

WARHAMMER
40,000

A SPACE MARINE BATTLES NOVEL

THE GILDAR RIFT

SARAH CAWKWELL



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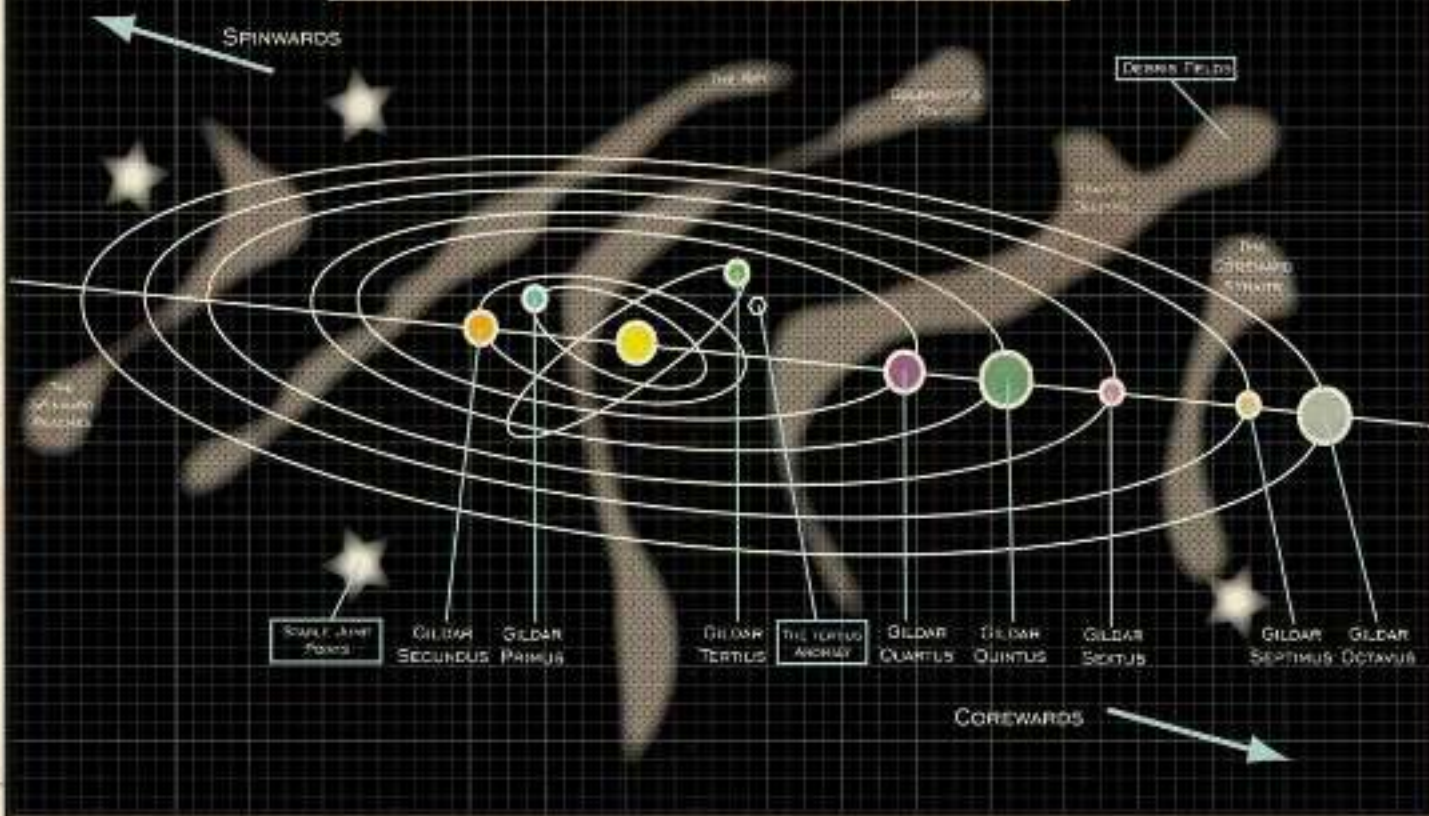
Warhammer 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

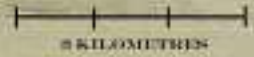
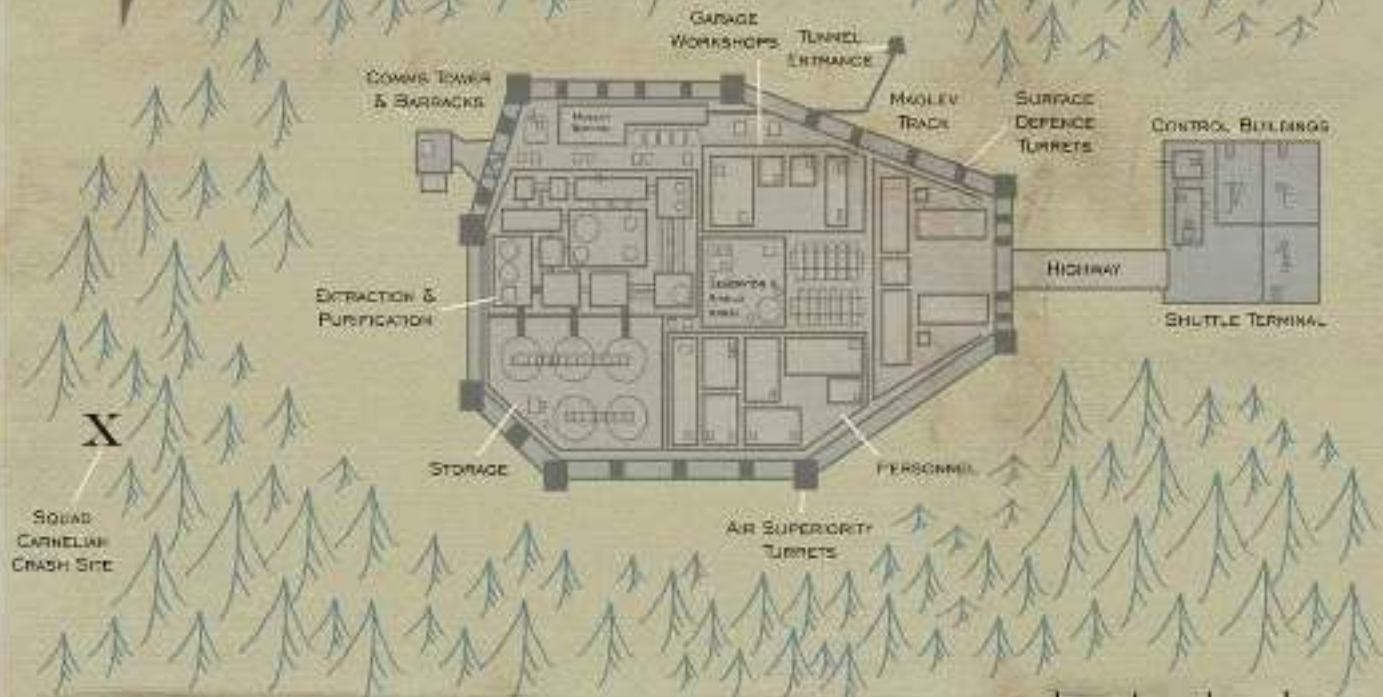
Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

