

THE LAUREL OF DEFIANCE

Guy Haley

They called him the killer of Titans.

Lucretius Corvo did not care for the title. He was captain of the 90th Company of the XIII Legion. That was honour enough for him.

In Martial Square, Corvo stood with the veterans of the Shadow Crusade and the atrocity at Calth. Ten files of thirteen: officers, battle-brothers and neophytes ordered without deference to rank. They were joined by brotherhood of a kind that transcended the boundaries of Chapter, station and company.

Inhumanly large and resplendent in their battleplate, they scintillated in the bright sun of Macragge, their badges of service and recognition crisp with fresh paint. Many times Corvo had stood in noble assemblage with his brothers, but never in one quite like this.

Once uniform in everything, the hammers of war had wrought the Ultramarines variously, beating out a different tune on each of them. Armour of differing marks mixed in their ranks and within individual sets. Battle salvage and worn elements had been lovingly restored by the Legion artisans rather than replaced. Commendation studs, non-regulation weaponry and unique war-plate revealed the identity of their wearer for all to see. Personal foibles sanctioned and let speak of victory, victory, victory!

They bore the marks of their actions proudly. They had prevailed against all odds, and they were to be honoured for it.

Amongst this august company, Corvo nevertheless stood out. He was taller than many of his gene-kin – that was a factor, yes, as was the massive suit of Mark III armour that singled him out as a void-war specialist. But it was the unique nature of his colours that set him truly apart. The cobalt-blue of his plate was quartered with bone-white. His personal banner, hanging from a pole mounted on his power plant, was likewise divided. It bore the emblems of the Ninth Chapter and the 90th Company. In the top left field was a spiked, hollow circle: a dark blue starburst.

This was not of Legion origin.

Serried ranks filled the rest of the square, representatives of every military force currently on Macragge – three Legions, the Imperial Army, and others. At the north and south, a pair of Warlord Titans stood sentinel. The eyes of millions of citizens watched the ceremony, hundreds of thousands in the vast crowds beyond the square alone. They were quiet. All of Macragge listened respectfully.

Three primarchs occupied a grand dais beneath the massive Pro-pylae Titanicum.

Sanguinius stood forward and centre as befitted his status as Imperial Regent. He shone with his customary radiance, but appeared troubled even so. He said little, and the enigmatic Lion El'Jonson even less. Today was their brother Roboute Guilliman's day – the master of Ultramar and the XIII Legion. Today the sacrifices of his realm, his people, were to be remembered. His words boomed out across the square – dozens of names, dozens of victories, dozens of heroes born from the horrors of defeat.

Guilliman honoured the unenhanced first, scores of mortal men and women who had defied the traitors, whether by lasgun and blade, or through acts of less obvious heroism: a scholam mistress who had led three hundred children to safety, a fabricatory adept who had worked for ten days without rest when his fellows had fled, and the sole survivor of a hundred port workers who had marched their industrial loaders into the enemy.

The Legiones Astartes waited motionless in the sun. Hours passed. The bulk of the southern Titan draped Corvo in welcome shadow for a while, but soon enough he was in the sun's full glare again. Half the standard humans had yet to be feted.

The sun was westering when the last bowed before the giant lords of men and walked away. A scroll was unfurled by Guilliman's equerry. Now it was time for the Ultramarines to pay respect to their brothers.

These were the champions of Ultramar.

The first name was read out. Honours were stated and bestowed. Short words from the primarch. The receiver renewed his oaths of loyalty. He was only the first to do so.

Corvo's hands twitched.

The night before. With Guilliman there was always a night before, or a night after. Feasts and parties went with his honour-giving like bolts went with boltguns. He held it important for his sons to mingle with the citizens, another chore in preparing themselves for peaceful duties once war was done.

It was clear now that those days would never come. Corvo expected ambivalence at the thought – he was made for war, after all – but found melancholy instead. Guilliman's dream was fading.

The whole of the Regia Civitata had been given over to the function. Inside its baroque halls, the one hundred and thirty mingled with the common mortals of Ultramar. The Space Marines stood like adults in a room of children, but the two strands of humanity were, for the most part, at ease with one another. The primarchs were absent from the pre-feast socialising, a calculated decision on Guilliman's part.

Corvo wore a simple, formal uniform, like all those who were to be honoured. Even so, he carried his gladius and bolt pistol on a broad belt. Events of the last few months had taught the XIII to be cautious. Members of the Invictus Guard stood garbed for battle at the main entrance. Around the perimeter and on the roof, the Prae-cental Guard and legionary brothers of the First Chapter patrolled. This heightened security saddened Corvo further. As much as the captain disliked company, Guilliman did not. It was important for his lord to be comfortable among his people. Distance was growing between the shepherd and his flock.

A woman was talking to Corvo. He reminded himself to pay attention to her.

'So much heroism,' the woman was saying.

'War breeds heroes,' said Corvo, and immediately felt foolish. 'The larger proportion of them perish uncelebrated.'

The woman was not fazed by his bluntness. She's used to this, he thought. Some women enjoyed flirting with legionaries, though he could not fathom for what reason. Women had been a mystery to him before his ascension to the XIII, and they only seemed more obtuse afterwards. She was very beautiful, and finely dressed. It did not matter to him.

Theoretical, he told himself, you're behaving like an oaf.

Practical, he added, you are an oaf.

'Something amuses you?' she said. An ironic smile played on her lips, a smile that seem to say: where is the power if there is no potency?

'No, no. A memory, that is all.'

She looked at him expectantly.

'It would not translate well,' he said awkwardly. By the old gods, he wanted to get away.

