

THE NO-FAEAR CYCLE

BOOK ONE

ORDINANCE

PENDING

Metaurus · Titus · the ridge before the lance

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ARJUNA BADGER PRESS



Ordinance Pending

The No-Fear Cycle · Book One

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Dedication

For **Daniel** — who has been there so consistently when needed that I make the unconscious mistake of just accepting he will be there when needed, like he was manifested.

You have all the books — the games, the fiction, the lore. You're the real fan; this one is for you. I know almost nothing about Warhammer, apart from what you've shown me and what it took to build a demo. The actual series and spin-off novels will be yours.

— Andries J. Greyling

Foreword

Note: This foreword is **original Arjuna Badger Press prose** in homage to Syama Pedersen's public craft philosophy (*Astartes*, *Secret Level* layout contribution). It is not an authorised statement from Games Workshop or Mr Pedersen. The setting remains GW IP; this is fan work.

I did not expect to read a novel.

For years the work lived in frames—eighteen minutes on a streaming service, thirteen on a channel, the space between footfalls and bolter discharge where language fails and the body carries everything. Animation can cut away. Prose cannot. Prose must stay in the helmet.

These pages stay.

I contributed layout to the episode you know. I care when bolt stabilisers freeze in time-stop, when tilting shields are scavenged from wreckage, when corrupted fuel dies wrong and the melta-secondary goes blue. This manuscript notices that as physics. The Omnissiah would not approve of that tank's machine spirit. Neither does the paragraph. Good.

If you came for Ultramarines winning the galaxy, you are in the wrong cathedral.

Read it aloud in the quiet passages. See if your mouth wants to speak when the characters do not. If the silence holds, the prose has

earned respect.

The Emperor protects. The authors did the harder work.

— S. P.

(in homage; fan work)

Prologue

ATMOSPHERIC SEAL INTEGRITY: COMPROMISED

The lie came first.

A scrap of parchment spun down out of nothing and landed on his gorget as if the galaxy had coughed up someone else's deceit and chosen his throat to land on. Metaurus stepped on the scrap before the ink could set. He let the lie lie.

LARRAMAN'S ORGAN: CRITICAL FAILURE
BELISARIAN FURNACE: UNRESPONSIVE
OOLITIC KIDNEY: INACTIVE
SUS-AN MEMBRANE: PRIMED

Four lines. Four doors closing. The fifth door was the boy.

Titus stood at the ridgeline with las-residue cooling on his gauntlet. The lieutenant's vox crackled with numbers. Orbit was listening again. The Warp's choke on their targeters had weakened when the idol died wrong, and the machine spirits of the sky remembered how to be obedient.

Metaurus watched the coordinates climb his retinal display like a rosary.

CONFIRM STRIKE GRID: ZSAH'UJ NODE VI-APOSTATE RELIC-
PURGE AUTHORISED
SECONDARY GRID: VOG NODE I-PROVISIONAL-AWAITING GROUND TRUTH

He did not remember authorising a second grid. He remembered blood in his gauntlet where the vision had stabbed him—Titus corrupted, Titus grinning with bird eyes—and the shame of believing it for even one heartbeat. The sorcerer's last cruelty. It had worked. That was the point of cruelty.

The cultists were coming up the slope in a wave without formation. Bird cries in human throats. Mutation as gift. Metaurus had seen their tank die—primary blast, then the melta-secondary blue when the reactor's abused spirit finally refused the Omnissiah's order. Titus had dropped the grenade like a man dropping a habit.

The sarcophagus lay open behind them. The astropath was gone—and the Geller-analogue field generator ticked down its last seconds of ghost hum in Metaurus's audioreceptors. Without the box, the thin veil would start peeling them again. Without the box, lies would condense out of sparks. Without the box, the second coordinate would not hold long enough to mean anything.

Titus had dragged Metaurus out of the vision-rubble anyway.

SKULL ICON: BROTHER KALLAN—KIA

SKULL ICON: BROTHER VORR—KIA

SKULL ICON: BROTHER SETH—KIA

He sees a boy where I see a weapon. He sees a boy where the enemy saw a weapon and broke their teeth on him. Emperor, if I sleep—let him remain what she could not find.

The first orbital lance hit the dead shrine like a verdict.

Light without warmth. Stone becoming memory. The Lord of Change idol—greater daemon frozen in monument—went first because orbit loved symbolism almost as much as the Ecclesiarchy. The shockwave passed through Metaurus's compromised seal and he felt it in his lungs—multi-lung compromise with gravity, not entirely his anymore. He did not fall. Sus-an would take the choice when the membrane demanded it.

The second signal was voice—layered, *Honour's Edge* when the Novahistorium council split the work into channels Marines were trained to hear as one god:

Judge, ordnance authorisation—Mark Sheppard's distant register, or whatever name the ship gave that stratum in the catechism of command:

"Ground truth logged. Node One provisional lock. Primary holder shall maintain position until confirmation receipt is logged. Hold the line, Sergeant."

Under it, softer, Mother—life sign, medicae, the channel that had been screaming at him for ten minutes without mercy:

"Sus-an imminent. Atmospheric seal compromised. Recommend immediate extraction or holder transfer."

Metaurus heard the Imperium asking a dying man to hold as if holding were a skill he lacked. He had held Titus on a battlefield. He had held a squad together across three thin-veil deployments. He was holding his organs inside his body with will alone, and will was not on the HUD.

Titus turned from the ridgeline. Faceplate blank. Steady.

"Old man."

Metaurus nodded once because speech cost blood he could not spare.

"They're still coming," Titus said.

"Yes."

"Orbital can fire again. They won't. Not until the coordinate sticks."

"Yes."

"I can hold."

Metaurus looked at the skull icons. At the open sarcophagus. At the parchment lie on his armour that wasn't his lie. At the coordinate

orbit had already spent.

He sees a boy, Metaurus thought. The enemy saw a child and called it weakness. Orbit sees a weapon and calls it Lieutenant. I see—

He saw the sus-an line pulse.

SUS-AN MEMBRANE: IMMINENT

The cultists crested the ridge.

Metaurus raised his bolt pistol. The action was familiar even when the body was not. Titus stepped forward into the gap between the sergeant and the cultists cresting the ridge. Rain found the seam where his gorget met pauldron—cold, then gone, then cold again.

Above them, the sky kept counting.

Below them, the dead shrine burned.

begin.

Wolf spoke once—threat perimeter, a channel that almost never bothered with syntax:

“Contact. Ridge. Mass.”

Metaurus fired once.

Then silence took the world again: gunfire, breath, HUD, nothing more.

The ridge smelled of wet cordite where rain found strike glass.

The Ridge Holds

The first cultist died without learning his name.

Titus put two bolts through the ribcage—upper group, lower group, the split the Codex liked because it turned men into geometry—and moved on before the casings finished ringing on stone. His auto-senses tracked seventeen hostiles on the slope, more in the dust beyond, heat signatures blurred where the thin veil still hiccupped lies into the auspex. He tracked hostiles on the ground—how the stone vibrated under boots, how bird-call war cries layered wrong on human vocal cords, how Metaurus's breath rasped behind him through a cracked seal.

The sergeant was still upright. That was all that mattered for the next minute.

Titus fired again. A woman with eyes that had forgotten how to be human—pupils slit, sclera gold—came apart in a way the Bolter was designed to make final—the Emperor's work, done quickly.

Hold the line, orbit had said. As if lines were abstract. As if the coordinate now burning in his HUD were not tied to Metaurus's leaking life.

VOG NODE I: PROVISIONAL LOCK-00:04:12 REMAINING
ATMOSPHERIC EVENT: STRIKE RESIDUE-THERMAL NOISE ELEVATED
BROTHER STATUS: SERGEANT METAURUS-CRITICAL

Four minutes. The number was cleaner than fear would have been,

if he had any.

A cultist with a scavenged las-lock fired from the wreckage of their own tank—the same wreckage whose tilting shield Metaurus had lifted against the Russ's first salvo, metal that had been sacred once and was now just **thick enough**. He thought about angle. He dropped one knee, absorbed the las-burst on his shoulder pauldron where the paint was already scarred from Zsah'uj's long day, and returned fire through the wreck's viewport. Glass and scream. The machine spirit of the tank was finally silent. Good.

Metaurus fired beside him—slower, the bolt pistol's cycle wrong because the hand guiding it was wrong. Belisarian Furnace unresponsive meant combat stims were a memory. Larraman critical meant every shot cost something that would not be repaid here. Metaurus's breath rasped behind him—foam at the edge of the vox grille.

"Left flank," Metaurus said.

Titus pivoted.

Three cultists had found the sarcophagus—the open box, the dead astropath's cables still sparking—and were touching it like pilgrims. They thought it was holy. The generator housing was a timer now.

He crossed the distance in four strides that the armour made look like two. The knife came out because the distance was knife distance and because the knife had always been his, even when the Chapter had given him a chainblade and a bolt pistol and a name that meant *soldier of the Emperor*. He had learned kill patterns with this blade before he learned litany.

First throat. Second under the arm where armour was cloth. Third—the youngest, no older than hive scum in the face before mutation—took the point through the sternum and looked surprised, as if death were a lie the Library had not catalogued yet.

Titus cleaned the blade on the youngest's robe and sheathed it.

"Touch the box again," he said, "and I will burn you from orbit per-

sonally.”

None of them would understand the joke. There was no joke. Orbit burned people. He would hold the coordinate until it did or until four minutes became zero.

Metaurus reached the sarcophagus a step later and placed one gauntlet on the generator housing—a blessing or a stabilisation, Titus could not tell which. The sergeant’s HUD reflected in his faceplate for a microsecond:

SUS-AN MEMBRANE: IMMINENT

“Not yet,” Titus said.

It was the most he had spoken all day.

Metaurus’s helm turned toward him. The voice that came out was not the briefing voice, not the armouring- chamber voice with Guilliman’s statue watching from the wall. This was private.

“You should fall back to the pod ring.”

“No.”

“Titus.”

“I held the tank when you told me not to.” He said it without defence. Fact. “I hold this now.”

A beat—bird cry on the ridge, las-fire somewhere downslope, the distant hush of strike residue cooling in the shrine pit. Metaurus looked at him the way he had on the red field when he found a boy among the dead and took the knife without ceremony.

“You were never the problem,” Metaurus said.

Titus nodded because words were for men who had time, and he did not.

The next wave hit the ridge like weather.

They fought in silence after that—bolter reports, footfalls, the clack

of a magazine change, Metaurus's breathing getting thinner. No speeches. No Emperor's name shouted for courage.

Titus counted in HUD instead of prayer.

A cultist with a chain axe got inside his guard—mistake, brief, fatal for the cultist. Titus headbutted through the faceplate, felt the crunch transmit through his neck, fired into the soft joint at the shoulder where armour became meat. The chain axe spun away. Downslope stayed empty behind him.

Metaurus went down on one knee at the sarcophagus.

If the skull icon had screamed red, Titus would have felt it like a wire cut. It stayed grey. Sus-an was finally winning the argument with Belisarian and Larraman and whatever was left of the man.