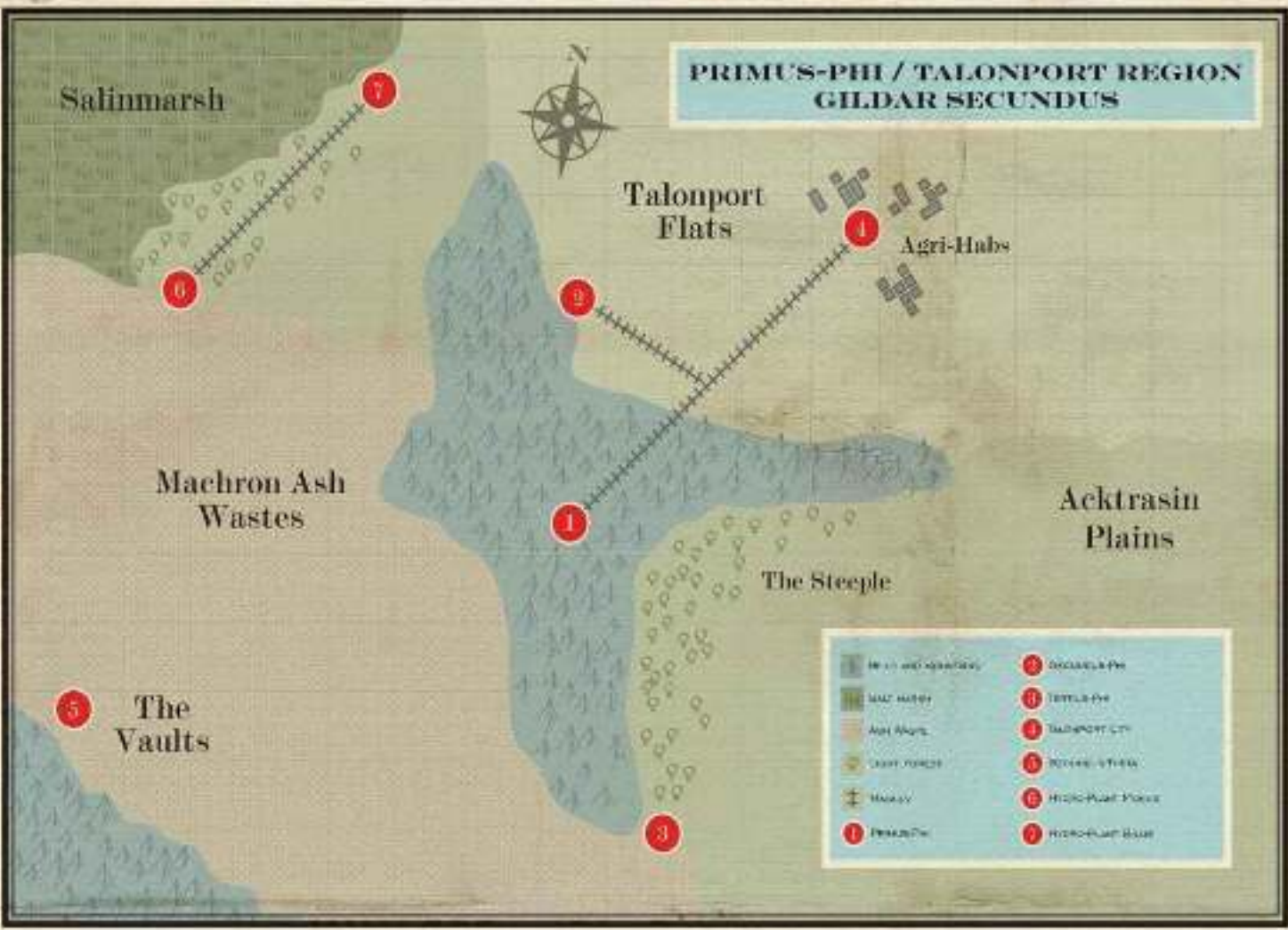
THE GILDAR SYSTEM



PRIMUS-PHI FACILITY

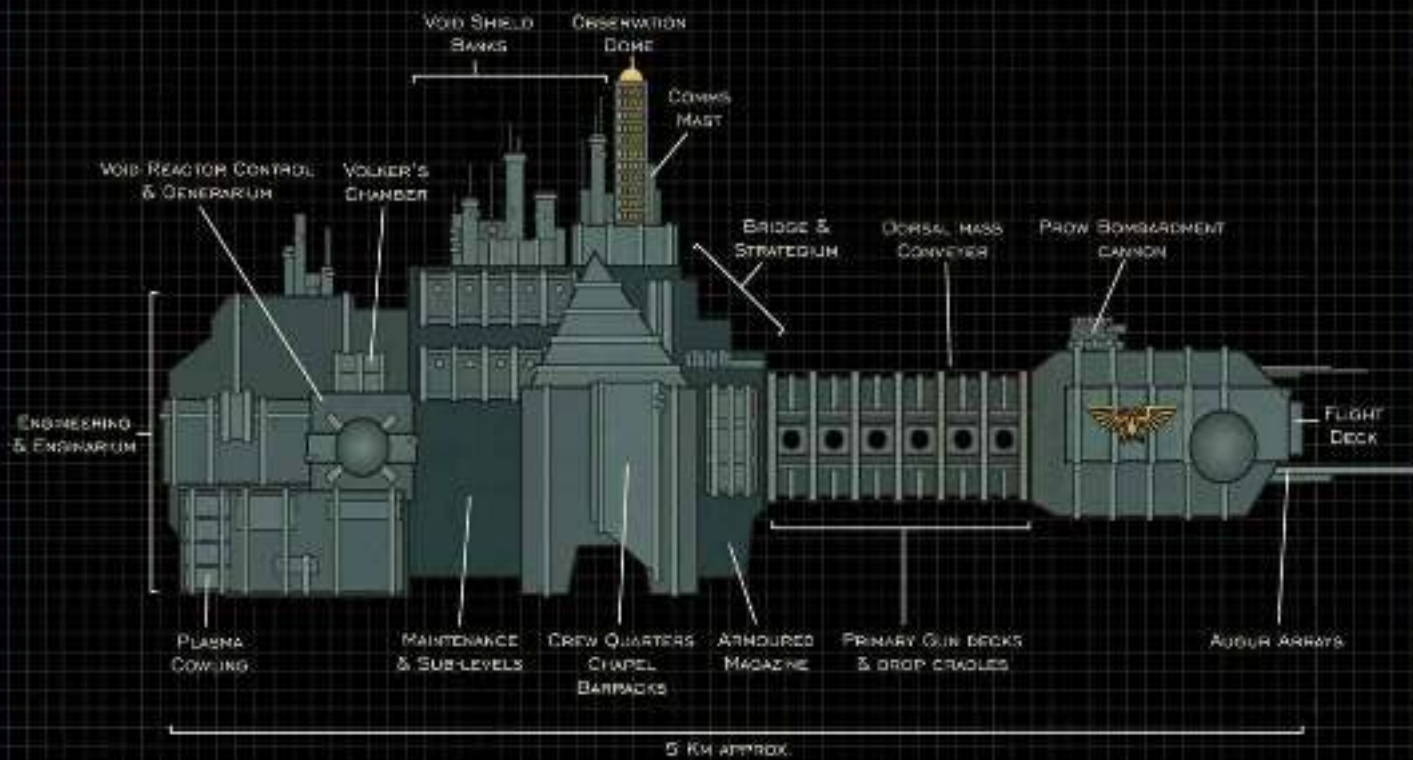


**PRIMUS-PHI / TALONPORT REGION
GILDAR SECUNDUS**



	HEATH AND AGRIHUBS		DOUGLAS PINE
	SALT MARSH		TERRACE
	ASH WASTE		TALONPORT CITY
	LEANT FORGE		DOUGLAS PINE
	HABITAT		HYDRO-PLANT POWER
	PRIMUS-PHI		HYDRO-PLANT POWER
			HYDRO-PLANT BLADE

THE DREAD ARGENT





ONE

INTO THE RIFT

The emptiness of space buckled and bulged just for an instant as though it were being sucked into a vacuum. Stars wheeled and distorted and then the endless night shimmered, disgorging a single vessel back into realspace. Its engines burned white-hot for a few moments, the internally-generated field that had cocooned it on its journey through the warp flared briefly and flickered out. Then gradually, the thrusters began to cool, slowly making their way down through the spectrum to standard operating levels.

Space around the ship rippled as cycling shield generators doubled their output to compensate for the dense clouds of particulate debris, then the scene returned to normal as though the ship had always been here.

The *Endless Horizon*, a lone trader vessel, decelerated dramatically as soon as it was able; a hot blast of plasma drives stalling its headlong flight from the empyrean to a crawl. Within the ship's interior, countless system checks and re-calibrations were taking place. Several of its crew murmured thanks to the God-Emperor and to the ship's machine spirit for a safe trip through the warp.

They had gotten this far intact, but whether they would survive their trip through this sector remained to be seen. They had translated into the fringe of the Gildar Rift.

'We're definitely alone, sir.'

Silence followed this ominous pronouncement as the bridge crew of the *Endless Horizon* exchanged glances. There was concern in those looks; a deep anxiety that was almost palpable. Luka Abramov frowned, running a hand across his jaw as he considered the situation. His eyes passed over the unfortunate young man who had delivered this worrying report and his grey eyes steadily narrowed in obvious disapproval. It was not the news he had wanted to hear.

The youth shifted uncomfortably under the captain's gaze, aware instinctively that more was expected of him. A slow, creeping realisation that every pair of eyes on the bridge was riveted on him began to seep unpleasantly through his body and he cleared his throat, tapping at the data-slate in his hand. Before he could speak however, Abramov leaned forward.

'Let's try basics. Our coordinates are correct, yes?'

'Y... yes, sir. Captain.' The youth offered up the data-slate and Abramov took it without even bothering to look down at it. The lumen-strips on the bridge were still dimmed, not yet back to full power after their trip through the warp and in the dull half-light, Abramov's hawkish face was unreadable.

'Then the words "We're definitely alone" are, as I'm sure you appreciate Kaman, completely unacceptable.' Abramov rose from his control throne and stepped down from the dais so that he was on a level with the other man. 'Are we so very early? Or even late?' Abramov silently cursed the inconveniences of warp travel. Its time dilation effects were generally considered the very least of the problems a ship could encounter; but they were a frequently irritating side-effect nonetheless.

'Ship's chronometers put us approximately four hours ahead of schedule,' came the answer from somewhere over to Abramov's right. The captain glanced across and nodded curtly. When he spoke, it was with an outward confidence that he wasn't feeling inside.

'Then we keep going. We may as well continue onwards to our destination.'

