

SALAMANDER

A Warhammer 40,000 Novel

By Nick Kyme

Hailing from the volcanic world of Nocturne, Space Marines from the Salamanders Chapter are in search of an ancient artefact that leads to a world overrun by Chaos. They are the fire-born: implacable warriors with iron hard determination. But all is not what it seems as far more dangerous foe is revealed. As bitter rivalries break out amongst the Salamanders their endurance will be tested to the limit. Will the Salamanders survive long enough to discover the truth about this world and the revelations that will shake the very foundations of this Chapter forever?



**NOW YOU CAN READ 'FIRES OF WAR', FROM THE
'HEROES OF THE SPACE MARINES' ANTHOLOGY,
FOR FREE!**

**'FIRES OF WAR' IS THE THRILLING PREQUEL STORY TO
THE TOME OF FIRE TRILOGY, WHICH BEGINS IN
SEPTEMBER WITH 'SALAMANDER'.**

About the Author

Nick Kyme hails from Grimsby, a small town on the east coast of England. Nick moved to Nottingham in 2003 to work on White Dwarf magazine as a Layout Designer. Since then, he has made the switch to the Black Library's hallowed halls as an editor and has been involved in a multitude of diverse projects. His writing credits include several published short stories, background books and novels.

You can catch up with Nick and read about all of his other published works at his website: www.nickkyme.com

•BY THE SAME AUTHOR•

ASSAULT ON BLACK REACH

The following is the full text of *Fires of War* by Nick Kyme, taken from the *Heroes of the Space Marines* anthology, edited by Nick Kyme and Lindsey Priestley.

Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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‘Give me some good news, Helliman,’ growled Colonel Tonnhauser. The old soldier spoke out the side of his mouth, a cigar smouldering between his lips.

He ducked instinctively as another explosion rocked the walls of the workshop, sending violent tremors through the floor and chips of rockcrete spitting from the ceiling onto the map-strewn bench below.

‘That was closer...’ Tonnhauser muttered, blowing smoke as he brushed away the dislodged dust and debris for the umpteenth time.

It’s a hard thing for a man to lose his own city to an enemy. When that enemy comes from within, it’s even more repugnant. But that was the stark reality facing Abel Tonnhauser of the 13th Stratosan Aircorps. He’d given too much ground already to the endless hordes of insurgent cultists, and still they pushed for more. Soon there’d be nothing left. The defence of the three primary cities of Stratos was on the brink of failure. The cloud and bolt badge he wore, though tarnished by weeks of fighting, was pinned proudly to a double-breasted tan leather jacket. It was only made of brass, but felt about as heavy as an anvil.

The workshop structure in which he’d made his command post was full of disused aeronautical equipment and machinery, more or less a refit and repair yard for dirigibles and other flying craft that were a necessary part of life on Stratos. Air tanks, pressure dials and coils of ribbed hosing were strewn throughout the building.

The one in which Tonnhauser conferred with Sergeant Helliman, while Corpsman Aiker monitored the vox-traffic, was broad and long with vast angular arches and tall support columns, all chrome and polished plasteel.

Typical of the Stratosan architectural style, it had been beautiful once but was now riddled with bullet holes and crumbling from shell damage. A demo-charge rigged by insurgents to a ballast tractor had taken out most of the south-facing wall, the bulk of the colonel's command staff with it. With no time to effect repairs, a sheet of plastek had been piston-drilled to cover the hole.

This largely pointless measure did little to keep out the stutter of sporadic gunfire and incessant explosions from tripped booby traps and purloined grenade launchers. Sergeant Helliman had to raise his voice to be heard.

'Three loft-cities remain under the control of the insurgents, sir: Cumulon, here in Nimbaros, and Cirrion. They have also collapsed all except the three major sky-bridges into these areas.'

'What of our ground forces, any progress there?' asked Tonnhauser, lifting his peaked cap to run a hand across his receding hairline and wishing dearly that the expulsion of the insurgents was someone else's job.

Helliman looked resigned, the young officer grown thinner over the passing weeks, and pale as a wraith.

'Heavy resistance is dogging our efforts to make any inroads into the cities. The insurgents are dug in and well organised.'

Helliman paused to clear his dry throat.

'There must be at least ninety thousand of the cities' total populations corrupted by cult activity. They hold all of the materiel factorums and are equipping themselves with our stockpiles. Armour too.'

Tonnhauser surveyed the city maps on the bench, looking for potential avenues of assault he might have missed. He saw only bottlenecks and kill-zones in which the Aircorps would be snared.

Helliman waited anxiously for Tonnhauser's response, and the void in conversation was filled by the frantic chatter coming from the command vox. Corpsman Aiker, crouched by the boxy unit in one corner of the workshop, tried his best to get a clear signal but static ran riot over all channels in the wake of the destruction of the antenna towers. Tonnhauser didn't need to hear the substance of the vox-reports to know it was bad.

'What *do* we hold then?' he asked at last, looking up into the sergeant's tired eyes.

'Our safe zones are—'

A shuddering explosion slapped against the workshop, cutting Helliman off. Fire spilled through the plastek towards the sergeant in a tide. It funnelled outwards, the plastek becoming fluid in the intense heat wave, and melted around the hapless Helliman.

Tonnhauser swore loudly as he was dumped on his arse, but had enough presence of mind to pull out his service pistol and shoot the screaming sergeant through the head to spare him further agony.

Ears still ringing from the blast, Tonnhauser saw a figure scuttle through the fire-limned gouge in the plastek. It was a man, or at least a dishevelled interpretation of one, clad in rags and flak armour. His hair was sheared roughly all the way down to the skull. Hate-filled eyes caught sight of Tonnhauser as the wretch cast about the room. But it was the mouth of the thing that gave the loyal Stratosan pause. It was sewn shut with thick black wire, the lips and cheeks shot through with purple-blue veins.

At first, Tonnhauser thought the insurgent was unarmed. Then he saw the grenade clutched in his left hand...

'Holy Emperor...'

Tonnhauser shot him through the forehead. As the cultist fell back there was an almighty thunderclap as the grenade went off, blasting the bodily remains of the insurgent to steaming chunks of meat.

The metal workbench spared Tonnhauser from the explosion, but he had little time to offer up his thanks to the Throne.

Through the smoke and falling debris three more insurgents emerged, mouths sewn shut just like the first. Two carried autoguns; one had a crude-looking heavy stubber.

Squeezing off a desultory burst of fire, Tonnhauser went to ground behind the solid bench just as metal rain ripped into the workshop. It chewed up the room with an angry roar, tearing up the walls and disused machinery, perforating Corpsman Aiker where he crouched.

Crawling on his hands and knees, Tonnhauser pressed himself tighter into cover, discharging the spent clip from his pistol before reaching for another with trembling fingers.

No way could he kill them all...

Through the incessant barrage of gunfire, Tonnhauser first heard the *plink-plink* of a small metal object nearby, then saw the tossed grenade land and roll to within a metre of his foot. Survival instinct taking over, he lurched towards the grenade and kicked. It went off seconds later, heat, noise and pressure crashing over Tonnhauser in a violent wave, close enough for a shard of shrapnel to embed itself in his outstretched leg.

The colonel bit down so he wouldn't cry out.

Won't give this scum the satisfaction, he thought.

A sudden rash of las-fire spat overhead and abruptly the shooting ceased.

'Colonel,' an urgent voice called out from across the workbench a few moments later.

'Behind here,' Tonnhauser growled, wincing in pain as he saw the jagged metal sticking out of his leg.

Five Stratosan Aircorpsmen ran around the side of the bench, lasguns hot.

Tonnhauser read the first man's rank pins.

'Impeccable timing Sergeant Rucka, but aren't you supposed to be with Colonel Yonn and the 18th at the Cirrion border?'

A second corpsman carried a portable vox. Reports were drumming out on all frequencies, accompanied by a throbbing chorus of explosions and muted gunfire from across the length and breadth of Nimbaros.

‘Colonel Yonn is dead, sir. And the 18th are pulling out of Cirrion. The city is totally lost, all safe zones are compromised,’ Rucka told him. ‘We’ve got to get you out.’

Tonnhauser grimaced as two of the other corpsmen helped him to his feet.

‘What about Cumulon? Has that fallen too?’ he asked, passing the dead bodies of the three cultists, and staggering out of the back entrance to the workshop.

The sergeant’s tone was hollow but pragmatic.

‘We’ve lost them all, sir. We’re in full retreat, back beyond the city limits and across the sky-bridge to Pileon.’

Once out into the city streets the noise of the encroaching gun battle grew exponentially louder. Tonnhauser looked up to the dome roof of the city and saw a stormy sky through the reinforced plastek above him. Scudding smoke clouded his view as the upper atmosphere of the loft-city was lost from sight. As he fell back with Sergeant Rucka and his squad, Tonnhauser risked a glance over his shoulder. A mass retreat was in effect. Distant insurgents closed on their position en masse, clutching various guns and improvised weapons. Their battle cries were muted by the wire lacing their lips together – the effect was unnerving. Tonnhauser didn’t need to hear them to tell the enemy was pressing a large-scale attack.

A gas-propelled rocket roared close by overhead, forcing Tonnhauser and the others to duck. It struck the side of a mag-tram depot and exploded outwards, engulfing an entrenched Aircorps gunnery position. The three-man team died screaming amidst brick and fire.

Rucka altered course abruptly, taking Tonnhauser and his men away from the destruction of the depot and down a side alley.

‘Throne, how did this happen?’ Tonnhauser asked when Rucka had them stop in the alley to wait for the all clear to proceed. ‘We were pressing them back, weren’t we?’

‘Took us by surprise,’ said Rucka, ducking back into the alley as a bomb blast lit up the road beyond. ‘Set off a chain of booby traps that decimated our troops then launched a mass ground offensive. They’re using advanced military tactics. No way can we retake the cities like this. We’ll have to regroup. Maybe then we can get Nimbaros and Cumulon back, but Cirrion...’ The sergeant’s words trailed away, telling Tonnhauser everything he needed to know about the capital’s fate.

‘What about Governor Varkoff?’

‘He’s alive, bunkered down in Pileon. It’s the nearest of the minor sky-cities that’s still under our control. That’s where we are headed now. He’s enacted official distress protocols on all Imperial astropathic and comm-range frequencies, requesting immediate aid.’

‘Do something for me will you, corpsman,’ said Tonnhauser. The colonel had moved to the end of the alley and watched as another explosion took out a statue of the first Stratosan governor. It was a symbol of Imperial rule and order. It shattered as it struck the ground wrapped in fire.

‘What’s that, sir?’

‘Get on your knees and pray,’ Tonnhauser said, ‘pray for a bloody miracle...’

* * *

For the last forty years, the dream hadn’t changed.

At first there was only a vague sensation of heat, and then Dak’ir was back in the hot dark of the caves of Ignea on Nocturne. In his dream he was only a boy, the rock wall of that hostile place coarse and sharp against his pre-adolescent skin as he touched it. Mineral seams glinted in the glow of lava pools fed by the river of fire that was the lifeblood of the mountain above him. Ignea then faded, and the light from the river of fire died with it, resolving into a new vista...

The Cindara Plateau stretched before Dak'ir's sandaled feet, its edge delineated by rock-totems, its surface the colour of rust and umber. Ash scudded in drifts across the Pyre Desert below, obscuring scaled saurochs as they hunted for sustenance amongst the crags. Above there came the sound of thunder, as if Mount Deathfire was about to erupt flame and smoke to blot out the heavens. But the great mountain of Nocturne slumbered still. Instead, Dak'ir looked up and saw a fiery blaze of a different kind, the engines of a vast ship slowly coming to land.

A ramp opened in the side of the vessel as it came to rest at last, and a warrior stepped out, tall and powerful, clad in armour of green plate and emblazoned with the symbol of the salamander, the noble creatures that lived in the heart of the earth. Others joined the warrior, Dak'ir knew some of them; he had worked beside them rebuilding and rock-harvesting after the Time of Trial. His heart quailed at the sight of these giants, though. For he knew they had come for him...

The image changed again, and this time Dak'ir had changed too. He now wore the mantle of warrior, carried the tools of war. His body was armoured in carapace, a holy bolt pistol gripped in his Astartes fist, his onyx flesh a stark reminder of his superhuman apotheosis. Monoliths of stone and marble loomed above Dak'ir like grey sentinels, ossuary roads paved the streets and the acrid stench of grave dust filled the air. This was not Nocturne; this was Moribar, and here the skies were wreathed in death.

Somewhere on the horizon of that grey and terrible world, Dak'ir heard screaming and the vision in his mind's eye bled away to be filled by a face on fire. He had seen it so many times, 'the burning face', agonised and accusing, never letting him truly rest. It burned and burned, and soon Dak'ir was burning too, and the screams that filled his ears became his own...

'We were only meant to bring them back...'

Dak'ir's eyes snapped open as he came out of battle-meditation. Acutely aware of his accelerated breathing and high blood pressure, he went through the mental calming routines as taught to him when he had first joined the superhuman ranks of the Space Marines.

With serenity came realisation. Dak'ir was standing in the half-darkness of his isolation chamber, a solitorium, one of many aboard the strike cruiser *Vulkan's Wrath*. It was little more than a dungeon: sparse, austere and surrounded on all sides by cold, black walls.

More detailed recollection came swiftly.

An urgent communication had been picked up weeks ago via astropathic messenger and interpreted by the Company Librarian, Pyriel. The Salamanders were heading to the Imperial world of Stratos.

A prolific mining colony, one of many along the Hadron Belt in the Reductus Sector of Segmentum Tempestus, Stratos had great value to the Imperium for its oceanic minerals as well as its regular tithe of inductees to the Imperial Guard. Rescue of Stratos, liberation for its inhabitants from the internecine enemies that plagued it, was of paramount importance.

Hours from breaking orbit, Captain Ko'tan Kadai had already assigned six squads, including his own *Inferno Guard*, to be the task force that would make planetfall on Stratos and free the world from anarchy. As Promethean belief dictated, all Salamanders about to embark on battle must first be cleansed by fire and endure a period of extended meditation to focus their minds on self-reliance and inner fortitude.

All, but Dak'ir, had been untroubled in their preparations.

Such a fact would not go unnoticed.

'My lord?' a deep and sonorous voice asked.

Dak'ir looked in its direction and saw the hooded form of Tsek. His brander-priest was dressed in emerald green robes with the Chapter icon, a snarling salamander head inside a ring of fire, stitched in amber-coloured wire across his breast. Half-concealed

augmetics were just visible beneath the serf's attire in the flickering torchlight.

The chamber was small, but had enough room for an Astartes' attendants.

'Are you ready for the honour-scarring, my lord?' asked Tsek.

Dak'ir nodded, still a little disoriented from his dream. He watched as Tsek brought forth a glowing rod, white-hot from the embers of the brazier-cauldron that Dak'ir was standing in barefooted. The Astartes barely registered the pain from the fire-wrapped coals beneath him. There was not so much as a globule of sweat across his bald head or onyx-black body, naked but for a tribal sash clothing his loins.

The ritual was part of the teachings of the Promethean Cult, to which all warriors of the Salamanders stoically adhered.

As Tsek applied the branding rod to Dak'ir's exposed skin he embraced the pain it brought. His fiery eyes, like red-hot coals themselves, watched approvingly. First, Tsek burned three bars and then a swirl bisecting them. It conjoined the many marks he and other brander-priests had made upon Dak'ir's body where they'd healed and scarred into a living history of the Salamander's many conflicts. Each was a battle won, a foe vanquished. No Salamander went into battle without first being marked to honour it and then again at battle's end to commemorate it.

Dak'ir's own marks wreathed his legs, arm and some of his torso and back. They were intricate, becoming more detailed as each new honour scar was added. Only a veteran of many campaigns, a Salamander of centuries' service, ever bore such markings on his face.