Titus reached him in three strides. Grabbed the gorget. Hauled him upright enough to fire over the sergeant's shoulder at a bird-voiced heretic trying to flanking-charge the box.

"Stay," he said.

Metaurus's bolt pistol rose anyway. Two shots. Centre mass. Economical.

"Impertinent," the sergeant murmured.

Titus did not smile.

Orbit spoke again never loud, the battle-council choosing which stratum needed a mouth:

Judge:

"Primary holder confirmation required. Sergeant Metaurus life signs below operational threshold. Ground truth telemetry wavering. Lieutenant shall confirm receipt of holder transfer per interlock doctrine."

Metaurus's sus-an was taking him. Titus had the box.

Titus looked at the open sarcophagus. At the dead astropath's empty restraints. At the generator that hummed like a dying hymn.

Metaurus's gauntlet found the override stud on the sarcophagus housing—**manual authorisation**, the thing cogitators could not do for you, the Fool's move in a chorus of machines. His voice was barely air.

"Take the keys, boy. Wolf channel. You—not me. Now."

Parchment spun out of the air near his boot—fresh, wet ink, words in a script that was not his and did not need to.

Titus stepped on the parchment and crushed it into mud.

"I confirm," he said.

One sentence for Judge. One sentence for the record.

The HUD flashed:

INTERLOCK: JUDGE-DECLINING (HOLDER CRITICAL)

FOOL OVERRIDE: SERGEANT METAURUS-MANUAL

WOLF CHANNEL: PRIMARY HOLDER-LT. DEMETRIAN TITUS

VOG NODE I: LOCK CONFIRMED

STRIKE AUTHORISATION: STANDING BY

Wolf:

"Keys. Take. Hold."

Metaurus sagged against him, the sus-an line pulsing like a second heartbeat taking over the first.

"Good," the sergeant whispered. "Now—"

The cultists came over the ridge in a final push, dozens, sloppy, desperate—shrine ash, sorcerer meat, noise only.

Titus stood between them and the box.

He braced Metaurus against his shoulder, knife on his thigh, four minutes become forever.

He raised his bolt pistol.

“For the coordinate,” he said, mostly to himself.

After the Push

The cultists came in a mass that had forgotten how to be an army.

Titus fired into the centre because centre mass was what remained when mutation erased anatomy. Bolt propellant ignited in the chamber; stabiliser spun; the round left the muzzle at the speed the Codex promised and crossed the distance before the first heretic finished his bird-cry. The upper group detonated in the chest. The lower group detonated in the gut. He did not watch them fall. He tracked the next signature.

Metaurus sagged against his shoulder—dead weight, grey skull icon, sus-an line pulsing. The sergeant's bolt pistol hung from a tether, barrel still smoking. His breathing had gone from expensive to absent.

MOTHER:

SUS-AN MEMBRANE: ENGAGING-00:00:47

BROTHER STATUS: SERGEANT METAURUS-CRITICAL / HIBERNATION IMMINENT

VOG NODE I: LOCK HELD-PRIMARY HOLDER: LT. TITUS

Forty-seven seconds until the long sleep took him entirely. Titus had forty-seven seconds of shoulder weight and a ridge full of heretics who thought the box was still holy.

He fired left. Fired right. A cultist with a scavenged chainsword got three strides before the knife found the armpit gap where armour was wishful thinking. The blade came out red and went back to its sheath without ceremony. Ceremony second.

Perimeter vectors painted east slope—twelve hostiles closing on the flank.

Titus dragged Metaurus backward one step—two—until the sergeant's greaves caught on the sarcophagus lip. The open box waited like a mouth. The dead astropath's restraints still held the ghost of a shape. The generator hummed wrong but negotiating.

"Inside," Titus said.

Metaurus did not answer. Sus-an had already begun its work: the body cooling, the organs yielding decision to membrane and machine. Titus hooked his arms under the sergeant's pauldrons and lifted—the weight of a Space Marine in full war plate—and fed him into the sarcophagus feet-first.

The cultists hit the lip of the ridge.

Titus turned with the bolt pistol raised and the box at his back. Titus stood where the astropath had stood.

Behind him, through the sarcophagus status strip, Metaurus's sus-an pulse slowed—one beat, pause, one beat—the rhythm of a man leaving the battlefield by the only door his body still owned. Titus kept the bolt pistol on the lip.

A heretic with bird-gold eyes lunged for the generator housing. Titus shot him in the knee first—then in the head when he fell. Two bolts. Two casings ringing on stone. The sound was the only prayer he knew how to offer.

Parchment spun out of the air near his boot—wet ink, fresh lie, words in a tongue that hurt to peripherally see. He stepped on it and kept firing.

Grey skull. He checked Castell's icon and moved on.

They came in a wave—all at once, sloppy, desperate. Las-lock fire painted his pauldron cerulean. A rusted autogun stitched sparks off the sarcophagus ceramite—wrong target. Titus killed the autogunner

with a bolt through the throat because throats were easier than explaining theology to dead men.

The knife again. Close work. A woman with feathers growing from her cheeks tried to touch his faceplate as if blessing him. He broke her arm at the elbow, pivoted, drove the point up under the jaw. She stopped being a problem.

Lock integrity nominal on the HUD. He held.

Midway through the push his HUD flashed ammunition warning—bolt pistol, eighteen rounds remaining.

A vox burst cut through bird-cries—Brother Castell, downslope, voice thick with aspirator foam.

“Lieutenant—knee breached. Seal failing. Requesting extract to ridge line.”

Titus did not look downslope. Looking was angle lost.

“Can you move?”

“Negative on full plate. Crawl possible. Forty seconds before bleed-out on the HUD Mother gave me.”

Forty seconds. Metaurus in the box behind him. The geometry did not balance.

MOTHER:

Brother Castell—triage window closing. Recommend holder maintain l

WOLF VECTOR: Maintain locus.

First command friction: the channels disagreed, and Titus was the body they both spoke through. He had never held primary before Zsah’uj. He had held a fire team on the ridge push and a grenade slot in the tank wreck and the lip of a sarcophagus while a sergeant slept. He had not held a man’s life against a coordinate.

“Castell. Bearing zero-nine-zero from my position. Crawl to sarcophagus shadow. I will cover.”

"Copy. Moving."

Titus fired left at the downslope mass. Fired right at a cultist testing the generator housing.

Castell appeared at the edge of vision, dragging his left leg, las-burn across the knee joint venting steam where seal foam had failed. He left a smear on the stone Titus would not look at directly.

"Inside the shadow line. Now."

Castell collapsed against the sarcophagus ceramite below the latch, breath ragged. Titus kept the bolt pistol on the hip and reached back with his free hand, tore a seal patch from his belt kit, slapped it across Castell's knee vent without precision—good enough, not good, the kind of field work apothecaries cited in reprimands.

Castell's gauntlet found the latch housing and held it—not to open, just to steady himself. His fingers left three red prints on the ceramite where Larraman had worked through the glove weave. Titus saw them and did not wipe them off. Apothecarium would photograph worse.

"You have water in the belt kit?" Castell asked. Not a request for doctrine. Throat dry.

Titus broke a ration tube with his thumb, passed it back without turning. Castell drank half, stopped, capped the tube, tucked it against his chest plate where a Marine kept things that were not ammunition. *"For later,"* Castell said, breath catching on each word. *"My sister kept ration tubes in the clinic fridge at Macragge sector nine. She said wounded men always think there will be a later even when the seal says otherwise. I think she was right and I hate that I am proving it on your ridge."*

"Stay down," Titus said.

"I am down and I cannot stand and I am scared of the dark between the wreck and your shadow line," Castell said, each phrase a full sentence he could not stop once he started. *"The wreck downslope looks closer from here than your bearing says. I trust your bearing anyway"*

because I have nothing else to trust and that is a stupid reason but it is mine."

Titus filed the sister. Filed Macragge. Filed the clinic. None of it changed the lip geometry. He fired at the downslope mass.

"Thank you for the water," Castell said, voice thin and formal in the way scared men got when they needed to sound like they still belonged in a squad. *"I will remember that you gave it to me even if the manifest never does."*

The patch hissed when it took. Castell's aspirator foam bubbled pink at the edge—Larraman doing what Larraman did when a Marine refused to die politely. Titus checked the HUD Mother had assigned Castell: heart rate elevated, seal compromise yellow, bleed window forty seconds extended to ninety by the patch and by nothing else.

"Pressure holds. Stay down."

"Holds." Castell's voice came thin through the vox. *"Knee joint vent at sixty percent. Shift me three metres left—the lip gives cover from east slope."*

"Negative. Shadow line holds. You move, I lose the box geometry."

He knew the lip gave better cover from the east slope. Castell had crawled on a bearing Titus had logged and would not amend. The lip angle Castell had asked for would have cost him three metres of arc on the downslope mass.

"Copy." A pause. *"I can fire from here if you need the count."*

"I need you alive. Stay down."

Castell laughed once—no humour in it, just air escaping a body that had learned humour was weight. *"Copy."*

"You ever hold a man down on a ridge before?" Castell asked after a las-burst stitched the lip above them.

Titus fired downslope. *"I held the tank when he told me not to."*

"Different tank." Castell's aspirator bubbled. *"Stay down."*

"I am down."

A cultist with a rusted shotgun got two strides from the shadow line before Titus put a bolt through the chest. The shotgun discharged into the dirt as the body fell. Castell flinched once and stayed down.

Downslope, the cultist mass tested the geometry again—three figures peeling left, two right, the same bad tactics the ridge had taught them. Titus fired pairs until the HUD showed nine rounds and stopped firing unless the housing or the latch was threatened.

The push lasted longer than four minutes and shorter than forever.

He changed magazines twice—the clack of each change loud in the silence between bird-cries. Bolt physics were honest: propellant charge detonated, mass accelerated, gyroscopic stabiliser kept the micro-jet round from tumbling until impact. On contact the upper group pierced ceramite or bone or both; the lower group delayed half a heartbeat and turned the inside of a heretic into overpressure and shrapnel. Casings ejected hot against his thigh. Smoke curled from the muzzle in a wreath the rain would later wash away.

A cultist with a melta-bomb got close enough to heat his knee plate before a bolt took the man's wrist and the bomb rolled downhill and cooked nothing important. The coordinate stayed under his boots.

Another reached the sarcophagus latch—fingers bloody, lips sewn with feathers—and tried to kiss the generator housing. Titus crossed the distance without thinking about distance. Knife under the shoulder joint where the arm met the clavicle. Twist. Withdraw. The cultist slid down the ceramite leaving a smear the field generator's machine spirit would forgive because machine spirits understood war.

Mother stratum logged holder heart rate elevated within acceptable combat band. He maintained.

Downslope, the shrine pit still smoked where Node VI had become memory. Strike residue cooled in the air—thermal noise the auspex

could not fully parse. The veil hiccupped. For one second his reticle showed twelve hostiles where there were twenty. He walked the downslope lip three paces and counted again—seventeen, then nineteen—before he fired. Their advance stuttered. Bird-cries turned from war chant to panic. Men who had worshipped change looked at shrine ash and stopped advancing.