'But, sir...' Kaman hesitated, biting back the words that rose to his lips. He used the honorific without even thinking. It was a sure sign he was nervous and Abramov noted it. He liked to encourage an element of informality amongst his crew. Some of them had come to him from spells in the Naval service. Sticklers for tradition and formality to a man. It seemed that some old habits died hard.

Kaman rubbed the bridge of his nose with a thoughtful finger. He did not wish to appear patronising or condescending, but even a member of the bridge crew was thinking what he was rather clumsily attempting to put into words. 'But, sir. The dangers...'

'The dangers of the Gildar Rift are well known to me, Kaman. I would be most grateful if you did not presume to lecture me on that of which I am well aware.' A look of shame coloured the youth's features and Abramov softened his attitude slightly. 'For now concentrate on assessing all available data so that our helmswoman can get us safely through the belt and to Gildar Secundus. I'm prepared to compromise. We'll wait a while for our escort. I'm sure that they will show up soon enough.' Or perhaps, he added mentally, not at all. 'You all know just as well as I do that we're on a tight schedule.'

This was not the first time he had commanded a vessel through the treacherous straits of the system and he sincerely hoped that would not be the last. But without the safety net of their intended escort he could not help but feel an anxiety that would not settle. A knot of discomfort began to twist in his stomach, but he retained a stoic expression. There was little point in displaying uncertainty to his crew.

'Yes, sir, straight away.' Kaman crossed his hands over his chest and returned to his station. Abramov nodded. They were a good

crew, reliable and trustworthy. There were a number whose experience was lacking but they would learn in time. Kaman was a case in point. But Abramov had very carefully cherry-picked his crew over the years. There was enough combined expertise on board to ensure that their journey to Gildar Secundus should have presented no major difficulties. He believed he had taken all the factors in consideration. Indeed, he was completely confident in that knowledge.

And yet...

Were he brutally honest with himself, he would have admitted the truth of the matter. Had he been allowed to have his own way he would have preferred to navigate through the debris field with his crew alone. The *Endless Horizon* was a good ship; she handled well. His helmswoman was a skilled and seasoned veteran of many years and was without question one of the most extraordinarily gifted pilots he had ever known. They were a fine assembly and they had an excellent track record. So his ship may be old and, as is often joked, was held together with little more than wishful thinking. But she was certainly reliable. The old girl had many years of service left in her yet.

Abramov had not wanted an escort for this trip, but in the event he had not been given a choice. If there had been the option to refuse the vessel assigned to oversee their passage through the Rift, he would have taken it without question. However, he had not been given the chance to repudiate the suggestion. He had been *told* in no uncertain terms that he would receive the escort.

Luka Abramov was a shrewd man and an excellent captain – and he knew better than to refuse what was tantamount to a direct order from the Adeptus Astartes. They were, after all, entering the Silver Skulls patrol corridor and to have gone against that one instruction would have been a grave insult that would inevitably have courted disaster. On top of that, from what he knew of the Silver Skulls Chapter in general – and of Captain Daerys Arrun in particular – it would possibly be perceived as more than simple disobedience. The Silver Skulls were noted throughout this sector for their ferocity. To contravene an order was something that would be seen as a challenge, or something that would raise suspicion. It was the sort of activity that freebooters and smugglers engaged in. Abramov, whilst he may occasionally and almost always entirely accidentally have transported the odd microgram over his allowance, was no smuggler.

Not all ships were guided with an escort through the Rift. Most of the time, as long as their presence was made known, that was enough. But when the order had come through that the *Endless Horizon* was to rendezvous with another ship on arrival in the system it wasn't something that could be lightly dismissed.

Abramov had enough problems to deal with – he neither wanted nor needed the displeasure of Captain Arrun adding to his load.

'Maintain regular augur sweeps,' he said to the operative at the scanner console. 'I want to know the very second they show up.' Unlike some other ships, the *Endless Horizon* had an almost entirely unaugmented human crew. Abramov had served in ships crewed largely by servitors and had never felt comfortable around them, at least not when he had employed them on his own bridge. As such, the moment he had taken command of the vessel, he had instigated his own rules. Lobotomised servitors still moved around the engineering section in their lifeless way, never needing their morale attending to and keeping the literal cogs of the ship turning. But all of Abramov's core crew were human. There was not a servitor in sight. He was proud of that fact.

'Of course, Luka,' the operative replied. She was more comfortable by far with the informality adopted on board the *Endless Horizon*. Like Abramov, she was dressed in dull grey overalls emblazoned with the ship's insignia, that of a sun setting on a horizon. Her dark blonde hair was pulled back from her face in a highly unflattering manner, emphasising the tired eyes and frown lines that marred her handsome profile. Abramov watched her with undisguised affection for a few moments as she expertly worked the buttons and dials on the archaic systems at her fingertips. The cogitators and systems groaned into semi-obedient life and she murmured soft thanks to the machine spirits that she had disturbed from their slumber.

After some time, activity on the bridge of the *Endless Horizon* resumed some sort of normality. Abramov allowed himself the opportunity to relax a little. The earlier tension had been uncomfortable, but had been inevitable. There was always a brief spasm in the bustle and flow of regular activity after re-entry from the warp. Those moments may have been laden with apprehension, but there was nonetheless a certain peace in the wake of re-entry; it represented a marked change from usual hubbub of life and animation that dictated his existence on board the freighter.

Information was passed to him both verbally and in the form of printed reports and as things resumed their normal pace, he took great comfort in the perfect symphony of the workings of the bridge crew. It was a familiar, well-orchestrated pandemonium of sound that he could have conducted perfectly without even trying. The chimes on the quarter hour that reminded the machine operators to renew their litanies. The slow, steady growl of the engine's pulse far beneath them – and the occasional lull in that constant background noise as a slightly worn piston skipped a beat. There was the accompanying sound of the monotone responses of the engine room servitors as they obeyed orders and relayed information across the ship-wide vox... Abramov leaned back in his command throne and closed his eyes, allowing it all to wash over him like a soothing balm. All was calm. All was well.

Abramov had taken ownership of the *Endless Horizon* several years ago and although his preference had always been for drawing up his own contracts and working for no master but himself, he had nonetheless served the Imperium well when called upon to do so. Particularly when the agreed contract was as lucrative as the one he had negotiated for this run to the promethium refineries. For all his strong and notable points, Luka Abramov's head was turned with promises of financial reward. It was not a trait that he ever allowed to display itself, though.

Known for his thoroughness and diligence and an honesty that was almost disarming, he was well respected and had often been entrusted with an assortment of precious cargo. He had spent the first ten years of his ship-board life working solely for the Imperium. It had been long enough to give him a strong urge to work for himself and so he had become freelance. Ironic really, that here he was, back under contract to them once again. He'd developed a taste for the life of a freelancer, however – and had already decided that once he had run a few more Imperial contracts, he would reclaim his independence. He had established that there were

many opportunities for ships to make trade runs to the Gildar system. Blessed with a wealth of natural resources, there were always contracts available to this part of the Segmentum Obscurus. It didn't hurt to run a few more 'official' missions. Practice, he knew, made perfect.

There were certainly far more contracts than there were ships willing to travel there. Abramov had no compunction about such a journey. He knew the risks and welcomed them as part of what he considered his responsibility.

For countless centuries this part of space had always presented itself as a major hazard to all vessels entering its vast tracts. 'The Gildar Rift' was the name that had been bestowed upon the shipping channel cleaving its way through the area. Comprised of a number of scattered, largely uninhabited worlds, it was a potentially lethal zone to traverse.

Through the centre of the system, an asteroid belt orbited the densely populated planet of Gildar Secundus. The field's intrinsic dangers were made far more lethal by the vast quantities of space debris drifting eternally through the void. Remains of smashed vessels that had failed to heed warnings not to attempt transit were strewn throughout the Rift, an area that was too hazardous by far to salvage. Any opportunistic would-be looters who had tried to recover the wrecks often added their own ships to the mass.

Ruptured and broken, the ships slowly leached slow trickles of plasma and other toxic wastes into the area. The lethal cocktail created a permanent chemical haze that constantly caused interference with auguries and communications signals.

So the asteroid belt was both a blessing and a curse; presenting difficulties for any who wished to descend to or leave Gildar Secundus, but also offering an excellent natural defence for a planet whose promethium reserves were a critical resource for the Imperium. The challenge faced by visitors to the system in the shape of the swirling band of rock and ship debris was only the beginning. Xenos ships were regular trespassers here and, so it was rumoured, pirate activity was increasing not just here in the Gildar Rift but in the whole of the furthest reaches of the Segmentum Obscurus.

Relishing the challenges that maintaining peace in the sector offered, the Silver Skulls had long ago set themselves to the task of patrolling the Gildar Rift. Other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes would rarely volunteer themselves for such a plain, inglorious duty. But the Silver Skulls considered the sector as part of their territory. And the Silver Skulls were *proud*.