Tsek bowed his head and stepped back into shadow. A votive-servitor shambled forward in his wake on reverse-jointed metal limbs, bent-backed beneath the weight of a vast brazier fused to its spine. Dak'ir reached out and plunged both hands into the iron

caldera of the brazier, scooping up the fragments of ash from the burned matter collected at its edges.

Dak'ir smeared the white ash over his face and chest, inscribing the Promethean symbols of the hammer and the anvil. They were potent icons in Promethean lore, believed to garner endurance and strength.

'Vulkan's fire beats in my breast...' he intoned, making a long sweep with his palm to draw the hammer's haft.

'...With it I shall smite the foes of the Emperor,' another voice concluded, letting Dak'ir cross the top of the haft with his palm to form the hammer's head before revealing himself.

Brother Fugis stepped into the brazier's light, clanking loudly as he moved. He was already clad in his green power armour, but went unhooded. His blood-red eyes blazed vibrantly in the half-dark. As befitted a Space Marine of his position, Fugis bore the ash-white of the Apothecaries on his right shoulder pad, though the left still carried the insignia of his Chapter on a jet-black field, the snarling salamander head there a blazing orange to match the pauldrons of his Third Company battle-brothers.

Thin-faced and intimidating, some in the company had suggested Fugis might be better served in a more spiritual profession than the art of healing. Such 'suggestions' were never voiced out loud, however, or given in front of the Apothecary, for fear of reprisal.

Dak'ir's response to the Apothecary's sudden presence was less than genial.

'What are you doing here, brother?'

Fugis did not answer straight away. Instead, he scanned a bio-reader over Dak'ir's body.

'Captain Kadai asked me to visit. Examinations are best conducted before you're armoured.'

Fugis paused as he waited for the results of the bio-scan, his blade-thin face taut like wire.

‘Your arm, Astartes,’ he added without looking up, but gesturing for Dak’ir’s limb.

Dak’ir held his arm out for the Apothecary, who took it by the wrist and syringed off a portion of blood into a vial. A chamber in his gauntlet then performed a bio-chemical analysis after the vial was inserted into its miniature centrifuge.

‘Are all of my brothers undergoing such rigorous conditioning?’ asked Dak’ir, keeping the annoyance from his voice.

Fugis was evidently satisfied with the serology results, but his tone was still matter of fact.

‘No, just you.’

‘If my brother-captain doubts my will, he should have Chaplain Elysus appraise me.’

The Apothecary seized Dak’ir’s jaw suddenly in a gauntleted fist and carefully examined his face. ‘Elysus is not aboard the *Vulkan’s Wrath*, as you well know, so you will have to endure my *appraisal* instead.’

With the index finger of his other hand Fugis pulled down the black skin beneath Dak’ir’s left eye, diffusing its blood-red glow across his cheek.

‘You are still experiencing somnambulant visions during battle-meditation?’ he asked. Then, apparently satisfied, he let Dak’ir go.

The brother-sergeant rubbed his jaw where the Apothecary had pinched it.

‘If you mean, am I dreaming, then yes. It happens sometimes.’

The Apothecary looked at the instrument panel on his glove, his expression inscrutable.

‘What do you dream about?’

‘I am a boy again, back on Nocturne in the caves of Ignea. I see the day I passed the trials on the Cindara Plateau and became an Astartes, my first mission as a neophyte...’ The Salamander’s voice trailed away, as his expression darkened in remembrance.

The burning face...

'You are the only one of us, the only Fire-born, ever to be chosen from Ignea,' Fugis told him, eyes penetrating as he looked at Dak'ir.

'What does that matter?'

Fugis ignored him and went back to his analysis.

'You said, "We were only meant to bring them back". Who did you mean?' he asked after a moment.

'You were there on Moribar,' Dak'ir uttered and stepped off the brazier-cauldron, hot skin steaming as it touched the cold metal floor of his isolation cell. 'You know.'

Fugis looked up from his instruments and his data. His eyes softened fleetingly with regret. They quickly narrowed, however, sheathed behind cold indifference.

He laughed mirthlessly, his lip curling in more of a sneer than a smile.

'You are fit for combat, brother-sergeant,' he said.

'Planetfall on Stratos is in less than two hours. I'll see you on assembly deck six before then.'

Fugis then saluted, more by rote than meaning, and turned his back on his fellow Salamander.

Dak'ir felt relief as the Apothecary departed.

'And Brother Dak'ir... Not all of us *want* to be brought back. Not all of us *can* be brought back,' said Fugis, swallowed by the dark.

The surface of Stratos writhed with perpetual storms. Lightning streaked the boiling tumult and thunderheads collided in violent flashes, only to break apart moments later. Through these ephemeral gaps in the clouds tiny nubs of chlorine-bleached rock and bare earth were revealed, surrounded by a swirling maelstrom sea.

The Thunderhawk gunships *Fire-wyvern* and *Spear of Prometheus* tore above the storm's fury, turbofans screaming. They were headed for the conglomeration of floating cities in Stratos's

upper atmosphere. Named ‘loft-cities’ by the Stratosan natives, these great domed metropolises of chrome and plascrete were home to some four point three million souls and linked together by a series of massive sky-bridges. Due to the concentrated chlorine emissions from their oceans the Stratosans had been forced to elevate their cities with massive plasma-fuelled gravitic engines; so high, in fact, that each required its own atmosphere in order for the inhabitants to breathe.

The words of Fugis were still on Dak’ir’s mind and he willed the furore inside the Chamber Sanctuarine of the *Fire-wyvern* to smother his thoughts. The gunship’s troop hold was almost at capacity – twenty-five Astartes secured in standing grav-harness as the Thunderhawk made its final descent.

Brother-Captain Kadai was closest to the exit ramp, his gaze burning with courage and conviction. He was clad in saurian-styled artificer armour and, like his charges, had yet to don his helmet. Instead, he had it clasped to his armour belt, a simulacrum of a snarling fire drake fashioned in metal. His close-cropped hair was white and shaven into a strip that bisected his head down the middle. Alongside him was his command squad, the Inferno Guard: N’keln, Kadai’s second in command, a steady if uncharismatic officer; Company Champion Vek’shen, who had bested countless foes in the Chapter’s name, and gripped his fire-glaive; Honoured Brother Malicant who bore the company’s banner into battle, and Honoured Brother Shen’kar clasping a flamer to his chest. Fugis was the last of them. The Apothecary nodded discreetly in Dak’ir’s direction when he saw him.

It was dark in the chamber. Tiny ovals of light came from the Salamanders, their red eyes aglow. As Dak’ir’s gaze left Fugis it settled on another’s, one that burned coldly.

Brother-Sergeant Tsu’gan glared from across the hold.

Dak’ir felt his fists clench.

Tsu’gan was the epitome of Promethean ideal. Strong, tenacious, self-sacrificing – he was everything a Salamander should

aspire to be. But there was a vein of arrogance and superiority hidden deep within him. He was born in Hesiod, one of the seven Sanctuary Cities of Nocturne, and the principal recruiting grounds for the Chapter. Unlike most on the volcanic death world, Tsu'gan was raised into relative affluence. His family were nobles, tribal kings at the tenuous apex of Nocturnean wealth and influence.

Dak'ir, as an itinerant cave-dwelling Ignean, was at its nadir. The fact that he became Astartes at all was unprecedented. So few from the nomadic tribes ever reached the sacred places where initiates underwent the trials, let alone competed and succeeded in them. Dak'ir was, in many ways, unique. To Tsu'gan, he was an aberration. Both should have left their human pasts behind when they were elevated to Astartes, but centuries of ingrained prejudice were impossible to suppress.

The Thunderhawk banked sharply as it made for the landing zone adjacent to the loft-city of Nimbaros, breaking the tension between the two sergeants. The exterior armour plate shrieked in protest with the sudden exertion, the sound transmitting internally as a dull metal moan.

'A portent of the storm to come?' offered Ba'ken in a bellow.

The bald-headed Astartes was Dak'ir's heavy weapons trooper, his broad shoulders and thick neck making him ideally equipped for the task. Ba'ken, like many of his Chapter, was also a gifted artisan and craftsman. The heavy flamer he had slung on his back was unique amongst Tactical squads, and he had manufactured the weapon himself in the blazing forges of Nocturne.

'According to the Stratosan's reports, the traitors are dug in and have numbers. It will not be—'

'We are the storm, brother,' Tsu'gan interjected, shouting loudly above the engine din before Dak'ir could finish. 'We'll cleanse this place with fire and flame,' he snarled zealously, 'and purge the impure.'

Ba'ken nodded solemnly to the other sergeant, but Dak'ir felt his skin flush with anger at such blatant disrespect for his command.

An amber warning light winked into existence above them and Brother-Captain Kadai's voice rang out, preventing any reprisal.

'Helmets on, brothers!'

There was a collective *clank* of metal on metal as the Astartes donned battle-helms.

Dak'ir and Tsu'gan fitted theirs last of all, unwilling to break eye contact for even a moment. In the end Tsu'gan relented, smiling darkly as he mouthed a phrase.

'Purge the impure.'

'Cumulon in the east and Nimbaros in the south are still contested, but my troops are taking more ground by the hour and have managed to secure the sky-bridges that link the three cities,' explained a sweating Colonel Tonnhauser over the crackling pict-link of Kadai's Land Raider Redeemer, *Fire Anvil*. 'We're using them to siphon out civilian survivors. There are still thousands trapped behind enemy lines though, my men amongst them.'

'You have done the Emperor's work here, and have my oath as a Salamander of Vulkan that if those men can be saved, I will save them,' Kadai replied, standing inside the hold of his war machine as it shuddered over the sky-bridge to Cirrion. Four armoured Rhinos rumbled behind it in convoy, transporting the rest of the battlegroup.

Once the Salamanders had made planetfall outside Nimbaros, Kadai had ordered Brother Argos, Master of the Forge, to make a structural assessment of the approach road to Cirrion. Using building schematics from the Stratosan cities inloaded to the *Vulkan's Wrath's* cogitators and then exloaded back to a display screen on the *Fire-wyvern*, the Techmarine had determined the sky-bridges were unfeasible locations for the gunships to land and redeploy the Astartes.

Less than twenty minutes later, three Thunderhawk transporters had descended from orbit and deployed the Salamanders' dedicated transport vehicles.

Kadai had held his Salamanders at the landing zone in squad formation, ready for the arrival of the transports. There had been no time for a tactical appraisal with the Stratosan natives. That would have to be conducted en route to Cirrion.

'I pray to the Emperor that some yet live,' Tonnhauser continued over the pict-link, network-fed to all of the Astartes transports. 'But I fear Cirrion is lost to us, lord Astartes,' he added, lighting up a fresh cigar with shaking fingers. 'There's nothing left there but death and terror, now.' He seemed to be avoiding eye contact with the screen. Kadai had taken off his helmet during the ride over the sky-bridge and the human clearly found his appearance unsettling.

'*Wars have been won on the strength of that alone,*' he remembered the old Master of Recruits telling him almost three hundred years ago when he had first been given the black carapace.

'Tell me of the enemy,' Kadai said, face hardening at the thought of such suffering.

'They call themselves the Cult of Truth,' said Tonnhauser, the pict-link breaking up for a moment with the static interference. 'Until roughly three months ago, they were merely a small group of disaffected Imperial citizens adept at dodging the mauls of the city proctors. Now they are at least fifty thousand strong, and dug in all throughout Cirrion. They're heavily-armed. Most of the Stratosan war-smiths are based in the capital, as are our dirigible fleets, our airships. They carry a mark on their bodies, usually hidden, like a tattoo in the shape of a screaming mouth. And their mouths...' he said, taking a shuddering breath, 'their mouths are sewn shut with wire. We think they might remove their tongues, too.'

'What makes you say that?'

Tonnhauser met the captain's burning gaze in spite of his fear.

‘Because no one has ever heard them speak.’ Tonnhauser paled further. ‘To fight an enemy that does not cry out, that does not shout orders. It’s not natural.’

‘Do they have a leader, this *cult*?’ said Kadai, showing his distaste at such depravity.

Tonnhauser took a long drag on his cigar, before crushing it in an ash tray and lighting another.

‘Our gathered intelligence is limited,’ he admitted. ‘But we believe there is a hierophant of sorts. Again, this is unconfirmed, but we think he’s in the temple district. What we do know is that they call him the *Speaker*.’

‘An ironic appellation,’ Kadai muttered. ‘How many troops do you have left, colonel?’

Tonnhauser licked his lips.

‘Enough to hold the two satellite cities. The rest of my men in Cirrion are being pulled out as we speak. Civilians too. I’ve lost so many...’ Tonnhauser’s face fell. He looked like a man with nothing more to give.

‘Hold those cities, colonel,’ Kadai told him. ‘The Salamanders will deal with Cirrion, now. You’ve done your duty as a servant of the Imperium and will be honoured for it.’

‘Thank you, my lord.’

The pict-link crackled into static as Kadai severed the connection.

The captain turned from the blank display screen to find Apothecary Fugis at his shoulder.

‘Their courage hangs by a thread,’ he muttered. ‘I have never seen such despair.’

‘Our intervention is timely then.’ Kadai glanced over Fugis’s shoulder and saw the rest of his command squad.

N’keln was readying them for battle, leading them in the rites of the Promethean Cult.

‘Upon the anvil are we tempered, into warriors forged...’ he intoned, the others solemnly following his lead. They surrounded a

small brazier set into the floor of the troop hold. Offerings to Vulkan and the Emperor burned within the crucible, scraps of banners or powdered bone, and one by one the Inferno Guard took a fistful of the ash and marked their armour with it.

‘Guerrilla warfare is one thing, but to defeat an entire Imperial Guard regiment... Do you think we face more than a cult uprising here?’ asked Fugis, averting his gaze from the ritual and resolving to make his own observances later.

Kadai brought his gaze inward as he considered the Apothecary’s question.

‘I don’t know yet. But something plagues this place. This so-called Cult of Truth certainly has many followers.’

‘Its spread is endemic, suggesting its root is psychological, rather than ideological,’ said the Apothecary.

Kadai left the implication unspoken.

‘I can’t base a strategy on supposition, brother. Once we breach the city, then we’ll find out what we’re facing.’ The captain paused a moment before asking, ‘What of Dak’ir?’

Fugis lowered his voice, so the others could not hear him.

‘Physically, our brother is fine. But he is still troubled. Remembrances of his human childhood on Nocturne and his first mission...’

Kadai scowled, ‘Moribar... Over four decades of battles, yet still this one clings to us like a dark shroud.’

‘His memory retention is... *unusual*. And I think he feels guilt for what happened to Nihilan,’ offered Fugis.

Kadai’s expression darkened further.

‘He is not alone in that,’ he muttered.

‘Ushorak, too.’

‘Vai’tan Ushorak was a traitor. He deserved his fate,’ Kadai answered flatly, before changing the subject, ‘Dak’ir’s spirit will be cleansed in the crucible of battle; that is the Salamander way. Failing that I will submit him to the Reclusiam and Chaplain Elysium for conditioning.’

Kadai re-activated the open vox-channel, indicating that the conversation was over.

It was time to address the troops.

‘Brothers...’ Dak’ir heard the voice of his captain over the vox. ‘Our task here is simple. Liberate the city, protect its citizens and destroy the heretics. Three assault groups will enter Cirrion on a sector by sector cleanse and burn – *Hammer*, *Anvil* and *Flame*. Sergeants Tsu’gan and Dak’ir will lead *Anvil* and *Flame*, into the east and west sectors of the city respectively. Devastator heavy support is Sergeant Ul’shan’s Hellfire Squad for *Anvil* and Sergeant Lok’s Incinerators for *Flame*. I lead *Hammer* to the north with Sergeant Omkar. Flamers with all units. Let nothing stay your wrath. This is the kind of fight we were born for. In the name of Vulkan. Kadai out.’