Corvo held out his glass, an oversized thing made for his oversized hands. A server stopped – his ewer was fit for men, but Corvo's glass was fit for the sons of demigods, and the server used his full measure in charging it. The liquid ran up the

side as it flowed into the bulb, the thick swell of it trailing a lesser curve of clear alcohol as it found its equilibrium.

Not at all like the wall of blood that burst from the coffin ship. Not like that in the least.

'That is some drink,' said the woman. 'If I were to drink it, I would not wake for a week.' She was trying for levity, Corvo supposed. She was not intimidated by him.

'Our lord is still at pains to make us feel part of humanity,' he said. 'A lesser amount would have no effect upon me whatsoever. We are supposed to be enjoying ourselves.' He tried to hide his irritation, unsuccessfully.

He sipped the drink. There was a hard burn to it. A good, strong Macragge pine brandy. Very fine vintage.

'Will that help you to enjoy yourself, good sir?'

'Only if I drink a lot, and quickly,' he replied.

The woman cradled her own glass in both hands, the drink untouched. 'Does it work then? All this, talking to the little people. Does it make you feel like one of us?'

Corvo looked over the gathering of humans and transhumans. They ignored the monster outside as they conversed and pretended that the sky was not red. They acted as if the galaxy had not been ripped asunder by fratricide, as if the order of all right things was not upset. If they could just pretend all was well, then all would be well. It was as much a pantomime as serving humans and giants from the same jug, or of pretending that their chairs were of equal size because they were made in the same style. He looked down upon the woman. She was so tiny, so frail. Of course, it didn't work.

'I am one of you,' said Corvo, and tried his hardest to believe it. 'It is better not to forget our humanity in the first place, rather than seek to remind ourselves. That is my opinion.'

'We have all heard what you did at Astagar. I doubt any human soldier could have done as you did.'

Corvo's smile became fixed. She sensed his irritation, and formed an expression of concern. 'Oh no, no! Not just the Titan, sir. I do not talk of that – no doubt you are sick of it.'

She was right.

'I talk of your efforts in the rebuilding. I have family there,' she explained.

Corvo dipped his head in gratitude. 'If only I could have seen it to the end. I was recalled for this ceremony. One week to destroy Eurythmia Civitas, and two years later it is still not set right. And I fear it never shall be.'

'He is right, our Lord Guilliman.' She cocked her head, appraising him. 'You are as much an asset in peace as in war.'

'We strive to be so,' he said. 'Now, if you will excuse me, mamzel?'

'I am Medullina,' she said with a slight curtsy.

'Well then, Mamzel Medullina, I bid you enjoy the rest of the evening.'

Corvo dipped his head to her and made his way through the crowd of worthies. He was courteous enough to move with purpose, as if he had somewhere else to be, though he did not. He headed for solitude, offered by the tall doors leading out onto the balcony. It was hard to navigate such fragile beings without damaging them – not a consideration he'd had in some while.

The greatest luxury in Corvo's recent life had been preparedness. He only heard the true, appalling scale of what had happened at Calth later, but by the time the enemy approached Astagar he was at least aware of the treachery. Corvo set the operational mark running as soon as the Word Bearers and World Eaters translated in-system, and his erstwhile cousins were met with a wall of fire.

Why they even attacked Astagar was beyond Corvo, his incredulity at the waste of resources vying with the outrage of betrayal. It made no sense. Astagar had little strategic or symbolic value. He had not known then that wanton destruction was the traitors' main intent.

The force that attacked was commensurately small: five battle cruisers and attendant support – enough to ravage a lightly defended world, no more, no less. Good theoretical, perhaps, but the enemy's intelligence was lacking. They reckoned without him.

Corvo was not supposed to be there. He was en route to the muster at Calth but had been diverted by a malfunctioning warp engine on his command ship. Call it fate. Call it luck. Corvo believed in neither. He was there, and that was all that mattered.

The manner of the enemy's approach told him they were intent on a ground battle. So be it. He landed his own men and ordered his fleet to run out ahead of the enemy. A raid cost the foe five Army transports at minimal damage to Corvo's ships. Satisfied that the enemy would thereafter have one eye over his shoulder, Corvo had his fleet withdraw. He would save the ships, if nothing else.

Astagar's modest orbital defences accounted for a portion more of the enemy's strength before being overrun. Light bombardment of the principal habitation zones opened hostilities on the ground. Corvo was appalled at this prioritisation of civilian targets, but had had the presence of mind to send the population to the shelters away from the city. When the enemy commenced orbital insertion over Eurythmia Civitas it was empty but for six hundred Ultramarines and the seventy thousand men of the Astagarian Light Rangers.

All this was in his report. Corvo was diligent. He put everything into the report, even the parts that he didn't believe.

Corvo was granted a brief respite. The balcony was typically grand in the Ultramar style, running all the way around the top of the Regia Civitatis's extensive arcade. Intimate groupings of couches were dotted about, coloured lanterns and braziers of cheerful coals at their centres to blunt the bite of Macragge's night. There were few people seated near them. Guilliman's attention to detail in all things extended as far as ensuring that light pollution from the city did not drown out the stars, and the sky should have been ablaze with distant suns.

It was not. It glowered a dull red. Only a single star burned beyond the lights of the orbitals and ships at anchor, and that was false – the Pharos, xenos technology illuminating Macragge from afar.

Corvo walked to the balustrade and looked out. There were only a handful of cities so perfect. There were prettier, certainly, and definitely livelier ones. None, however, could match Magna Macragge Civitas's perfect marriage of form and function.

He breathed deeply. The sight of such order gave him pleasure.

'The entire galaxy should have been like this.'