Their presence loaned an air of safety to what was otherwise a treacherous place. But it came at a cost. The Silver Skulls monitored and maintained control over passage through the system with a rule of iron. The more fortunate vessels, such as the *Endless Horizon*, followed protocol, alerting the Space Marines to their planned transit in advance. After the necessary approvals and verifications had been carried out, they were granted permission and provided with coordinates where they would be met by an escort. Those who simply translated into realspace on the fringes of the Gildar Rift were very swiftly met with a 'welcoming party'. A misnomer if ever there was one. The stoic Space Marines weren't known for their warm and embracing natures. They were, however, definitely well known for their adherence to and the enforcing of Imperial regulations and didn't take kindly to chancers. Woe betide any ship's captain who thought to argue the point with the Silver Skulls Chapter. No, there were protocols to be followed.

Yet for all he had followed the guidelines and adhered rigidly to instruction in this instance; for all he had dutifully waited a tedious length of time for Captain Arrun's grudging acknowledgement before he had arranged to travel here... for all he had ensured that the coordinates he had been given had been adhered to most rigidly, Abramov and his crew were completely alone.

The captain's hand ran over his jaw again. It was a nervous gesture and one that didn't even begin to hint at the sense of extreme caution that was beginning to eat away at him. They had been told that to traverse the Gildar Rift without an escort or without some sort of acknowledgement to a patrol vessel was a blatant admission of piracy. But there was no escort present and try though they might, no ships were answering their frequent hails. Abramov would be damned before he drifted idly in space, a sitting target for any *actual* pirates who might chance their arm.

He had always hungered for the autonomy of his own command and so when the opportunity to invest his dead father's money had come along, he had grasped it with both hands. The years of managing his own contracts and pulling together the best crew he could afford had given him a wealth of experience. Thus it was from this pool of worldliness upon which he now drew.

The choice as he saw it was reasonably straightforward, yet far from simple. He could either maintain his current position and wait for the Silver Skulls to arrive – or he could order engines to quarter speed and continue towards Gildar Secundus. It would not take them long to enter the planet's atmosphere and Abramov had every confidence in his crew's combined skill and ability to get them there in one piece. Exactly how the taciturn Captain Arrun would react to such a breach of verbal contract, he had no idea. He could hazard a reasonably well educated guess.

In the end, compromise won out.

'Very well,' he said. 'We will hold position for three hours.' He dropped back down onto the command throne. 'If we have received no word from our escort by then, we continue onwards to Gildar Secundus. At the slowest speed we can manage.'

'Aye, captain.'

Abramov let out a rushing breath. With luck, he would not need to risk the wrath of the Emperor's Angels.

Sleep had been elusive during the journey to the Gildar system and Abramov had taken advantage of the grace period to retire to his quarters in an attempt to catch up on some much-needed rest. There had barely been opportunity for his eyes to close and for him to fall into a deep sleep before he was rudely dragged awake by the bellowing scream of the ship's alert system. Scant seconds later he felt the ship lurch beneath him. The suddenness of the movement tipped him ungraciously from the bunk, leaving him sprawled on the ground.

'Captain Abramov to the bridge,' an insistent female voice was saying across the ship-wide vox system. 'Proximity alert. Repeat captain to the bridge.'

'I heard you the first time,' he grumbled. Roused into full wakefulness, Abramov hauled himself off the floor and rubbed sleep

from his eyes. He caught a passing glimpse of himself in the tarnished mirror above his sink and immediately wished he hadn't. He was looking dishevelled and tired, many years past his Terran standard complement of fifty. He hardly cut the figure of authority he had always at least attempted to maintain.

He was still pulling his overalls on over his clothing as he strode through the door to the bridge.

'Report.' He stifled a yawn and glanced at the ship's chronometers. He regretted that almost as much as he had when he'd looked in the mirror. He had been asleep for barely any time at all. 'Is it the Silver Skulls? Have they arrived?'

'No, I'm afraid not.' Telyna, his pilot – and the most competent woman he had ever met in his life bar none – turned her head to study him with casual indifference. 'Debris field dead ahead. Mostly small asteroids, fortunately. I'm doing what I can to avoid the worst of it.'

Telyna's words made their way through his muzziness and snapped him back almost immediately to full alertness.

'Evasive manoeuvres? Yes. I could tell by the way you woke me up.'

Telyna tossed her long, blonde plait over one shoulder. It was a simple gesture, but there was a lot of suppressed aggression there. 'Well, *captain*,' she said, with heavy sarcasm, 'I could have just let the remnants of that ship hit us. Would you have preferred that?'

Their eyes locked for a moment and it was Abramov who looked away first, a slight smile on his lips. He considered for a moment. 'They never showed, then?'

'No. We've been travelling towards Gildar Secundus for the best part of an hour. Hence...' She gestured expansively, a means of indicating the debris field that lay ahead.

'Can we not simply go around?'

'Something's stirred up the field,' she reported, turning away from him and this time pointing out of the forward viewscreen.

'There's enough junk outside to ensure that no matter which direction we take, we're going to encounter obstacles of one form or another.' Telyna fell silent for a moment or two, concentrating on the matter at hand. 'Most of what's out there looks pretty old. But we've already seen at least one complete vessel. Recently disabled according to the preliminary scans.'

'Probably the last ship that didn't follow Arrun's orders,' Abramov muttered, then shook his head. Probably better not to let himself wander down that line of thought. 'Maintain course and heading. Be alert and prepared for anything. It's a deathtrap out there.'

'I am well aware of the dangers, captain.' Telyna's voice was so insulted that despite his weariness, Abramov's face split in a broad smile.

'I love you, Telyna, did I ever tell you that? Even if you do wake me up just to prove how damned clever you are.'

'You tell me constantly.' She returned the smile with one of her own. 'I thought you would want to be awake in the event that I get things wrong and you can say "I told you so" as we're ripped apart.'

'Your concern for my ongoing welfare is noted.'

'Don't mention it.'

The brief, companionable exchange over, Telyna turned her attention back to the console. Someone, Abramov was too distracted to notice who, put a steaming cup of recaff in his hand and he muttered his thanks. He sipped the bitter liquid with a wrinkle of his nose. If he were brutally honest, he despised the taste of recaff, but its stimulating effects were certainly welcome at this time. He studied the printouts that had been placed on the arm of his command throne.

His feet settled firmly on the floor, unconsciously reaching out for the pulse of his ship's engine. Its ever-present hum was there, only just felt beneath the soles of his boots. It was a connection of the simplest kind, but it was a habit he'd never broken. Like most captains, Abramov had his own private superstitions. Like a warrior who would cup a handful of dirt before a battle, he stuck to them rigidly. As long as his ship still had a heartbeat, they would be fine.

Their speed now greatly reduced, Telyna concentrated on avoiding the debris outside the *Endless Horizon* as best she could. There was certainly a lot of it. Machine parts, chunks of metal, even several human corpses drifted by in an endless parade of the merciless nature of this part of space. Wide-eyed and rimed with a thin skein of ice, the corpses seemed to scream silent warnings to the crew of Abramov's ship. It was the stuff of nightmares and several of the crew were clearly unsettled and a little distressed by the sight.

For what seemed like an age, the freighter moved with excruciating slowness, its progress painstakingly measured. Telyna's eyes were watering with the effort of staring from the viewscreen to the console at her command and Abramov's headache was getting no better. There seemed to be no end to it at all and tempers were beginning to fray.

When the rear port thrusters began to fail, Abramov knew about it several moments before the message came up from the engineering deck. His unconscious connection with the ship's harmonies and rhythms whispered the news through the vibrations beneath him. Normally, the loss of one of the rear thrusters would have been something easily dealt with. In clear space, he would have sent service drones outside to deal with the problem. In this chaotic cluster though, he wouldn't risk losing one of his crew – soulless or not – to a glancing blow from the passing flotsam and jetsam. Not to mention that coming to a stop at this point was also no longer an option. If they maintained position, they'd likely be pulverised. He felt irritated more than concerned.

The dull monotone of the servitor's voice confirming the problem irritated him still further.

'We're almost through the field,' Telyna said between gritted teeth. Her jaw had been clenched so hard for so long that it ached terribly. 'If I can just use the remaining thrusters to stabilise our position... our shields should deflect the smaller stuff. I just have to avoid the rest of it.'

'Our shields *should* deflect, yes,' said Abramov grimly. 'They should – and I don't doubt that they will. But they won't do so indefinitely.'

‘Do you have a better plan, captain?’ Again, the rising sense of hostility on the bridge deck was detrimental to the situation and the captain bit back the harsh retort. He gripped the arms of his command throne until his knuckles turned white. All it would take would be a single big hit to their shields, enough to break through. Once that happened, they would be torn apart and join the unfortunate dead that they had observed already outside the ship.

‘Anticipated time to exit this accursed junk pile?’ His question came out as a bark. Before she could answer, Telyna let out a string of blasphemous expletives. At her outburst, several of the bridge crew hurriedly made the sign of the aquila, their faces horrified. When she spoke, Abramov merely nodded as though he had expected this to happen.

‘New contact.’ She looked round at him and her face was a picture of abject terror. ‘Xenos raiders, sir.’