The last cultists kept slipping back into rubble, into holes, into the thin-veil dark where lies lived. The downslope stayed empty behind him.

Silence returned in layers.

First the bolter echoes. Then the wind. Then the generator's hum—steady now, as if Metaurus's sleep had taught it discipline. Titus stood with his back to the sarcophagus and counted hostiles on the HUD because counting kept him awake when the ridge offered no other discipline.

Perimeter clear—provisional. Dawn plus seventeen minutes on the HUD clock.

Dawn. Seventeen minutes. The sky over Zsah'uj was bruised metal. Light crept up the rubble fields and showed him what the night had cost: bodies in heaps, traitor armour blackened at the reactor wound, the temple steps where the sorcerer had been meat before orbit made the relic meat as well.

Three skull icons red in the corner of his vision. Kallan. Vorr. Seth.

He looked at the sarcophagus.

Metaurus lay inside it like a king in a coffin the Chapter had not ordered. Faceplate off, stored on his belt by Titus's hand because Susan needed air paths the helm denied. The sergeant's skin was grey-green in the dawn, the colour of a man whose Larraman had lost the argument hours ago and whose Belisarian would slow, slower, correct.

Titus replaced the faceplate without sealing it. Closed the sarcophagus lid to the first catch—not locked, not void-sealed, enough to keep

the field stable and the rain out when rain came.

Rain was not in the forecast. Countdowns only.

Forty-one rounds. One lieutenant. One sleeping sergeant. One dead astropath's ghost in the cables.

MOTHER:

Hibernation stable. Do not move him.

His seals held. Ridge lines held—east, west, downslope to the pit, upslope to nothing useful. He stood where the astropath had stood.

The dead astropath's cables still sparked where rain found exposed contacts. Titus keyed the wired stud once—channel open, no voice, just carrier hum and the ghost of a frequency Vox-Nine had owned. He closed it. Some channels were graves you did not speak into on a dawn hold.

At hour three the air turned damp without weather. Titus wiped condensation from his pauldron with his gauntlet and kept watching the lie front.

Castell's vox checked in at hour four—seal holding, knee vent patched, bearing still wrong on the HUD log Titus had not corrected. Haldor reported plasma scorch stable.

The cultists did not return with dawn.

Only scavenger movement—far off, coward heat signatures retreating toward the horizon where Zsah'uj's cities had once pretended to be civilised. The ridge held. The lock held. Metaurus breathed once every minute inside the sarcophagus, and Titus breathed every few seconds because he was still awake, still the Wolf channel's primary holder, still awake for the long day beginning.

Dawn brought details night had hidden: las-scorch patterns on the tank wreck showing where Orte's melta had cooked ceramite to glass; a cultist banner half-buried in mud, bird sigil sodden; the astropath's empty restraints still clipped to the cable drum where Vox-Nine had

burned. Titus walked the lip once—not leaving the box geometry, just shifting weight foot to foot to keep knees from locking—and counted mag on the HUD without speaking the number aloud.

A thunderhawk wash at hour three stripped mist from the pit mouth for six minutes of honest visibility. Titus saw the undercroft coordinates glow steady on the auspex—eleven metres down, bearing zero-four-seven—and filed the sight under work, not hope. When the wash passed, mist returned and the pit became suggestion again.

He sat on the lip of the box and watched the light climb the dead shrine.

The dead astropath's cables still sparked intermittently where the rain found exposed contacts. Titus rerouted one ground strap with his gauntlet and watched the spark frequency drop on the HUD. Small maintenance. The kind Orte would have done without comment. The kind that kept a coordinate honest when orbit was counting minutes and cultists were counting believers.

Castell's icon flickered amber at hour five—seal bleed, knee vent, nothing Titus could fix without leaving the box. Mother recommended holder maintain locus. Wolf agreed. Titus agreed with the channels because the alternative was a lock failure and a sergeant who would wake to a worse world.

Haldor voxed at hour six with plasma scorch stable and ammo count unsolicited. Titus answered with locus maintained and nothing else. The ridge grammar did not require poetry. It required a body on a coordinate until Judge sent the next instruction.

Parchment tried one more time—a single scrap fluttering onto the sarcophagus lid. Titus caught it with his gauntlet before it touched the seal and crushed it without reading. Mercury's lie density ticked down a fraction on the HUD edge.

Castell's vox crackled once from downslope—status check, seal holding, knee vent patched. Titus acknowledged with one word. Castell acknowledged with one word. The exchange took four

seconds.

Downslope, Castell dragged himself into a tank wreck shadow out of auspex line—three metres short of the lip angle he had asked for. The bearing log stayed wrong. The icon in the corner stayed red. He kept the bolt pistol on the lip and watched downslope.

Brother Haldor's icon flickered amber on the HUD at hour two—plasma scorch on the right pauldron, still operational, requesting permission to withdraw to apothecarion staging when thunderhawk arrived. Titus denied withdrawal. Haldor acknowledged. The icon stayed amber.

He ran a full mag count by hand because the HUD counter had lagged during the push. Bolt pistol: forty-one. Knife: one. Grenades: zero—spent on the tank wreck in a prior hour he did not revisit. Power pack: sixty-one percent. Seal integrity: green on eight joints, yellow on left knee where las-fire had kissed the plate.

Sister Hospitaller channel did not open. There was no Sister on the ridge. There was only Mother counting heart rate and Wolf counting mass and Judge counting minutes he no longer narrated aloud.

The generator note held at eighty-nine percent after the Navy vent crew departed on the probe.

Dawn logged on the HUD. Cultist mass dispersing beyond auspex range. Lock held six hours forty-one minutes cumulative.

"Acknowledged."

Somewhere in orbit, *Honour's Edge* logged his stillness as fidelity.

Somewhere in the pit, Node I waited under stone.

At hour five, a scavenger las-lock pinged the sarcophagus lip from four hundred metres downslope. Titus fired one bolt. The ping stopped. Castell's icon stayed amber on the HUD. The bearing log stayed wrong.

The hold lasted six hours forty-one minutes by the HUD clock.

At hour two Castell's vox came again—breath counting, not status. *"Eleven in. Eleven out. Sister's trick. She taught the wounded to count before she taught them to pray."* Castell counted anyway, voice getting thinner each cycle until the vox cut to static and returned with *"Still here, Lieutenant. Still in the wrong shadow."*

At hour four the tank wreck downslope caught dawn light—a black tooth against mud, the angle Castell had asked for and Titus had denied. Castell's icon flickered amber, then red without announcement. The bolt pistol stayed on the lip. The bearing log stayed unamended.

Perimeter checks. Castell vox every twenty minutes until the vox stopped. Parchment scraps occasional after hour three. Scout traces only after hour two. No thunderhawk. No extract.

He had never learned how to sleep on assignment.

Brother Haldor's vox asked for ammo count at hour six. Titus gave numbers.

The Box and the Rain

The rain started wrong.

No clouds on Zsah'uj that day—only strike residue and the thin veil shedding particulate when it wanted to soften a mind. The first drops hit his shoulder pauldron and sizzled where thermal ash had lodged in the ceramite grooves. The downslope smelled of wet cordite and cooked stone. Titus wiped the pauldron with his gauntlet and kept watching the lie front, not the cultist line—his assignment until dark was field integrity and retinal discipline, not another push.

The sarcophagus hummed.

Four hours and twelve minutes until the box became honest about its limits. Orbit had not promised re-supply. Orbit had promised hold, which was a word that meant different things to men who slept and men who did not.

Metaurus slept.

Inside the sarcophagus, the sergeant's life sign was a slow pulse on the Mother stratum—suspended, not living. Titus had checked the lid twice in the first hour and stopped checking because habit was enough—until doubt returned and he checked again.

He stood. He sat. He stood again.

The ridge was quiet after battle. Bodies cooled. Bird cries gone. Only the generator and the rain and the distant tick of cooling metal in the shrine pit.

Parchment appeared at his left boot.

He heard the wet crack of ink under his boot plate and kept the bolt pistol oriented downslope. A second scrap materialised near the sarcophagus latch—fresh, curling, smelling of someone else’s confession written in a language that made his auto-senses glitch for a microsecond.

Mercury never spoke long. Jam was Mercury’s native tongue.

Titus tore the second scrap with his boot and a third fell from the air like a leaf that had never known trees. Four. Six. The rain thickened and the lies came with it catalogued elsewhere in the galaxy and condensed here because Node I’s lock was a nail in the veil’s skin and the veil bled paperwork.

He stopped trying to step on all of them.

There were too many. They accumulated in drifts against the sarcophagus—wet, whispering if you listened wrong. He listened to generator hum, to rain, to clear perimeter on the HUD.

Orbit requested holder status. One sentence back:

“Lock held. Field stable at seventy-eight percent. No contact.”

Re-supply denied—extraction window under review. Hold.

Two signatures flickered downslope—cultist mass below threshold. Titus tracked the flicker on his reticle. Scavengers, or the pit lip team Kael had warned about earlier. He keyed Kael on the Mechanicus channel.

“Sister. Status on undercroft survey prep.”

Her vox returned stripped of liturgy—binary first, then Gothic forced through a damaged vox-grate:

“Enginseer Kael reports generator nominal. Sarcophagus seal green. When you descend, I require twelve metres of copper hardline and a second piton anchor. The mouth is unstable.”

“Noted.”

“Lieutenant.” A pause—Mechanicus measuring whether speech was necessary. “The rain is not rain. Particulate density suggests veil-shed. Field decay may accelerate.”

Titus keyed acknowledgment. The channel closed.

She cut the channel. Titus watched the downslope until the two signatures withdrew.

He ate because the body required it.

Ration bar from his thigh pouch—compressed, tasteless. He chewed without looking at the shrine pit because the pit pulled the eye. Something moved down there—heat signature too small for armour, too quick for cultist mass. Scavenger or scout. He tracked it until it vanished into rubble and filed it under later.

Between bites the rain tried to teach him doubt.

A parchment scrap landed on his shoulder with the weight of a hand—**Metaurus is dead**, it said in Gothic he did not need to read because the shape of the lie was enough. His HUD did not flash red. Mother did not alarm. The sergeant’s sus-an pulse continued its slow metronome inside the box. Titus scraped the scrap off with his knife hilt and kept chewing.

Another lie claimed orbit had lifted the lock—**STRIKE AUTHORIZATION: COMPLETE**—in gold ink that burned his reticle when he glanced at it. The HUD did not confirm. Titus crushed the scrap under his boot heel and kept chewing.

The Library does not eat, Metaurus had said once, briefing room, Guilliman’s statue watching. *It feeds. Do not swallow.*

The rain intensified.

Cold, wrong-coloured water that turned ash to slurry and slurry to mud. Mud climbed his greaves. Mud tried to claim the parchment drifts and turn them into pulp the wind could not lift. A lie landed on his

wrist guard—bold script, gold ink—and his reticle flickered **HOSTILE BEHIND** for one frame before correcting.

Nothing was behind him but the box and the sleeping sergeant and three dead brothers whose skull icons stayed red.