Titus Prayto of the Librarius joined him at the rail. He wore his full plate, his head shadowed by an ornate technological cowl.

'Librarian,' said Corvo.

'Captain.'

'And what is your role in this charade, Prayto? Do you not undo our lord's intentions, alienating the people as you stride about with witchfire in your eyes and your body cased in ceramite?'

'An assassination attempt by the Alpha Legion. Konrad Curze so recently at large, here in the city. The creatures from beyond the veil embraced and welcomed by our kinsmen? Alienation is the least of concerns.'

'You are another watchdog then.' Corvo offered his drink. Prayto took it carefully in his gauntleted hand. His armour whined softly as he lifted it to his lips and drank half of it down. He handed it back.

'Call me that, for that is what I am. My talents and those of the rest of the Librarius help to safeguard our lord and his brothers. There are three of the Emperor's loyal sons here, together. Such a target. The Pharos lights the way for our enemies just as it does for our allies.' They looked up at the Pharos shining in the red sky. 'And what horrors I look for...'

'You will find none in me.'

'I will not?' asked Prayto.

'Surely, you have looked.'

Prayto gave a little laugh. He did not take his eye from the Pharos. 'I have. You are what you say you are, a loyal son of Ultramar. You do not say much, though, and you are hard to read. You are a closed man, Captain Corvo.'

'I find chatter tiresome,' he said. 'I prefer to leave talk to those who enjoy it.'

'You put me in mind of the Lion.'

Corvo shook his head. The Lion is a master of secrets. It is in the nature of the secretive to hold their own thoughts mysterious, yet to demand the revelation of the thoughts of others. I care as much for secrets and revelation as I do for conversation.'

'This gathering is a chore for you, then.'

'It is.'

'Each to his own. Be careful you do not appear too aloof or ungrateful.'

Thank you, centurion,' said Corvo. 'I am always mindful of that. It is the burden of those who share my mindset. Talkers talk, and they do not understand those who do not feel the need to speak. To sidestep their concern, we are forced to perform against our inclination, engaging in pointless discourse, while they prattle on and do not listen to what we have to say anyway.'

The Librarian laughed again, louder this time. 'A joke from you, Corvo?'

'I am not without humour.'

'No, no.' Prayto was silent a space. He pressed his hands onto the balustrade twice. The metal clicked on the stone. 'I will not detain you.'

'Speak what is on your mind. I do not have your gift, but I know you did not follow me out here to talk of man's temperament.'

'I did not,' he agreed. 'I came out because I have a sense of what you intend to do tomorrow. I would give you some advice, if you'd take it.'

Corvo looked out over the city. Warning lights winked on cranes over the Via Decmanus Maximus. There, a new proscenium was being raised. He wondered what kind of victory it was for Ultramar, when more than a hundred worlds had died.

'I am not surprised you sense my intention,' he muttered. 'It is at the forefront of my thoughts. What is this advice you have?'

'I urge you to reconsider.'

'I will not reconsider,' said Corvo. 'Our lord will understand.'

'Of course he will!' Prayto exclaimed. 'But your peers will likely not.'

'My deeds speak for themselves.'

'Our deeds do not always speak the truth for us,' Prayto countered.

Corvo downed his drink and left his glass on the stone rail.

'That is not my concern. Only the truth is true, whether people believe it to be so or not. That is all I care for. Good evening, brother.'

He went back inside.

The coffin ship was hit several times and came down trailing fire, damaged braking thrusters on its port underside guttering. A lance beam slashed down from orbit, missing the craft by a hundred metres and demolishing a tower block. The

shock wave staggered the lander, huge though it was, and it yawed dangerously, functioning jets shooting intense bursts of flame. It struggled upright, drifting out over the Via Longia toward the city centre, where the buildings were densely packed.

It was coming down too fast. Corvo didn't think that it would manage to land intact. True enough, when it hit, it levelled entire civic blocks and sent out a wash of gritty dust that billowed through the dying city's streets.

'Report hard landing of enemy war engine transport.'

'Acknowledged, Sergeant Phillipus,' said Corvo. 'I'm looking right at it.'

The coffin ship's scorched umber bulk reared up over the buildings of Eurythmia, battered but still whole. Lighter enemy landers were following. Streaks of fire crisscrossed the smoking sky, more coming down now than going up. Corvo's interdiction emplacements were being picked off. He tracked the assault crafts' vectors, calculating where they would land.

'Tertiary group, divert to Mnemsyne district, south side. Looks like a major landing. If engaged, hold and await further orders. Do not advance, or they will be coming down on top of you.'

Acknowledgements snapped back at him. The vox was still crisp, but that wouldn't last.

'Squads four, seven and nine with me. Crassus, bring up the Shadowswords. Let's see what we've got here. If there's anything in that coffin ship still alive, let us ensure it does not remain so.'

'Theoretical, captain,' Lieutenant Apelles voxed to him from inside the command tank. 'You are in overall command, you should remain here, with me.'

'Practical,' Corvo responded. 'I want to kill some of these bastards myself.'

No one argued with that.

'Redeploy Apelles, take the remainder of the men with you. Await my order.'

'Yes, sir.'

There was movement in the rubble and shattered buildings. Half of Corvo's total company strength was there. The thumping growl of multi-fuel engines roared up behind. Corvo's Land Raider pulled back, turned and headed away. Several squads of Space Marines followed it. Three super-heavy tanks in cobalt-blue moved forward when it was clear, their tracks grinding rubble to dust and tearing up the road surface.

Corvo's group set out.

The Space Marines scouted ahead, moving fast. Quiet fell for a few minutes, the space between the last weapon-strike and the first real ground assault. It didn't last. More and more craft streaked through the air. Plumes of dust rose where they landed.

