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from
LEVIATHAN
by Graham McNeill

LORD ADMIRAL LAZLO Tiberius, captain of the *Vae Victus*, looked up from the pict-slate on his command pulpit and asked, 'Philotas, do you have a firing solution locked in on the close-in surveyors yet?'

'Yes, sir,' answered Philotas. 'Shall I order battle stations?'

'Aye, battle stations,' confirmed Tiberius, descending from the pulpit and striding to the stone-rimmed command plotter where Captain Uriel Ventris and his Master of Surveyors awaited him. The admiral rubbed a hand over his scarred and hairless skull, staring at the new tactical plot that now displayed the exact position, course and speed of the intruder.

'Opinions?' demanded Tiberius.

'Well, it's drifting now,' said Philotas. 'That much we can tell from its speed. It's not travelling under its own power and it's a big one, that's for sure. It's no wonder the Tarsis Ultra system defence ships couldn't handle it. As to its course, it appears to be heading roughly towards the planet Chordelis. On its present heading it should pass out of the system without incident.'

'But we can't take that chance. We must treat it as a hostile contact until proven otherwise,' added Uriel.

'Agreed,' said Tiberius. 'How did it arrive in-system? A jump, or did it just drift in?'

'It just drifted in,' said Philotas. 'It appeared on the outer rim surveyors about five months ago, coming from below the galactic plane, but they are unmanned and the hulk did not pass

close enough for a pict-capture. However, it passed close enough to listening post Trajen for the adepts there to get a more precise fix on its position.'

'Damn,' hissed Tiberius. 'Can they estimate where it came from?'

'The senior magos believes it came from the regions of space we know to be controlled by an ork warlord known as the Arch Fiend of Octarius,' replied Philotas.

'What do you think, lord admiral?' asked Uriel. 'Is this the vanguard of an ork invasion?'

'No, I do not believe so,' said Tiberius.

'Why not?'

'Well, we would be seeing a lot more hulks if this was an invasion, Uriel. Orks don't come singly; they come en masse, in a green tide that smashes through anything in its way. You remember the reports we received following the invasion of Armageddon?'

Uriel and Philotas both nodded as the venerable admiral continued.

'Segmentum command at Bakka has issued several warnings of increased incidences of ork migrations from the realm of the Arch Fiend, but the strategos feel they are too fragmentary and disparate to be an invasion, and I agree.'

'Then if not an invasion, what is causing this migration?' asked Uriel.

'I do not know, but then you can never tell with the damned greenskins. Sector command seems to think that the orks are fleeing from something, as unlikely as that sounds.'

'But you think there are orks on board?'

'Aye,' said Tiberius pointing at a fluctuating set of numerals at the side of the display, 'but I do not think they will be alive. The mass readings look about right, but the mean internal temperature is probably too low and there does not appear to be enough interior oxygen voids for anything to survive – even orks. I think we are just looking at something that has split from an even larger ship, but we need to know for sure.'

'Are the auguries picking up any anomalous readings?' Uriel asked Philotas.

'None, but I wouldn't necessarily expect any just yet.'

Tiberius nodded. 'Continue monitoring anyway, I want to be ready for anything unexpected.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Range to target?'

'Nine thousand kilometres, lord admiral.'

A green icon winked into life on the display before Tiberius, indicating that the Thunderhawks in the prow flight-bays were now prepped and ready for launch. The damage to the launch bays caused by an eldar ship en route to Pavonis had been repaired in the shipyards orbiting Calth and the *Vae Victus* was once again operating at full readiness. He pressed the flashing icon, acknowledging the information.

'Uriel, I want you and your men ready to launch within the hour.'

'We will be, lord admiral.'

'Plant those demolition charges quickly and get your men out of there, Uriel,' ordered Tiberius. 'You are not on the hunt for archaeotech here. I just want this thing destroyed.'

'Understood, lord admiral. From the sound of things, I don't expect to find anything troublesome over there, but if we do we'll be ready for it,' assured Uriel.