Static reigned once more. Dak’ir cut the link completely as the convoy rumbled on slowly past sandbagged outposts crested with razor wire. Weary troops with hollow eyes manned those stations, too tired or inured by weeks of fighting to react to the sight of the Astartes.

‘This is a broken force,’ muttered Ba’ken, breaking the silence as he peered out of one of the Rhino’s vision slits.

Dak’ir followed his trooper’s gaze. ‘They are not like the natives of Nocturne, Ba’ken. They are unused to hardship like this.’

A lone file of Stratosan Aircorps passed the convoy, marching in the opposite direction. They trudged like automatons, nursing wounds, hobbling on sticks, lasguns slung loose over their shoulders. Every man wore a respirator, and a tan storm-coat to ward off the chill of the open atmosphere. Only the cities were domed, the sky-bridges lay open to the elements, though they had high walls and were suspended from rugged-looking towers by thick cables.

The gate of Cirrion loomed at the end of the blasted road. The way into the capital city was huge, all bare black metal, and hermetically sealed to maintain its atmospheric integrity.

‘I heard a group of corpsmen talking before we mustered out,’ offered Ba’ken as they approached the gate. ‘He said that Cirrion was how he imagined hell.’

Dak’ir was checking the power load of his plasma pistol before slamming it back into its holster. ‘We were born in hell, Ba’ken... What do we have to fear from a little fire?’

Ba’ken’s booming laughter thundered in the Rhino all the way up to the gate.

Deep within the bowels of Cirrion the shadows were alive with monsters.

Sergeant Rucka fled through shattered streets, his pursuers at his heels. His heart was pounding. Cirrion’s principal power grid had collapsed, leaving failing back-up generators to provide intermittent illumination for the city via its lume-lamps. With every sporadic blackout, the shadows seemed to fill with new threats and fresh enemies. It didn’t help matters.

Rucka had been at the front of the second push in the capital city. The attack had failed utterly. Something else was stalking the darkened corridors of Cirrion, and it had fallen upon his battalion with furious wrath. It was totally unexpected. In strategising his battalion’s assault Rucka had deliberately taken an oblique route, circumventing the main battle zones, to come through the northern sector of the city.

All Stratosan gathered intelligence had suggested that insurgent resistance would be light. It wasn’t insurgents that had wiped out five hundred men.

Rucka was the last of them, having somehow escaped the carnage, but now the cultists had found him. They were gaining too. His once proud city was in ruins. He didn’t know this dystopian version of it. Where there should have been avenues there were rubble blockades. Where there should be plazas of chrome there were charred pits falling away into stygian darkness. Hell had come here. There was no other word to describe it.

Rounding another corner, Rucka came to abrupt halt. He was standing at the mouth to a mag-tram station; on one side a stack of industrial warehouses, on the other a high wall and an overpass. The trams themselves littered the way ahead, just burnt out wrecks, daubed in crude slogans. But it was the tunnel itself that caught the sergeant's attention. Something skittered there in the abject darkness.

Behind him, Rucka heard the pack. They'd slowed. He realised then he'd been steered to this place.

Slowly the skittering from the tunnel became louder and the pack from behind him closer. The cultists scuttled into view. Rucka counted at least fifty men and women, their mouths sewn shut, blue veins threading from their puckered lips. They carried picks and shards of metal and glass.

It wasn't the end that Rucka had envisaged for himself.

The sergeant had picked out his first opponent and was about to take aim with his lasgun when a piece of rockcrete clattered down onto the street. Rucka traced its trajectory back to the overpass and saw the silhouettes of three armoured giants in the ambient light.

The brief spark of salvation given life in Rucka's mind was quickly crushed when he realised that these creatures were not here to save him.

Thunder roared and muzzle flares tore away the darkness a second later.

Rucka read what was about to happen and went to ground just before the onslaught. The deadly salvo lasted heartbeats, but it was enough. The cultists were utterly annihilated – their broken, blasted bodies littered the street like visceral trash.

Rucka was on his back, still dazed from the sudden attack. When he couldn't feel his legs, he realised he'd been hit. Heat blazed down his side like an angry knife ripping at his skin. His fatigues were wet, probably with his own blood. A sudden earth tremor shook the rockcrete where Rucka lay prone, sending fresh daggers of pain through his body, as something large and dense

smashed into the ground. More impacts followed, landing swift and heavy like mortar strikes.

Vision fogging, the sergeant managed to turn his head... His blood-rimed eyes widened. Crouched in gory armour, two bloody horns curling from its snarling dragon helm, was a terrible giant. It rose to its feet, like some primordial beast uncurling from the abyss, to reveal an immense plastron swathed in red scales. Heat haze seemed to emanate from its armoured form as if it had been fresh-forged from the mantle of a volcano.

‘The vault, where is it?’ the dragon giant asked, fiery embers rasping through its fanged mouth-grille as if it breathed ash and cinder.

‘Close...’ said another. Its voice was like cracked parchment but carried the resonance of power.

Though he couldn’t see them in his eye-line, Rucka realised the secondary impacts had been the giant warrior’s companions.

‘We are not alone,’ said a third, deep and throaty like crackling magma.

‘Salamanders,’ said the dragon giant, his vitriol obvious.

‘Then we had best be swift,’ returned the second voice. ‘I do not want to miss them.’

Rucka heard heavy footfalls approaching and felt the ominous gaze of one of the armoured giants upon him.

‘This one still lives,’ it barked.

Rucka’s vision was fading, but the sergeant could still smell copper coming off its armour, mangled with the acrid stench of gun smoke.

‘No survivors,’ said the second voice. ‘Kill it quickly. We have no time for *amusement*, Ramlek.’

‘A pity...’

Rucka tried to speak.

‘The Empe—’

Then his world ended in fire.

The black iron gates of Cirrion parted with slow inevitability.

The armoured Astartes convoy rumbled through into the waiting darkness. After a few moments the gates shut behind them. Halogen strip lights flickered into life on the flanking walls revealing a large metal chamber, wide enough for the transports to travel abreast.

Abandoned Stratosan vehicles lay abutting the walls, dragged aside by clearance crews. Caches of discarded equipment were strewn nearby the forlorn AFVs. Webbing, luminator rigs and other ancillary kit had been left behind, but no weapons – all the guns were needed by the human defenders.

Hermetically sealed from the outside to preserve atmospheric integrity, the holding area had another gate on the opposite side. This second gate opened when the Salamanders were halfway across the vast corridor with a hiss of pressure, and led into Cirrion itself.

The outskirts of the benighted city beckoned.

Deserted avenues bled away into blackness and buildings lay in ruins like open wounds. Fire seared the walls and blood washed the streets. Despair hung thick in the air like a tangible fug. Death had come to Cirrion, and held it tightly in its bony grasp.

Akin to a hive, Cirrion was stacked with honeycomb levels in the most densely packed areas. Grav-lifts linked these plateau-conurbations of chrome and blue. Sub-levels plunged in other places, allowing access to inverted maintenance spires or vast subterranean freight yards. Above, a dense pall of smoke layered the ceiling in a roiling mass. Breaks in the grey-black smog revealed thick squalls of cloud and the flash of lightning arcs from the atmospheric storm outside and beyond the dome.

Tactically, the city was a nightmarish labyrinth of hidden pitfalls, artificial bottlenecks and kill-zones. Tank traps riddled the roads. Spools of razor wire wreathed every alleyway. Piled rubble and wreckage created makeshift walls and impassable blockades.

The Salamanders reached as far as Aereon Square, one of Cirrion's communal plazas, when the wreckage-clogged, wire-choked streets prevented the transports from going any further.

It was to be the first of many setbacks.

'Salamanders, disembark,' Kadai voiced sternly over the vox. 'Three groups, quadrant by quadrant search. Vehicles stay here. We approach on foot.'

'Nothing,' Ba'ken's voice was tinny through his battle-helm as he stood facing the doorway to one of Cirrion's municipal temples. It yawned like a hungry maw, the shadows within filled with menace.

From behind him, Dak'ir's order was emphatic.

'Burn it.'

Ba'ken hefted his heavy flamer and doused the room beyond with liquid promethium. The sudden burst of incendiary lit up a broad hallway like a flare, hinting at a larger space in the distance, before dying back down to flickering embers.

'Clear,' he shouted, stepping aside heavily with the immense weapon, allowing the sergeant and his battle-brothers through.

Sergeant Lok and his Devastators were assigned to the rearguard and took up positions to secure the entrance as Ba'ken followed the Tactical squad inside.

Dak'ir entered quickly, his squad fanning out from his lead to cover potential avenues of attack.

They'd been travelling through the city for almost an hour, through three residential districts filled with debris, and still no contact with friend or foe. Regular reports networked through the Astartes' comm-feeds in their helmets revealed the same from the other two assault groups.

Cirrion was dead.

Yet, there were signs of recent abandonment: lume-globes flickering in the blasted windows of tenements, sonophones playing grainy melodies in communal refectories, the slow-running engines

of dormant grav-cars and the interior lamps of mag-trams come to an all-stop on the rails. Life here had ended abruptly and violently.

Numerous roads and more conventional routes were blocked by pitfalls or rubble. According to Brother Argos, the municipal temple was the most expedient way to penetrate deeper into the east sector. It was also postulated that it was a likely location for survivors to congregate. The Techmarine was back in Nimbaros with Colonel Tonnhauser, guiding the three assault groups via a hololithic schematic, adjusting the image as he was fed reports of blockades, street collapses or structural levelling by Salamanders in the field.

‘Brother Argos, this is *Flame*. We’ve reached the municipal temple and need a route through,’ said Dak’ir. Even through his power armour, he was aware of the dulcet hum of the plasma engines keeping the massive city aloft and reminded of the precariousness of their battlefield.

Putting the thoughts out of his mind, he swept the luminator attached to his battle-helm around the vast hall. Within its glare a lozenge-shaped chamber with racks of desks on both flanking walls was revealed. Overhead, exterior light from the city’s lume-lamps spilled through a glass-domed ceiling in grainy shafts illuminating patches on the ground. Lightning flashes from Stratos’s high atmosphere outside augmented it.

Parchments and scraps of vellum set ablaze by Ba’ken’s flamer skittered soundlessly across a polished floor, or twisted like fireflies on an unseen breeze. More of the papers were fixed to pillars that supported the vaulted roof above, fluttering fitfully – some stuck with votive wax, others hammered fast with nails and stakes. The messages were doubtless pinned up by grieving families long since given in to despair.

‘These are death notices, prayers for the missing,’ intoned Brother Emek, using the muzzle of his bolter to hold one still so he could read it.

‘More here,’ added Brother Zo’tan. He panned the light from his luminator up a chrome-plated staircase at the back of the room to reveal the suited bodies of clerks and administrators entangled in the balustrade. Torn scrolls were pinned to the banister, and gathered over the corpses on the steps like a paper shroud.

‘There must be thousands...’ uttered Sergeant Lok, who had entered the lobby. The hard-faced veteran looked grimmer than ever as he surveyed the records of the dead with his bionic eye.

‘Advance to the north end of the hall,’ the Techmarine’s voice returned, cracked with interference as it called the Salamanders back. ‘A stairway leads to a second level. Proceed north through the next chamber then east across a gallery until you find a gate. That’s your exit.’

Dak’ir killed the comm-feed. In the sudden silence he became aware of the atmospheric processors droning loudly in the barrier wall around the city, purifying, recycling, regulating. He was about to give the order to move out when the sound changed abruptly. The pitch became higher, as if the processing engine were switched to a faster setting.

Dak’ir re-opened the comm-feed in his battle-helm.

‘Tsu’gan, are you detecting any variance in the atmospheric processors in your sector?’

Crackling static returned for a full thirty seconds before the sergeant replied.

‘It’s nothing. Maintain your vigilance, Ignean. I have no desire to haul your squad out of trouble when you let your guard slip.’

Tsu’gan cut the feed.

Dak’ir swore under his breath.

‘Move out,’ he told his squad. He hoped they’d find the enemy soon.

‘He should never have been chosen to lead,’ muttered Tsu’gan to his second, Iagon.

‘Our brother-captain must have his reasons,’ he replied, his tone ever sinuous but carefully neutral.

Iagon was never far from his sergeant’s side, and was ever ready with his counsel. His body was slight compared to most of his brethren, but he made up for sheer bulk with guile and cunning. Iagon gravitated towards power, and right now that was Tsu’gan, Captain Kadai’s star ascendant. He also carried the squad’s auspex, maintaining a watch for unusual spikes of activity that might prelude an ambush, walking just two paces behind his sergeant as they stalked through the shadows of a hydroponics farm.

Tiny reservoirs of nutrient solution encased in chrome tanks extended across an expansive domed chamber. The chemical repositories were set in serried ranks and replete with various edible plant life and other flora. The foliage inside the vast gazebo of chrome and glass was overgrown, resembling more an artificial jungle than an Imperial facility for the sector-wide provision of nutrition.

‘Then that is his folly,’ Tsu’gan replied, and signalled a sudden halt.

He crouched, peering into the arboreal gloom ahead. His squad, well-drilled by their sergeant, adopted overwatch positions.

‘Flamer,’ he growled into the comm-feed.

Brother Honourious moved forwards, the igniter of his weapon burning quietly. The Salamander noticed the blue flame flicker for just a moment as if reacting to something in the air. Slapping the barrel, Honourious muttered a litany to the machine-spirits and the igniter returned to normal.

‘On your order, sergeant.’

Tsu’gan held up his hand.

‘Hold a moment.’

Iagon low-slung his bolter to consult the auspex.

‘No life form readings.’

Tsu’gan’s face was fixed in a grimace.

‘Cleanse and burn.’

‘We would be destroying the food supply for an entire city sector,’ said Iagon.

‘Believe me Iagon, the Stratosans are long past caring. I’ll take no chances. Now,’ he said, turning back to Honourous, ‘cleanse and burn.’

The roar of the flamer filled the hydroponics dome as the sustenance of Cirrion was burned to ash.

* * *

‘They are drawing us in,’ said Veteran Sergeant N’keln over the comm-feed. He was in the lead, tracking his bolter left and right for any sign of the enemy.

‘I know,’ Kadai agreed, trusting his and N’keln’s warrior instincts. The captain held his inferno pistol by his side, thunder hammer crackling quietly in his other hand. ‘Remain vigilant,’ he hissed through his battle-helm, his squad treading warily with bolters ready.

The city loomed tall and imposing as the Salamanders advanced slowly down a narrow road choked with wreckage and Stratosan corpses – ‘remnants’ of the battalions Tonnhauser had mentioned. The hapless human troopers had erected sandbagged emplacements and makeshift barricades. Habs had been turned into bunkers, and bodies hung forlornly from their windows like rags. The defences had not availed them. The Stratosan infantry had been crushed.

Fugis was crouched over the blasted remains of a lieutenant, scowling.

‘Massive physical trauma,’ muttered the Apothecary as Captain Kadai approached him.

‘Colonel Tonnhauser said the cultists were heavily armed,’ offered N’keln alongside him.

Fugis regarded the corpse further. ‘Rib cage is completely eviscerated, chest organs all but liquefied.’ Looking up at his fellow Salamanders, his red eyes flared behind his helmet lenses. ‘This is a bolter wound.’

Kadai was about to respond when Brother Shen'kar called from up ahead.

'I have movement!'

'Keep it tight,' warned Dak'ir as he advanced up the lobby stairs towards a large chrome archway leading to the second level of the municipal temple.

The igniter on Ba'ken's heavy flamer spat and flickered furiously until he reduced the fuel supply down the hose.

'Problem?'

'It's nothing sergeant,' he replied.