They were practically drifting, with very little in the way of firepower to defend themselves. If they didn’t collide violently with the debris and junk that threatened their path, then they would be blasted apart by the pirates, or worse, crippled and boarded.

All at once, the calmness of the bridge descended into a discordant babble, a far cry from the orchestrated glory of earlier. Voices spoke over one another, but with the ease of the years, Abramov filtered out what was important and added his own orders to the tumultuous noise.

‘Front starboard thrusters are also starting to fail. Transferring power from port thrusters to compensate.’

‘Shield generators still holding steady. Ninety-eight per cent.’

‘Power to fore thrusters stabilising. Levelled at sixty per cent.’

‘Time to exit?’

‘Fifteen minutes.’

‘Maintain current pattern. Telyna...’

A staccato of sound, a counterpoint of voices that rose to a crescendo of noise. Cutting across it all, the whispered, fervent litanies of each crew member as they prayed with due diligence to the distant God-Emperor of Mankind to get them through safely. The uproar continued.

‘Incoming. Dead ahead.’

‘Enemy ships are moving to intercept. There are two of them. No, not two. Three, sir! There are three of them! Holy Terra...’

‘I’m trying to... damn it!’

‘Impact in ten... nine...’

‘All stations, this is Abramov. Brace for impact. Channel whatever power we have into the guns and fire on the xenos ships. If we’re going to go down, we’ll not go quietly.’

The three xenos vessels were manoeuvring their way with practiced ease through the field of destruction. The freighter captain had seen them before... eldar. In days past he had fought against them. ‘Nightshade’ was the human designation for the three vessels bearing down on them with silent menace. But they were now officially the least of their immediate worries. Let the eldar launch their torpedoes. It would be a violent, sudden death, but at least there was a chance of obliterating them outright. Better by far than what *could* happen.

The captain leaned forward, his hands clasped in silent prayer as he stared through the *Endless Horizon’s* oculus. Their demise was spinning towards them: a twisted, unrecognisable hulk of girders, conduits and crushingly dense hull plating. Something so warped and broken had absolutely no right to be pirouetting with such majesty through the airless vacuum of space.

‘Eight... seven...’

In seven seconds, it would strike their void shields. It was big enough to burst through the *Endless Horizon’s* shields like its protective layer was nothing more than an ephemeral bubble. One good, solid hit and the freighter vessel would be ripped apart. Unlike the flare of pain and death of an explosion caused by a torpedo strike, they would be helpless as their ship was torn apart. They would be adding their corpses and destroyed ship to everything else that lay outside the hull.

‘Six.’

We haven’t got a hope. Abramov’s confidence fled in the face of his imminent demise. For a fleeting moment, he despised everyone on the deck with him. Hated them for being here with him. Blamed himself for their deaths.

‘Five.’

So this is how it ends, then.

‘Fo— incoming vessel! Extreme proximity. It’s... it’s powering up its weapons, sir!’

Abramov should perhaps have been feeling terror, or at least a modicum of fear, but there was nothing. His heart was like stone. Instead of being atomised by a chunk from a long-destroyed ship, they were going to be vaporised by a hostile vessel. There wasn’t time to ask why it was that nobody had picked this new threat up on sensors. Indeed, Abramov wouldn’t even question that until much, much later. The moment was now, and he was irrevocably caught up in it.

The eldar raiders simultaneously turned; impossible angles that the bulky, practical transports of the Imperium could never hope to achieve and launched their torpedoes at the new arrival. There were three sudden blossoms of light as the projectiles detonated harmlessly against their target’s shields.

A second later, light lanced from the ship that had apparently come out of nowhere, destroying the chunk of wreckage in a silent spray of molten metal. A second shaft of searing brightness incinerated one of the eldar ships immediately. The intense glare temporarily blinded the bridge crew of the *Endless Horizon* and Abramov turned his face away. Gradually, as the intense brightness dwindled away and vision returned to normal, the shape of their surprising saviour could be made out.

‘Gladius-class frigate,’ Abramov observed. An Adeptus Astartes escort vessel. Of course it was. Despite himself, a smile tugged at his lips. It seemed that their chaperone had arrived. Late, but perfectly timed nonetheless. The frigate banked slightly and moved

away so that it was running alongside them.

Of the other two eldar ships, there was no sign. Abramov did not know if the Gladius had destroyed them or if they had fled. Either way, they had gone and that was a perfectly acceptable outcome. There was a crackle, a hiss and the ship-to-ship vox spat in life.

‘*Endless Horizon*, hold your position. Slow your engines and wait for further instructions.’ It was a clearly human voice; not desensitised and changed as one would expect from one of the Emperor’s Angels. Doubtless it was one of the Silver Skulls Chapter serfs serving aboard the craft.

As quickly as the channel of communications was opened, it was silenced again. A reply was not invited, not that any of Abramov’s crew could have found words anyway. The crew of the *Endless Horizon* drew a collective breath when the Gladius-class frigate veered sharply away allowing another vessel clear passage through.

It was an ugly thing on first glance; a closed-fist of a vessel with a prow bombardment cannon clenched menacingly at its fore. Uniformly painted in serviceable machine grey, it was possible at this proximity to pick out some of the painstakingly worked lettering on the ship’s exterior. It was huge, a gargantuan monster of metal that filled the viewscreen completely as it placed itself between the ailing freighter and the punishing debris field.

The unseemly appearance of the front of the strike cruiser gradually tapered into a long, graceful neck and ultimately resolved in a veritable fortress astern. Abramov couldn’t help but gaze at it with awe.

‘They’re forming a barrier!’ Telyna leaned forward on the console as she stared up at the seemingly endless grey ship. ‘They’re shielding us from the onslaught.’ Her voice was filled with astonished reverence, a far cry from her usual casual manner.

Abramov nodded, grimly. Ship-to-ship vox communication channels remained closed but he knew well who this monstrosity belonged to. The gold and silver worked insignias that could be made out on the grey ship’s edge displayed quite clearly the Imperium aquila, the Chapter emblem of the Silver Skulls and the vessel’s name.

The Dread Argent.

Abramov cleared his throat, which suddenly seemed to have become completely dry.

‘Then we had better hail them,’ he said. ‘And we had better make it formal.’

Captain Daerys Arrun, Master of the Fleet and Commander of the Silver Skulls Fourth Battle Company loomed in front of Luka Abramov. His closely shaven head did nothing to hide the mass of scar tissue on his skull; something that on a human would be considered disfiguring, but which on a Space Marine could only be a mark of honour. His face was covered in swirling whorls of dark ink that all but obscured his flesh; the battle tattoos of the warriors that all commanding officers of the Chapter earned the right to. If his sheer breadth and height and forcible presence hadn’t been fearsome enough, the tribal-like brandings would have done the job admirably.

Eyes that were ice-blue and just as cold pierced into Abramov for a while before Arrun spoke, his voice a deep and sonorous rumble.

‘There are a thousand things I can think of that might have encouraged you to act against your very clear and very specific instructions, Captain Abramov.’ Arrun held up a massive hand to forestall any protest. ‘And yet for every one of those, I can think of another reason as to exactly why you should not have done it. I trust that you have something to tell me that will prove my thousand theories wrong?’

The *Dread Argent* had run alongside the *Endless Horizon* for some time, deflecting the worst of the debris field as though she had been flicking insects away. In time, the message had come that Captain Daerys Arrun would be boarding the freight vessel to speak to Abramov. An explanation, it was communicated, was in order. The *Endless Horizon* would also be subjected to the standard checks for smuggling at the same time. Abramov was not worried by the latter. He had nothing to hide.

Talking to the Space Marines captain, on the other hand... that filled him with trepidation.

Abramov ran nervous fingers through his greying hair and looked up at the captain. He swallowed back the comments and self-assured responses that he had been so sure he would have been able to muster and shook his head. Arrun’s sheer physical presence had quashed any attempts at being even remotely sarcastic. In the end, the best he could manage was a rather pitiful excuse that sounded plaintive and poor even as it left his mouth.

‘You were late. We... are on a schedule and thought we would make progress until your arrival.’ Arrun’s brow arched, distorting the tribal markings on his face briefly.

‘I am never late, Captain Abramov. In this instance, I was unavoidably detained. I deeply regret that our astropath’s message did not reach you before you entered the warp. But you should have waited. You did not. Fortunately for you, the *Dread Argent* arrived before you were pulverised.’ Those cold, emotionless eyes scoured Abramov once and in that penetrating glance, the *Endless Horizon*’s captain was aware that he was being weighed and measured. He shifted uncomfortably. It was time to fall back on his only possible course of action.

‘You have my sincerest apologies and deepest gratitude, of course, Captain Arrun...’ Abramov hated how wheedling his voice sounded. He was guilty of no crime other than being in possession of an impetuous nature. If he told himself that enough times, perhaps he might start to believe it. He squared his shoulders and straightened his spine. With the very greatest of concentration, he injected energy and enthusiasm into his voice. ‘Of course, now that you are here, we can resume our journey to Gildar Secundus.’ He lifted his head and smiled brightly. He couldn’t hold Arrun’s gaze for longer than a few moments.