MASSIVE STONE ARCHES supported the groined stone ceiling of the launch bay and the air reeked of fuel and incense. Three Thunderhawks sat idling on the ready line, their engines growling as the crews built up power before take off. Techmarines circled them, anointing their armoured sides with sacred unguents and removing the arming pins from the missiles slung under the wings in time with the Words of Ordnance.

The armoured deck rang with booted steps as the Ultramarines prepared to take the light of the Emperor into the dark places once more. Techmarines accompanied by engineering servitors chanted mantras of ire to the gunships and cast the runes of war to rouse the battle spirits of each craft.

The crew ramps were lowered, and tracked lifter-servitors loaded cylindrical ammunition crates, supply boxes and the demolition charges that would blow the hulk to pieces into the hold. The pilots and Techmarines walked around the exterior of the gunship, ensuring every access panel was properly sealed. Uriel watched the scene of controlled efficiency before him with pride. Once more his company was going into battle and he relished the thought. It had been too long since Pavonis, and both he and his men were eager to prove themselves once more.

He gripped the hilt of his new power sword. The weapon was yet to be blooded and, despite his belief that the hulk they were to board was lifeless, he hoped that there might be enemies as yet undiscovered aboard that might satisfy his blade. Uriel felt the onset of his lust for battle kindle in his belly and was surprised at its nascent ferocity. He suppressed it for now. Too often had it surged to fiery life at the thought of battle since his encounter with the Nightbringer, images of war and death filling his mind with the desire to shed blood.

The armoured blast door to the launch bay rumbled open and two squads of Space Marines led by sergeants Pasanus and Learchus entered, their bolters held at parade rest.

Uriel marched quickly to where his men had begun performing final checks on their equipment and running through their devotional prayers.

'Officer on deck!' bawled Pasanus and the Space Marines snapped to attention.

'As you were,' said Uriel, raising his hand. The armoured warriors returned to their pre-battle drills as he shook hands with Pasanus and Learchus. Even now, almost a year after the Pavonis expedition, Uriel found it hard to adjust to the idea of Pasanus having a bionic replacement for the limb he had lost fighting the Nightbringer thousands of metres below the planet's surface. The arm shone like silver, its surface smooth and brilliantly reflective. Truly the artificers of Pavonis had excelled themselves.

'Everything is in order?' he asked needlessly. He already knew his sergeants would have everything prepared and trusted them implicitly, but as any commander worthy of the name would say: you could never be too prepared before going into battle.

'Of course,' affirmed Pasanus.

'Do we make for Tarsis Ultra after destroying this hulk?' asked Learchus, unable to mask the anticipation in his voice.

'Possibly,' replied Uriel. 'Admiral de Corte has despatched system defence ships to join us should our charges prove insufficient to destroy it. We will return to the docks around Chordelis to re-arm, but I dare say we will journey to Tarsis Ultra before long.'

Learchus smiled. 'I have heard great things of Tarsis Ultra. The tale of the Warrior's Debt was always my favourite at Agiselus, it

will be good to see a planet's populace upholding the ideals of the primarch so far from Ultramar.'

'Ten thousand years is a long time, Learchus,' said Pasanus. 'I doubt many will even remember who Roboute Guilliman was, let alone follow his teachings.'

'What? The worlds of Ultramar prosper under his teachings. Why then should a world choose to abandon such notions of courage and honour? It makes no sense.'

Uriel smiled, hearing the inflexibility of Learchus's argument in every syllable. Learchus could see no benefit in turning from the teachings of the primarch and simply assumed that everyone else shared his view. Any other possibility was unthinkable.

Pasanus pointed to where a Techmarine was giving the thumbs up to the pilot in the cockpit of the Thunderhawk.

'Looks like our chariot is prepared, captain.'

'Gather the men, we depart in five minutes.'

'Aye, captain,' saluted his sergeants.