Dak'ir continued up the stairway, battle-brothers on either side of him, the Devastators still in the lobby below, ready to move up if needed. When he reached the summit he saw another long hallway beyond, just as Brother Argos had described. The room was filled with disused cogitators and other extant machinery. Sweeping his gaze across the junk, Dak'ir stopped abruptly.

In the centre of the hall, surrounded by more dead Administratum workers, was a boy. An infant, no more than eight years old, he was barefoot and clad in rags. Dirt and dried blood encrusted his body like a second skin. The boy was staring right at Dak'ir.

'Don't move,' he whispered to his battle-brothers through the comm-feed. 'We have a survivor.'

'Mercy of Vulkan...' breathed Ba'ken, alongside him.

'Stay back,' warned Dak'ir, taking a step.

The boy flinched, but didn't run. Tears were streaming down his face, cutting through the grime and leaving pale channels in their wake.

Dak'ir scanned the hall furtively for any potential threats, before deeming the way was clear. Holstering his plasma pistol and sheathing his chainsword, he then showed his armoured palms to the boy.

‘You have nothing to fear...’ he began, and slowly removed his battle-helm. Dak’ir realised his mistake too late.

This infant was no native of Nocturne. One look at the Salamander’s onyx-black skin and burning eyes and the child yelped and fled for his life back across the hall.

‘Damn it!’ Dak’ir hissed, ramming his battle-helm back on and re-arming himself. ‘Sergeant Lok, you and your squad secure the room and await our return,’ he ordered through the comm-feed. ‘Brothers, the rest of you with me – there may be survivors, and the boy will lead us to them.’

The Salamanders gave chase, whilst the Devastators moved up the stairs behind them. Dak’ir was halfway across the hall with his squad when he felt the tiny pressure of a wire snapping against his greave. He turned, about to shout a warning, when the entire room exploded.

‘Dead end,’ stated Brother Honourous, standing before the towering barricade of heaped grav-cars and mag-trams.

Tsu’gan and *Anvil* left the hydroponics farm a smouldering ruin and had advanced into the city. Directed by Brother Argos, they’d passed through myriad avenues in the urban labyrinth until reaching a narrow defile created by tall tenement blocks and overhanging tower-levels. A hundred metres in and they’d rounded a corner only to find it blocked.

‘We’ll burn through it,’ said Tsu’gan, about to order Sergeant Ul’shan’s Devastators forward. The multi-meltas would soon—

‘Wait...’ said Tsu’gan, surveying the tall buildings reaching over them. ‘Double back, we’ll find another way.’

At the opposite end of the alleyway a huge trans-loader rolled into view, cutting off their exit. Slowly at first, but with growing momentum it rumbled towards the Salamanders.

‘Multi-meltas now! Destroy it!’

Sergeant Ul'shan swung his squad around to face the charging vehicle just as the cultist heavy weapon crews emerged from their hiding places in the tenements above and filled the alleyway with gunfire.

'Eyes open,' hissed Captain Kadai.

The Inferno Guard, together with Omkar's Devastators, were crouched in ready positions spread across the street. The dangers were manifold – every window, every alcove or shadowed corner could contain an enemy.

Kadai's gaze flicked back to Fugis, as the Apothecary hurried, head low, towards a distant gun emplacement. A Stratosan lay slumped next to its sandbagged wall, alive but barely moving. Kadai watched the trooper's hand flick up for the third time as he signalled for aid.

Something didn't feel right.

The trooper's movements were limp, but somehow forced.

Sudden unease creeping into the pit of his stomach, Kadai realised it was a trap.

'Fugis, stop!' he yelled into the comm-feed.

'I'm almost there, captain...'

'Apothecary, obey my ord–'

The roar of a huge fireball billowing out from the emplacement cut Kadai off. Fugis was lifted off his feet by the blast wave, the slain Stratosans buoyed up with him like broken dolls. Chained detonations ripped up the road, rupturing rockcrete, as an entire section of it broke apart and fell away creating a huge chasm.

Flattened by the immense explosion, Captain Kadai was still struggling to his feet, shaking off the blast disorientation, when he saw Fugis lying on his chest, armour blackened by fire, gripping the edge of the artificial crater made during the explosion. Kadai cried out as the Apothecary lost his hold and slipped down into the gaping black abyss of Cirrion's underbelly, vanishing from sight.

From the hidden darkness of the city, the depraved cultists swarmed into the night and the shooting began...

Shrugging off the effects of the explosion, Dak'ir saw figures moving through the settling dust and smoke.

One loomed over him. Its mouth was stitched with black wire; blue veins infected its cheeks. Eyes filled with fervour, the cultist drove a pickaxe against the Space Marine's armour. The puny weapon broke apart on impact.

'Salamanders,' roared Dak'ir, rallying his squad as he pulverised the cultist's face with an armoured fist. He took up his chainsword, which had spilled from his grip in the blast, eviscerating three more insurgents as they came at him with cudgels and blades.

Reaching for his plasma pistol, he stopped short. The atmospheric readings in his battle-helm were showing a massive concentration of hydrogen; the air inside the dome was saturated with it.

To Dak'ir's left flank, Ba'ken was levelling his heavy flamer as a massive surge of cultists spilled into the hall...

'Wai—'

'Cleanse and burn!'

As soon as the incendiary hit the air, the weapon exploded. Ba'ken was engulfed in white fire then smashed sideways, through the rockcrete wall and into an adjoining chamber where he lay unmoving.

'Brother down!' bellowed Dak'ir, Emek offering suppressing fire with his bolter as he came forward, chewing up cultists like meat sacks.

More were piling through in a steady stream, seemingly unaffected by the bolt storm. Picks and blades gave way to heavy stubbers and autocannons, and Dak'ir saw the first wave for what it was: a flesh shield.

Another Salamander came up on the sergeant's other flank, Brother Ak'sor. He was readying his flamer when Dak'ir shouted into the comm-feed.

'Stow all flamers and meltas... the air thick with a gaseous hydrogen amalgam. Bolters and secondary weapons only.'

The Salamanders obeyed at once.

The press of cultists came on thickly now, small-arms fire whickering from their ranks as the heavy weapons were prepared to shoot. Dak'ir severed the head from one insurgent and punched through the sternum of another.

'Hold them,' he snapped, withdrawing a bloody fist.

Ak'sor had pulled out a bolt pistol. Bullets pattered against his armour as he let rip, chewing up a bunch of cultists with autoguns. The dull *thump-thud* of the heavier cannons starting up filled the room and Ak'sor staggered as multiple rounds struck him. From somewhere in the melee, a gas-propelled grenade whined and Ak'sor disappeared behind exploding shrapnel. When the smoke had cleared, the Salamander was down.

'Retreat to the lobby, all Salamanders,' shouted Dak'ir, solid shot rebounding off his armour as he hacked down another cultist that came within his death arc.

The Astartes fell back as one, two battle-brothers coming forward to drag Ba'ken and Ak'sor from the battle. As Dak'ir's squad reached the stairs and started to climb down, Sergeant Lok rushed in. Due to the presence of the explosive hydrogen gas the Incinerators were down to a single heavy bolter, strafing the doorway and ripping up cultists with a punishing salvo.

There was scant respite as the enemy pressed its advantage, wired-mouthed maniacs hurling themselves into the furious bolter fire in their droves. Brother Ionnes was chewing through the belt feed of his heavy bolter with abandon, his fellow Salamanders adding their own weapons to the barrage, but the cultists came on still. Like automatons, they refused to yield to panic, the fates of their shattered brethren failing to stall, let alone rout them.

‘They’re unbreakable!’ bellowed Lok, smashing an insurgent to pulp with his power fist, whilst firing his bolter one-handed. A chainsaw struck his outstretched arm seemingly from nowhere and he grimaced, his weapon falling from nerveless fingers. Red-eyed eviscerator priests were moving through the throng, wielding immense double-handed chainblades. Dak’ir crushed the zealot’s skull with a punch, but realised they were slowly being enveloped.

‘Back to the entrance,’ he cried, taking up Lok’s fallen bolter and spraying an arc of fire across his left flank. The ones he killed didn’t even scream. Step by agonising step, the Salamanders withdrew. There was a veritable bullet hail coming from the enemy now, whose numbers seemed limitless and came from every direction at once.

Inside the comm-feed it was chaos. Fragmented reports came in, plagued by static interference, from both *Anvil* and *Hammer*.

‘Heavy casualties... enemy armour moving in... thousands everywhere... brother down!’

‘Captain Kadai...’ Dak’ir yelled into the vox. ‘Brother-captain, this is *Flame*. Please respond.’

After a long minute, Kadai’s broken reply came back.

‘Kadai... here... Fall... back... regroup... Aereon Square...’

‘Captain, I have two battle-brothers badly injured and in need of medical attention.’

Another thirty seconds passed, before another stuttering response.

‘Apothecary... lost... Repeat... Fugis is gone...’

Gone. Not wounded or down, just gone. Dak’ir felt a ball of hot pain develop in his chest. Stoic resolve outweighed his anger – he gave the order for a fighting withdrawal to Aereon Square, and then raised Tsu’gan on the comm-feed.

‘Vulkan’s blood! I will not retreat in the face of this rabble,’
Tsu’gan snarled at Iagon. ‘Tell the Igean, I have received no such order.’

Anvil had, under Tsu’gan’s steely leadership, broken free of the ambush without casualties, though Brother Honourous was limping badly and Sergeant Ul’shan had lost an eye when the trans-loader hit and the drums of incendiary heaped onboard had exploded.

Without use of their multi-meltas, Tsu’gan had torn through the vehicle wreckage himself, scything cultists down on the other side with his combi-bolter. They were falling back to defended positions in the wider street beyond when Dak’ir’s message came through.

At some point during the fighting, Tsu’gan had damaged his battle-helm and he’d torn it off. Since then he’d been relying on Iagon for communication with the other assault groups.

‘We are Salamanders, born in fire,’ he raged zealously, ‘the anvil upon which our enemies are broken. We do not yield. *Ever!*’

Iagon dutifully relayed the message, indicating his sergeant’s refusal to comply.

Further up the street, something loud and heavy was rumbling towards them. It broke Tsu’gan’s stride for just a moment as a tank, festooned with armour plates and daubed with the gaping maw symbol of the Cult of Truth, came into view. Swinging around its fat metal turret, the tank’s battle cannon fired, jetting smoke and rocking the vehicle back on its tracks.

Tsu’gan had his warriors in a defensive battle line, strafing the oncoming cultist hordes with controlled bursts of bolter fire. The tank shell hit with all the force of a thunderbolt, and tore the ragged line apart.

Salamanders were tossed into the air with chunks of rockcrete chewed out of the road, and fell like debris.

‘Close ranks. Hold positions,’ Tsu’gan snarled, crouching down next to a partially destroyed barricade once occupied by Stratosan Aircorps.

Iagon shoved one of the bodies out of the way, so he could rest his bolter in a makeshift firing lip.

‘Still nothing from the captain,’ he said between bursts.

Tsu’gan’s reaction to the news was guarded, his face fixed in a perpetual scowl.

‘Ul’shan,’ he barked to the sergeant of the Devastators, ‘all fire on that tank. In the name of Vulkan, destroy it.’

Bolter fire *pranged* against the implacable vehicle, grinding forward as it readied for another shot with its battle cannon. In the turret, a crazed cultist took up the heavy stubber and started hosing the Salamanders with solid shot.

‘You others,’ bellowed Tsu’gan, standing up and unhitching something from his belt, ‘grenades on my lead.’ He launched a krak grenade overarm. It soared through the air at speed, impelled by Tsu’gan’s strength, and rolled into the tank’s path. Several more followed, *thunking* to earth like metal hail.

At the same time, Iagon’s bolter fire shredded the cultist in the stubber nest, whilst Sergeant Ul’shan’s heavy bolters hammered the tank’s front armour and tracks. An explosive round from the salvo clipped one of the krak grenades just as the armoured vehicle was driving over it. A chained detonation tore through the tank as the incendiaries exploded, ripping it wide open.

‘Glory to Prometheus!’ roared Tsu’gan, punching the air as his warriors chorused after him.

His fervour was dampened when he saw shadows moving through the smoke and falling shrapnel. Three more tanks trundled into view.

Tsu’gan shook his head in disbelief.

‘*Mercy of Vulkan...*’ he breathed, just as the comm-link with Captain Kadai was restored. The sergeant glared at Iagon with iron-hard eyes.

They were falling back to Aereon Square.
Dak'ir had been right. Tsu'gan felt his jaw tighten.

'Hold the line!' Kadai bellowed into the comm-feed. 'We make our stand here.'

The Salamanders held position stoically, strung out across the chewed-up defences, controlled bursts thundering from their bolters. Behind them were the armoured transports. Storm bolters shuddered from turret mounts on the Rhinos and *Fire Anvil's* twin-linked assault cannon whirred in a frenzy of heavy fire, though the Land Raider's flamestorm side sponsons were powered down.

The Salamanders had converged quickly on Aereon Square, the fighting withdrawal of the three assault groups less cautious than their original attack.

The slab floor of the square was cratered by bomb blasts and fire-blackened. Fallen pillars from adjacent buildings intruded on its perimeter. The centre of the broad plaza was dominated by a felled statue of one of Stratos's Imperial leaders, encircled by a damaged perimeter wall. It was here that Kadai and his warriors made their stand.

The cultists came on in the face of heavy fire, swarming from every avenue, every alcove, like hell-born ants. Hundreds were slain in minutes. But despite the horrendous casualties, they were undeterred and made slow progress across the killing ground. The corpses piled up like sandbags at the edge of the square.

'None shall pass, Fire-born!' raged Kadai, the furious zeal of Vulkan, his progenitor, filling him with righteous purpose. *Endure* – it was one of the central tenets of the Promethean Cult, *endure and conquer*.

The bullet storms crossed each other over a shortening distance as the cultist thousands poured intense fire into the Salamanders' defensive positions. Chunks of perimeter wall, and massive sections of the fallen statue, were chipped apart in the maelstrom.

Brother Zo'tan took a round in the left pauldron, then another in the neck, grunted and fell to his knees. Dak'ir moved to cover him, armour shuddering as he let rip with a borrowed bolter. Insurgent bodies were destroyed in the furious barrage, torn apart by explosive rounds, sundered by salvos from heavy bolters, shredded by the withering hail from assault cannons whining red-hot.

Still the cultists came.

Dak'ir gritted his teeth and roared.

'No retreat!'

Slowly, inevitably, the hordes began to thin. Kadai ordered a halt to the sustained barrage. Like smoke, dispersing from a doused pyre, the insurgents were drifting away, backing off silently into the gloom until they were at last gone from sight.

The tenacity of the Salamanders had kept the foe at bay this time. Aereon Square was held.

'Are they giving up?' asked Dak'ir, breathing hard underneath his power armour as he tried to slow his body down from its ultra-heightened battle-state.

'They crawl back to their nests,' Kadai growled. His jaw clenched with impotent anger. 'The city is theirs... for now.'

Stalking from the defence line, Kadai quickly set up sentries to watch the approaches to the square, whilst at the same time contacting Techmarine Argos to send reinforcements from *Vulkan's Wrath*, and a Thunderhawk to extract the dead and wounded. The toll was much heavier than he had expected. Fourteen wounded and six dead. Most keenly felt of all, though, was the loss of Fugis.

The Salamanders were a small Chapter, their near-annihilation during one of the worst atrocities of the Heresy, when they were betrayed by their erstwhile brothers, still felt some ten thousand years later. They had been Legion then, but now they were merely some eight hundred Astartes. Induction of new recruits was slow and only compounded their low fighting strength.

Without their Apothecary and his prodigious medical skills, the most severe injuries suffered by Kadai's Third Company would

remain untended and further debilitate their combat effectiveness. Worse still, the gene-seeds of those killed in action would be unharvested, for only Fugis possessed the knowledge and ability to remove these progenoids safely. And it was through these precious organs that future Space Marines were engineered, allowing even the slain to serve their Chapter in death. The losses suffered by Third Company then became permanent with the loss of their Apothecary, a solemn fact that put Kadai in a black mood.

