead, inlayed into the vaulted surface of the far wall. It too was made of bone, but rather than the old, inert wraithbone of the walls and ceiling this sprouted alive from the floor, branching like a fan of tree roots that had grown up instead of down.

No, Trazyn corrected, that was not quite accurate. His oculars stripped away the outer layers of the World Spirit, refocusing on the veins of energy that ran through the psychoactive material. Arcane power pulsed to and fro in a circulatory system, racing through arteries and nerves as it travelled to the highest forks of the network and back to the floor. Not roots, then – antlers. Yes, that was it, a great set of antlers, large as a mountain, the points of its forks curving away from the wall. Here and there it sprouted buds, fuzzy with new growth.

Exquisite.

Stepping closer, Trazyn appraised the object. The substance was not

wraithbone, he noted, at least not entirely. This was a hybrid, a substitute, grown from the skeletons of the great lizards and interwoven with the psycho-plastic wraithbone salvaged from their crashed ship. A gene-sequence scry failed to find where one substance began and the other ended, no points where the ancient craftsman had fused or grafted the two materials together. This was a seamless blend, nurtured and shaped over millions of years, wraithbone woven between the molecules of reactive, but lower quality, dinosaurid remains. A masterwork by one of the finest bonesingers in the galaxy, an act of artistry and devotion that was at once temple, mausoleum and metropolis. A place for the souls of his slain aeldari ancestors to be at rest, united and safeguarded from the hungry gods of the aether.

Trazyn carried towards it on tireless legs, craning his hunched neck to see where the highest forks disappeared in the darkness of the vault. Once, his own kind had been able to accomplish works such as this. But the process of biotransference, the blighted gift that had moved their consciousness to deathless metal bodies, had also burned away nearly all artistry. His kind were no longer artisans or poets. Those few that retained the knack found their powers diminished. Now they forged rather than created. A work that took this much care, this much love, was beyond them.

Such a shame he could not take the whole thing.

Given time he could extract it, perhaps even lock the entire temple in a stasis field and transplant it whole to his historical gallery on Solemnace. To have the gemstone in its original context would be a rare coup. But somehow these primitives had sensed the coming of his acquisition phalanx, and there was no time. In truth, he had broken protocol by waking even thirty of the lychguard before their time. Doing so had damaged their neural matrices, making them little more than automatons that followed tactical programs and explicit commands.

But if they could not remember this expedition, so much the better – Trazyn was not supposed to be here anyway.

He approached the base of the World Spirit – the chamber was a full league across – and beheld the true genius of its creation.

The structure sprouted from the skull of a predator lizard twice Trazyn's height, its lower jaw removed and sickle-like upper teeth buried in the wraithbone floor. A glow, like the orange light cast by wind-stoked embers, emanated from the cavities of the creature's eye sockets.

Trazyn's vision stripped away layers of bone and he saw the gemstone embedded in the predator's fist-sized brain cavity.

'A carnosaur. Astonishing.'

He brushed a metal hand over the skull's cranium, an emitter in the palm casting electromagnetic radiation through its core.

It was old. Older than he had thought possible. Indeed, perhaps Trazyn should have tempered his dismissal of the aeldari tales, for it was indeed a meteorite, and one of extreme antiquity and unknown make-up. He reviewed the spectromantic divination results manually, to confirm its findings. Given the age of the components, their degradation, and the style on the beam-cut faces of the gem, it was entirely possible that it dated from the War in Heaven.

A delicious shiver passed through Trazyn's circuitry.

'Well met, my dear,' he said, his cooing tone offset by the hollow echo of his vocal emitter. 'It is not so often that I meet a thing as old as I am.'

He was so entranced, in fact, that he did not see the dragon riders coming.

Deep focus tended to dim his circumspection protocols, and the beasts' footfalls had been masked via training and sorcery.

And for all his inputs, scryers, protocols and diviners, the movements of the empyrean were muffled in his senses. When it came to warp sorcery, he was like a deaf man at a dinner table, able to make out words through dampened sounds and lip-reading, but unable to even notice the voices behind his back.

An interstitial alert flashed in his vision and he wheeled, dialling back his chronosense to slow the world and give himself time to calculate a microsecond decision.

Scales, claws and sawtooth fangs were about to break down on him like a wave – twenty cavalry riding knee to knee in tight formation, wraithbone lances braced, tattooed swirls on arrowhead-sharp faces. Scrimshawed charms dangled from the halters of their raptor mounts, each leather harness crisscrossing a scaled snout that ended in flared nostrils and hooked teeth. The raptors – underwater slow in Trazyn's enhanced vision – swung their avian frames low, shifting weight to their bunched haunches in preparation for a final lunge.

One lance came at him so directly, its tip looked like a circle in his vision.

Minimal options, none attractive. But his proximity to the World Spirit had at least given him a moment to act as they pulled their charge, afraid of

smashing into their venerated ancestral tomb.

Trazyn slid left, past the first lance tip.