URIEL'S BOLTCUN NESTLED in the rack beside him, its dull sheen gleaming with sacred oils in the red-lit crew compartment. He had honoured the battle spirit within the weapon before boarding the gunship and his armour was a fresh, brilliant blue, its surfaces smooth and untarnished. The Chapter's artificers on Macragge had repaired its fabric after the damage it had suffered on Pavonis, though the scar where the C'tan's infernal metal had scorched the backplate had resisted their every effort to remove it.

A Space Marine always honoured the battle gear that protected him and the weapons that were the instruments of the Emperor's will. To do any less would be to arouse the wrath of the war spirits that empowered such holy artefacts and no warrior would dare run such a risk.

Uriel gripped the hilt of his power sword and offered a prayer to Roboute Guilliman that he would prove worthy of his Chapter. He had not failed in his duty before this and vowed that he would not do so now.

For this present duty was entrusted to him by no less a person than the primarch himself.

The defence of the Tarsis Ultra system was a sacred task to the Ultramarines, the result of an ancient oath sworn by Roboute Guilliman during the days of the Great Crusade. It had been a

time of heroes, when the Emperor's own progeny, the primarchs, had stood shoulder to shoulder and carved His realm from the flesh of the galaxy, wresting His worlds back from the domination of vile aliens and heretics.

Tarsis III had been one such world, liberated from the lies of heretic secessionists by Roboute Guilliman at the head of the Ultramarines Legion. The battles fought to reclaim this world of the Emperor were the stuff of fireside legend on Macragge, taught at every one of the many training barracks throughout Ultramar, as was the courage and discipline shown by the inhabitants in rising to fight alongside the Ultramarines. It was said that a lowly trooper of Tarsis III had saved the life of Guilliman in the last battle and such was the primarch's gratitude that, at its end, he had dropped to one knee and sworn to a mighty oath of brotherhood with the soldier, declaring that should Tarsis III ever be threatened, the Ultramarines would return to fight by their side.

The victory was commemorated in a legendary work that adorned the walls of a giant room in the heart of the Imperial governor's palace. Named the Tarsis Fresco, it was said to be a gargantuan mosaic that covered the walls and ceiling of the palace's inner sanctum. Tales spoke of a work of unsurpassed majesty and Uriel greatly looked forward to seeing this spectacular mosaic.

Instead of the wastelands many of his brother primarchs left in the wake of their victories, Guilliman left those who could help rebuild the world in the image of his homeworld. The grateful populace eagerly took up the challenges laid before them by the primarch and renamed their world Tarsis Ultra, that they might always remember their liberators.

Once more entrusted with the honour of the Chapter, Uriel knew that his victory on Pavonis had earned him this sacred duty and, though the oath sworn by the primarch was almost ten thousand years past, it was no less binding. He would see that the ancient debt was fulfilled.

This he swore by the spirit of the weapon he now held. He could sense the intensity around him and knew that his men felt the same. He felt the courage of his seasoned veterans, those he had fought beside in the Mereneas Core, on Black Bone Road, on Ichar IV, Thracia and Pavonis. In counterpoint to the calm courage of the veterans, he saw the eagerness of

those warriors newly elevated to the Fourth Company. Though they had fought in many battles already, this would be their first engagement as full battle-brothers and the desire not to let their brethren down was palpable.

He felt the motion of the Thunderhawk change as the craft pitched upwards towards the location the auguries had pinpointed as the most favourable location for the gunship to enter the hulk. Uriel watched as the vast shape of the *Vae Victus* yawed from sight through the thick vision blocks, and the screaming of the engines changed in pitch, the pilot making his final approach on manoeuvring thrusters alone. He caught a brief glimpse of the other two Thunderhawks, similarly laden with Ultramarines, making their way to their own designated entry points.