‘We will re-assault the city proper as soon as we’re reinforced,’ he raged.

‘We should level the full weight of the company against them. Then these heretics will break,’ asserted Tsu’gan, clenching a fist to emphasise his vehemence.

Both he and Dak’ir accompanied Kadai as he walked from the battle line, leaving Veteran Sergeant N’keln to organise the troops. The captain unclasped his battle-helm to remove it. His white crest of hair was damp with sweat. His eyes glowed hotly, emanating anger.

‘Yes, they will learn that the Salamanders do not yield easily.’

Tsu’gan grinned ferally at that.

Dak’ir thought only of the brothers they had already lost, and the others that would fall in another hard-headed assault. The traitors were dug-in and had numbers – without flamers to flush out ambushers and other traps, breaking Cirrion would be tough.

Then something happened that forestalled the captain’s belligerent plan for vengeance. Far across Aereon Square, figures were emerging through the smoke and dust. They crept from their hiding places and shambled towards the Salamanders, shoulders slumped in despair.

Dak’ir’s eyes widened when he saw how many there were, ‘Survivors... the civilians of Cirrion.’

‘Open it,’ rasped the dragon giant. His scaled armour coursed with eldritch energy, throwing sharp flashes of light into the gloom. He and his warriors had reached a subterranean metal chamber that ended in an immense portal of heavy plasteel.

Another giant wearing the red-scaled plate came forward. Tendrils of smoke emanated from the grille in his horned helmet. The silence of the outer vault was broken by the hissing, crackling intake of breath before the horned one unleashed a furious plume of flame. It surged hungrily through the grille-plate in a roar, smashing against the vault door and devouring it.

Reinforced plasteel bars blackened and corroded in seconds, layers of ablative ceramite melted away, before the adamantium plate of the door itself glowed white-hot and sloughed into molten slag.

The warriors had travelled swiftly through the mag-tram tunnel, forging deep into the lesser known corridors of Cirrion. None had seen them approach. Their leader had made certain that the earlier massacre left no witnesses. After almost an hour, they had reached their destination. Here, in the catacombs of the city, the hydrogen gas clouds could not penetrate. They were far from the fighting; the battles going on in the distant districts of Cirrion were dull and faraway through many layers of rockcrete and metal.

‘Is it here?’ asked a third warrior as the ragged portal into the vault cooled, his voice like crackling magma. Inside were hundreds of tiny strongboxes, held here for the aristocracy of Stratos so they could secure that which they held most precious. No one could have known of the artefact that dwelled innocuously in one of those boxes. Even upon seeing it, few would have realised its significance, the terrible destructive forces it could unleash.

‘Oh yes...’ replied the eldritch warrior, closing crimson-lidded eyes as he drew of his power. ‘It is exactly where he said it would be.’

Desperate and dishevelled, the Stratosan masses tramped into Aereon Square.

Most wore little more than rags, the scraps of whatever clothed them when the cultists had taken over the city. Some clutched the tattered remnants of scorched belongings, the last vestiges of whatever life they once had in Cirrion now little more than ashen remains. Many had strips of dirty cloth or ragged scarves tied around their noses and mouths to keep out the worst of the suffocating hydrogen gas. A few wore battered respirators, and shared them with others; small groups taking turns with the rebreather cups. The hydrogen had no such ill-effects on the Salamanders, their Astartes multi-lung and oolitic kidney acting in concert to portion off and siphon out any toxins, thus enabling them to breathe normally.

‘An entire city paralysed by terror...’ said Ba’ken as another piece of shrapnel was removed from his face.

The burly Salamander was sat up against the perimeter wall, and being tended to by Brother Emek who had some rudimentary knowledge of field surgery. Ba’ken’s battle-helm had all but shattered in the explosion that destroyed his beloved heavy flamer and, after being propelled through the wall, fragments of it were still embedded in his flesh.

‘This is but the first of them, brother,’ replied Dak’ir, regarding the weary passage of the survivors with pity as they passed the Salamander sentries.

Aereon Square was slowly filling. Dak’ir followed the trail of pitiful wretches being led away in huddled throngs by Stratosan Aircorps to the Cirrion gate. From there he knew an armoured battalion idled, ready to escort the survivors across the sky-bridge and into the relative safety of Nimbaros. Almost a hundred had already been moved and more still were massing in the square as the Aircorps struggled to cope with them all.

‘Why show themselves now?’ asked Ba’ken, with a nod to Emek who took his leave having finally excised all the jutting

shrapnel. The wounds were already healing; the Larraman cells in Ba'ken's Astartes blood accelerating clotting and scarring, the ossmodula implanted in his brain encouraging rapid bone growth and regeneration.

Dak'ir shrugged. 'The enemy's withdrawal to consolidate whatever ground they hold, together with our arrival must have galvanised them, I suppose. Made them reach out for salvation.'

'It is a grim sight.'

'Yes...' Dak'ir agreed, suddenly lost in thought. The war on Stratos had suddenly adopted a different face entirely now: not one bound by wire or infected by taint, but one that pleaded for deliverance, that had given all there was to give, a face that was ordinary and innocent, and afraid. As he watched the human detritus tramp by, the sergeant took in the rest of the encampment.

The perimeter wall formed a kind of demarcation line, dividing the territory of the Salamanders and that held by the Cult of Truth. Kadai was adamant they would hold onto it. A pair of Thunderfire cannons patrolled the area on grinding tracks, servos whirring as their Techmarines cycled the cannons through various firing routines.

Brother Argos had arrived in Aereon Square within the hour, bringing the artillery and his fellow Techmarines with him.

There would be no further reinforcements.

Ferocious lightning storms were wreaking havoc in the upper atmosphere of Stratos, caused by a blanketing of thermal low pressure emanating off the chlorine-rich oceans. Any descent by Thunderhawks was impossible, and all off-planet communication was hindered massively. Kadai and the Salamanders who had made the initial planetfall were alone – a fact they bore stoically. It would have to be enough.

'How many of our fallen brothers will be for the long dark?' Ba'ken's voice called Dak'ir back. The burly Salamander was staring at the medi-caskets of the dead and severely wounded, aligned together on the far side of the perimeter wall. 'I hope I will

never suffer that fate...' he confessed in a whisper. 'Entombed within a Dreadnought. An existence without sensation, as the world dims around me, enduring forever in a cold sarcophagus. I would rather the fires of battle claim me first.'

'It is an honour to serve the Chapter eternally, Ba'ken,' Dak'ir admonished, though his reproach was mild. 'In any case, we don't know what their fates will be,' he added, 'save for that of the dead...'

The fallen warriors of Third Company were awaiting transit to Nimbaros. Here, they would be kept secure aboard *Fire-wyvern* until the storms abated and the Thunderhawk could return them to the *Vulkan's Wrath* where they would be interred in the strike cruiser's *pyreum*.

All Salamanders, once their progenoids had been removed, were incinerated in the *pyreum*, still wearing their armour, their ashes offered in Promethean ritual to honour the heroic dead and empower the spirits of the living. Such practices were only ever conducted by a Chaplain, and since Elysus was not with the company at this time, the ashen remains would be stored in the strike cruiser's crematoria until he rejoined them or they returned to Nocturne.

Such morbid thoughts inevitably led to Fugis, and the Apothecary's untimely demise.

'I spoke to him before the mission, before he died,' said Dak'ir, his eyes far away.

'Who?'

'Fugis. In the isolation chamber aboard the *Vulkan's Wrath*.'

Ba'ken stood up and reached for his pauldron, easing the stiffness from his back and shoulders. The left one had been dislocated before Brother Emek had righted it, and Ba'ken's pauldron had been removed to do it.

'What did he say?' he asked, affixing the armour expertly.

Not all of us want to be brought back. Not all of us can be brought back.

‘Something I will not forget...’

Dak’ir shook his head slowly, his gaze fixed on the darkness beyond Aereon Square. ‘I do not think we are alone here, Ba’ken,’ he said at length.

‘Clearly not – we fight a horde of thousands.’

‘No... There is something else, too.’

Ba’ken frowned. ‘And what is that, brother?’

Dak’ir voice was hard as stone, ‘Something worse.’

The interior of the *Fire Anvil*’s troop hold was aglow as Dak’ir entered the Land Raider. A revolving schematic in the middle of the hold threw off harsh blue light, bathing the metal chamber and the Astartes gathered within. The four Salamanders present had already removed battle-helms. Their eyes burned warmly in the semi-darkness, at odds with the cold light of the hololith depicting Cirrion.

Summoned at Kadai’s request, Dak’ir had left Ba’ken at the perimeter wall to rearm himself, ready for the next assault on Cirrion.

‘Without flamers and meltas we face a much sterner test here,’ Kadai said, nodding to acknowledge Dak’ir’s arrival, as did N’keln.

Tsu’gan offered no such geniality, and merely scowled.

‘Tactically, we can hold Aereon Square almost indefinitely,’ Kadai continued. ‘Thunderfire cannons will bulwark our defensive line, even without reinforcement from the *Vulkan*’s *Wrath* to compensate for our losses. Deeper penetration into the city, however, will not be easy.’

The denial of reinforcements was a bitter blow, and Kadai had been incensed at the news. But the granite-hard pragmatist in him, the Salamander spirit of self-reliance and self-sacrifice, proved the stronger and so he had put his mind to the task at hand using the forces he did possess. In response to the casualties, Kadai had combined the three groups of Devastators into two squads under Lok

and Omkar, Ul'shan with his injury deferring to the other two sergeants. Without reinforcements, the Tactical squads would simply have to soak up their losses.

‘With Fugis gone, I’m reluctant to risk more of our battle-brothers heading into the unknown,’ Kadai said, the shadows in his face making him look haunted. ‘The heretics are entrenched and well-armed. We are few. This would present little impediment should we have the use of our flamers, but we do not.’

‘Is there a way to purify the atmosphere?’ asked N’keln. He wheezed from a chest wound he’d sustained during the withdrawal to Aereon Square. N’keln was a solid, dependable warrior, but leadership did not come easily to him and he lacked the guile for higher command. Still, his bravery had been proven time and again, and was above reproach. It was an obvious but necessary question.

Brother Argos stepped forward into the reflected light of the schematic.

The Techmarine went unhooded. The left portion of his face was framed with a steel plate, the snarling image of a salamander seared into it as an honour marking. Burn scars from the brander-priests wreathed his skin in whorls and bands. A bionic eye gleamed coldly in contrast to the burning red of his own. Forked plugs bulged from a glabrous scalp like steel tumours, and wires snaked around the side of his neck and fed into his nose.

When he spoke, his voice was deep and metallic.

‘The hydrogen emissions being controlled by Cirrion’s atmospheric processors are a gaseous amalgam used to inflate the Stratosan dirigibles – a less volatile compound, and the reason why bolters are still functioning normally. Though I have managed to access some of the city’s internal systems, the processors are beyond my knowledge to affect. It would require a local engineer, someone who maintained the system originally. Unfortunately, there is simply no way to find anyone with the proper skills, either alive amongst the survivors or amongst those still trapped in the city.’ Argos

paused. 'I am sorry, brothers, but any use of incendiary weapons in the city at this time would be catastrophic.'

'One thing is certain,' Kadai continued, 'the appearance of civilian survivors effectively prevents any massed assault. I won't jeopardise innocent lives needlessly.'

Tsu'gan shook his head.

'Brother-captain, with respect, if we do not act the collateral damage will be much worse. Our only recourse is to lead a single full-strength force into Cirrion, and sack it. The insurgents will not expect such a bold move.'

'We are not inviolable against their weapons,' Dak'ir countered. 'It is not only the Stratosans you risk with such a plan. What of my battle-brothers? Their duty ended in death. You would add more to that tally? Our resources are stretched thin enough as it is.'

Tsu'gan's face contorted with anger.

'Sons of Vulkan,' he cried, smacking the plastron of his power armour with his palms, 'Fire-born,' he added, clenching a fist, '*that* is what we are. Unto the Anvil of War, that is our creed. I do not fear battle and death, even if you do, Ignean.'

'I fear nothing,' snarled Dak'ir. 'But I won't cast my brothers into the furnace for no reason, either.'

'Enough!' The captain's voice demanded the attention of the bickering sergeants at once. Kadai glared at them both, eyes burning with fury at such disrespect for a fellow battle-brother. 'Dispense with this enmity,' he warned, exhaling his anger. 'It will not be tolerated. We have our enemy.'

The sergeants bowed apologetically, but stared daggers at each other before they stood down.

'There will be no massed assault,' Kadai reasserted. 'But that is not to say we will not act, either. These heretics are single-minded to the point of insanity, driven by some external force. No ideology, however fanatical, could impel such... madness,' he added, echoing Fugis's earlier theory. The corner of Kadai's mouth

twinged in a brief moment of remembrance. ‘The hierophant of the cult, this Speaker, is the key to victory on Stratos.’

‘An assassination,’ stated Tsu’gan, folding his arms in approval.

Kadai nodded.

‘Brother Argos has discovered a structure at the heart of the temple district called Aura Hieron. Colonel Tonnhauser’s intelligence has this demagogue there. We will make for it.’ The captain’s gaze encompassed the entire room. ‘Two combat squads made up from the Devastators will be left behind with Brother Argos, who will be guiding us as before. This small force, together with the Thunderfire cannons will hold Aereon Square and protect the emerging survivors.’

Tsu’gan scowled at this.

‘Aereon Square is like a refugee camp as it is. The Aircorps cannot move the survivors fast enough. All they are doing is getting in our way. Our mission is to crush this horde, and free this place from terror. How can we do that if we split our forces protecting the humans? We should take every battle-brother we have.’

Kadai leaned forward. His eyes were like fiery coals and seemed to chase away the cold light of the hololith.

‘I will not abandon them, Tsu’gan. We are not the Marines Malevolent, nor the Flesh Tearers nor any of our other bloodletting brothers. Ours is a different creed, one of which we Salamanders are rightly proud. We will protect the innocent if—’

The *Fire Anvil* was rocked by a sudden tremor, and the dull *crump* of an explosion came through its armoured hull from the outside.

Brother Argos lowered the ramp at once and the Salamanders rushed outside to find out what had happened.

Fire and smoke lined a blackened crater in the centre of Aereon Square. The mangled corpses of several Stratosan civilians, together with a number of Aircorps were strewn within it, their bodies broken by a bomb blast. A woman screamed from the

opposite side of the square. She'd fallen, having tried to flee from another of the survivors who was inexplicably clutching a frag grenade.

Tsu'gan's combi-bolter was in his hands almost immediately and he shot the man through the chest. The grenade fell from the insurgent's grasp and went off.

The fleeing woman and several others were engulfed by the explosion. The screaming intensified.

Kadai bellowed for order, even as his sergeants went to join their battle-brothers in quelling the sudden panic.

Several cultists had infiltrated the survivor groups, intent on causing anarchy and massed destruction. They had succeeded. Respirator masks were the perfect disguise for their 'afflictions', bypassing the Stratosan soldiery and even the Astartes.

Ko'tan Kadai knelt with the broken woman in his grasp, having gone to her when the smoke was still dissipating from the explosion. She looked frail and thin compared to his Astartes bulk, as if the rest of her unbroken bones would shatter at his slightest touch. Yet, they did not. He held her delicately, as a father might cradle a child. She lasted only moments, eyes fearful, spitting blood from massive internal trauma.

'Brother-captain?' ventured N'keln, appearing at his side.

Kadai laid the dead woman down gently and rose to his full height. A thin line of crimson dotted his ebon face, the horror there having ebbed away, replaced by anger.