‘Yes,’ mused Arrun, turning his back on Abramov. ‘Yes, I imagine you can.’ He stared out of the view portal at the *Dread Argent*. As Master of the Fleet, he had a keen and abiding interest in all the vessels of the Imperium, particularly his own. With practiced

confidence, he let his eyes roam across it, calculating its external condition. Despite his apparent distraction, he continued the conversation with Abramov. 'You have the report I requested, I take it?'

'Yes, my lord.' Abramov offered the cargo manifest in a hand that shook only slightly. One of the Silver Skulls serfs who had accompanied Arrun stepped forward to take it. It was duly handed to Arrun without words and the captain pulled his gaze from the *Dread Argent*.

'Confirm for me what your cargo consists of, if you please, Captain Abramov?'

'Of course, Captain Arrun.' Made more comfortable by the familiarity of this process, Abramov relaxed a little. 'We are taking replacement machine parts bound for the promethium refinery.' It was correct and the physical inspection of his ship would corroborate that statement.

From that point, the Silver Skulls captain was nothing but solid business. No more was said about the transgression and when Arrun announced he would be returning to his own ship, Abramov allowed himself a moment to breathe.

'Be wary, Abramov. Something translated into the Gildar Rift several solar days ago and disturbed the peace. It appears to have gone again, but you never can tell. This debris field could well be the least of your worries.'

'Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord.'

Offering Arrun a deep bow as he strode away, Abramov returned to his bridge and crew in contemplative silence. He knew he should count himself lucky that whatever it was that was distracting the Silver Skulls captain meant that he had escaped a sterner, more serious chastisement – but the sense of deep unease that Arrun's parting words had engendered in him negated any relief he may have felt.

The least of your worries.



TWO

RESURGENT

The Gildar Rift
In geostationary orbit above Gildar Secundus
++ One week later ++

Gildar Secundus was a harsh and cruel planet. Yet despite its inhospitable, almost suffocating environment, it was one of the wealthiest places in the segmentum. The promethium refineries sprawling across much of its surface like creeping mould were extensive, industrious, productive sites that churned out seemingly endless quantities of the much-coveted fuel.

Promethium, the life blood of the Imperium, not only sated thirsty machine spirits in vehicles and fuelled weaponry, but was the core ingredient in any other number of industrial products. Its value was incalculable and its appeal was a beacon to would-be raiders to take it for themselves.

Ever since the very first attempt at taking the spoils had been made, ever since piratical raiders had exploded into the Gildar system, the Silver Skulls had established their patrols across the Rift. From the moment they had responded to the first foray, any further such incursions that had been attempted had met with swift justice, delivered by a Chapter who were not known for their patience. Generally, the Silver Skulls delivered their judgement on transgressors with the minimum of preamble – and such judgement was invariably punctuated with a punishing and ultimately terminal salvo from a bombardment cannon.

The Chapter's home world of Varsavia hugged the outer rim of the Gildar Rift and in this far-flung, oft-neglected area of the Imperium they were the closest Adeptus Astartes response force. With the increasing, although still irregular raids threatening the region, Lord Commander Argentius had agreed the very real need for providing semi-permanent protection. Regular patrols were provided from the fleet, a rotating duty for those brothers who were not deployed on the field of battle elsewhere.

Captain Arrun had been Master of the Fleet for several decades and possessed a quicksilver mind and the forward thinking ability of a true tactical genius. At any time he knew the status of every functioning ship in the fleet. His eidetic memory allowed him to bring to mind every flaw, every weakness and, conversely, every strength. He knew in seconds which ship was the most appropriate to deploy to any given situation when the requests for assistance were received. He had overseen operations in the Gildar Rift from the very beginning. Now, in response to new orders received that morning from Varsavia, it looked as though the scale of patrols would be stepped down.

It was something of a puzzle to Arrun. The Chapter Master knew the dangers this system presented and yet still he had put out the order for them to return. The only explanation Arrun could consider was that Argentius must be recalling the fleet for deployment on a different operation. This would come as a relief to those patrolling the Rift. Space Marines needed purpose to their existence and whilst they may have been protecting the inhabitants of the Gildar system and overseeing the smooth operation of the Imperium at large – they were warriors first and foremost. They needed to be at war.

Arrun had consistently conveyed his personal concerns to the Chapter Master that the Gildar Rift possessed many hidden threats and had maintained his argument that the current numbers deployed in the system were necessary. Even if they had *not* been necessary, he had argued, maintaining a visible presence would be wise. Argentius, it seemed, did not agree. As such, the Master of the Fleet's mood was decidedly dark as he assembled his key advisors.

The strategium rested atop the pyramid-like interior of the strike cruiser. It was one of the few locations in the main structure that had something other than the functional steel mesh that ran everywhere else. In this instance, the floor itself was constructed from armaplas mesh. It afforded a dizzying view down to the bridge and with a little effort someone could see through the steel mesh even further still; to the deeper levels of the ship where the training cages and habitation areas were located. The interior of the *Dread Argent* had been constructed in tiers of concentric rings, each level getting smaller, ziggurat style, until it reached the top and this domed room at its pinnacle. The sounds of the everyday activity of the ship floated up to them in a muted murmur.

The only furniture within the strategium were the chairs and table that dominated the room's centre. All of these items had been specifically designed with the increased bulk and weight of the Space Marines in mind. On the extremely rare occasions when the regular crew members were brought up here, they looked ridiculously child-like in the immense seats. There was no décor on the walls other than Fourth Company's battle banner, unfurled and pinned out and the aquila that spread its wings imperiously across the wall behind Arrun's head. Seated at the top of the table, the wings of the Imperial symbol opened out behind him. It was not merely design coincidence that situating the aquila in that location created an illusion that the captain himself bore the wings of the Imperium.

Captain Arrun looked from one face to the other, a slight tic under his right eye the only betrayal that he was struggling to keep

his annoyance as well controlled as he could manage. Eventually, he spoke in a dark, gravelly tone. The discontent in his voice was evident.

‘We received orders from Varsavia this morning. We scale down our patrols with immediate effect.’

The other Silver Skulls gathered at the table exchanged brief glances. It was unheard of for Arrun to begin such a meeting with anything other than requesting that the Prognosticator lead them all in the litanies. It certainly didn't bode well for the rest of this gathering. The battle brother seated to the captain's right reached out and laid a hand on Arrun's arm with easy familiarity. Irritated, Arrun was about to shrug off the touch, then glanced at the other warrior. The Prognosticator was dressed in a heavy, dark grey robe with a hood that obscured his features completely. All that could be seen of him was the glitter of two green eyes deep within the hood's depths.

Arrun felt the touch of his advisor's mind brush his own and gave a brief, terse nod. The unspoken chastisement was all that was needed. He adjusted his attitude with visible reluctance, but his face betrayed the fury bubbling just beneath the surface.

‘My apologies, Prognosticator. Brothers, I beg your indulgence a while longer. Please forgive my mood, but as I am sure you can appreciate, this news concerns me deeply.’ He ran a hand over his shaven head and leaned forward. ‘I have communicated back to our Lord Commander my worries about activity in the system. Despite incursions into the Gildar locale being sporadic, the fact remains that they are still happening. The threat in this system is very real. And despite this...’ Arrun scowled. ‘Despite this, until our astropaths receive his response, we must make every move towards prosecuting his request to reduce the number of the patrols in the Gildar Rift.’

His words had an electrifying effect on his battle-brothers. The silence that descended was suddenly broken by the *crack* of a balled metal fist slamming down on the table. The suddenness of the noise reverberated around the strategium's dome and all eyes turned to the young Techmarine whose synthetic hand trembled with barely suppressed rage. Arrun's eyes swivelled to him, hardening like diamonds.

‘Brother Correlan? Is there something you want to say?’

The Techmarine, never known for his subtlety, shook his head. His augmented right eye whirred softly as he focused on the captain and the red lens flickered briefly. His voice shook with the irritation that Arrun was sure they all felt. ‘After all our work, after all that we have achieved here, I hope the Chapter Master is not putting a stop to the project.’ He kept the question out of his tone, keeping his voice moderate with obvious difficulty. The others seated at the table nodded slowly, each harbouring the same thought. They had been assembled as a team for a very specific reason and the project that was nearing its completion had taken each and every one of them firmly into its grip.

‘You can consider yourself fortunate on that front, brother. To the best of my knowledge and until the Lord Commander decrees otherwise, the Resurgent Project will continue as planned.’ There was a tone of something largely akin to disgust in the captain's voice. He had committed time and resources to an experiment that he had never wanted to truly be a part of. Events had overtaken him, though, and Vashiro's will was not something to be denied.

His words garnered no response. All present knew Daerys Arrun's thoughts on the Resurgent Project. It was something that he had inherited from his predecessor who had in turn, inherited it from the Master of the Fleet before him. A legacy of sorts; a plan that had been waiting to come to fruition for several centuries. It had waited on the orders of the Prognosticator for the conditions to be right. Even with the Chapter Master's approval, even with the Chapter's wisest and most revered Prognosticators fully in support of the project, Daerys Arrun's open distrust and scepticism had remained. He had even tried to argue against it when he had been initiated into its deepest secrets.