Slowly, the vision port was filled with the undulating flank of the space hulk, frosted metal caked with the residue of its voyage through space and cratered with asteroid impacts. A shiver rippled up Uriel's spine as he wondered where this vessel had been, where it had come from and what calamitous fate had seen it consigned to the icy graveyard of space. The thought of entering the craft filled him with a cold dread, and though he told himself it was simply the unclean nature of the vessel, he wasn't sure he believed himself. During his service in the Deathwatch, the Chamber Militant of the Ordo Xenos, he had cleansed many such abominable places, part of a kill-team whose sole aim was to eradicate alien creatures. He had felt the same sense of trepidation as he felt now and no matter how many times he had boarded one of these hateful vessels, the same primal loathing remained.

Something had once made its home on this ghost ship and Uriel knew full well that none of the things that might do so would be friendly.

He saw a yawning chasm torn in the side of the gargantuan vessel, the twisted metal ringing it looking for all the world like fangs in some alien predator's gaping jaws. The thought was not a comforting one. The view through the block slid from sight as the pilot gently rolled the gunship, matching his speed of rotation to that of the hulk, and turned the ship to face the fanged maw they would fly into. Uriel watched as what little light filtered through the vision block was snuffed out as they flew inside the structure of the ancient leviathan.

The ready light above Uriel's head changed from a baleful red to a gently flashing amber and he knew they were almost in place.

The pilot's voice cracked over the vox. 'Depressurising in ten seconds. All crew go to internal air supply.'

Uriel disconnected his backpack from the gunship's own air tanks and sealed the valve, whispering the prayer of thanks to his armour's spirit as an icon flashed up on his visor, indicating that its integrity was intact. He checked that the air level in his armour's tanks was full and watched as his warriors followed suit.

The thin, engraved purity scrolls affixed to the gunship's venting systems fluttered as the pilot gradually depressurised the crew compartment, readying it for opening into the hard vacuum of the hulk's interior.

Uriel released the harness restraints and slammed a magazine into his bolter as he rose to his feet. The motion of the Thunderhawk shifted again, the engines rumbling and the deck vibrating with the tonal shift. The ready light flickered from amber to green.

Then, with a thump and groan of landing gear, they were down and the frontal boarding ramp dropped, slamming into a pile of twisted wreckage. Uriel nodded to Pasanus and together the two Ultramarines swiftly descended the ramp, weapons at the ready. Surprisingly, Uriel felt the weight of his armour and realised that there was gravity within the space hulk. It could not have been generated naturally, which told him that even if there were no inhabitants on board, then at least some remainder of their technology was still functional. The rest of the gunship's passengers debarked and formed a protective cordon around their leaders as Uriel surveyed the interior of the space hulk. Bright beams of light speared from the frontal section of the gunship, illuminating their landing zone.

The chamber was a vast, echoing cavern of twisted, glittering girders bolted and welded to what must have been the flank of another starship in a random fashion, forming a groaning latticework roof some hundred metres above them. Stalactites of ice drooped from the ceiling and jagged pillars of glistening blue rose to meet them. Steam feathered from the Space Marines' backpacks as they spread out through the frosted chamber, ice crystals crunching underfoot as they moved off into the hulk.

A multitude of beams from the Ultramarines' armour lights criss-crossed through the spectral twilight as Uriel stabbed his hand in the direction of a yawning slash torn through the wall two hundred metres before them.

'All squads check in,' ordered Uriel.

The vox bead in his helmet clicked and hissed with white noise. Crackling voices stuttered through his helmet.

'Squad Brigantus in place and moving inside.'

'Squad Learch... in pla... and... movi... in...'

'Sq...d... arin in p...ce.'

'S...a... terion...'

Uriel cursed as the last transmission faded from his headset, blocked either by the sheer mass of the hulk or some failing of their vox units. Techmarine Harkus had warned him that they tended to fare badly in the depths of hulks. Well, Uriel had personally briefed each of his squad leaders and there was nothing more he could do. He was now beginning to understand something Marneus Calgar had said to him before departing on the long journey towards Segmentum Tempestus and Tarsis Ultra: that there was a world of difference between leadership and command.