'Two combat squads,' he asserted, his iron-hard gaze finding Tsu'gan, who was close enough to hear him, but wisely displayed no discontent. 'Everyone is screened... *Everyone.*'

'Now we know why the survivors came out of hiding. The cultists wanted them to, so they could do this...' Ba'ken said softly to Dak'ir as the two Salamanders looked on.

Kadai touched the blood on his face then saw it on his fingers as if for the first time.

‘We need only get a kill-team close enough to the Speaker to execute him and the cultists’ resolve will fracture,’ he promised. ‘We move out now.’

Five kilometres filled with razor wire, pit falls and partially-demolished streets. Cultist murder squads dredging the ruins for survivors to torture; human bombers hiding in alcoves, trembling fingers wrapped around grenade pins; eviscerator priests leading flocks with wire-sewn mouths. It was the most expedient route Techmarine Argos could find in order for his battle-brothers to reach Aura Hieron.

Only two kilometres down that hellish road, after fighting through ambushes and weathering continual booby traps, the Salamanders’ assault had reached yet another impasse.

They stood before a long but narrow esplanade of churned plascrete. Labyrinthine track traps were dug in every three or four metres, crowned with spools of razor wire. The bulky black carapaces of partially submerged mines shone dully like the backs of tunnelling insects. Death pits were excavated throughout, well-hidden with guerrilla cunning.

A killing field; and they had to cross it in order to reach Aura Hieron. At the end of it was a thick grey line of rockcrete bunkers, fortified with armour plates. From slits in the sides constant tracer fire rattled, accompanied by the throbbing *thud-chank* of heavy cannon. The no-man’s-land was blanketed by fire that lit up the darkness in gruesome monochrome.

The Salamanders were not the first to have come this way. The corpses of Stratosan soldiers littered the ground too, as ubiquitous and lifeless as sandbags.

‘There is no way around.’ Dak’ir’s reconnaissance report was curt, having tried, but failed, to find a different angle of attack to exploit. In such a narrow cordon, barely wide enough for ten Space Marines to operate in, the Salamanders’ combat effectiveness was severely hampered.

Captain Kadai stared grimly into the maelstrom. The Inferno Guard and Sergeant Omkar's Devastators were at his side, awaiting their rotation at the front.

No more than fifty metres ahead of them Tsu'gan and his squad were hunkered down behind a cluster of tank traps returning fire, Sergeant Lok and his Devastators providing support with heavy bolters. Each painful metre had been paid for with blood, and three of Tsu'gan's troopers were already wounded, but he was determined to gain more ground and get close enough to launch an offensive with krak grenades.

The battle line was stretched. They had gone as far as they could go, short of risking massive casualties by charging the cultists' guns head on. The insurgents were so well protected they were only visible as shadows until their twisted faces were lit by muzzle flashes.

Kadai was scouring the battle line, searching for weaknesses.

'What did you find, sergeant?' he asked.

'Only impassable blockades and un-crossable chasms, stretching for kilometres east and west,' Dak'ir replied. 'We could turn back, captain, get Argos to find another route?'

'I've seen fortifications erected by the Imperial Fists that put up less resistance,' Kadai muttered to himself, then turned to Dak'ir. 'No. We break them here or not at all.'

Dak'ir was about to respond when Tsu'gan's voice came through the comm-feed.

'Captain, we can make five more metres. Requesting the order to advance.'

'Denied. Get back here, sergeant, and tell Lok to hold the line. We need a new plan.'

A momentary pause in communication made Tsu'gan's discontent obvious, but his respect for Kadai was absolute.

'At once, my lord.'

‘We need to get close enough to attack the wall with Krak grenades and breach it,’ said Tsu’gan, having returned to the Salamanders’ second line to join up with Dak’ir and Kadai, leaving Lok to hold the front. ‘A determined frontal assault is the only way to do it.’

‘A charge across the killing ground is insane, Tsu’gan,’ countered Dak’ir.

‘We are wasting our ammunition pinned here,’ Tsu’gan argued. ‘What else would you suggest?’

‘There must be another way,’ Dak’ir insisted.

‘Withdraw,’ Tsu’gan answered simply, allowing a moment for it to sink in. ‘Loath as I am to do it. If we cannot break through, then Cirrion is lost. Withdraw and summon the *Fire-wyvern*,’ he said to Kadai. ‘Use its missile payload to destroy the gravitic engines and send this hellish place to the ocean.’

The captain was reticent to agree.

‘I would be condemning thousands of innocents to death.’

‘And saving millions,’ urged Tsu’gan. ‘If a world is tainted beyond redemption or lost to invasion we annihilate it, excising its stain from the galaxy like a cancer. It should be no different for a city. Stratos can be saved. Cirrion cannot.’

‘You speak of wholesale slaughter as if it is a casual thing, Tsu’gan,’ Kadai replied.

‘Ours is a warrior’s lot, my lord. We were made to fight and to kill, to bring order in the Emperor’s name.’

Kadai’s voice grew hard.

‘I know our purpose, sergeant. Do not presume to tell me of it.’

Tsu’gan bowed humbly.

‘I meant no offence, my lord.’

Kadai was angry because he knew that Tsu’gan was right. Cirrion *was* lost. Sighing deeply, he opened the comm-feed, extending the link beyond the city.

‘We will need Brother Argos to engage the Stratosan failsafe and blow the sky-bridges connecting Cirrion first, or it will

take an entire chunk of the adjacent cities with it,' he said out loud to himself, before reverting to the comm-feed.

'Brother Hek'en.'

The pilot of the *Fire-wyvern* responded. The Thunderhawk was at rest on the landing platform just outside Nimbaros.

'My lord.'

'Prepare for imminent take off, and prime hellstrike missiles. We're abandoning the city. You'll have my orders within—'

The comm-feed crackling to life again in Kadai's battle-helm interrupted him. The crippling interference made it difficult to discern a voice at first, but when Kadai recognised it he felt his hot Salamander blood grow cold.

It was Fugis. The Apothecary was alive.

'I blacked out after the fall. When I awoke I was in the sub-levels of the city. They stretch down for about two kilometres, deep enough for the massive lifter-engines. It's like a damn labyrinth,' Fugis explained with his usual choler.

'Are you injured, brother?' asked Kadai.

Silence persisted, laced with static, and for a moment he thought they'd lost the Apothecary again.

'I took some damage, my battle-helm too. It's taken me this long to repair the comm-feed,' Fugis returned at last. In the short pauses it was possible to hear his breathing. It was irregular and ragged. The Apothecary was trying to mask his pain.

'What is your exact location, Fugis?'

Static interference marred the connection again.

'It's a tunnel complex below the surface. But it could be anywhere.'

Kadai turned to Dak'ir. 'Contact Brother Argos. Have him lock on to Fugis's signal and send us the coordinates.'

Dak'ir nodded and set about his task, all the while heavy cannon were chugging overhead.

‘Listen,’ said Fugis, the crackling static worsening, ‘I am not alone. There are civilians. They fled down here when the attacks began, and stayed hidden until now.’

There was another short silence as the Apothecary considered his next statement.

‘The city is still not ours.’

Kadai explained the situation with the hydrogen gas amalgam on the surface, how they could not use their flamers or meltas, and that it only compounded the fact that the cultists were well-prepared and dug in. ‘It is almost as if they know our tactics,’ he concluded.

‘The gas has not penetrated this deep,’ Fugis told him. ‘But I may have a way to stop it.’

‘How, brother?’ asked Kadai, fresh hope filling his voice.

‘A human engineer. Some of the refugees were fleeing from the gas as well as the insurgents. His name is Banen. If we get him out of the city and to the Techmarine, Cirrion can be purged.’ A pregnant pause suggested an imminent sting. ‘But there is a price,’ Fugis explained through bursts of interference.

Kadai’s jaw clenched beneath his battle-helm.

There always is...

The Apothecary went on.

‘In order to cleanse Cirrion of the gas, the entire air supply must be vented. Its atmospheric integrity will be utterly compromised. With the air so thin, many will suffocate before it can be restored. Humans hiding in the outer reaches of the city, away from the hot core of the lifter-engines, will also likely freeze to death.’

Kadai’s brief optimism was quickly crushed.

‘To save Cirrion, I must doom its people.’

‘Some may survive,’ offered Fugis, though his words lacked conviction.

‘A few at best,’ Kadai concluded. ‘It is no choice.’

Destroying the city's gravitic engines had been bad enough. This seemed worse. The Salamanders, a Chapter which prided itself on its humanitarianism, its pledge to protect the weak and the innocent, was merely exchanging one holocaust for another.

Kadai gripped the haft of his thunder hammer. It was black, and its head was thick and heavy like the ready tool of a forgesmith. He had fashioned it this way in the depths of Nocturne, the lava flows from the mountain casting his onyx flesh in an orange glow. Kadai longed to return there, to the anvil and the heat of the forge. The hammer was a symbol. It was like the weapon Vulkan had first taken up in defence of his adopted homeworld. In it Kadai found resolve and in turn the strength he needed to do what he must.

'We are coming for you, brother,' he said with steely determination. 'Protect the engineer. Have him ready to be extracted upon our arrival.'

'I will hold on as long as I can.'

White noise resumed.

Kadai felt the weight of resignation around his shoulders like a heavy mantle.

'Brother Argos has locked the signal and fed it to our auspex,' Dak'ir told him, wresting the Salamander captain from his dark reverie.

Kadai nodded grimly.

'Sergeants, break into combat squads. The rest stay here,' he said, summoning his second in command.

'N'keln,' Kadai addressed the veteran sergeant. 'You will lead the expedition to rescue Fugis.'

Tsu'gan interjected.

'My lord?'

'Once we make a move the insurgents will almost certainly redirect their forces away from here. We cannot hold them by merely standing our ground,' Kadai explained. 'We need their attention fixed where we want it. I intend to achieve that by charging the wall.'

‘Captain, that is suicide,’ Dak’ir told him plainly.

‘Perhaps. But I cannot risk bringing the enemy to Fugis, to the human engineer. His survival is of the utmost importance. Self-sacrifice is the Promethean way, sergeant, you know that.’

‘With respect, captain,’ said N’keln. ‘Brother Malicant and I wish to stay behind and fight with the others.’

Malicant, the company banner bearer, nodded solemnly behind the veteran sergeant.

Both Salamanders had been wounded in the ill-fated campaign to liberate Cirrion. Malicant leaned heavily on the company banner from a leg wound he had sustained during the bomb blast in Aereon Square, whereas N’keln grimaced with the pain of his crushed ribs.

Kadai was incensed.

‘You disobey my orders, sergeant?’

N’keln stood his ground despite his captain’s ire.

‘Yes, my lord.’

Kadai glared at him, but his anger bled away as he realised the sense in the veteran sergeant’s words and clasped N’keln by the shoulder.

‘Hold off as long as you can. Advance only when you must, and strike swiftly. You may yet get past the guns unscathed,’ Kadai told him. ‘You honour the Chapter with your sacrifice.’

N’keln rapped his fist against his plastron in salute and then he and Malicant went to join the others already at the battle line.

‘Make it an act of honour,’ he said to the others as they watched the two Salamanders go. They were singular warriors. All his battle-brothers were. Kadai was intensely proud of each and every one. ‘Fugis is waiting. Into the fires of battle, brothers...’

‘Unto the anvil of war,’ they declared solemnly as one.

The Salamanders turned away without looking back, leaving their brothers to their fate.

The tunnels were deserted.

Ba'ken tracked his heavy bolter across the darkness, his battle-senses ultra-heightened with tension.

'Too quiet...'

'You would prefer a fight?' Dak'ir returned over the comm-feed.

'Yes,' Ba'ken answered honestly.

The sergeant was a few metres in front of him, the Salamanders having broken into two long files, either side of the tunnel. Each Space Marine maintained a distance of a few metres from the battle-brother ahead, watching his back and flanks in case of ambush. Helmet luminators strafed the darkened corridors, creating imagined hazards in the gathered shadows.

The Salamanders had followed the Apothecary's signal like a beacon. It had led them south at first, back the way they had come, to a hidden entrance into the Cirrion sub-levels. The tunnels were myriad and did not appear on any city schematic, so Argos had no knowledge of them. The private complex of passageways and bunkers was reserved for the Stratosan aristocracy. Portals set in the tunnel walls slid open with a ghosting of released pressure and fed off into opulent rooms, their furnishings undisturbed and layered with dust. Reinforced vaults lay unsecured and unguarded, their treasures still untouched within. Several chambers were jammed with machinery hooked up to cryogenic floatation tanks. Purple bacteria contaminated the stagnant gel-solutions within. Decomposed bodies, bloated with putrefaction, were slumped against the glass, their suspended existence ended when the power in Cirrion had failed.

Kadai raised his hand from up ahead and the Salamanders stopped.

Nearby, one step in the chain from Tsu'gan, Iagon consulted his auspex.

'Bio-readings fifty metres ahead,' he hissed through the comm-feed.

The *thud-chank* of bolters being primed filled the narrow space.

Kadai lowered his hand and the Salamanders slowly began to proceed, closing up as they went. They had yet to meet any cultist resistance, but that didn't mean it wasn't there.

Dak'ir heard something move up ahead, like metal scraping metal.

'*Hammer!*' a voice cried out of the dark, accompanied by the sound of a bolt round filling its weapon's breech.

'*Anvil!*' Kadai replied with the other half of the code, and lowered his pistol.

Twenty metres farther on, a wounded Salamander was slumped against a bulkhead, his outstretched bolt pistol falling slowly.

The relief in Kadai's voice was palpable.

'Stand down. It's Fugis. We've got him.'

Banen stepped from the shadows with the small band of survivors. Short and unassuming, he wore a leather apron and dirty overalls that bulged with his portly figure. A pair of goggles framed his grease-smeared pate.

He didn't look like a man with the power to wipe out a city.

The gravitas of the decision facing Kadai was not lost on him as he regarded the human engineer.

'You can vent the atmosphere in Cirrion, cleanse the city of the gas?'

'Y-yes, milord.' The stammer only made the human seem more innocuous.

The Salamanders formed a protective cordon around the bulkhead where Fugis and the survivors were holed up, bolters trained outwards. The Apothecary's leg was broken, but he was at least still conscious, though in no condition to fight. With the discovery of the Apothecary an eerie silence had descended on the tunnel complex, like the air was holding its breath.

Salamanders encircling them, Kadai stared down at Banen.
I will be signing the death warrant of thousands...

‘Escort them back to Aereon Square,’ he said to Brother Ba’ken. ‘Commence the cleansing of the city as soon as possible.’

Ba’ken saluted. The Salamanders were breaking up their defensive formation when the held breath rushed back.

A few metres farther down the tunnel, a lone insurgent dropped down from a ceiling hatch, a grenade clutched in her thin fingers.

Bolters roared, loud and throaty down the corridor, shredding the cultist. The grenade went up in the fusillade, the explosion sweeping out in a firestorm. The Salamanders met it without hesitation, shielding the terrified humans with their armoured bodies.

Hundreds of footsteps clattered down to them from the darkness up ahead.

‘Battle positions!’ shouted Kadai.

A ravening mob of insurgents rounded the corner. Further hatchways in the walls and ceilings suddenly broke open as cultists piled out like fat lice crawling from the cracks.

Kadai levelled his pistol.

‘Salamanders! Unleash death!’

A team of cultists brought up an autocannon. Dak’ir raked them with bolter fire before they could set it.

‘Iagon...’ shouted Tsu’gan over the raucous battle din.

‘Atmosphere normal, sir,’ the other Salamander replied, knowing precisely what was on his sergeant’s mind.

Tsu’gan bared his teeth in a feral smile.

‘Cleanse and burn,’ he growled, and the flamer attached to his combi-bolter roared.

Liquid promethium ignited on contact with the air as a superheated wave of fire spewed hungrily down the corridor.