'I don't understand this,' said Sergeant Crassus from atop the lead Shadowsword. 'They are not establishing proper beachheads. They're coming down all over the place. Where is their discipline?'

'Same place as their honour,' cracked Brother Ligustinus, squad nine's resident wit.

Corvo was also astounded at the sloppiness of the assault. He followed pict-feeds from the first dropzones – World Eaters rushed from drop pods as soon as they touched down, not waiting for their fellows, while the ragged Army units supporting the traitor legionaries seemed little better than a mob, pouring out of their transports right into loyalist gunfire. For now, this worked to Corvo's advantage. His lieutenants directed XIII Legion response teams and local Army to where the enemy was most numerous.

He had to leave them to it. He had the situation on the ground and in orbit to monitor. And now this possibility of war engines...

Vox traffic increased exponentially, until it chattered incessantly at him: casualty reports, the constant repositioning of his mobile command centres, the status of refugees in their shelters. He dearly wished to mute most of it, sticking to the close-range squad bands, but he had to see it all. His visor was so crowded with tactical information that he was left with only a small, clear space to look ahead. His bodyguards Glabrio and Aratus recognised his distraction, and walked close by him in support as his eyes and ears.

A tangle of wrecked vehicles, burning trees and collapsed city blocks forced Crassus to take the Shadowswords a longer route. After a moment's consideration, Corvo had his men clamber through the ruins, heading right for the Titan lander.

'Sergeant Crassus, find a good firing solution for the Shadowswords. Squad nine, stick with them.'

Voxed assent. Fifteen of his men peeled away, falling back to join the tanks. The Titan-killers rumbled around on the spot and lurched off down a clearer street. Corvo came onto the Via Longia, Astragar City's main avenue. The Mechanicum ship had landed perpendicular to the line of the city grid, its kilometre-long bulk scoring a fresh street through at least five blocks. The prow sat on the pavement of the Longia, atop a fan of shattered stone. Its high, humped back was crooked. Landing on such a surface without control had broken its spine.

The battle was becoming more fierce. A number of feeds went dead.

A moment later, Lieutenant Apelles's voice crackled on the vox. 'I've lost contact with Verulus. Fighting's fierce in the northern deme. He's probably dead.'

'Acknowledged,' said Corvo. 'Assess situation there. Take command of his forces.'

Two command tanks left. Was it good theoretical to abandon the command bunker in favour of mobile targets, he wondered? This tactical situation was unexpected. No pre-existing theoretical told of how to slay one's own legionary kin. He was forced to innovate.

They moved up to the coffin ship cautiously. 'Be advised, Crassus, Apelles, approaching Mechanicum lander. No sign of enemy activity.'

They crept down the Via Longia, right up to the steaming flank of the vessel. After a moment's consideration, Corvo chanced crossing the front with a squad of his men.

The ship leaned ten degrees out of true, its hull battered by atmospheric re-entry and weapons fire. Flames flickered in the buildings and rubble around it. It was quiet there, the crump of explosions and howl of landing jets muted by the high buildings around them.

'Perhaps the war-engines are destroyed,' said Glabrio.

'I doubt it. I saw the same thing happen in the Coralan compliance,' said Aratus to the younger warrior. Glabrio had not been with the Legion as long as he had. 'Ships all smashed to wreckage, and the Titans came out anyway.'

'I don't see any sign that the doors are-'

Corvo held his hand up. His men froze, dropping into cover. 'Hear that?' he said.

A banging sounded from inside.

'Theoretical – the doors are jammed,' said Aratus. 'No Mechanicum support. The only practical for the engines is to batter their way out.'

'Crassus, get ready,' voxed Corvo. 'Are you in position?'

'Via Macraggia is blocked, sir. We're having to push directly through the buildings fronting Platea Lata!

'You are heading for the Agora?'

'Yes, sir. Should get a good line right down the Longia once there!

'Be quick,' said Corvo. 'Do not leave yourself exposed. There is not much cover there.'

'Sir...' said Aratus.

The coffin ship's doors vibrated as something pounded at them from within.

'Fall back,' the captain ordered.

They dropped back squad by squad, retreating down the Via Longia. Away from the crash site the city was dusty, the glass from broken casements slippery underfoot but otherwise oddly untouched. A roar, like that of a trapped animal, rumbled in the guts of the downed transport.

'That's not normal, is it?' asked Glabrio.

Tricks. Psychological warfare,' said Aratus. 'Some of the Titan Legions do it on compliance actions. Growls rather than war-horns. Scares the hell out of the natives.'

'Get back,' said Corvo. 'Crassus, are you getting a good line here? Can you hear it? Something about this is not right.'

The clanging from within grew to manic levels. With a grinding of torn metal, a giant chainfist emerged from the doors. A spray of sparks and red liquid came with it.

Glabrio gasped. 'Is that...?'

The doors were wrenched apart. A torrent of blood poured from the interior of the ship, slopping up the buildings on the opposite side of the street. A wall of red seven metres high bore down the Via Longia in both directions, staining the walls almost to the second storey. Fierce, animalistic howling rent the air.

The Ultramarines ran. Corvo was bowled over by the sheer weight of the flood, his men scattered.

The red wave subsided as quickly as had come. Space Marines were sprawled across the road, all of them coated from head to foot in slippery blood. Corvo wiped at his helmet lenses, his armoured fingers clattering off the conductive crystal. Red smeared his vision.

'Squads! Report!'

'By the Throne!' said Glabrio.

The shattered frame of a Reaver engine tumbled out of the door, its cockpit smashed, limbs lifeless.