He approached the opening in the wall, his shoulder-mounted illuminator revealing a wide, ribbed corridor of glistening, pustule-like growths that stretched off into the darkness. Thin scraps of mist clung to the floor and soft, puffs of gas soughed from sphincter-like orifices in the pustules. Water dripped in a fine rain around the opening from melting ice above, and condensing air gusted around it. Uriel stepped through the opening, feeling his boot connect with something hard and metallic.

Lying on the floor, partially covered in the clinging moisture was a flattened sheet of iron, hammered into a crude representation of a horned skull. The jaw was sawn with elongated fangs, and despite the crudity of the work, it was recognisable as a totemistic ork head.

Pasanius knelt beside the ork head, keeping the hissing nozzle of his enormous flamer pointed down the corridor.

'So it looks like there are greenskins on this vessel after all,' he said.

'Aye, so it would seem,' agreed Uriel. 'But where are they?'

Both Space Marines looked up as the click of something moving from ahead sounded from the oddly shaped walls, throwing

the echoes around them. Uriel pressed himself against the undulating wall, raising his bolter as Pasanus motioned the warriors of his squad forward. The Ultramarines moved in two-man fire teams down the corridor in disciplined groups as the noise came again.

Uriel followed his men, his footsteps sucking from the gelatinous, spongy floor. A soft, chittering sound rippled through the walls, the puffs of gas from the pustules feeling like the breath of some disgusting sea beast. If that were the case, then truly they were in the belly of that beast.

The corridor rounded a bend, the wet, organic walls of the corridor abruptly changing to the armoured bulkheads and the rigid mesh of an internal floor so common on Imperial vessels. The walls were scorched black, pocked with fist-sized craters and Uriel knew immediately that they were weapon impacts; too large for most small arms fire and too shallow for heavy weapons.

Human ones at least.

He'd fought orks often enough to know that their weapons were easily capable of these kinds of impacts and opened a channel on the vox.

'Brother Flavian, front and centre, we need your auspex.'

Seconds later a Space Marine with his bolter slung and carrying a hand-held device with a gently glowing plate joined him. A soft chime sounded regularly from the device as the spirit caged within the machine swept the architecture before them with an array of surveyors.

'Brother-captain,' said Flavian, keeping his eyes trained on the device.

'How far to the first waypoint?' asked Uriel.

Flavian consulted the auspex, scrolling through the display and said, 'Two hundred metres, brother-captain. Along this corridor and right.'

'Very well. Let's go, and stay alert.'

HARKUS NODDED, INDICATING that the first charge was set and Uriel led his squad onwards, following the chiming auspex of Brother Flavian. The corridors echoed to the heavy, armoured footfalls of the Ultramarines, throwing their steps back at them in ringing metallic waves. Uriel saw a riot of interiors butted against one another in a chaotic jumble of accidental

architecture. Girders stamped with faded Imperial eagles abutted rusted metal structures that were plainly of ork construction, which in turn were welded to portions of ships that Uriel did not recognise at all. Vessels too numerous and strange to guess at had unwittingly supplied the material required to construct this space-borne leviathan; yet another reason to see it utterly destroyed.

Uriel stepped across a frost-limned stanchion, feeling his steps lighten the further he travelled down this particular section of corridor. He raised his fist and halted the advance.

Ahead, the corridor widened into a high ceilinged chamber of blue ice and swirling mist. Glittering shards of ice tumbled lazily through the air, catching the light from his armour's illuminator. Sparkling like miniature suns, Uriel realised that the crystals were floating in a zero-gravity environment. Whatever arcane devices or alien archaeotech had kept gravity functioning in other portions of the hulk was plainly not at work here.

'There is an area of weightlessness ahead,' he voxed to the rest of his squad. 'Engage boot magnets and switch to auto-senses; there is a great deal of airborne debris.'

He stepped onwards, feeling the powerful grip his boots now had on the mesh of the deck beneath him. As he entered the chamber, he felt a lurch in his stomach as he suddenly became weightless. There had been no gradual change in environment, simply a switching from one state to another. Ice brushed against him and a spinning bar of metal rang against his thigh armour. His grip on the deck did not feel as secure as he would have liked, the thick ice on the floor preventing the magnetised soles of his boots from gaining a better purchase.