It had been a tense, lengthy debate which had ultimately been swayed with the additional enthusiasm and backing of the Master of the Forge. Finally convinced that the idea had some small amount of merit and that to resist the will of Chapter command would be ultimately detrimental, Arrun had capitulated.

Correlan nodded and folded his arms before him, the servos and minute air compressors in his mechanised arm hissing softly as he made the gesture. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘Because to be brutally honest, captain, we passed the point of no return several days ago. I have very much doubt that the work Brother-Apothecary Ryarus and I have accomplished can be undone now.’ His young face was open and honest, hiding nothing of his aggressive nature or underlying indignity and yet there was open challenge in his tone.

‘Mind your attitude, Techmarine.’ The hooded warrior seated next to Arrun folded his own arms, deliberately mimicking Correlan's body language. ‘Captain Arrun must, as we *all* must, obey our Lord Commander's orders without question. Believe it or not, he has as much invested in this project as you do. More, in fact. You are not even an officer in this company, something which you would do well to remember. Remember your place and hold your tongue.’

Correlan scowled even more deeply and leaned back in his seat. In his life before his ascension to the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes, he had been one of the few Silver Skulls raised to adolescence amongst one of the semi-feral, aggressive tribes of the southern Varsavian steppes. Some habits and mannerisms took longer to overwrite than others and a tendency to fall prey to a hair trigger temper was one.

‘My apologies, Prognosticator.’

The psyker threw his hood back and studied the young Space Marine with a cool, appraising look. ‘Whilst your lack of sincerity in those words is duly noted, your enthusiasm is to be commended, brother. I ask you to not mistake my words for those of anger. Consider instead that I am offering you advice. You would do well to heed it.’

Correlan, out of a habit borne from months of working alongside Prognosticator Brand let himself fall into sullen silence. He would never argue such a point. Fourth Company's principal advisor may have been ageing, his long hair threaded through with silver and his tattooed face lined and wise, but his acuity was as sharp as ever it had been. His not inconsiderable psychic abilities

went a very long way towards ensuring that no secrets were ever kept from him.

'Thank you, Brand.' Arrun had used the natural pause offered by the brief exchange as an opportunity to cool his own temper and was already much calmer than he had been before. He had engaged Correlan's involvement in the project knowing that the younger warrior had occasionally been described as borderline reckless. It was a small price to pay because his particular skills had been perfect for this work. Varsavia was something of a technological backwater and as a consequence, those who demonstrated technical aptitude and who had undergone training at the hands of the Adeptus Mechanicus were afforded similar levels of respect as the Chaplain-Librarians of the Prognosticatum. Regardless of how bad-tempered they might have been.

Drumming his fingertips on the table, his chin held thoughtfully between his thumb and forefinger, Arrun considered his comrades for several moments. Then he nodded, his course of action determined.

'We will comply with Lord Commander Argentius's request, of course. I do not think that it is a secret that I am not happy about it. I am confident that by the time he receives the astropathic response, he will be more than aware of that himself.' Arrun let out an exasperated breath. 'As such, we must proceed to discussion of the fleet's redeployment.' He gestured towards Correlan who tapped out several digits on the control panel set into a recess before him.

A static hiss filled the strategium and a hololithic display flickered into life above the featureless surface of the table. Created almost lovingly after months of mapping the system, it was a perfect graphical representation of the Gildar Rift. Satellites orbiting the many planets in the system wheeled and spun in proper calculations of their trajectories. Even the asteroid field was recreated practically to the last piece of rock. Of course, it was constantly shifting. The recent transgression of the *Endless Horizon* had stirred up the asteroid belt in particular and it had taken time to settle back down.

'I updated the display mere hours ago,' Correlan, now unleashed from the constraints of obeisance and allowed free rein to do what he did best, was almost unrecognisable from the sullen, resistant Space Marine he had been mere moments before. His confrontational body language dissolved under a relentless assault of enthusiasm and energy. His hands moved rapidly and with great animation as he spoke. 'The Ommissiah be praised, I had no major problems this time. Here.' He took a cable that dangled from the table and plugged it snugly into the jack port of the device he wore on his arm, an integral part of his metal hand replacement. There was a soft *click* as the cable bedded into it.

His fingers danced nimbly across the keypad at his wrist and several bright runes winked into existence amidst the dancing display. Their own vessel was shown as a softly pulsing red light that moved in perfect time with the planet of Gildar Secundus. At Correlan's gentle coaxing, other symbols gradually brightened up.

Every ship that was presently deployed in the region showed up on the tactical hololith and Arrun pointed a finger to them in turn, naming each individually as he did so. In all cases, he named the ship before its occupants; a reflection on his position.

'The *Quicksilver* is closest to us. Our brothers of Ninth Company were to begin their journey back to Varsavia within the next few days. For now, however, I will inform them to resume their patrol.' Seeing the furrowed brows of the others, he elaborated, his face unmoving. 'Our ship may be incapable of quick response should the Resurgent fail at inauguration. We may need their support should such a thing occur.' He flashed the briefest of smiles. 'It is essential to always remain one step ahead of the enemy, particularly when there is no enemy visible.'

Arrun was aware of the sudden bristling of both the Techmarine and the Apothecary at the implication that the project may fail. He ignored them carefully.

The *Dread Argent* and the *Quicksilver* were only two of the Silver Skulls strike cruisers, the others all presently deployed elsewhere throughout the segmentum and beyond. Arrun resumed his register of the other ships still in the Rift. Most of these were Gladius-class escorts, many crewed largely by Chapter serfs. With the ease of decades of commanding the fleet, he drew up the outline of the redeployment.

Ryarus, the taciturn, stoic Apothecary had up until now remained silent. Now he tipped his head slightly and studied the redesign of the fleet. He made a laconic observation.

'Lord Commander Argentius is planning something.' It was not a question, but a shrewd observation. The sheer number of ships that Arrun was picking off from the display was extraordinary. When the orders were prosecuted and transmitted to the rest of the fleet, the presence of the Silver Skulls in the Gildar Rift would be cut by more than half.

'Aye. He probably is. Despite my repeated reports that something is not right in this system, he has chosen to downscale our activity here. We aren't to leave Gildar entirely without protection, of course. But yes.' Arrun stared at the hololith, his brow furrowing. 'Yes, he has something planned. It is not the place for me to question or begin to second-guess his judgement...'

He left the rest of the sentence unspoken.

Arrun turned from the strategium table to stare out of the ship's viewport and down at the world of Gildar Secundus. From here there was no way of recognising the volcanic nature of its surface. Far above the swirling atmosphere, there was a faint reminiscence of distant Mars. It was a uniform shade of murky red, as though someone had poured dust and ancient blood into the crucible at the time of its forging. Millennia of brutal eruptions during its cataclysmic formation had formed the distinctive jagged peaks and deep valleys that scarred its surface.

Hundreds of years had passed since the last active eruption and an exploratory geological mission had not only declared the planet was suitable for human colonisation, but had discovered rich deposits of the raw minerals needed for the refining of promethium which also bubbled to the surface in plentiful lakes. It was a double blessing from the Father of Mankind.

Far beneath them on the planet, thousands of Imperial citizens now dwelt largely in subterranean blocks tunnelled kilometres beneath the surface. Most worked the promethium refineries but as was the way with the children of mankind, they had an unerring habit of taking root wherever they could and making a life for themselves. After several years, agricultural domes began to output

their produce and despite the best efforts of the planet's militia, there was a steady underground trade in obscura. Over the past year it had become a thriving planet, the destination for many traders of the Imperium – and those serving themselves first. Despite its prosperity, it was first and foremost a human settlement and as such, had swiftly become a target for thieves, raiders and smugglers.

'Ryarus, Correlan... transmit the orders to the other ships,' he said. 'Advise the fleet to wait on my word.' With a brusque nod, Correlan shut down the hololith, unplugged the cable and left the room with Apothecary Ryarus.

Left alone with his chief advisor, Arrun turned from the viewport.

'Perhaps you would be good enough to once again divine the omens in this matter, Prognosticator.'

'Of course. But I must ask that you be very specific with your question, brother-captain.' Brand reached into a pouch at his waist and extracted a number of card-thin crystalline wafers. He shuffled them together as he spoke to Arrun, the surfaces of each brushing against one another with a faint whisper. 'The Emperor does not like to repeat himself.'

Arrun considered for a few moments. Since the inception of the Resurgent Project, he had used Brand's psychic connection with the Emperor to determine the appropriate course of action on many occasions. Thus far, the Prognosticator hadn't steered them wrong. But he had never asked the questions that he most wanted the answer to.

Until now.

'Are we doing His will by facilitating the creation of this... *thing*? Will we succeed?' he said, asking the question in a cool, calm voice. Brand let the captain's words fill the silence and die out, then inclined his head graciously before dealing out the pattern that would determine the answer to the captain's question. He dealt each wafer one at a time, relishing the familiarity of them beneath his fingers. He had come into the possession of his own personal tarot four hundred years before, and when his psychic abilities activated the illustrations hidden in their mystical depths, they were quite beautiful.