And then its killer came.

Whatever the monster was, it was no longer a Titan. Terrible modifications had been inflicted upon it. The cockpit had become a brazen skull. Long horns swept back from its brows over the lower edge of the carapace. It moved with a sinuous grace alien to its machine body. A long, articulated tongue of metal probed the air between sword-long teeth, a tail of similar material curling around its legs. The Warlord, if that was what it still was, crushed its mangled sibling beneath heavy feet as it struggled out onto the street. It wrenched itself free of the broken doors and staggered into the buildings opposite, bringing them down in a cascade of rubble and dust.

'Crassus!' cried Corvo.

'I'm still not in position, sir!'

The Titan's head moved back and forth, for all the world like it was scenting the air. It hit upon something, let out an unearthly, blaring howl from its war-horns, and smashed its way through the ruins, heading west and away from the downed ship.

Corvo, sprawled in the gritty gore of the Titan's afterbirth, watched it go.

'What have those fanatics done?' asked Aratus in disbelief. 'What are we fighting?'

Corvo moved around the function - room to room, hall to hall - as if he were clearing a building in a firefight. Dancing was underway in the ballroom. In others, large tables were piled with food. More Ultramarines were to be found there than in the dance hall, as was to be expected. His brothers knew him by reputation if not in person, and greeted him briefly and respectfully. It was some time yet to the feast

and the arrival of the primarchs. He engaged in polite conversation with the unaltered where it was unavoidable.

'They say you killed a Titan,' they would declare.

'Not I. My men. It was my men. And it was no Titan.'

Many of his interlocutors left disappointed. He would not be drawn further on the event. Let others tell their stories. He had no stomach for boasting.

He caught sight of Captain Ventanus – the Saviour of Calth and Guilliman's new favourite – attentively conversing with some functionary or other, a broad sash across the Space Marine's chest thick with fresh honours. His adjutant, a sergeant by the look of him, was engaged with another group of humans close by. Adoration and laughter rose around him. Corvo wished that he shared their facility for small talk.

He found a server and took both of the jugs of brandy that he was carrying. He consumed them as quickly as decorum allowed, enjoying the faint buzz of mild intoxication for the few minutes before his transhuman metabolism purged it from his body.

'Brother-captain,' said a Space Marine he did not know. The rank marks on his collar marked him out as a sergeant.

'Brother,' said Corvo.

The other legionary held out his hand. 'I am Sergeant Tullian Aquila, 168th Company.'

'Lucretius Corvo, 90th Company.' He grasped Aquila's forearm in a warrior's handshake.

'I know who you are, sir. I just wanted to come and greet you. I was caught in an engine battle at Ithra on Calth. What you did greatly impressed me. Your action on Astagar is the talk of my company, or what's left of it. It would have been good to have you with us. If there were only more of you and Captain Ventanus's kind...'

Corvo held up his hand. 'Please, you embarrass me. We all march for Macragge.'

'We march for Macragge,' Aquila replied automatically.

'If you are here, then you too must have performed well.'

'So they say,' said Aquila.

'You do not seem convinced.'

Aquila looked pained. 'I fought hard enough, but I doubted we would survive. I almost despaired. That is not what the primarch taught us.'

'We all despaired, sergeant. What else could we have done?'

Aquila shrugged. 'But tomorrow, I will be honoured for my doubt as much as my achievement. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth.'

'If Lord Guilliman has chosen you for honour, then be assured – you are deserving,' said Corvo.

'Perhaps. But the doubt came first.'

'Without doubt, how can we construct a foolproof theoretical? Without doubt there is only arrogance.'

Aquila was mollified by this. Tell me sir, did you ever doubt?'

Corvo gave stared back, stony-faced. 'In truth? No. Not for a second.'

The mark was a little over six days. Facing stiff resistance from Corvo's forces, the traitors had laid siege to the city. Why they had not ended it with a single, decisive orbital strike was a matter for conjecture, but still they did not. Instead, probing assaults searched for the Ultramarines' weaknesses. They displayed none.

Corvo's subordinate officers gathered around the table of an empty bunker. Dust sifted down from the ceiling with each artillery hit above, covering everything in a grey shroud. Cogitators were choked with it, hololiths sparked and would not cast their images properly. The Space Marines were forced to rely on paper maps.

'Theoreticals? Anyone?' asked Corvo. 'We have no engine support, and our heavy armour can't catch it.'

'It is wary of the Shadowswords,' said Apelles.

'And well it might be,' snorted Aratus.

'They will soon be occupied elsewhere,' said Lieutenant Sextus. He spoke to them via vox, since Corvo would not gather all of his command assets into one place. 'There are signs of an imminent enemy armour attack. Since Verulus fell, they've been bringing their heavy landers in unopposed. They are mustering to end the siege and crush us.'

'I do not understand why they did not wait to land this engine until then,' said Apelles. 'Why send it in first? It is vulnerable.'

'Is it now?' said Corvo softly. 'It moves faster than any war-engine I've ever seen. And it seems... indiscriminate in its slaughter. The enemy, my brothers, are not playing by the rules.'

Their muted laughter was cut short by a particularly loud detonation on the surface. Debris pattered on the table. Eyes flicked upwards to stuttering lumen strips.

'If we can't get the Shadowswords into range, how do we kill this damned Titan?' asked Corvo.

'It is hardly a Titan,' Sergeant Domitian muttered. 'Not anymore.'

'Whatever they have done to it,' said Glabrio, 'it behaves more like a beast than a machine.'

'He is right,' said Aratus. 'Perhaps we should divert our efforts to tackling the Seventeenth Legion. Let's take our chances that the beast is too stupid to act in concert with them. Kill them first, bring it down later when it is alone and vulnerable.'