Shen'kar intensified the conflagration with his own flamer. The cultists were obliterated in the blaze, their bodies becoming slowly collapsing shadows behind the shimmering heat haze.

It lasted merely seconds. Smoke and charred remains were all that was left when the flames finally died down. Dozens of insurgents had been destroyed; some were little more than ash and bone.

'The fury of fire will win this war for the Salamanders,' said Fugis, as the Astartes were readying to split their forces once again. Ba'ken supported the Apothecary and was standing with the others that would be returning to Aereon Square.

Kadai was adamant that Fugis and the human survivors be given all the protection he could afford them. If that meant stretching his Salamanders thin, then so be it. The captain would press on with only Tsu'gan, Dak'ir, Company Champion Vek'shen and Honoured Brother Shen'kar as retinue. The rest were going back.

'I am certain of it,' Kadai replied, facing him. 'But at the cost of thousands. I only hope the price is worth it, old friend.'

'Is any price ever worth it?' Fugis asked.

The Apothecary was no longer talking about Cirrion. A bitter remembrance flared in Kadai's mind and he crushed it.

'Send word when you've reached Aereon Square and the gas has been purged. We'll be waiting here until then.'

Fugis nodded, though it gave the Apothecary some pain to do so.

'In the name of Vulkan,' he said, saluting.

Kadai echoed him, rapping his plastron. The Apothecary gave him a final consolatory look before he had Ba'ken help him away. It gave Kadai little comfort as he thought of the thousands of innocents still in the city and their ignorance of what was soon to befall them, a fate made by his own hand.

‘Emperor, forgive me...’ he whispered softly, watching the Salamanders go.

Aura Hieron hung open like a carcass. It had been austere beautiful once, much like the rest of Cirrion, stark silver alloyed with cold marble. Now it was an abattoir-temple. Blood slicked its walls, seeping down into the cracks of the intricate mosaic floor. Broken columns punctuated a high outer wall that ran around the temple’s vast ambit. Statues set in shadowy alcoves had been beheaded or smeared in filth, their pale immortality defaced.

Crude sigils, exulting in the dark glory of the Cult of Truth, were daubed upon the stonework. A black altar, re-fashioned with jagged knives and stained with blood, dominated a cracked dais at the back of the chamber. Metal spars ripped from the structure of Cirrion’s underbelly had been dragged bodily into the temple, tearing ragged grooves in the tarnished marble. Blackened corpses, the remains of loyal Stratosans, were hung upon them as offerings to the Chaos gods. A shrine to the Emperor of Mankind no longer, Aura Hieron was a haven for the corrupt now, where only the damned came to worship.

Nihilan revelled in the temple’s debasement as he regarded the instrument of his malicious will from afar.

‘We should not be here, sorcerer. We have what we came for,’ rasped a voice from the shadows, redolent of smoke and ash.

‘Our purpose here is two-fold, Ramlek,’ Nihilan replied, his cadence grating. ‘We have only achieved the first half.’ The renegade Dragon Warrior overlooked the bloodied plaza of Aura Hieron from a blackened anteroom above its only altar. He was watching the Speaker keenly, beguiling and persuading the cultist masses basking in his unnatural aura with his dark-tongued rhetoric.

The brand Nihilan had seared into the hierophant’s flesh over three months ago, when the Dragon Warriors had first come to Stratos, had spread well. It almost infected his entire face. The seed the sorcerer had embedded there would be reaching maturation.

‘A life for a life, Ramlek; you know that. Is Ghor’gan prepared?’

‘He is,’ rasped the horned warrior.

Nihilan smiled thinly. The scar tissue on his face pulled tight with the rare muscular use. ‘Our enemies will be arriving soon,’ he hissed, psychic power crackling over his clenched fist, ‘then we will have vengeance.’

Eyes like mirrored glass stared out from beneath a mausoleum archway, no longer seeing, unblinking in mortality. Tiny ice crystals flecked the dead man’s lips and encumbered his eyelids so they drooped in mock lethargy. The poor wretch was arched awkwardly across a stone tomb, his head slack and lifeless as it hung backwards over the edge.

He was not alone. Throughout the temple district, citizens and insurgents alike lay dead, their breath and their life stolen away when the atmospheric processors had vented. Some held one another in a final desperate embrace, accepting of their fate; others fought, fingers clutched around their throats as they tried in vain to fill their lungs.

The ruins of the temple district were disturbingly silent. It was oddly appropriate: the quietude fell like a shroud over broken monoliths and solemn chapels; acres of cemeteries punctuated with mausoleums and sepulchres; and hooded statues bent in sombre remembrance.

‘So much death...’ uttered Dak’ir, reminded of another place decades ago, and glanced to his captain. Kadai seemed to bear it all stoically, but Dak’ir could tell it was affecting him.

The Salamanders had passed through the city unchallenged, plying along the subterranean roads of the private tunnel complex. Though he had no map of the underground labyrinth, Techmarine Argos had extrapolated a route based on the position of the hidden entrance and his battle-brothers’ visual reports, relayed to him as they progressed through its dingy confines. After an hour of trawling

through the narrow dark, the Salamanders had emerged from a shadowy egress to be confronted with the solemnity of the temple district.

Kadai had told his retinue to expect resistance. Truthfully, he would have welcomed it. Anything to distract him from the terrible act he had been forced to commit against the citizens of Cirrion. But it was not to be – the Salamanders had passed through the white gates of the temple district without incident, yet the reminders of Kadai's act lurked in every alcove, in each darkened bolthole of the city.

Mercifully, Fugis and the others had arrived at Aereon Square without hindrance. Kadai was emotionally ambivalent when the Apothecary's communication had reached him over the comm-feed. It was a double-edged sword, salvation with a heavy tariff – annihilation for Cirrion's people.

'Aura Hieron lies half a kilometre to the north,' the metallic voice of Argos grated over the comm-feed, dispelling further introspection.

'I see it,' Kadai returned flatly.

He cut the link with the Techmarine, instead addressing his retinue.

'The people of Cirrion paid for a chance to end this war with their lives. Let us not leave them wanting. It ends this day, one way or the other. On my lead, brothers. In the name of Vulkan.'

Ahead, the temple of Aura Hieron loomed like a skeletal hand grasping at a pitch black sky.

Dak'ir crept through the darkened alcoves of the temple's west wall. Opposite him, across the tenebrous gulf of the temple's nave, Tsu'gan stalked along the other flanking wall.

Edging down the centre, obscured by shattered columns and the debris from Aura Hieron's collapsed roof, was Kadai and the rest of his retinue. They kept low and quiet, despite their power armour, and closed swiftly on their target.

Ahead of them cultists thronged in hundreds, respirators fixed over their sewn mouths, prostrate before their vile hierophant. The Speaker was perched on a marble dais and clad in dirty blue robes like his congregation of the depraved. Unlike the wire-mouthed acolytes abasing themselves before him, the Speaker was not mute. Far from it. A writhing purple tongue extruded from his distended maw, the teeth within just blackened nubs. The wretched appendage twisted and lashed as if sentient. Inscrutable dogma spewed from the Speaker's mouth, its form and language inflected by the daemonic tongue. Even the sound of his words gnawed at Dak'ir's senses and he shut them out, recognising the mutation for what it was – Chaos taint. It explained at once how this disaffected Stratosan native, who, up until a few months ago, had been little more than a petty firebrand, had managed to cajole such unswerving loyalty, and in such masses.

Surrounding the hierophant was the elite of those fanatical troops, a ring of eight eviscerator priests, kneeling with their chainblades laid out in front of them in ceremony.

It left a bitter tang in Tsu'gan's mouth to witness such corruption. Whatever foul rite these degenerate scum were planning, the Salamanders would end with flame and blade. He felt the zeal burn in his breast, and wished dearly that he was with his captain advancing down the very throat of the enemy and not here guarding shadows.

Let the Ignean skulk at the periphery, he thought. I am destined for more glorious deeds.

A garbled cry arrested Tsu'gan's arrogant brooding. Spewing an unintelligible diatribe, the Speaker gestured frantically towards Kadai and the other two Salamanders emerging from their cover to destroy him. His craven followers reacted with eerie synchronicity to their master's warning, and surged towards the trio of interlopers murderously.

Shen'kar opened up his flamer and burned down a swathe of maddened cultists with a war cry on his lips. Vek'shen charged into the wake of the blaze, the conflagration having barely ebbed, fire-glaive swinging. The master-crafted blade reaped a terrible harvest of sheared limbs and heads, spurts of incendiary immolating bodies with every flame-wreathed strike.

Kadai was like a relentless storm, and Tsu'gan's warrior heart sang to witness such prowess and fury. Channelling his fiery rage, the captain tore a ragged hole through one of the eviscerator priests with his inferno pistol, before crushing the skull of another with his thunder hammer.

As the wretched deacon went down, his head pulped, Kadai gave the signal and enfilading bolter fire barked from the alcoves as Tsu'gan and Dak'ir let rip.

As cultists fell, shot apart by his furious salvos, Tsu'gan could contain his battle lust no longer. He would not be left here like some sentry. He wanted to be at his captain's side, and look into his enemy's eyes as he slew them. Dak'ir could hold the perimeter well enough without his aid. In any case, the enemy was here amassed for slaughter.

Roaring an oath to Vulkan, Tsu'gan left his post and waded into the battle proper.

Dak'ir caught sight of Tsu'gan's muzzle flare and cursed loudly when he realised he had abandoned his orders and left the wall deserted. Debating whether to press the attack himself, his attention was arrested when he noticed Kadai, having bludgeoned his way through the mob, standing scant feet from the Speaker and levelling his inferno pistol.

'In the name of Vulkan!' he bellowed, about to end the threat of the Cult of Truth forever, when a single shot thundered above the carnage and the Speaker fell, his head half-destroyed by an explosive round.

Kadai felt the meat and blood of the executed Speaker spatter his armour, and started to lower his pistol out of shock. A strange lull fell over the fighting, enemies poised in mid-attack, that didn't feel entirely natural as the Salamander captain traced the source of the shot.

Above him there was a parapet overlooking the temple's nave. Kadai's gaze was fixed upon it as a figure in blood-red power armour emerged from the gathered shadows, a smoking bolt pistol in his grasp.

Scales bedecked this warrior's battle-plate, like those of some primordial lizard from an archaic age. His gauntlets were fashioned like claws, with long vermillion talons, and eldritch lightning rippled across them in crackling ruby arcs. In one he clutched a staff, a roaring dragon's head at its tip rendered in silver; in the other his bolt pistol, which he returned to its holster. Broad pauldrons sat like hardened scale shells on the warrior's shoulders, a horn curving from each. He wore no battle-helm, and bore horrific facial scars openly. Fire had blighted this warrior's once noble countenance, twisting it, devouring it and remaking his visage into one of puckered tissue, angry wheals and exposed bone. It was the face of death, hideous and accusing.

A chill entered Kadai's spine as if he was suddenly drowning in ice. The spectre before him was a ghost, an apparition that died long ago in terrible agony. Yet, here it was in flesh and blood, called back from the grave like some vengeful revenant.

'Nihilan...'

'Captain,' the apparition replied, his voice cracked like dry earth baked beneath a remorseless sun, burning red eyes aglow.

Kadai's posture stiffened as the shock quickly passed, subjugated by righteous anger.

'Renegade,' he snarled.

Wracking pain gripped Dak'ir's chest as he beheld the warrior and was wrenched back into the otherworld of his dream...

The temple faded as the grey sky of Moribar engulfed all. Bone-monoliths surged into that endless steel firmament, ossuary paths stretched into endless tracts of cemeteries, mausoleum fields and sepulchral vales. Through legions of tombs, across phalanxes of crypts, along battalions of reliquaries sunk in earthen catacombs, Dak'ir followed the grave-road until he reached its terminus.

And there beneath the cold damp earth, boiling, burning, its lambent glow neither warm nor inviting, was the vast churning furnace of the crematoria.

Pain lanced Dak'ir's body as the vision changed. He gripped his chest, but no longer felt his black carapace. He was a scout once more, observing from the edge of the crematoria, the massive pit of fire large enough to swallow a Titan, burning, ever burning, down into the molten heart of Moribar.

Dak'ir saw two Astartes clambering at the edge of that portal to fiery death. Nihilan clung desperately to Captain Ushorak, his black power armour pitted and cracked with the intense heat emanating from below.

The terrible conflagration was in turmoil. It bubbled explosively, plumes of lava spearing the air in fiery cascades, when a huge pillar of flame tore from the crematoria. Dak'ir shielded his eyes as a massive fire wall obliterated the warriors from view.

Strong hands grasped Dak'ir's shoulder and wrenched him away from the blaze as the renegades they had come to bring to justice, not to kill, were immolated. Barely visible through the solid curtain of flame, Nihilan was screaming as his face burned...

Dak'ir lurched back to the present, a sickening vertigo threatening to overwhelm him, and he reached out to steady himself. He tasted blood in his mouth and black spots marred his vision. Tearing off his battle-helm, he struggled to breathe.

Somewhere in the temple, someone was speaking...

‘You died,’ Kadai accused, looking up at the warrior on the parapet. He fought the invisible pressure stopping him from striking the renegade down, but his arms were leaden.

‘I survived,’ returned Nihilan, the effort to maintain the psychic dampening that held the battle in stasis against the Salamander’s will creasing his scarred face.

‘You should have faced justice, not death,’ Kadai told him, then smiled vindictively. ‘Overloading the crematoria, stirring up the volatile core of Moribar, you provoked it in order to escape and kill me and my brothers into the bargain. Ushorak’s destruction was your doing, yours and his.’

‘Don’t you speak of him!’ cried Nihilan, red lightning coursing through his eyes and clenched fists, writhing around his force staff and spitting off in jagged arcs. Exhaling fury, the Dragon Warrior recovered his composure. ‘*You* are the murderer here, Kadai – a petty marshal who’d do anything to catch his quarry. But perhaps you’re right... I did die, and was *reborn*.’

Kadai raised his inferno pistol a fraction. Nihilan’s grip was loosening. He was readying for it to slip completely, and slay the traitor where he stood, when the Speaker’s body started to convulse.

‘It doesn’t matter anymore,’ the Dragon Warrior added, stepping back into the shadows of the parapet. ‘Not for you...’

Kadai fired off his inferno pistol, melting away a chunk of parapet as Nihilan released his psychic hold. The Salamander was about to chase after him when a terrible aura enveloped the Speaker, lifting his prone corpse inexplicably so that it dangled just above the ground like meat on an invisible hook.

Slowly, agonisingly slowly, he raised his chin to reveal a ruined face destroyed by the bolt pistol’s explosive round. Slick red flesh, wrapped partially around a bloody skull, shimmered in the ambient light. What remained of the Speaker’s cranium was split open like an egg. Luminous cobalt skin was revealed beneath. Cracking bone gave way to a leering visage called forth from a dark

unreality as something... *unnatural*... pulled itself forth into the material plane.

A lidless eye of fulgent black glared with otherworldly malevolence. The eight-pointed star, once burned into the Speaker's forehead, was now glowing upon this new horror. It was raw and vital, pulsing like a wretched heart as the warp-thing grew hideously. Bulbous protrusions tore from mortal flesh, spilling out with thickets of spines. Fingers splayed as if pulled taut by unseen threads, talons rupturing from them, long, sharp and black. The thing's distended maw, in mimicry of the Speaker's original mutation, stretched further and wider until it was a terrible lipless chasm, the lashing tongue within three-pronged and spiked with bloodied bone.

Cultists shrieked in fear and adoration as the Speaker's corpse was possessed. Eviscerator priests pledged their mute allegiance, turning their chainblades towards the Salamanders once again.

The creature was primal, wrenched from ethereal slumber and only partially sentient, a deep soul-hunger driving it. Roaring in fury and anguish, it surged forwards devouring a pair of eviscerator priests closing on Kadai. Like some terrible basilisk, it consumed them whole, bones crunching audibly as it dragged the prey down its bulging gullet.