He closed his eyes, a flicker of blue warp lightning crackling between his fingertips as he extended forth the probing, questing tendrils of his psychic conduit with the Emperor of Mankind.

His voice barely audible, he mumbled the Litany of Conjecture and turned over the first card. Its crystal surface shimmered and flickered into life. He studied it thoughtfully, then passed his hand over it again.

'The Emperor. The most powerful card in the pack.' Brand looked up. 'Inverted.'

His heart had leaped at the first words, but had then sunk. Even Arrun who was not gifted with the foresight of the Prognosticator knew that the most powerful card in the tarot deck inverted was never to be taken as a good sign. An involuntary sense of unease ran like a chill of ice through his veins, trickling down his spine.

'Continue,' he said. 'I would know more.'

The engineering deck was a bustling hive of activity. Servitors, engineers and Chapter serfs created a constant, dull monotone which dipped in pitch momentarily as Ryarus and Correlan entered. As the two warriors crossed from one side of the deck to the other, the throng parted silently to let them through. The ripple closed behind them in a smooth wave and the raucous, incomprehensible noise started up again.

There was little to no ostentation on board the Silver Skulls vessels, apart from the rich displays of the company trophies that were located in the chapels. The Chapter was not aesthetically barren of course; they took great pride in their body art and the tattoo artists the Custodes Cruor, were regarded highly. Many of the Silver Skulls designed their own tattoos and a number of them were genuinely talented, gifted artists. The ancient Varsavian tradition of marking their bodies was considered the ultimate battle honour and every brother of the Silver Skulls Chapter wore designs that were completely unique to the individual. Some chose representations of great battles that were breathtaking in their detail.

In all cases, the last part of a Silver Skull's body to receive markings was his face. Only on ascension to the rank of captain were they allowed to receive that honour.

Passing through the bustle of the engine decks, Ryarus and Correlan headed for another room that was certainly not notable for any decoration. It was, however, notable for the many pieces of machinery strewn on every available surface. The smell of machine oil, burned promethium and lapping powder was all-pervading in here, its acrid odour permeating the air strongly. There was another Techmarine working who got up to leave when Correlan and his companion appeared. Correlan stilled him with a wave of his hand.

'Stay,' he said simply. 'You might learn something.'

This was Correlan's main workshop and the centre of the project that had taken over their lives. Cables and wires littered the ground and Ryarus picked his way through the treacherous obstacle course with a hint of a smile on his craggy face.

'I've never really quite understood how you can possibly work like this, Correlan. How in the Emperor's name do you know where things are?'

Compared to the ordered, spotless apothecary where Ryarus carried out his procedures, Correlan's workshop was a place of nightmarish bedlam. Machines had been stripped back to their bare souls so that the Techmarine might better tend to them. Often, these stripped-down machines simply lay where he had left them when another, more pressing project had demanded his attention. In the far corner of the workshop was his harness, the mechadendrites motionless and devoid of animation without the Techmarine's connection with them stirring them into life. The Techmarine treated Ryarus to an infectious grin, a stark contrast to his sour mood earlier. Here, in what could be described as his natural habitat, the warrior was without a doubt at his best.

'A foolish question, brother.' His tone was playfully scolding. The Techmarine swept a pile of rolled-up schematics to one side. 'I know *precisely* where everything is, Ryarus, because everything will always be *precisely* where I left it.' As if to demonstrate the proof of this gargantuan, seemingly unbelievable claim, he moved aside several more mysterious objects, the purpose of which Ryarus couldn't ever begin to comprehend and picked up a data-slate. He waved it triumphantly at the Apothecary.

‘You see?’ he said. ‘Precisely where I left it.’

As an aspirant, Correlan had demonstrated a remarkable talent with machines and an unerring ability to soothe troubled spirits. At times it was hard to believe that an individual in possession of such a fiery soul could demonstrate such patience with the stubborn servants of the Ommissiah. His training with the Adeptus Mechanicus on Mars had ended some five years previously and he had served under Captain Arrun for the entire time since his return. He worked hard and with great diligence and his prowess on the battlefield was executed with the same intensity that he delivered to everything.

Correlan was in possession of an honest, open personality and his emotions were always writ large in an unscarred, boyish face. His humours were often unpredictable but his abilities were without question. He had a tendency to insubordination and bad moods that made him tricky to handle; a trait which the Master of the Forge had frequently lamented.

‘Emotions, Correlan,’ he had said, ‘are superfluous to the purity of the machine. You must learn to put aside such petty thoughts and feelings.’ They weren’t words that the young Techmarine had taken to heart. The Master of the Forge had let it pass, knowing that in time, circumstance and the growing sense of one-ness with the Ommissiah would mark changes in him.

Ryarus liked him. He liked the younger warrior’s honesty and blunt nature and had taken Correlan under his wing in some respects, particularly during the course of the project.

More than once, Correlan’s patience and faith in his own ability had been stretched beyond its limits and the Techmarine had been on the verge of admitting defeat. What they were trying to accomplish was beyond anything the Silver Skulls had ever attempted and there was no frame of reference for the depth of work needed: no research, no failed attempts that had gone before – and as the days and weeks had blurred into months, failure had begun to look like a very real option.

Whenever those moments had loomed, dark and miserable, Ryarus had been there to encourage and support the younger warrior. A real friendship had grown between the two, as different as they were, and a mutual respect that meant they worked together like they had been a team for decades.

Daerys Arrun may have been many things; arrogant and prideful amongst others. But he was also a great judge of character. It had been no chance arrangement that Apothecary Ryarus had been reassigned to Fourth Company at the inception of the Resurgent Project. His cool, level-headedness was the perfect counterpoint to Correlan’s fire.

Correlan led the way to the far side of his workshop and placed his massive hand on the biometric scanner that was affixed to the wall. With a low hum and grinding of ancient gears, the door slid open almost reluctantly to admit them to the Resurgent’s chamber. The room was located perfectly between the Techmarine’s workshop and the apothecarion, allowing both Space Marines easy access whenever they were working.

This room was also cluttered – although this time it was with servitors rather than general debris. As the two entered, the machine-like chattering of the lobotomised Chapter servants swelled in volume. In their dull, emotionless voices, they delivered their reports. The noise would have been incomprehensible to anybody other than a Space Marine, but Correlan and Ryarus easily extracted the prudent and important information.

There was also a group of tech-priests picking their way awkwardly around the untidy area. Some were murmuring litanies that were barely audible over the noise of the servitors, whilst others were anointing various pieces of equipment with unfathomable shapes using fingers coated in sacred engine oil from a vial carried by one of their number. Everything they did was a complete mystery to Ryarus, but the earnest manner in which they behaved filled him once again with pride at his involvement.

Each one of them, from the lowliest menial all the way up to himself, had a specific purpose; a focus that related to the dominant feature of the room.

In the very centre of the room, encased within a transparent, narrow chamber; more of a tank which rose continuously from floor to ceiling was the Resurgent himself. A massive figure displaying the over-developed musculature and slightly equine face of the Adeptus Astartes was within, moving sluggishly within its confines. He was kept in a mostly rigid, standing posture, arms out by his side, by several clamps that minimised his body movements.

A gelatinous, sticky-looking liquid filled the tank, enveloping its occupant completely. It clung to his body, giving his darkly tanned skin an unnatural sheen. His arms and legs had long been severed from his torso at the elbows and knees and the machinery that had replaced them was not dissimilar to the arm and leg pieces of the Mark VII battle plate that the Silver Skulls favoured.

The human – if this was what he could still be considered – within the tank was now far more machine than anything and yet his face remained deeply human and astonishingly youthful. He was barely out of his teens. His skin was studded at regular intervals with jack-ports, exactly as Correlan and Ryarus themselves bore. These were the interfaces that granted a Space Marine the ability to connect to his power armour. But the boy in the tank had never been granted the Emperor’s Ward, what other Chapters knew as the black carapace, the membrane that coated a Space Marine’s bones and provided the valuable connection with their power armour.

The boy in the tank was incomplete. He was imperfect. He should, by all rights, be viewed as nothing more than a failure. Yet, to Ryarus’s eyes, the boy was something else entirely. He was their future. He represented everything that they had worked so hard for over the past months.

His still-human eyes were closed. Even though he had long gained mastery of the Watchful Sleeper which allowed parts of his brain to rest whilst the rest of him remained alert and aware, old habits died hard. Perhaps, the Apothecary considered as he stared at the youth within the tank, he drew some comfort from the act of sleeping. He shook his head and crossed the room, resting his hands on the armaplas separating him from the Resurgent. He spoke a single word.

‘Volker.’

At the sound of his name, the boy’s eyes opened and he met Ryarus’s gaze. A hint of a smile gave his face added warmth. Unable to move, he simply inclined his head in greeting. When his voice came, it floated from a speaker grille embedded in the front of his

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