'What did you say?' asked Corvo.

Aratus was taken aback. 'I meant no...'

'No, no, about hunting.'

'He said it's like a beast, sir,' said Glabrio.

Corvo nodded. He brushed grit from the map. 'We need to fell this Titan. It is a focal point for their forces - not tactically, but emotionally. It is a kind of idol, I think, to those Seventeenth Legion fanatics. I am certain we can lure a portion of their forces into the city to save it, should it come under threat. Once they are inside we shall destroy them. As to the Titan's destruction, we are plotting practicals from the wrong theoretical position. This is not a machine, Aratus has that right. Not like any we have faced before.

But we have fought beasts. And if it is a beast, then so shall we trap it like one.'

His finger creased the map at Konor's Forum.

'FELGHAAAAAAAAAASSSST!'

The pretence of its war-horns had been cast aside. The Titan had a voice. Diabolic, but a voice nonetheless - a deafening whisper, the rush of stale air from an opened tomb. The name it uttered was not the one on the Titan's identification plaques.

'Now,' Corvo ordered.

He watched his Rhino's vid-screens as Astagaran troopers broke cover and fled before the beast. Each sprinted eighty metres or so before diving out of sight; troopers further ahead taking up the flight. The Titan's head swung round, attracted by the movement.

'Go, go, go!' ordered Corvo. 'It has the bait!'

'FELGHAAAAAAAAAASSSST!'

The corrupted Titan levelled its giant las-blasters at the fleeing troopers. Deafening thunderclaps rolled out as focused light cleaved the sky. Repeated shockwaves of

superheated air blew out windows and flipped the wrecks of groundcars onto their sides. A handful of men were caught and incinerated. Others were thrown aside, organs pulverised by overpressure.

'Come on! Come on!' said Domitian, stationed in the forum some four kilometres down the road.

'It will come,' said Corvo. 'Patience.'

A half company of the XVII and a selection of mismatched armour followed the thing. The droning chants of the traitors set Corvo's teeth on edge. The sound was pervasive, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

But their fanaticism had made them predictable. Half of them broke off to engage the Shadowsword detachment. This time, Corvo had the tanks remain in place. The enemy would find themselves walking into an ambush.

His plan was working. Eager on the hunt, Felghast broke into a run, outpacing its supporting armour and infantry.

'Sir, it's moving too fast for the men.'

'All troopers, stand down!' voxed Corvo. 'Fall back to muster points! Stand by to engage supporting ground forces. Strikeforce Alpha, prepare to assault siege lines at quadrant three.' He turned to his driver. 'Ready, Crassus?'

'Ready, sir.'

Corvo watched as the Titan pounded down the street. A thousand metres, seven hundred...

'Now!' he roared.

Crassus slammed the Rhino out of its hiding place in a demolished shop front, cracked columns bouncing off the tank's glacis as it careened onto the street. Corvo went out through the gunner's hatch and aimed the Rhino's searchlight at the creature's face.

'FELGHAAAAAAAAASSST!'

The Titan let off a rattle of inaccurate fire, smashing buildings into ruin.

'We have its attention, sergeant!'

Crassus was the finest armour specialist under Corvo's command. He was a master of all aspects of tank warfare, but he was also a particularly gifted driver. He accelerated the carrier to maximum speed.

Ultramar streets ran long and straight, but slumped buildings had narrowed the Via Palatine. Wrecked civilian vehicles cluttered what space remained. Corvo was slammed into the hatch rim as the Rhino burst through the shell of a burnt-out tram. Colonnades crashed down as Felghast spat fury all about them.

The fog curled in vortices around the pursuing Titan. It was gaining.

A missile hammered into the road. The Rhino slewed along the blast front as Crassus fought for control.

Konor's Forum lay ahead, a large market square paved in marble now thick with dust. Great idealised statues of the long-dead Battle King stood at each corner.

Ramps led down underneath, where the streets intersected the square. If Felghast had been behaving to tactical norms, it would never have ventured into the forum.

But Felghast was not operating to tactical norms.

A spear of light slashed into the Rhino as it entered the square, sending it spinning across the pavement. It crashed to a halt in one of the arcades running around the edge.

The Titan roared and then slowed, approaching its prey.

Corvo cursed. He dropped back inside the tank. Fire licked out of the driver's cabin. Crassus was clutching at his neck and moaning.

'Release your belt!' said Corvo. 'Squad seventeen, lure it in. Lure it in!'

Corvo kicked the side door open and pulled Crassus free. Felghast looked down at them, looming out of the fog like a monster of legend. Old gods help him, if Corvo didn't actually see the metal nose snuffling.

A beam of ruby las-light connected with the Titan's void shields, sending up an oily flare. The beast swung around to find its source, already firing.

Corvo dragged Crassus into the lee of a toppled column.

The giant foot of Felghast moved over the square, throwing it into shadow.

'Now,' voxed Corvo.

Explosive plumes ripped up the sides of the plaza. A rain of shattered ferrocrete pinged off his armour. He held his head down, shielding Brother Crassus. His body shook as a large piece of stone clanged off his armoured backpack. Warning indicators on his visor display climbed to critical, alarms sounded in his ears, but he blink-dicked them to silence. His power plant was compromised. Coolant jetted from the cracked left exhaust, and the bars indicating its level dropped dangerously low.

The rain of debris stopped. Corvo raised his head.

Felghast's uncanny war-horns blared in alarmed tandem with its voice. Machinery squealed as its torso twisted, trying to arrest its progress. Walking was little more than controlled falling – now that there was nothing solid to place its foot upon, Felghast fell uncontrollably.