Before the warrior could swing the long weapon around, Trazyn gripped the haft and tore the tattooed Aspect Warrior from his saddle. He watched the rider's face twist as he fell from the mount, long hair flying free and hands sheltering his face as he tumbled to the bone floor.

*Trazyn, who is called Infinite*, a voice said. It was not audible speech. Nor was it telepathy, to which he was immune. Instead, it was a wavelength of psychic pulses pushing on his auditory transducer to mimic language. One of these riders must be a farseer.

He ignored it.

The riderless raptor struck at him, jaws closing on the place where his ribcage met his hooded neck. Trazyn had overcommitted himself and could not dodge.

You will not keep what you seek.

Hooked teeth met the cold surface of his necrodermis – and shattered.

Trazyn channelled kinetic force into his fist and punched the dinosaur in the throat.

Vertebrae popped, cartilage tore. The raptor went down with the noise of a bugle player experiencing sudden and unbearable agony.

Listen to the song. This world sings for the blood of Trazyn.

And it was true – even through the syrupy haze of slowed time he could hear the keening chants of the knights. That he did not have blood was no matter, these aeldari wanted it anyway.

But their formation was not optimised to deal with a single opponent. It was jumbling, folding as the knights tried to get to him. And he had just created a gap.

As the unit tried to wheel on itself, Trazyn slipped through the hole in the line – making sure to step on the fallen warrior on his way through.

Behind him, riders collided and mixed.

'Aeldari,' he scoffed. 'So old and wise. You are children to us.'

This World Spirit is our ancestry, Trazyn. Our culture. Our dead. And it will wither without the Solar Gem.

That's when Trazyn saw the carnosaur. He'd missed it before now, his focus overwhelmed by the charging raptor riders and senses clouded by witchery. It reared above him, its well-muscled chest protected by a breastplate shaped

from dinosaurid bone, twin-linked shuriken cannons emerging like tusks from its chin. Serrated blades fashioned from the teeth of aquatic predators studded the armour plates clamped to its feet and spine. A calcium scythe capped its lashing tail.

And on its back, the farseer – her willow-thin face half-covered by the mask of an unfamiliar god, graceful frame armoured in mother-of-pearl, and pink hair gathered into a topknot.

We have long known that you desire it, but if you take it, the World Spirit will die.

'If you knew I was coming,' Trazyn said. 'You should have made a contingency plan.'

I know you will return, the farseer said. But I will still enjoy this.

The carnosaur bit down on him at the waist, his whole upper half trapped inside the wet darkness of its mouth. Nine-inch fangs – even now, he could not stop analysing, cataloguing – sank into the tough tubes and pelvic ambulation structures of his torso. Vital systems tore and failed. Emerald sparks erupted from the wound, lighting the interior of the carnosaur's mouth with baleful flashes. He felt his legs separate.

Trazyn channelled his diminishing reserves into a fist and reshaped it into a brutal spike. He stabbed at the carnosaur's lashing tongue, hot reptilian blood spurting over his oculars. To his annoyance, his systems autonomously ran an analysis of the genetic make-up.

He marked it to read later.

The muscular tongue flipped and rolled him to the side. He sprawled, saw a sawtooth strip of light as the jaws opened.

He regretted slowing his chronosense as he watched the row of jagged teeth close on him, puncturing his oculars, driving through his neural fibre spools and crushing his skull.

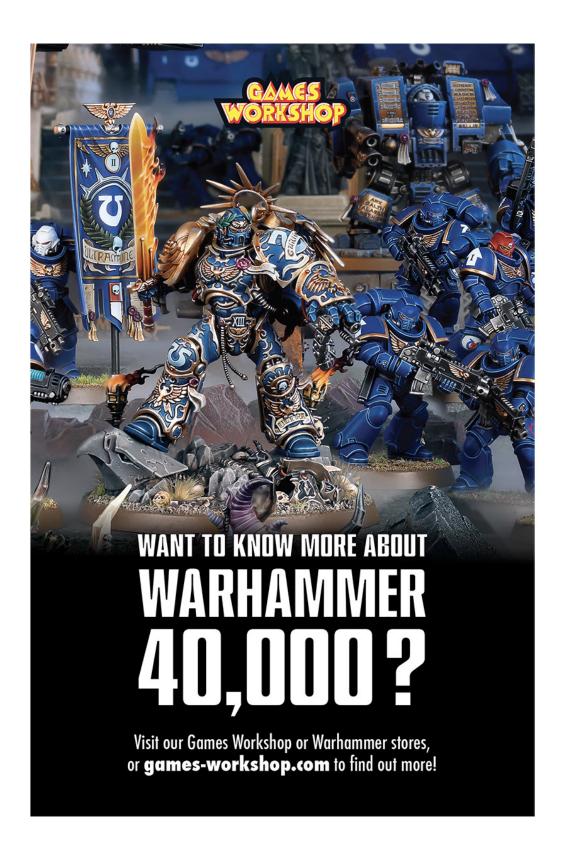
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For Grinchard. Keep up the good work, mate

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