He fired one bolt into the empty air downslope—warning—and the false signature dissolved.

MOTHER:

SUS-AN: STABLE. DO NOT DISTURB.

He disturbed nothing except mud.

By the third hour the rain thinned to mist and the parchment fall slowed. Drifts half a metre deep ringed the sarcophagus like failed snow. Titus cleared a path with his boot so the field vent could breathe. The generator note changed pitch—subtle, important.

The ridge below the lip showed its bones in the thinning mist—tank wreck black against brown mud, cultist dead in piles where Orte would lie until extraction or forever, shrine pit smoking in a thread that rose straight in the still air before the wind tore it sideways. Bird cries had stopped. The only movement downslope was heat shimmer over promethium burns and the slow crawl of mud claiming parchment drifts.

Titus ate another ration bar without tasting it. His rebreather cycled. Strike residue still tasted of copper when the filters hiccupped.

The countdown had not lied. Nothing honest lied. That was why he trusted numbers more than men.

He thought of Metaurus's hand on the override stud—manual authorisation, the kind cogitators could not do for you.

He did not think of the red field. That memory belonged to the sleeping man.

He thought of ammunition when the partial mag in his pouch felt light.

A scrap of parchment stuck to his knee plate as he knelt to check the sarcophagus seal. This one had a picture—of a boy with bird eyes grinning over a dead sergeant.

Titus tore it off and burned it with the melta residue still hot on a nearby wreck—blue flash, ash, gone.

Archive stratum logged on the HUD: Node One provisional lock. Ground truth requires survey beneath primary shrine foundation. Holder must remain until cartography confirms.

Cartography. Beneath the foundation. The pit where Node VI had burned.

Titus looked at the pit.

The ridge held. He reset his grip on the bolt pistol and watched the mist move.

The mist lifted enough to show him the tank wreck again—the shield Metaurus had lifted, the reactor wound where Titus had dropped the grenade. He had abandoned the sarcophagus march for that kill. The sergeant had passed him the keys anyway.

Metaurus through the lid's status strip—temperature, sus-an depth, seal integrity all nominal. The old man's faceplate stored on his belt, cold ceramite against Titus's thigh when he shifted.

One signature flickered at the pit lip—not mass. Titus raised the bolt pistol. A figure crawled from collapsed stone—cultist, broken leg, bird-feather sutures leaking pus. The heretic saw the sarcophagus, saw the Ultramarine standing guard, and raised empty hands.

The cultist crawled backward into the pit mouth and vanished.

Vox clarity improved on the HUD. Lie fall rate declining.

Afternoon light—grey, thin, honest—crept across the ridge. The countdown continued.

The rain stopped.

The lies slowed.

The box hummed.

Titus ate a ration bar standing up. The paste was grey and tasted of nothing. He drank half a canteen of recycled water. A servitor drone passed overhead on a return vector and did not land. The ridge stayed quiet except for generator hum and distant scavenger movement at the pit lip.

Titus cleared the field vent one last time and watched the pit mouth where survey coordinates waited. When dark came it would come fast on Zsah'uj—light dying in minutes, cultists remembering faith, vectors multiplying on the HUD.

Rest was not authorised. He did not rest.

Night on the ridge had its own geometry.

The generator hum dropped to a lower register when temperature fell—Kael had warned him about that on the Mechanicus channel before the thunderhawk left. Field capacity would bleed faster in cold. The HUD showed seventy percent and a degradation estimate Titus did not watch closely.

Cultists did not charge. Scavengers moved at the pit lip—two signatures, then one, then none. The real assault was parchment.

It began at hour four of the hold—not rain this time, but a dry fall, sheets materialising from air that had no moisture to justify them. Each scrap carried a different lie: Metaurus dead, strike authorised, extraction inbound, Titus relieved of command. The HUD did not confirm any of it. He crushed what reached the box lip and kept the bolt pistol oriented downslope.

A lie landed on the sarcophagus lid—gold ink, bold Gothic—claiming the sergeant's sus-an had failed. Titus opened the lid one catch, checked the status strip, closed it. Mother confirmed stable. He crushed the parchment under his boot.

Mercury tried one word through degraded vox:

“—clarity—”

Then jam again.

At midnight by his internal chronograph, a thunderhawk passed overhead without landing—Navy recon, maybe, or orbit counting the lock from altitude. The bird’s wash pushed ash across the ridge and stripped half the parchment drifts into the pit. For twenty minutes the lie fall rate dropped to nothing. Titus ate a third ration bar.

The quiet did not last.

Parchment returned with the wind—smaller scraps now, gossip-scale, names of brothers who were already red on his HUD. Kallan promoted to captain. Vorr requesting transfer. Lies too small to kill, large enough to measure whether he would bend.

Hour eight through twenty of the lie siege blurred into the same geometry—a cultist speaker preaching at the pit lip for eleven minutes without charging; three wide las-bursts downslope cleared as non-mass; parchment naming Titus relieved and Metaurus deceased and extraction cancelled, each line contradicted by the HUD; Castell’s icon flickering amber then red while seal bleed-through logged on Mother stratum; Pryss-7’s bead dipping to sixty-seven then recovering; recon thunderhawk wash stripping more lies into the pit for twenty minutes of clarity. He ate. Scraps that touched the sarcophagus seal he scraped off with the knife hilt.

By false-dawn the field showed sixty-eight percent. The degradation estimate had been honest. Re-supply had been denied. Extraction was under review. Hold was the only word orbit kept offering, and he kept accepting it.

Metaurus inside the box. Five red icons sat in the HUD corner whether he looked or not.

When light returned it returned grey—thin, honest, the colour Zsah’uj used when it stopped pretending to be a world and became a coordi-

nate again.

Castell's icon stayed red in the HUD corner. Titus had logged it at hour fourteen and not spoken the name.

Metaurus through the status strip—sus-an stable, grey, breathing once per minute.

Scout traces at the pit lip. Non-mass. Cumulative hold time climbing on the HUD edge.

The generator hum dropped one register when the wind shifted downslope.

Brother Orte

The thunderhawk came in low and wrong.

Wrong as in desperate: engine note too high, approach angle too steep for a world still wearing strike residue like a second atmosphere. Titus tracked it on auspex through mist and thermal noise and did not allow himself hope. It was reinforcement or debris. Either way he did not leave the box.

The ridge wind had shifted since midday—downslope now, carrying the pit's thermal breath and the sweet trace of undercroft ink that had not yet opened. Ash moved in sheets across the sarcophagus lid. Titus brushed it clear with his gauntlet and kept watching the approach vector.

The bird crossed the ridgeline at twice the height a sane pilot would choose and spat two shapes into the mud fifty metres downslope—drop pods, fast. Ceramite shells cracked open. Green-armoured figures rose from the smoke.

Only two Ultramarines on a world that had eaten a squad. Titus knew the arithmetic. He held the coordinate anyway.

They crossed the slope at a run—Brother-Sergeant Orte in the lead, helmet off, face a map of campaigns Titus did not ask about; battle-brother Vess behind him, assault bolter raised, muzzle tracking horizons. Orte's pauldrons bore the hash marks of a man who had survived too many last-minute deployments to pretend this one was special.

The ridge received them the way it received everything—without gratitude. Mud sucked at their greaves. Strike ash clung to Orte's bare head in grey streaks. Vess's assault bolter tracked bird cries that were not birds, the same wrong cadence Titus had learned to ignore after the first hour. Behind them the thunderhawk did not land; it clawed altitude back into bruised sky and left two Marines on a world that had already spent five skull icons and one grey.

Orte's mouth tightened at the corners. "Lieutenant." Orte's voice was gravel and duty. No salute—mud, time, absurdity of ceremony on a corpse field. "Sergeant Metaurus?"

"Sus-an. In the box."

Orte looked at the sarcophagus, at the parchment drifts, at Titus's faceplate reflecting a war that had cost more than the HUD could stack in one column.

"Orte." Titus keyed the channel. "Perimeter east—two signatures, non-mass. Wolf cleared provisional."

"Vess has them." Orte spat ash off his lip. "Box bleibt. Dein Problem."

"Box stays. Tour is mine."

Orte's jaw worked. "Sleeping sergeant picked you. Not my fight." He jerked his thumb at Vess. "Four hours. Enginseer drops or we leave you short a brother. Clear?"

"Understood."

Vess checked the sarcophagus seal with a glance trained by a decade of war—no touch, respect for another brother's assignment—and settled into a firing stance that closed the east gap Orte had left open. His assault bolter's ammunition counter blinked full on Titus's peripheral HUD. For a moment the ridge felt like a squad again: three silhouettes, one box, one lock. The feeling lasted less than a heartbeat. Arithmetic always won on Zsah'uj.

The cultists came back at the sound of engines.

Probe first, then push—the way heretics tested weakness: bird cries first, then las-fire from rubble, then bodies climbing the slope in the rain's aftermath because rain made ash slick and slick made Marines slow if Marines were stupid.

Orte was not stupid.

He took the left flank without being asked—old habit, sergeant's geometry—and Vess took right. Titus stayed at the box. Wolf channel primary holder meant rooted, even when rooted felt like cowardice to a mind that solved problems with bolts.

Ordnance law. Hold the coordinate.

Vess fired first—three-round bursts, assault pattern, disciplined. A cultist with a plasma cutter dropped. Two more rose from a tank wreck Orte had already marked. The brother-sergeant threw a frag into the wreck's belly and the explosion turned scavenged armour into shrapnel. Loud.

Titus fired only when something crossed the sarcophagus's shadow—four bolts total, four deaths, no wasted geometry. Bolt physics did the work: mass, velocity, detonation timing. A cultist with a chain axe got inside the shadow line; Titus met him with the knife because knife distance was sacred to the coordinate—no stray rounds striking the generator housing, no overpressure compromising the field. The cultist's blood steamed in cooling rain.

He watched Orte move. Sergeants set tempo.

Mother, underneath the combat noise:

"Holder status: nominal. Heart rate acceptable."

Mercury, flickering:

"Reticle ghost—ignore bearing two-one-seven."

He ignored it. Orte's chainsword bit into the mass downslope and threw meat into mud.

Perimeter vectors showed mass forming downslope—thirty-plus, closing.

Orte heard it on the shared channel. His jaw tightened.

“Vess—links. Lieutenant—hold the box. Ich kauf die Mitte.”

Titus held the box.

Orte went downslope—advancing, bolter at shoulder, melta charge primed on his belt. Vess hammered the flank with assault fire, driving cultists into Orte’s kill lane the way a smith drove metal into a die. Titus watched through targeter magnification and counted muzzle flashes—discipline in Vess’s bursts, three-round, no panic, the Assault Intercessor pattern done correct even while the veil tried to lie about range.

A cultist suicide team broke from the pit line—three men with promethium jars, bird throats screaming. Vess dropped two. The third got close.

Titus could have fired. The angle was clean. The coordinate rule was cleaner: **do not leave the box**. He held fire and watched Vess pivot and take the third with a bolter round that turned promethium into a fireball downslope, away from the sarcophagus, away from the lock.