'Be on your guard, the ice is distorting my auto-senses. Pasanius, clear us a path through this mist.'

'Aye, captain,' said Pasanius, hefting his bulky flamer unit as easily as another Space Marine might carry a boltgun. The veteran sergeant unleashed a whooshing tongue of flame into the mist, a hiss of ice flashing to steam and liquid droplets exploded away from the fires.

But rather than simply dissipating, the liquid promethium rolled in the air, miniature infernos spinning through the chamber as the fire revelled in the sensation of weightlessness. Removed from the tyranny of gravity, the flames slid like liquid through the air, rippling in strangely lifelike ways. Adhering to

icy pieces of tumbling refuse, the splintered fire lit the chamber with the glow of a million dancing fireflies.

Uriel shook his head, entranced by the myriad patterns of liquid fire twisting before him and said, 'We should expect to find many more places like this.'

He pushed on through the icy mist, his senses stretched out before him for any foe that might be lurking in the swirling fog ahead. He saw hummocks of ice on the ground and knelt beside one. Its skin a deathly pale, the ork lay immobile, its limbs welded to the deck by the cold. Uriel saw that the other hummocks were also dead bodies.

'This place is a tomb,' he whispered to himself.

The huge body before him was frozen utterly solid, its wide fanged mouth twisted in a last roar of aggression. Its torso was ripped open in a dozen places and glistening entrails, frozen as they spilled from its belly, coiled around its meaty fists.

'It froze to death while trying to push its guts back inside,' said Pasanus.

Uriel nodded. 'And I just bet it would have survived had the cold not killed it. Obviously the chamber froze before the gravity failed.'

Apothecary Selenus knelt by the body, extending a forceps probe from his wrist-mounted narthecium. The dextrous callipers gripped something wedged in the ork's belly, cracking free a long, chitin-sheathed claw. Its surface was black and reflective, its edge lethally sharp.

'What is it?'

'A claw, and not an orkish one,' said the Apothecary. 'It obviously belongs to whatever killed this brute.'

'You mean something killed an ork with its bare hands?' said Pasanus.

'It would certainly appear so,' nodded Selenus.

Uriel stood and pushed the dead orks from his mind. They had a mission to perform and as diverting as this mystery was, it was delaying them from completing it.

'Leave it,' he ordered. 'We are behind schedule already.'

He waved his men forward and they carried on, passing more stiff, frozen corpses of orks. Eventually the icy mist cleared and Uriel stepped from the glacial sepulchre onto a dripping gantry high above a cavernous drop into darkness. Chains jangled from an unseen ceiling and melting water poured in runnels from

innumerable passageways all around them. The weight of his armour settled on his frame and he realised that they had once again entered a gravity pocket.

Brother Flavian joined Uriel and pointed his auspex down the length of the gantry.

'It's this way to the next waypoint,' he said.

Uriel acknowledged him with a nod of his head as he scanned the blurred darkness above him. Shadows and mist coiled high above and rippled with motion.

There was something else on this ship besides the orks.

He just hoped they could complete their mission before they found out what.

URIEL PANNED HIS shoulder-mounted illuminator around the columned chamber, noting the reading of his heartbeat in the lower left corner of his visor display. Higher than normal, he saw, though he wasn't surprised. This place was damned, cursed, and reeked of death. He looked up at the groaning structure above him. Hundreds of bowing columns supported a sagging roof of ice, the soft jingle of dangling chains and dripping moisture masking the sound of his breathing.

For another four hours, the Ultramarines had crept through the baroque interiors of the hulk, ghosting from waypoint to waypoint, planting explosive charges and following the soft, regular chiming of Brother Flavian's auspex. Patchy communications had been re-established with the other squads throughout the hulk, but each sergeant's reports were fragmentary. It appeared, though, that the mission was going well and the remainder of his squads were progressing unopposed.