The stacked layers of the subterranean spaces beneath Konor's Forum were open to the air, and the Titan's foot plunged into the hole. It roared in anger, its awful brazen jaws clacking. Weapons discharged furiously, pulverising the grand Administratum buildings around the ruined square.

Slowly, it toppled.

Corvo watched tensely.

The metallic tail of the Titan lashed backwards and forwards, sweeping up a storm of rubble as it raked the ground. With a whip-crack, the thin end of it wrapped itself around the pediment of the statue of King Konor closest to Corvo. The whole structure held, though it shifted at this new load.

Felghast hung over the precipice, and then it began to haul itself back upright. A daemonic laugh rumbled out from its engines.

'Stay here!' Corvo ordered Crassus. He mag-locked his bolter to his hip. 'Heavy support squad Calorem, hold. Stand ready to execute. Anyone else, with me!'

Space Marines came running from cover. To their rear, up the Via Palatine, gunfire rattled. The supporting units of Felghast were nearing, fighting running battles with the loyalist forces set to catch them.

'To the statue! To the statue!' Corvo roared.

He sprinted, his body and armour working as one to propel him at speeds that his bulk would suggest impossible. He charged at the pediment without slowing, slamming into it. The impact made his visor display fizz. Alarms sounded again as his suit's ruptured coolant system struggled to keep the temperature of his labouring power armour down. He ignored it, trusting to his superhuman metabolism to save him from heat exhaustion.

'With me, brothers!'

Others crashed into the statue. They pushed at it, grunting in effort, armoured boots skidding on the rubble at the square's edge. Brother Vestorious drew his gladius, leapt up, hooked his arm around the tail and hacked at the ribbed flesh-metal as he hung there. Molten metal spurted from the wound and splashed on his visor, but he did not stop.

'Heave!' cried Corvo. 'Heave!'

More Ultramarines hammered into the statue, but there was no space for anyone else. The newcomers pushed against their fellows' backs or dropped broken slabs underfoot, giving purchase to sliding feet on the treacherous ground.

'Heave!'

Small arms fire came in, pinging off their battleplate, followed by the deranged howls of the XVII's supporting Army units. Bolter fire barked in return as Corvo's rearguard squads moved up to engage from neighbouring streets. Popping bangs rattled around the dusty fog as mass reactive projectiles detonated. The intensity of the firestorm suggested a larger force of traitors than he had anticipated.

'Heave!' shouted Corvo.

The statue jolted, spilling Space Marines onto the ground. 'It's going! It's going!' shouted someone at the back of the group.

Corvo's vox was a torrent of feeds coming at him from all quarters. He had no effort to spare for their ordering.

'Heave!'

The defiled Titan was still trying to drag itself upright, its foot pawing at the air, seeking solid ground. They did not have much time. His men brought up a girder, and rammed it into the widening gap, levering the pediment upwards.

'Heave, brothers!' yelled Corvo. 'Heave!'

The statue lurched. With the sound of grinding stone, the pedestal came free of its foundations and toppled over. King Konor slid from his perch and shattered upon the flagstones.

Felghast gave out a withering howl as it fell. Its void shields breached themselves on the jagged lip of the pit, bursting in a storm of lightning that ran sparks over the Ultramarines power armour. It crashed down through the open sub-layers, bringing its armoured torso to ground level and jamming its weapon arms wide.

The Titan was down. One leg was splayed behind it, wrenched at an awkward angle, the other buried hip-deep in the hole. Machinery protested violently as it tried to drag itself up, but it could not. Its tail cracked back and forth in anger, catching three Space Marines and sending them crashing into the ruins.

'The tail! Get clear of the tail. Stand ready to repel ground forces.'

Shapes were coming up through the dust. Enemy armour. Corvo dismissed them – in the choked avenue they posed little threat. Poor theoretical, worse practical and XVII Legion idiocy as they raced to save their downed idol. In confirmation, a loud whoosh and clang heralded a rocket going into the side of one of the enemy tanks. It stopped dead, hatches blown, further blocking ingress to the forum.

There were other shapes in the mist. Power armoured. Legionaries. These did cause him concern. Still, if they were in the city, then they were not outside it, waiting them out. Corvo's plan was working. He had drawn the enemy in.

'Calorem, execute! Execute, now, now, now!'

At the other end of the downed daemon-machine, the heavy support squad advanced out from the shelter of a courtyard. Armourglass eyes caged by sloped brass brows stared hatred at the Space Marines as they approached the Titan's head. Carapace guns swivelled hopelessly. Its jaw clacked on the ground, seeking to bite. Heavy melta cannons were arrayed by the Space Marines, five of them, and set to maximum power.

The roar of the fusion weaponry was audible on Corvo's side of the square.

The Titan screamed. They fired again.

That is not the cry of a machine,' said one of his men.

The scream trailed off. Felghast writhed in its pit, the crashing of its death throes drowning out the sound of battle.

Corvo blink-clicked his way into Squad Calorem's helmet feeds. He saw a cooling puddle of molten brass where the Titan's head had been.

There was no sign of a princeps or moderati within what remained, nor any indication of a cockpit cavity - only a fibrous, organic mess shot through with bands of distorted metal. He clicked off.

'Good work,' he said, drawing his gladius. 'Move up to square east side. Prepare to engage Seventeenth Legion elements. Strikeforce Alpha, commence assault. We march for Macragge!'

'Captain Lucretius Corvo! Ninetieth Company, Ninth Chapter. Step forward!'

Corvo approached the dais. Corvo knew no fear, but this convocation of demigods gave him pause. Sanguinius's glorious visage in particular was hard to look at up close.