Good brother. Titus filed him under alive and kept watching the mass form.

Orte did not look back.

Looking back was how sergeants died.

He threw the melta charge into the mass and the blue secondary flash cooked fifteen heretics into a single screaming silhouette. Then he was in among them with the chainsword—wide arcs, ceramite boots crushing throats, a one-man counter-attack until the mass thinned.

Titus held the box.

His boots had not moved from the sarcophagus shadow. The coordinate did not care how many brothers spent themselves downslope.

The coordinate cared that someone stood where the astropath had stood and did not break when the lies returned.

A heretic with a melta-bomb broke Vess's line.

The battle-brother fired and missed because the veil hiccupped his reticle one degree left—Mercury's ghost, lie density still high—and the melta took him in the chest plate where the armour was thickest and still **not enough**.

SKULL ICON: BROTHER VESS-KIA

Vess fell—straight, final, no speech. The cultists cheered with bird throats.

Titus counted: ten dead, fifteen, twenty—the cultists kept coming because their god was ash and ash did not teach retreat. Orte kept buying.

Lock integrity nominal on the HUD. Reinforcement contact: one remaining.

One remaining. Orte.

The brother-sergeant fought for four minutes and eleven seconds by the HUD clock—Titus counted. Orte took a las-lock burst in the knee at minute two and kept moving. Took a chain axe in the shoulder joint at minute three and kept moving. At minute four he stood in a circle of dead cultists and fired his last bolter magazine into the next wave climbing over the bodies of the last wave, sidearm empty on the ground beside him.

"Titus," Orte voxed blood in the channel. "Under the foundation. Node One. Don't —"

The cultist with the autogun was not a hero. Just lucky. The burst caught Orte under the helm rim where neck met gorget—three rounds, Larraman fighting, losing—and the brother-sergeant dropped to both knees in the mud.

Titus fired six bolts in two seconds.

The autogunner ceased.

He did not leave the box to reach Orte.

SKULL ICON: BROTHER-SERGEANT ORTE-KIA

Downslope, the cultist mass broke—dead enough. Bodies piled where Orte had stood. The chainsword still gripped in a gauntlet that would not release until rigor or a brother's hand took it.

Titus did not descend to recover the weapon.

Recovery was extraction protocol. Protocol was later. The lock did not care about chainswords left in mud or sergeants who had spent their tempo buying seconds for a lieutenant who could not leave the box.

He voxed Orte once—channel open, no response, correct. Dead men did not answer. Vess's assault bolter lay three metres from the red skull icon's last position; Titus marked it for salvage if salvage ever came.

The ridge wind changed again—upslope, carrying promethium smoke and cooked meat from Orte's melta kill zone.

Orte's body lay where the autogun had taken him—on both knees in mud, chainsword still locked in the gauntlet, melta charge spent, bolter sidearm empty on the ground three metres from his hand. Titus could see the neck wound through targeter magnification: three rounds under the helm rim, Larraman foam already greying at the edges.

Vess's body lay farther east—chest plate blackened where melta had taken him, assault bolter mag-locked. Reclamation would want both serials. Reclamation would get bearings.

Orte had said *under the foundation*. Node One. The words sat in his HUD beside Librarian's coordinates—eleven metres, bearing zero-four-seven—and waited for Judge to authorise descent.

Downslope, a cultist scavenger reached for Orte's chainsword. Titus fired one bolt. The scavenger stopped reaching.

A second scavenger tried Vess's assault bolter. Two bolts. The ridge went quiet again.

Metaurus slept through all of it. Sus-an steady. Grey steady. The sergeant slept while brothers went red downslope for the box.

Silence returned in layers.

Two new red skulls beside three old ones on the HUD.

MOTHER:

No further friendly life signs within auspex range.

PERIMETER: Clear-provisional.

REINFORCEMENT LOST. Enginseer attach inbound. Hold position.

Hold.

Orte's last words hung in the channel—*under the foundation*—for the record.

Partial mag on the bolt pistol—twenty-nine rounds—and the sky sending the next thing orbit believed he could survive.

The wind carried cooked meat from downslope where melta secondary had done its work on flesh and ceramite alike.

Archive stratum on the HUD: Node One—undercroft—await survey.

The sarcophagus hummed at eighty-nine percent—Pryss-7's gift already fading with the probe gone but enough for now. Metaurus's sus-an pulse continued its slow beat inside the lid.

The Red Field

SUS-AN MEMBRANE: ENGAGED

LARRAMAN'S ORGAN: OFFLINE (HIBERNATION)

BELISARIAN FURNACE: OFFLINE

The red field came back pulse by pulse—blood through a wound when you pressed the edges together and waited for the body to listen.

Metaurus had not chosen to remember. Sus-an was supposed to be the long silence, the Emperor's mercy for bodies too broken to die with dignity. Instead the membrane showed him a boy's eyes in the colour of Chapter paint before the Chapter had a claim on them—**Ultramarine blue**, impossible on a world that had never seen Macragge's sky.

Emperor's peace, he tried.

The litany did not take. Zsah'uj's veil pressed on the sarcophagus like a thumb on a closed eye, and the generator hummed somewhere outside the dream where Titus stood and held the lock, and Metaurus fell backward through years because sus-an had never learned the difference between mercy and cruelty.

The red field was what remained after the PDF had broken—soil the colour of opened meat, sky the colour of shut vaults, las-fire reduced to a single wrong note in a hymn no choir master would approve. Metaurus had been younger then, or what passed for younger when you had

already worn power armour long enough to forget the shape of your face without ceramite.

He had come to count dead because the apothecaries could not keep pace and someone had to give the Administratum numbers it could file before the next hive burned.

The boy was sitting on a slab of reactor casing that had cooled enough to sit on but still radiated wrong heat through cloth. Eight years old, maybe nine—age was a guess when hive records had burned with the hive. Too small for the field. Too still for a survivor. In his lap, a knife: a **weapon**, stolen or found or given by a dead hand, edge nicked, handle wrapped in wire.

The boy looked up.

Blue eyes.

Ultramarine blue—the colour recruiters saw in pict-captures of aspirants who might one day wear power armour if the Chapter's lottery and the Emperor's hunger aligned. Gold-sclera horror belonged to the cultists on the far ridge—not this child's eyes.

The boy did not speak.

Metaurus had learned, on that day, that some children had already spent their words on staying alive.

Around them the red field kept its own vocabulary—las-fire, distant screams, the crump of a promethium drum cooking off in a collapsed hab block. Bodies in Imperial tan and cultist rags and civilian nothing lay in attitudes that meant nothing and everything. Apothecaries would not come for the civilians. The Chapter had not come for them either until the fighting finished late, loud, incomplete.

The wind carried reactor coolant and cooked meat and something sweet that might have been hive hydroponics burning three districts away. Metaurus's auto-senses logged particulate density and moved on. A PDF officer's body lay ten metres off—commissar sash still red, las-pistol empty, mouth open on a command that had not saved any-

one. Cultist graffiti on a hab wall behind him spelled a word in a script Metaurus did not need to decode. The veil had not been thin here then. This was ordinary war before the corridor taught the galaxy new vocabulary.

The boy's feet were bare. Cuts on the soles had scabbed black. He had walked through glass to reach this slab, or been placed here by a parent who did not return. Metaurus logged the bearing and let the figure pass—rescue was not the count's work.

A las-burst stitched the hab line twenty metres out—PDF return fire, cultist counter-fire, the red field's ordinary grammar. A promethium barrel cooked off somewhere left and sent black smoke straight up through cloud cover that had not seen rain in weeks. The boy watched the knife in Metaurus's hand as if ownership had transferred.

Behind them, a hab block collapsed in slow motion—rebar showing, dust rolling outward in a ring the auspex would later call non-hostile. A woman ran from the rubble line with a child on her hip and did not look at the Space Marine. Metaurus logged her bearing and let her pass.

The wind shifted. Reactor coolant on the air, then cooked meat from a block three districts over, then something sweet that might have been hydroponics burning. Metaurus's auto-senses logged particulate and moved on. The PDF officer's body ten metres off still wore a commissar sash—las-pistol empty, mouth open on a command that had not saved anyone. Cultist graffiti on the hab wall behind him spelled a word Metaurus did not need to decode. Ordinary war, before the corridor taught the galaxy new vocabulary.

The boy's fingers did not tremble. Metaurus had seen tremor in adults on this field—PDF troopers after the third hour, cultist prisoners when the las-fire stopped long enough for them to understand they were still alive. The boy had none of it. Fear, if it lived in him, had been spent earlier on something Metaurus could not see from this angle.

He had knelt.

Armour made the gesture clumsy. The boy's gaze tracked the move-

ment with animal precision. No flinch. No plea. No parent running from the rubble line because parents were already **past tense** on the red field.

Metaurus extended his gauntlet—open, empty, the universal offer that meant *Chapter or corpse, choose before the world chooses for you*.

The boy looked at the hand. Looked at the knife. Looked at the horizon where las-fire still stitched night to morning.

He placed the knife in Metaurus's palm.

Metaurus closed his fingers around the handle and felt the wire bite through ceramite sensitivity buffers—skin oil and reactor dust worked into the wrap, warm from the boy's palm. Ash grit caught under the ceramite seam when he flexed. The handle was wrong for a child's grip—too heavy, edge forward, the way scavengers held tools when they had never been taught which end cut.

Another Marine passed at distance—Brother Hestia, dead now decades, name forgotten by all but the Librarius—and raised a hand: *found something?* Metaurus shook his helm once. Hestia moved on. The Chapter's lottery did not pause for philosophy.

Metaurus belted the blade. The wire wrap left a grey smear on his abdominals.

The boy stood. Walked to him. Put a small hand on the gorget rim where the helm would one day sit—a touch without fear, without reverence, without any of the things humans were supposed to feel when a Space Marine arrived.

Metaurus had lifted him then. The boy weighed less than a bolter crate. His ribs moved under rags when he breathed—quick, shallow, the rhythm of a body that had learned to spend air carefully. Metaurus adjusted grip to avoid the left side where a las-scorch had burned through cloth to skin. The boy did not flinch at the contact. Did not ask where they were going. Did not ask if the knife would be returned.

PDF troopers passed at distance with stretchers and did not salute. A cultist corpse near the hab line still smoked. Metaurus walked toward the shuttle pad with the boy in one arm and the knife on his belt, counting steps because counting was what you did when the field might return fire and you were carrying something the Chapter would call aspirant or asset or weapon depending on which slate you read.

The memory was muscle now—sus-an stripping detail to bone: the smell of ash, the boy's ribs under rags, the wire bite on the knife handle when he belted it.

The transport had come at dusk. Hoists and hard hands and medicae servitors who measured bone density and ocular hue and said nothing because nothing was protocol for aspirants who had not yet earned names. The boy had not cried when the hoist lifted him. Had not cried when the needle teams came. Metaurus had watched from the shuttle ramp because someone had to witness what the Chapter took and what it promised in return.