'Abomination...' Kadai breathed, gripping the haft of his thunder hammer as he prepared to smite the daemon. Nihilan had given his soul over to the dark powers now, and this was but a taste of his malfesance.

'Die, hell-beast!' cried Vek'shen, stepping between his captain and the unbound daemon. Whirling his fire-glaive in a blazing arc, the Company Champion crafted an overhand blow that would've felled an ork warlord. The daemon met it with its talons and the glaive was held fast. Its tongue slid like lightning from its abyssal mouth, oozing swiftly around Vek'shen's power-armoured

form. The Salamander gaped in a silent scream, breath pressed violently from his body, as he was crushed to death.

Kadai roared, launching himself at the beast, even as his battle-brother's flaccid corpse, dented where the daemon's tongue had clutched him, crashed to the ground.

Dak'ir was recovering his senses. Though he hadn't seen how, the Speaker was dead, shot in the back of the head, his body lying at Kadai's feet. It wasn't all that he'd missed while he was under the influence of his memory-dream. In the time it had taken for his Astartes constitution and training to override the lingering nausea the remembrance had caused, Nihilan was already retreating into the shadows. Leaving his flank position, Dak'ir ran towards the nave determined to pursue, when a swathe of cultists impeded him.

'Tsu'gan!' he cried, gutting an insurgent with his chainsword and firing his bolter one-handed to explode the face of another, 'Stop the renegade!'

The other Salamander nodded in a rare moment of empathy and sped off after Nihilan.

Dak'ir was battling through the frenzied mob when he saw the Speaker's corpse rising and felt the touch of the warp prickle his skin...

Tsu'gan bolted across the nave, pummelling cultists with his fists, chewing up packed groups with explosive bursts of fire. Shen'kar was just visible in his peripheral vision, immolating swathes of the heretical vermin with bright streaks of flame.

Smashing through a wooden door at the back of the temple, Tsu'gan found a flight of stone steps leading up to the parapet. He took them three at a time with servo-assisted bounds of his power-armoured legs, until he emerged into a darkened anteroom.

Something was happening below. He heard Vek'shen bellow a call to arms and then nothing, as if all sound had fled in a sudden vacuum.

Burning red eyes regarded him coldly in the blackness.

‘Tsu’gan...’ said Nihilan, emerging from the dark.

‘Traitorous scum!’ the Salamander raged.

But Tsu’gan didn’t raise his bolter to fire, didn’t vanquish the renegade where he stood. He merely remained transfixed, muscles clenched as if held fast in amber.

‘Wha–’ he began, but found his tongue was leaden too.

‘Sorcery,’ Nihilan told him, the surface of his force staff alive with incandescent energy. It threw ephemeral flashes of light into the gloom, illuminating the sorcerer’s dread visage as he closed on the stricken Astartes.

‘I could kill you right now,’ he said levelly. ‘Snuff out the light in your eyes, and kill you, just like Kadai killed Ushorak.’

‘You were offered redemption.’ Tsu’gan struggled to fashion the retort, forcing his tongue into compliance through sheer willpower.

The sinister cast to Nihilan’s face bled away and was replaced by indignation.

‘Redemption was it? Spiritual castigation at the hands of Elysium, a few hours with his surgeon-interrogators, is that what was offered?’ He laughed mirthlessly. ‘That sadistic bastard would only have passed a guilty judgement.’

Stepping closer, Nihilan took on a sincere tone.

‘Ushorak offered life. Power,’ he breathed. ‘Freedom from the shackles forcing us to serve the cattle of men, when we should be ruling them.’

The Dragon Warrior clenched his fist as he said it, so close now that Tsu’gan could smell his copper breath.

‘You see, *brother*. We are not so dissimilar.’

‘We are nothing alike, traitor,’ snapped the Salamander, grimacing with the simple effort of speaking.

Nihilan stepped back, spreading his arms plaintively.

‘A bolter shot to the head to end my heresy then?’ His upturned lip showed his displeasure. ‘Or stripped of rank, a penitent brand in place of my service studs?’

He shook his head.

‘No... I think not. Perhaps I will brand you, though, *brother*.’ Nihilan showed the Salamander his palm and spread his fingers wide. ‘Would your resistance to corruption be stauncher than the human puppet, I wonder?’

Tsu’gan flinched before Nihilan’s approach, expecting at any moment for all the turpitude of Chaos to spew forth from his hand.

‘Cull your fear,’ Nihilan rasped, making a fist as he sneered.

‘I fear nothing,’ barked Tsu’gan.

Nihilan sniffed contemptuously. ‘You fear everything, Salamander.’

Tsu’gan felt his boots scraping against the floor as he was psychically impelled towards the edge of the parapet against his will.

‘Enough talk,’ he spat. ‘Cast me down. Break my body, if you must. The Chapter will hunt you, renegade, and there will be no chance of redemption for you this time.’

Nihilan regarded him as an adult would a simple child.

‘You still don’t understand, do you?’

Slowly, Tsu’gan’s body rotated so that he could see out onto the battle below.

Cultists fell in their droves, burned down by Shen’kar’s flamer, or eviscerated by Dak’ir’s chainsword. His brothers fought tooth and nail, fending off the horde whilst his beloved captain fought for his life.

Kadai’s artificer armour was rent in over a dozen places, a daemon-thing that wore the flesh of the Speaker assailing him. Talons like long slashes of night came down in a rain of blows against the Salamander captain’s defence, but he weathered it all, carving great arcs in riposte with his thunder hammer. Vulkan’s

name was on his lips as the lightning cracked from the head of his master-forged weapon, searing the daemon's borrowed flesh.

'I was devoted to Ushorak, just as you are to your captain...'
Nihilan uttered in Tsu'gan's ear as he watched the battle with the hell-spawn unfold.

Kadai smashed the daemon's shoulder, shattering bone, and its arm fell limp.

'...Kadai killed him,' Nihilan continued. 'He forced us to seek solace in the Eye. There we fled and there we stayed for decades...'

Ichor hissed from the tears in the daemon's earthly form, its hold on reality slipping as Kadai punished it relentlessly with fist and hammer.

'...Time moves differently in that realm. For us it felt like centuries had passed before we found a way out.'

A chorus of screams ripped from the distended throat of the daemon-thing, as Kadai crushed its skull finally and banished it back into the warp, the souls it had consumed begging for succour.

'...It *changed* me. Opened my eyes. I see much now. A great destiny awaits you, Tsu'gan, but another overshadows it.'
Nihilan gave the faintest inclination of his head towards Dak'ir.

The Ignean was fighting valiantly, cutting down the last of the cultists and heading for Kadai.

'Even now he rushes to your captain's side...' Nihilan said, insidiously, 'Hoping to gain his favour.'

Tsu'gan knew he could not trust the foul tongue of a traitor, but the words spoken echoed his own long-held suspicions.

And so, unbeknownst to the Salamander, Nihilan *did* plant a seed. Not one born of daemonic essence. No, this came about through petty jealousy and ambition, through the very thing Tsu'gan had no aegis against – himself.

'This cult,' the Dragon Warrior pressed. 'It is *nothing*. Stratos is nothing. Even this city is meaningless. It was always about *him*.'

Kadai was leaning heavily on his thunder hammer, weakened after vanquishing the daemon.

Nihilan smiled, scarred flesh creaking.

‘A captain for a captain...’

Realisation slid like a cold blade into Tsu’gan’s gut.

Too late he saw the armoured shadow closing in. The Dragon Warriors springing their trap at last. By leaving his post, he had let them infiltrate the Salamanders’ guard. The cultists were only ever a distraction; the true enemy was only now revealing itself.

He had been a fool.

‘No!’

Sheer force of will broke Nihilan’s psychic hold. Roaring the captain’s name, Tsu’gan leapt off the parapet.

Hoarse laughter followed him all the way down.

Dak’ir had almost reached Kadai when he saw the renegade hefting the multi-melta. Shouting a warning, he raced to his captain’s side. Kadai faced him, hearing the cry of Tsu’gan from above at the same time, and then followed Dak’ir’s agonised gaze...

An incandescent beam tore out of the darkness.

Kadai was struck, and his body immolated in an actinic flare.

An intense rush of heat smashed Dak’ir off his feet, backwash from the terrible melta blast. He smelled scorched flesh. A hot spike of agony tortured his senses. His face was burning, just like in the dream...

Dak’ir realised he was blacking out, his body shutting down as his sus-an membrane registered the gross trauma he had suffered. Dimly, as if buried alive and listening through layered earth, he heard the voice of Sergeant N’keln and his battle-brothers. Dak’ir managed to turn his head. The last thing he saw before unconsciousness claimed him was Tsu’gan slumped to his knees in front of the charred remains of their captain.

When Dak'ir awoke he was laid out in the Apothecarion of the *Vulkan's Wrath*. It was cold as a tomb inside the austere chamber, the gloom alleviated by the lit icons of the medical apparatus around him.

With waking came remembrance, and with remembrance, grief and despair.

Kadai was dead.

'Welcome back, brother,' a soft voice said. Fugis was thin-faced and gaunter than ever, as he loomed over Dak'ir.

Emotional agony was compounded by physical pain and Dak'ir reached for his face as it started to burn anew.

Fugis seized his wrist before he could touch it.

'I wouldn't do that,' he warned the sergeant. 'Your skin was badly burned. You're healing, but the flesh is still very tender.'

Dak'ir lowered his arm as Fugis released him. The Apothecary injected a solution of drugs through an intravenous drip-feed to ease the pain.

Dak'ir relaxed as the suppressants went to work, catalysing his body's natural regenerative processes.

'What happened?' His throat felt raw and abrasive, and he croaked the words. Fugis stepped away from Dak'ir's medi-slab to check on the instrumentation. He limped as he walked, a temporary augmetic frame fitted over his leg to shore up the break he had sustained in his fall. Stubborn to the point of bloody-mindedness, nothing would prevent the Apothecary from doing his work.

'Stratos is saved,' he said simply, his back to the other Salamander. 'With the Speaker dead and our flamers restored, the insurgents fell quickly. The storms lifted an hour after we returned to Aereon Square,' he explained. 'Librarian Pyriel arrived twenty minutes later with the rest of the company to reinforce N'keln, who had taken the wall and was already en route to Aura Hieron...'

'But too late to save Kadai,' Dak'ir finished for him.

Fugis stopped what he was doing and gripped the instrumentation panel he'd been consulting for support.

'Yes. Even his gene-seed was unsalvageable.'

A long grief-filled silence crept insidiously into the room before the Apothecary continued.

'A ship, Stormbird-class, left the planet but we were too late to give chase.'

The rancour in Dak'ir's voice could've scarred metal.

'Nihilan and the other renegades escaped.'

'To Vulkan knows where,' Fugis replied, facing the patient. 'Librarian Pyriel has command of Third Company, until Chapter Master Tu'Shan can appoint someone permanent.'

Dak'ir frowned.

'We're going home?'

'Our tour of the Hadron Belt is over. We are returning to Prometheus to reinforce and lick our wounds.'

'My face...' Dak'ir ventured after a long silence, 'I want to see it.'

'Of course,' said Fugis, and showed the Salamander a mirror.

Part of Dak'ir's facial tissue had been seared away. Almost half of his onyx-black skin had been bleached near-white by the voracious heat of the melta flare. Though raw and angry, it looked almost human.

'A reaction to the intense radiation,' Fugis explained. 'The damage has resulted in minor cellular regression, reverting to a form prior to the genetic ebonisation of your skin when you became an Astartes. I cannot say for certain yet, but it shows no sign of immediate regeneration.'

Dak'ir stared, lost in his own reflection and the semblance of humanness there. Fugis arrested the Salamander's reverie.

'I'll leave you in peace, such as it is,' he said, taking away the mirror. 'You are stable and there's nothing more I can do at this point. I'll return in a few hours. Your body needs time to heal,

before you can fight again. Rest,' the Apothecary told him. 'I expect you to be here upon my return.'

The Apothecary left, hobbling off to some other part of the ship. But as the metal door slid shut with a susurrus of escaping pressure, Dak'ir knew he was not alone.

'Tsu'gan?'

He could feel his battle-brother's presence even before he saw him emerge from the shadows.

'Brother,' Dak'ir croaked warmly, recalling the moment of empathy between them as they'd fought together in the temple.

The warmth seeped away, as a cold wind steals heat from a fire, when Dak'ir saw Tsu'gan's dark expression.

'You are unfit to be an Astartes,' he said levelly. 'Kadai's death is on your hands, Ignean. Had you not sent me after the renegade, had you been swift enough to react to the danger in our midst, we would not have lost our captain.' Tsu'gan's burning gaze was as chill as ice. 'I shall not forget it.'

Stunned, Dak'ir was unable to reply before Tsu'gan turned his back on him and left the Apothecarion.

Anguish filled his heart and soul as Dak'ir wrestled with the terrible accusations of his brother, before exhaustion took him and he fell into a deep and fitful sleep.

For the first time in over forty years, the dream had changed...

Sitting in the troop compartment of the Stormbird, Nihilan turned the device stolen from the vault in the depths of Cirrion over and over in his gauntlet. His fellow Dragon Warriors surrounded him: the giant Ramlek, breathing tiny goutts of ash and cinder from his mouth grille as he tried to calm his perpetual anger; Ghor'gan, his scaled skin shedding after he'd removed his battle-helm, cradling his multi-melta like a favoured pet; Nor'hak, fastidiously stripping and reassembling his weapons methodically; and Erkin his pilot, the other renegade left behind to watch the Stormbird, forearm bone-

blades carefully sheathed within the confines of his power armour as he steered the vessel to its final destination.

The Dragon Warriors had risked much to retrieve the device, even going as far as to establish the elaborate distraction of the uprising to cloak their movements. Kadai's death as part of that subterfuge had been a particularly satisfying, but unexpected, boon for Nihilan.

The Stormbird had been primed and ready before the trap in Aura Hieron was sprung. With eager swathes of suicidal cultists to ensure their escape, the renegades had fled swiftly, leaving the atmosphere of Stratos behind them as the engines of their extant craft roared.

'How little do they realise...' Nihilan rasped, examining every facet of the gilt object in his palm. Such an innocuous piece of arcana; within its twelve pentagonal faces, along the geodesic lines of esoteric script that wreathed its dodecahedral surface, there was the means to unlock secrets. It was the very purpose of the *decyphrex*, to reveal that which was hidden. For Nihilan that enigma existed in the scrolls of Kelock, ancient parchments he and Ushorak had taken over forty years ago from Kelock's tomb on Moribar. Kelock was a technocrat, and a misunderstood genius. He created something, a weapon, far beyond what was capable with the crippled science of the current decaying age. Nihilan meant to replicate his work.

Over a thousand years within the Eye of Terror, patiently plotting revenge and now he finally was closing on the means to destroy his enemies.

'Approaching the *Hell-stalker*,' the sepulchral voice of Ekrine returned over the vox.

Nihilan engaged the grav-harness. As it crept over his armoured shoulders, securing him for landing, he peered out of the Stormbird's vision slit. There across a becalmed and cobalt sea, a vessel of molten-red lay anchored. It was an old ship with old wounds, and older ghosts. The prow was a serrated blade, ripping a

hole in the void. Cannons arrayed its flanks, gunmetal grey and powder-blackened. Dozens of towers and antennae reached up like crooked fingers.

Hell-stalker had entered the Eye a mere battle-barge and had come out something else entirely. It was Nihilan's ship and aboard it his warriors awaited him – renegades, mercenaries and defectors; pirates, raiders and reavers. There they gathered to heed of his victory and the slow realisation of their ambition – the total and utter destruction of Nocturne, and with it the death of the Salamanders.

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