He came to the end of the carpet, to the top of the steps, and knelt before his lord.

'Look at me, captain.'

Corvo forced his eyes upwards.

Lord Guilliman looked upon him benevolently, as proud a father as ever there was.

'For you, my son, there is great honour.'

He held out a hand. A man came forward, bearing upon a velvet cushion a laurel wreath, so cunningly wrought from metal that it looked as though it were fashioned from fresh-cut leaves.

'The Laurel of Defiance!' called out Guilliman. He held up the award for all the world to see. 'One of our Legion's highest honours. For the Titan killer, for the saviour of Astagar, for Captain Lucretius Corvo!'

Corvo bent his head. The primarch placed the wreath. It clicked as it mag-locked itself around Corvo's helm.

The honour was my men's, not mine alone, lord,' said Corvo.

You led them well, captain. By honouring you, we honour them all.'

An expectant air formed. An uncomfortable silence followed.

The Lion spoke. 'Are you not forgetting something, captain?'

'Am I, my lord?' said Corvo.

'All others honoured here today have renewed their oaths to your Legion, and to the Imperium. Will you not do the same?'

'No, my lord.'

There was a sound akin to a soft wind, the sound of a world gasping.

The Lion's face hardened. Sanguinius looked to his brothers.

'Are you a traitor, then?' asked the Lion.

Corvo drew his gladius. The Space Marines on the dais brought their weapons up, but Guilliman stayed them with a hand. Corvo held the sword high above his head, blade flat upon his palms.

'I do not renew my oath, my lords, for the oaths of an Ultramarine are forever binding. I am not like my traitor kin to renounce their solemn promises. I have sworn already to serve the Imperium, the Emperor, the Legion and all of mankind, and through those oaths my lords have my sword until death takes me. You ask me to renew that which needs no renewal, for the oaths of an Ultramarine are eternal. To speak them again implies a weakness inherent to them. And there is no weakness. Not in my arm, nor in my mind, nor in my word. I am an Ultramarine. I march for Macragge and the Emperor for evermore, as I have pledged. I need not do so again.'

A slow, gauntleted clapping broke the silence.

Guilliman. Guilliman himself applauded his words. 'Well said, my son, well said!'

'Insolence, brother,' muttered the Lion.

'Honour,' Guilliman corrected him. 'Captain Corvo, put away your sword.'

Corvo did. His primarch's hand fell on his shoulder.

'Stand, my son. Stand and face your brothers.'

Corvo turned, and saw the Legions arrayed in the square as the primarchs did. Behind the expressionless visors of his brothers, he knew that some faces would show displeasure. Prayto had been right. He did not care.

'Do you hear his words, warriors of the Thirteenth?' said Guilliman.

'Listen, for he speaks the truth. The honour of our Legion is unimpeachable! We march for Macragge!'

The response rumbled out from the square, heavy as thunder.

'Return to your brothers, Lucretius.'

'Wait!' said the Lion.

Corvo paused.

Tell me, I understand it the custom in the Thirteenth to allow captains to modify their heraldry, but yours is a bold departure. Might I ask why?' asked the primarch.

At this, an image flickered through Corvo's mind. The eidetic memory of the Legiones Astartes was a great gift, but carried a high price. It made all recollections that came before its bestowing pale and unreal in comparison. Another irony in a life of ironies, that every image of death seen by his transhuman eyes remained sharp, that every privation could be recalled and felt anew in painful clarity. He fought for humanity, while his own youthful experience of being human was reduced to sun-bleached flashes, opaque moments of dreamlike quality that could not be trusted.

He treasured them all the same.

This was what he remembered.

The forecourt of his father's house one hundred and twenty years ago. Bone-white flags snapped in the breeze bearing the badge of the Corvo line - a hollow, spiked circle. A stylised sunburst.

His father was the last to fly that flag. There were no male heirs beyond Lucretius.

Natural memory was imprecise but in its looseness was found the miracle of evocation, and it was far more emotive than the cold exactness of his Legion-gifted mind. Lucretius again felt his hair stir, he felt the goosebumps rise on his bare arms. Autumn was chill that year, and already the wind had turned to come down from the mountains. There was something invested in this recollection, so deep and fundamental to who he was as a human being, not as a Space Marine. Something that he had almost forgotten how to feel, and struggled daily not to forget.

His father knelt before him, the proud scion of an old and powerful house. Corvo had never seen him kneel before. Not even in the old pict from when Sulustro was taken back into the fold of the Five Hundred Worlds.

'My son, Lucretius,' he had said. 'You go from us, and for this I grieve.' He grasped his son's shoulders. His voice was unsteady. I am proud of you. The Corvo name will die with you, and still I am proud.'

Corvo could not speak. What could he say? How could he be strong for the Emperor if his father – the strongest man he knew – was not?

Corvo's father searched his eyes for a glimpse of the man he would never know. They stayed like this, his father's hands warm on his shoulders, the wind cold on his skin.

He embraced his son and stood. 'Go now, Lucretius. Be proud of what you are to become, but never forget who you are or what you were!'

'I swear, father,' said Lucretius. 'I swear I will not forget!'

His father smiled. Corvo had never seen a sadder sight, before or since.

The memory faded. He was with a different father now.

It was hard to hold the Lion's eye. Perilous, even. But Corvo did.

The Lion glanced at Sanguinius. They seemed amused.

'Well, captain?' said the Lion. 'What is the significance of your colours? Would you care to explain?'

'It is simple, my lord.'

'Yes?'

'I made a promise,' said Corvo. He bowed from the waist.

They were calling out the name of the next hero as he walked away.