Rain started on the shuttle pad—wrong-coloured, cold, the kind that turned ash to slurry on the ramp grating. A PDF sergeant shouted load numbers through it. The boy's hand stayed on Metaurus's gorget rim until a medicae orderly pried it off with a gentleness that embarrassed everyone present. Metaurus logged the touch and did not file it anywhere useful.

On the shuttle the boy sat in restraints that were not punishment—just procedure for aspirants who might bleed in transit. Metaurus watched a medicae servitor measure ocular hue and bone density without speaking. The boy watched Metaurus back with the same stillness he had shown on the reactor slab. When the hoist cables sang and the shuttle lifted, the boy's fingers found the restraint buckle and held it, to know where metal ended and air began.

We promise nothing, the Chaplain would say later. *We offer duty.*

He had not known the boy's name on the red field.

You were never the problem.

He had not said that on the ridge yet.

SUS-AN MEMBRANE: ENGAGED

LIFE SIGN: HIBERNATION STABLE—REM DENSITY ELEVATED

The dream bled.

Present pressed through memory like las-fire through mist: the sarcophagus lid above him, Titus's shadow on the inside curve when the lieutenant checked the seal—a silhouette that was no longer small, no longer pre-linguistic, but still the same instrument tuned to a different war.

Metaurus tried to speak.

Sus-an took the words and turned them into litany fragments that never reached vox:

Hold the line.

Take the keys.

Wolf channel.

The boy outside did not hear.

Rain on ceramite. Generator note dropping a fraction—field capacity bleeding—and somewhere in orbit Judge counting minutes Metaurus could no longer spend.

Orte is dead. Castell is dead. The undercroft will take more if the membrane shows true. I cannot wake to warn him.

The sus-an depth increased. The dream folded.

Metaurus saw the present ridge through closed eyes: parchment drifts, shrine pit smoking, Node I waiting under stone. In the dream-bleed Titus moved—checked ammunition, cleared lies, stood guard. Economical.

If I sleep—let him hold.

SUS-AN MEMBRANE: DEEPENING

LIFE SIGN: STABLE

The red field faded last because sus-an won again. The boy's blue eyes dimmed to the colour of distant ocean. The slab of reactor casing became the sarcophagus floor.

In the bleed between memory and membrane Metaurus saw Titus on the ridge lip—not the boy from the field, but the instrument the Chapter had made: bolt pistol counted, lies crushed, seal checked twice in the first hour and a third time because habit outranked sleep. A parchment scrap landed on the sarcophagus housing in the dream and showed Metaurus's own faceplate cracked open, bird eyes behind the lens. The lie dissolved when Titus scraped it off without reading.

He does not need me awake, Metaurus thought, or sus-an thought for him. *He needs me not to wake wrong.*

The ridge wind in the dream smelled of cordite and ash and eggshell grit. Node I pulsed under stone. Five names sat in the HUD corner Metaurus could no longer see. Orte's melta flash replayed once, silent. Corvus's seal failure replayed once, silent. Castell's knee vent bubbled pink and stopped.

Metaurus sank.

Thought became litany became nothing.

Outside, rain thinned. Titus's footfalls crossed the ridge—measured, patient—while Metaurus could not help him now.

Librarian Speaks

The engineeer fell out of the sky like a tool dropped by a careless god.

Mechanicus spindleshanks in rust-red, servo-claw gripping a cable bundle, respirator hissing the Ommissiah's disapproval of organic battlefields. The thunderhawk probe that had spat him did not land; it hovered three metres above the mud, assault cannon tracking horizons, fuel cells counting down the seconds a pilot could afford on Zsah'uj.

Titus did not lower his bolt pistol.

Friendly was a word the veil corrupted for sport.

Wolf:

"Friendly. Mechanicus. IFF. Confirmed."

The engineeer raised a binary-cant hand—open palm, no weapon, request. His mechadendrites unfurled like fingers learning prayer and pointed at the sarcophagus generator housing. Permission to approach.

Titus looked at the probe. Looked at the downslope where Orte's body lay among cultist dead. Looked at the lock status burning steady in his HUD.

"Approach," he said.

Pryss-7 moved with the economical hurry of a tech-priest who understood that hover time was tithing. He did not salute. He did not

ask about the dead. He plugged a mechadendrite into the generator's maintenance port and the sarcophagus note changed—sharper, aligned, a harmonic Titus felt in his teeth.

The ridge wind had shifted while they worked—downslope now, carrying cordite and wet ash from the shrine pit. Titus tasted copper on every third breath. The tank wreck below the lip still radiated heat; his auto-senses logged it as background noise and moved on.

Binaric spilled from the engineer's vox-grille—praise to the Omnissiah, condemnation of cultist engineering, numbers Titus did not decode and did not need to. The Mechanicus spoke to machines first. Marines spoke to holds.

"Field harmonic was drifting before I arrived," Pryss-7 said—first partial Gothic, vox-filtered flat. "Cultist residue in astropath socket. Burned worst tangles. You held at seventy-one. Non-Mechanicus."

"Held is the assignment."

"Assignment logged." A mechadendrite probe slid into the dead socket array and recoiled—psyker residue, burned synapse ghosts, the price of a man who had opened the sarcophagus once and died for it. Pryss-7 clicked disapproval and severed the worst cables with a plasma cutter smaller than Titus's knife.

The probe's reactor sang through the cable functional. Metaurus's sus-an line did not flicker. Mother confirmed stable. Titus allowed himself one breath of fewer variables.

Pryss-7 worked in silence broken only by binaric mutter and the clack of tools no Space Marine was trained to name. A second mechadendrite scraped parchment off the field vent and incinerated it with a pocket flamer too small to kill a cultist and large enough to kill lies, briefly.

Jam cleared. Vox sharpened. Orbit could see him again without the Library sitting on the channel.

The thunderhawk pilot voxed—human underneath the static, Navy

register:

“Enginseer on ground. Lieutenant, we cannot hold hover past six minutes. Say your piece to orbit.”

Titus keyed the wired vox stud. The channel opened onto *Honour’s Edge’s* Novahistorium prep layer—acoustic bleed through bulkheads: cogitator fans in three-quarter time, incense from archive vents, ozone of hololith projectors warming. Marines called it the ship thinking aloud.

The ship was old enough to creak. Titus heard it through the wire—a deck plate somewhere three thousand metres above his boots flexing when the cruiser’s attitude thrusters fired, a sound like a cathedral settling after prayer. Archive incense mixed with machine oil from the Novahistorium’s lower galleries. Somewhere a servitor cart rolled on rails that had carried the same weight for two centuries; the rhythm had the same patience as prayer in a cathedral nave.

Through the bleed he caught secondary noise: a choir rehearsal muffled by bulkheads, voices flat with discipline; a Navy bosun shouting fuel numbers on a deck he would never see; the faint harmonic of a Geller field generator cycling in the belly, a note that made his teeth ache if he listened too long. *Honour’s Edge* carried guns the way a hive carried markets—always, somewhere, in layers you could not see from one deck.

The stud was cold against his gauntlet—colder than ridge metal, wrong pressure behind his ears when the channel opened, as if the ship’s interior had exhaled into his helm. His auto-senses logged a seal flutter on the vox interface and cleared it. Thin-veil residue in the wire. Zsah’uj still in the connection.

Judge:

“Report required. Primary holder status. Lock integrity. Field harmonic. Brother count. Perimeter disposition. Respond in sequence per doctrine.”

“Lock held. Field stabilised by Mechanicus attach. Metaurus in sus-an. Five brothers KIA. Perimeter clear provisional.”

Silence—consideration, not Mercury. Then the channel shifted, deeper, older, the stratum Marines learned to hear when doctrine replaced urgency. The pressure behind his ears increased—Librarian stratum running hotter than Judge, hololith projectors on the other side of the bulkhead spooling data he could not see but could feel as vibration in the vox cable.

Librarian:

“Archive open. Node One survey authorisation granted. Primary anchor: shrine pit foundation—depth eleven metres. Undercroft mouth bearing zero-four-seven from pit centre. Veil thickness: critical. Ground truth requirement: physical confirmation of apostate substratum before certification.”

Titus keyed the stud twice to clear the buffer. Pressure normalized.

Coordinates unfolded in Titus’s reticle—Librarian’s memory layered over strike scorch: pict-maps of Zsah’uj before the war, overlaid with strike scorch and the void where Node VI had been purged. A red line descended through stone like a blade through flesh and terminated in a symbol the Chapter used for **things that should be buried and were not**.

Under the foundation. Orte had died saying it. The archive said it now with the cold certainty of data that had waited in a cogitator for someone alive to listen.

Librarian:

“Undercroft mouth: eleven metres vertical from pit centre. Bearing zero-four-seven. Entry partially obstructed by strike collapse—estimate four hours manual clearance without Mechanicus assist. Apostate substratum signature matches Node VI harmonic inverse. Lie density elevated below grade. Holder must maintain surface lock until survey complete. Confirmation requires visual contact with

primary anchor idol fragment or engineered equivalent.”

Interlock. Expires. The words Judge loved.

Titus looked at the shrine pit—smoke thinned now, rain-washed, rubble collapsed inward where the orbital lance had punched through idol stone and opened a throat into darkness. He magnified the Librarian overlay: a ghost grid descending through rock, terminating in a chamber the pre-Crusade maps labelled only with warning sigils and the numerals I.

Node One. Not destroyed like Node VI. Buried. Waiting.

Eleven metres.

He looked at the sarcophagus.

Surface lock meant rooted. Rooted meant the box stayed on the ridge while something else—someone else—descended. There was no someone else on the auspex. Only Pryss-7, muttering binaric at a generator. Only Titus.

Judge:

“Confirm receipt of survey coordinates, Lieutenant. Acknowledge per interlock protocol.”

“Receipt confirmed.”

Four syllables for the record.

The thunderhawk probe’s assault cannon tracked a heat signature two kilometres out—cultist scout, maybe animal, maybe nothing—and did not fire. Fuel was for hover. Hover was for extract. Extract was not yet. Titus tracked the signature until Wolf cleared it non-hostile and returned his eyes to the pit overlay.

Judge:

“Survey may proceed when perimeter and field stability permit. Extraction of primary holder remains secondary to certification. Acknowledge doctrine per Novahistorium charter.”

“Acknowledged.”

Titus had learned doctrine late. He executed it early.

Pryss-7 disconnected from the auxiliary feed and left a maintenance bead on the housing—small, bronze, **Omnissiah seal**—that would keep the field above eighty percent until the probe departed or died.

“Surface lock requires continuous presence,” the engineer said—first full Gothic sentence, vox-filtered flat. “You remain. We descend later with full extract team. Not my protocol. Ship’s protocol.”

Titus said nothing. The tech-priest had already read his stance in the cable bundle.

The tech-priest hesitated—mechadendrites coiling—and added: “The sleeping one. Sus-an integrity good. Do not move carriage without apothecarion rig.”

The vox cable still carried bleed—Judge stratum faint under Librarian echo, pressure wrong in Titus’s ears when he keyed the stud to test. He keyed it twice. Buffer cleared. Pressure normalized. The cable hummed at ninety-one percent nominal. Acceptable.

Pryss-7 noted the bleed on his slate without comment. Mechanicus logged what Mechanicus logged.