A circle of light from the Ultramarines' armour lights surrounded the kneeling Techmarine Harkus, who set the last of the demolition charges Uriel's squads were to place. Silently, Uriel willed him to hurry up.

The longer they stayed here, the more his sense of trepidation grew and the greater the threat of encountering something hostile. The lord admiral believed the hulk to be abandoned and, aboard the *Vae Victus*, Uriel had agreed, but now, standing in the twisted, desolate interior, he wasn't quite so sure. The groaning darkness of the hulk was an unsettling place, and Uriel had the constant sensation of being watched.

The hulk creaked, though it was impossible to pinpoint from where the noises came.

'By Guilliman, I'll be glad to see the back of this place,' mused Pasanus, flexing his silver fingers on the grip of his flamer, the blue flame hissing at the weapon's nozzle.

'Aye,' agreed Uriel, glancing upwards as he thought he caught a glimpse of furtive movement. 'It is unnatural.'

Pasanus nodded grimly in agreement. 'It reminds me too much of the darkness below the mountains on Pavonis.'

'In what way?'

'I fear we may meet something as monstrous as the Bringer of Darkness, because this place is a tomb as well. People died on this ship and there are evil echoes here.'

'Evil echoes? That doesn't sound like you, my friend.'

'Aye,' said Pasanus with a shrug. 'Well, I don't like places like this, they bring out the superstitious in me.'

Uriel said nothing, but agreed with his old friend's belief. He had seen enough horrors in his time serving in the Deathwatch to know that places of ill-omen could indeed resonate with ancient evils. The battle with the Nightbringer only reinforced that belief and was another reason to be done with this place.

There were creatures known to dwell on hulks like this and he did not relish meeting any of them.

He watched as Harkus flipped open the glass lens covering a brass dial on the face of the demolition charge and turned the delicate arms of the timer mechanism. A red light winked into life beside the timer and the Techmarine intoned the words of arming.

'Holy Father of Machines, I ask thee to invest this blessed machine with a fragment of your divine wrath and beg your forgiveness for its destruction. *Destructus et abominatus, Omnis mortis justicus.*'

Harkus made the sign of the machine and nodded to Uriel.

'The demolition charges are now set, brother-captain. Within the hour, this hulk will be nothing more than wreckage.'

'That thought fills me with nothing but relief, Brother Harkus. Now let us be on our way.'

Harkus concealed the demolition charge beneath a handful of ice shards and thin sheets of metal as the vox-bead in Uriel's helmet clicked and Brother Covius, his northern perimeter sentry reported.

'Brother-Captain, I have movement before me. I can hear the sounds of many enemies approaching,' said Covius.

'What kind of enemies?' hissed Uriel.

'I do not yet know, brother-captain, I can see nothing beyond the edge of the chamber, but from the noise I believe there are a great many. And they are heading this way.'

'Brother Covius, remain in place until you can give me more information, then get back and join the rest of us,' ordered Uriel.

'Understood.'

Uriel circled his hand above his head and the Ultramarines closed the circle around him. Even as they did so, Uriel could hear the sound of battle erupt in the distance. Gunfire and the crump of an explosion echoed from the chamber walls. He opened a channel to Covius as the vox crackled with reports from the other squads scattered throughout the space hulk.

'Contact!' bellowed Sergeant Learchus over the vox-net.

'Enemies!' shouted Sergeant Brigantus.

Uriel was about to demand confirmation on who exactly was attacking when the answer came in a shout from Brother Covius.

'Brother-Captain, they're coming!'

'Who, Covius? I need better information than that!' yelled Uriel.

But before Covius could reply, the signal was suddenly cut off as a fiery explosion blossomed at the far edge of the chamber and half a dozen stalactites crashed down from the ceiling.

Then through the flames came a wave of screaming foes, their bestial faces twisted in alien hate and their powerful bodies rippling with bulging muscle.

Orks. Hundreds of them.

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