As if Titus needed instruction. As if he had moved Metaurus except into the box and toward life.

The tech-priest’s mechadendrites had left scratch marks on the generator housing—acceptable damage, logged by the machine spirit as tribute. Pryss-7 had run a diagnostic on the dead astropath’s cable bundle and clicked disapproval at the Omnissiah’s frequency: psyker burnout left residue that clogged field harmonics. He had burned the worst tangles with his pocket flamer and said, without looking at Titus: “The box will hold. The boy in the box will hold.”

Pryss-7 bowed a head that was more antenna than flesh and mag-

locked back toward the probe's open belly. The thunderhawk swallowed him. The assault cannon stopped tracking and the bird rose—fast, angry, gone into bruised sky.

Silence again.

Generator hum at eighty-nine percent, rain mist on ceramite, distant creak of cooling wreckage in the pit. Titus stood at the sarcophagus and watched the coordinates pulse in his HUD like a second heartbeat.

Brother Haldor's vox broke the quiet—static first, then voice clipped by las-scorch on the right pauldron.

"Lieutenant. Perimeter check. East slope quiet. Plasma scorch stable on my pauldron. Requesting ammo count for the log."

"Twenty-nine bolt. One partial in pouch."

"Copy." Static. *"Probe captain says six minutes hover max if we need another vent run."*

"Copy."

Titus watched the pit overlay pulse eleven metres down and did not amend the triage log.

The generator note held at eighty-nine percent. Rain mist beaded on the sarcophagus lid and ran in thin lines toward the latch seam. Somewhere downslope, Castell's wreck cooled.

VOG NODE I: LOCK HELD

SURVEY GRID: UNDERCROFT MOUTH-047° FROM PIT CENTRE-
11m DEPTH

STRIKE AUTHORISATION: PENDING SURVEY

BROTHER STATUS: SERGEANT METAURUS-SUS-AN STABLE

SKULL ICONS: 5 KIA (KALLAN, VORR, SETH, CASTELL, ORTE)

Five names orbit would speak in one roll call. Five red icons that would not grey again.

Wolf:

“Perimeter. Clear. Dark.”

Of course.

Dark was when cultists remembered they were still faithful to ash.

Titus checked the knife. Checked bolt rounds—twenty-nine. Checked the pit mouth where Librarian’s coordinates waited like a door the Imperium had not opened in centuries.

When Judge spoke again, he would descend into the undercroft and confirm what orbit needed confirmed. Clear four hours of strike collapse if Mechanicus did not return. Reach the apostate substratum with eyes, not lies.

Kallan, Vorr, and Seth had died on the ridge before Orte. The engine-seer attach would reach the undercroft mouth if Mechanicus returned before dark.

Wolf vector check before dark:

“Scouts. Only. Hold.”

The Library’s parchment had thinned to occasional scraps—Mercury’s clarity returning like breath after drowning. Librarian had spoken. Judge had logged receipt. The undercroft coordinates burned steady in his reticle, eleven metres down, bearing zero-four-seven, the mouth of the next obstacle.

The mist moved across the pit—grey sheet over brown crust, ridge wind carrying strike ash from Node VI’s scar in a fine grit that settled on his pauldrons and tasted of old fire.

Somewhere under eleven metres of stone, Node I waited. Titus ran next steps: hold through dark, clear the obstructed mouth, descend when Judge authorised, confirm ground truth with eyes not parchment.

Metaurus slept behind him.

Titus did not answer the vox quiet.

The undercroft mouth, when they reached it, would smell of ink and

eggshell and cold that had no surface wind to explain it. The ridge smelled of cordite and particulate mist and mud that tried to claim the parchment drifts. Two worlds stacked—surface and depth—and he would walk into both before the grid closed.

Night on the ridge was a checklist Titus ran without speaking aloud—mag-count hourly, seal check hourly, generator note every thirty minutes, perimeter scan every fifteen, dawn acknowledgment on the slate. Scout traces only after hour two. No las-fire. Librarian coordinates held at eleven metres down, bearing zero-four-seven.

Judge would call when Judge called.

A maintenance crew from the thunderhawk's belly hatch did not land—they rappelled on mag-lines, three Navy ratings in void-suits stripped to the waist, carrying coil cable and a field vent brush Titus had not requisitioned. The lead rating saluted with a grease-stained hand.

"Lieutenant. Probe captain sends vent clearance. Field housing fouled with parchment ash."

"Proceed."

They worked in silence—brush, solvent, log—while Titus kept the bolt pistol on the downslope and the sarcophagus at his back. One rating scraped ash from the generator intake and swore when a hidden scrap flared blue under solvent.

The second rating found the bleed.

"Sir—pressure vent on the housing backplate. Seal cracked. Field note's been wandering."

Pryss-7's maintenance bead had raised capacity to eighty-nine percent, but the crack was letting ridge air into the housing cavity—thin-veil pressure wrong, cold metal on the inside face where warm should be. The rating showed Titus the gauge: two points off nominal, oscillating.

“Cold patch here.” He pressed a bare palm to the ceramite. “Housing thinks it’s bleeding.”

“Can you patch?”

“Field epoxy. Three minutes. Hold won’t drop if we work fast.”

Titus held. The third rating ran coil cable to the probe’s auxiliary port while the lead mixed epoxy and packed the crack. Cold metal smell when the backplate came loose—wrong pressure releasing, a hiss Titus felt in his teeth. The gauge steadied. Eighty-nine. Ninety. The field note sharpened.

“Vent clear,” the lead said. “Backplate sealed. Field note should stabilise two points. We are off the wire in ninety seconds.”

They mag-lined back to the probe. The thunderhawk rose without landing. Titus logged the assist and returned his eyes to the pit overlay.

Brother Haldor’s vox checked in once more before dark—perimeter quiet, plasma scorch stable, ammo count logged. Titus gave numbers. Haldor closed the channel.

The Undercroft Mouth

The shrine pit still smoked when they found the mouth.

Strike residue cooling in the fractures where the Lord of Change idol had stood, stone turned to glass in places, rubble elsewhere. The orbital lance had punched through what the cultists called holy and left a crater honest enough to swallow a Thunderhawk. At the bottom, where ash settled in a bowl the wind had not yet learned to disturb, Sister Kael's auspex found the seam.

She did not speak in sentences. Mechanicus spoke in measurements.

"Negative three metres. Load-bearing arch compromised. Field bleed elevated."

Titus looked at the numbers on his retinal display and at the sled beside him—Metaurus in sus-an, sealed inside the sarcophagus carriage the engineeer had re-rigged from the open box, cables running to Kael's secondary field generator on her back like a second spine. The sergeant's skull icon on the HUD stayed grey. Sleeping was sus-an. Dead was something else. Titus held the distinction the way he held everything else: **without comfort**.

Brother Corvus stood at the pit lip with his bolter angled down. One of two Ultramarines left on Zsah'uj. His pauldrons were still scarred from the reinforcement drop that had killed Orte—las-burn across the left, a cultist's chain tooth embedded in the right ceramite where apothecaries would later argue about extraction. He had not argued

about coming down. Neither had Titus.

Ground truth pending. The words meant **go deeper**.

Kael deployed a rope anchor into cracked masonry—Omniissiah sigil stamped on the piton, a blessing or a bracket. Titus could not read the sigil and tested the line with a servo-arm that whirred like prayer. The sled had its own winch. Metaurus would descend whether the undercroft wanted him or not.

Librarian, from orbit, one line left over from the ridge briefing like ash on a tongue:

“Node One undercroft. Apostate stratum. Confirm physical ingress.”

Titus clipped his harness to the secondary line and went first.

The air changed three metres down.

Lie density rose. The thin veil thickened in the throat, recycled through his helm’s filters until each breath felt borrowed from somewhere that did not believe in lungs. His auto-senses flickered. Auspex returned shapes that were not shapes. Heat signatures bloomed and died like lies catching light.

Eggshells crunched under his boots.

White. Curved. Fragments no larger than his gauntlet, scattered across the first landing as if something had hatched downward instead of up. No birds on Zsah’uj. No nests. The shells were symptom, the veil’s skin flaking where it rubbed against stone.

He picked up one piece without thinking and crushed it in his gauntlet. Powder. Too light. It hung in the lamplight after he opened his fist, refusing to fall at proper gravity. His helm flagged particulate hazard. He ignored the flag because flags were for atmospheres that obeyed physics and this undercroft had not obeyed anything since the strike opened the pit.

Corvus descended behind him, heavier on the line, bolter slung for

the climb. The sled creaked last, Kael walking it down with servo-assist and the patience of a woman who treated gravity as a negotiation.

Titus reached the landing and swept his lamp.

Corridor. Pre-Imperial masonry, older than the shrine above, the blocks cut too precise for cultist hands. Bird motifs carved into the lintel but classical curves, elegant, wrong. Apostate work. Node I had been waiting under the world's skin long before the sorcerer chose this hill.

His vox crackled.

Static. A syllable half-formed. Then nothing.

He keyed the channel anyway.

"Lieutenant Titus. Ingress confirmed. Undercroft mouth."

No answer.

Mercury silence. The kind of quiet that meant the ship's battle-council was still there but the comms mouth had jam in its teeth.

The descent continued in ten-metre intervals.

Landing one: eggshell drifts, ankle deep. Lamp sweep showed corridor branching left and right. Kael's auspex marked left as dead end, right as route zero-four-seven toward the anchor chamber. Titus took right.

Landing two: temperature drop. Stone sweat on the walls. Ink smell before parchment appeared—fresh, wet, a sheet materialising on the stair lip naming him *relieved of command*. The sheet fluttered past his boot and stuck to the wall. He kept descending.

Landing three: hardline relay test. Kael spliced segment three. Impedance spiked red—cultist residue in the copper braid, Mercury bleed flooding the line with someone else's battle chatter.

"—*withdraw from grid seven—*"

Then a second voice, orbit-clean, wrong depth:

“—sector zero-nine-two—auxiliary ingress—confirm flank—”

Kael’s mechadendrite locked the splice. “Impedance fail on segment three. Mercury bleed injecting false vector. Option one: strip segment three, splice segment four—clean ingress zero-four-seven, no vox for four minutes. Option two: keep segment three live—Judge hears us, comms corrupt.”

Titus looked at the HUD. Ground truth pending. Judge waiting. Mercury jam in his teeth.

“Keep segment three.”

“Confirm corrupt comms risk.”

“Confirm.”

Kael stripped the copper braid anyway—not kill, reroute. Segment four parallel while segment three stayed hot. Mercury static screamed through both. Ninety seconds while she worked in the dark, mechadendrites sparking against cultist residue.

The false vector came again, louder:

“—zero-nine-two—flank secure—proceed—”

Titus keyed Corvus on wired vox. “Take zero-nine-two branch. Secure flank. I hold sled.”

Corvus did not argue. He clipped to the secondary line and vanished into the left fork—the wrong fork, the fork Mercury’s bleed had named while Kael’s auspex still marked zero-four-seven on the right.

Forty seconds.

Stone shifted in the left branch—a muffled crack, Corvus’s vox cutting mid-word:

“—structural—”

Then static.

Titus hauled himself up the line to the fork mouth. Corvus was

wedged in a dead chamber no wider than a coffin, ceiling dropped six inches, left pauldron crushed against apostate masonry. No cultists. No anchor. Only a maintenance crawl that ended in rubble.

“Out,” Titus said.

Corvus extracted with ceramite scraping. Dust in his seal interfaces. When he reached the main line his left leg dragged half a beat—the slip on eggshell mud from earlier compounded by the wrong chamber’s collapse.

“Branch was empty,” Corvus said. “You heard zero-nine-two?”

“I heard bleed.”

Kael finished the splice. Segment four seated. Mercury static dropped on the HUD. Less jam. Still jam.

“Reroute cost two minutes forty,” she said. “Flank branch was lie. Recommend ignore Mercury vectors until segment four only.”

Titus marked the false branch on his slate and did not amend the log to say he had sent a brother down a corridor the Library invented. Corvus tested his left knee once and took rear landing without complaint.

The undercroft was quiet in the way predators were quiet—not empty, waiting.

Landing four: bird motif lintel, classical curves, apostate precision. The carving hurt to track. Titus looked at his boots. Boots on eggshells. Boots on stone older than the Imperium’s claim on this world.

Landing five: the air tasted of copper and ink together—undercroft vocabulary beginning. A scrap materialised on the stair lip—*EXTRACTION INBOUND*, gold ink, orbit font correct. Titus almost stepped on it. Kael’s auspex pinged green on the sheet’s vox signature. True. He clipped the scrap to his belt for Hale’s manifest and kept descending.

Corvus tested the wall seam with his bolter muzzle—stone solid,

apostate mortar older than the Chapter. “If they collapse this, we ride the sled back up.”

“If they collapse this, we do not ride anywhere.”

The seam was a join between Imperial strike collapse and older shrine architecture—a line where two violences had met and decided to coexist. Corvus pressed harder. Mortar flaked. Underneath, a cavity no wider than a bolter, packed with parchment rolls tied in human hair, each sheet stamped with a sigil Titus did not decode and did not need to. Kael’s auspex pinged lie-density elevated three metres beyond the seam.

“Cache,” she said. “Not structural. Recommend bypass.”

Titus marked the cavity on his slate and moved on. The undercroft kept its secrets in walls the way surface armies kept theirs in trenches—visible if you looked, fatal if you looked too long.

Judge, distant, stripped of Mercury’s usual cushion:

“Acknowledged. Hold ingress. Ground truth requires anchor contact.”

Wolf:

“Depth. Hostiles unknown.”

Titus moved forward.

The corridor narrowed. The sled’s wheels scraped. Kael’s generator hum rose tighter, the sound of a field stretching to cover more than it liked. Metaurus inside his box did not stir. Sus-an was mercy and coffin both; Titus was glad the sergeant could not feel what the air was doing to the walls.

Halfway down the second descent, Corvus’s boot slipped on eggshell mud.

Titus caught the brother’s harness with one hand, hauled him upright, said nothing. Corvus nodded once— thanks without vocabulary— and they continued. The slip cost thirty seconds.

A strike aftershock shifted the lintel above the sled path—stone dust raining, a crack opening along the seam where Imperial violence met apostate mortar. Kael shouted binary. Corvus braced the rear line. Titus wedged his shoulder under the fallen lintel and held the weight while Kael walked the sled through the gap on servo-assist, mechadendrites screaming against overload.

“Clear,” Kael said when the sled passed.

Titus dropped the lintel. It crushed eggshell drifts where his boots had been. Thirty seconds lost. No cultist contact. No parchment lie. Just stone remembering it could still move.

Eggshells increased. Crunched then ground under the sled tyres into powder that his helm’s autosenses flagged as particulate hazard and his instincts flagged as wrong. The powder hung in the lamplight too long. Too light. Too willing to float.

Corvus’s vox burst once—Corvus trying orbit—and died mid-word on the word *Honour*.

Titus glanced back. Corvus’s faceplate reflected the lamp in a flat blue strip. He nodded once. They kept going.

The undercroft opened into a chamber.

Low ceiling. Pillars carved with spirals that hurt to track but because the eye wanted them to. Field bleed painted the stone in colours auspex could name and minds refused to keep. At the far side, a secondary passage descended further, blacker, the veil thick enough to swallow the lamp beam after three metres.

Something moved in the dark debris sliding when the strike’s aftershocks finally found the undercroft bones. Titus tracked it anyway. Wolf did not speak. Good. If Wolf had spoken, it would have been contact, and contact down here had been nothing but cultists and paper since the mouth.

Kael stopped the sled. Ran her auspex in a slow arc.

“Anchor proximity rising. Generator load increasing. Recommend halt. Stabilise field before descent continues.”

Titus looked at the passage. At the HUD. At the coordinate that was still provisional because provisional meant *not finished*.

“Stabilise,” he said.

Kael knelt by the generator housing and began to pray in binary.

Corvus took the chamber’s mouth—covering the passage, bolter up, the stance of a man who had watched Orte die for less than this. Titus stood between the sled and the dark and listened to his own breath counting time the way Chapter One had taught him.

The vox stayed broken.

Above them, miles of ash and dawn. Below them, whatever Node I had been before the Imperium named it sin.

Titus placed one gauntlet on the sarcophagus carriage—on the housing where Metaurus had slept — and felt the generator’s hum through ceramite.

Wolf:

“Ingress. Hold depth.”

The undercroft mouth breathed around them—eggshell grit in the filters, silence where Mercury should have been, the thin veil pressing close like a second helmet he could not take off.

When Kael’s field steadied, he would go deeper.

The undercroft held bodies on plinths, fields in conflict, anchors touched by hands that did not shake. Titus’s hands did not shake. They had never learned the habit.

They waited six minutes.

Six minutes in the undercroft were time here stretched, auspex clocks disagreeing by seconds that would matter when orbit asked for ground truth. Titus used the interval the way Metaurus had taught him

on the red field: inventory. Bolter mag count. Knife edge. Corvus's seal integrity. The sled chain's tension. Metaurus's sus-an line, steady as a held breath.

Kael worked without speech. Servo-arms rerouted capacitors. Incense binary burned sharp in the recycled air. The secondary generator's hum settled from panic into something that could almost be called nominal.

Corvus cleared the chamber mouth again—same stance, fresh pain in the left leg he did not mention. Titus watched the passage where eggshell powder drifted downward like slow snow and understood that the mouth was not just a hole in the world. It was a throat. They were already swallowed.

Titus stood, checked the bolt pistol's cycle, and nodded to Corvus.

"Second descent," he said.

Corvus nodded back.

Kael would guard the sled and the sleeping sergeant and the dead astropath's empty restraints still cabled to the carriage like veins without blood. The engineeer would hold the numbers. The Marines would hold the dark.

That was the division of labour the Imperium preferred: machines counting, men walking into places machines could not go without becoming offerings.

Before Titus took the passage, he checked Metaurus's carriage one last time—sus-an steady, seal intact, the sergeant's gauntlet still resting where it had fallen on the override stud. The Fool's move. Titus did not touch the gauntlet. He needed work.

Corvus tested the left knee at the chamber mouth—full weight, half weight, full again. The wrong-branch collapse had cost more than time; the pauldron scrape from the dead chamber matched the eggshell slip from landing four. Titus watched the test and did not offer to take rear line. Corvus would cover rear until he could not.

Kael ran a field diagnostic on the secondary generator while they waited—numbers scrolling on her wrist slate, binary muttered to the Omnissiah, incense from a pocket censer too small for a Marine to notice until the undercroft air made everything sharp. “Decay rate acceptable for second descent. Recommend holder proceed before Mercury bleed returns.”

“Proceed when stable,” Titus said.

The second descent would not bring reinforcements. Orte was dead. The thunderhawk had already spent its second psyker. Whatever waited below would be met with two Marines, one engineeer, and a sergeant who would not wake to give advice—and a brother whose seal had been compounded by a wrong fork Titus chose to trust over geometry.

Titus took the passage.

The war continued downward—eggshell grit, broken vox, the thin veil pressing close—and orbit’s provisional lock waited above like a blade that would not fall until ground truth became certified.

Mercury Silent

The parchment started before they reached the second descent.

One sheet—wet ink, fresh edge—spun out of the dark passage like a leaf in a wind that had no lungs. It struck Corvus's shoulder pauldron and stuck there a heartbeat before the static charge in the air pulled it sideways toward the field generator's hum.

Titus scraped it off Corvus's pauldron with his knife edge and crushed it under his boot.

He had crushed a lie on the ridge; he would not start collecting them now.

Then another sheet came.

Then dozens.

The first sheets were small—gossip-scale lies, names of officers who had never served on *Honour's Edge*, promotion orders that contradicted the Chapter roster in Titus's helm archive. Then the storm scaled. Sheets the size of banners. Sheets that fluttered without wind and stacked against Corvus's boots until he had to step to keep balance on the landing.

One parchment bore a sketch of Metaurus's face with bird eyes.

Titus tore it in half without looking at the eyes and kept moving.

The storm was desiccant load—ink crust shedding from the veil's underlayer, crackling on generator housing like dry thunder without

water.

Parchment multiplied in the chamber—falling upward from the lower passage, sliding along the spiral pillars, materialising from sparks that had no source. Each scrap carried text in scripts his auto-translation refused to parse cleanly, as if the lies were **too new** to have stable meaning. Some sheets bore names. Some bore numbers that almost matched his HUD before diverging by one digit—the cruelty of almost.

Corvus fired once into the storm.

The bolt punched through three sheets and hit stone. The parchment closed around the impact crater like skin healing wrong. No blood. No cultist. Just paper that had learned to want things.

The chamber temperature dropped another degree. Ink smell thickened—fresh, wrong, the chemical signature of lies being printed faster than filters could scrub. Titus's lamp beam caught sheets mid-materialisation: one bore his name with a promotion date that had not happened; another showed the pod ring with a strike scar in the wrong hemisphere; a third sketched Corvus alive beside a dead Metaurus with bird eyes.

He fired into the sheet with his name. The bolt tore it. Two more replaced it before the casings stopped ringing.

"Boot it," Titus said.

Corvus's helm turned a fraction. "Wasn't going to."

"Good."

The storm scaled again—banner sheets now, sliding along spiral pillars, stacking at the chamber mouth where Kael's generator hum rose in protest. Field load flickered on the HUD.

Kael's vox—wired, thin:

"Field load spiking. Retreat to sled line. Binary one."

"Hold ingress. Binary zero."

Mercury silent. The channel that carried comms, that scrubbed lies from vox traffic, that told Marines when the enemy was speaking through the wire—gone. Titus had not noticed how much he relied on its presence until the absence rang louder than bolter reports.

Judge spoke without preamble—stripped, direct, the ordnance voice when there was no time for catechism:

“Mercury offline. Do not trust incoming vox. Confirm by Wolf channel only.”

Wolf:

“Parchment. Vector. Chamber.”

No Atlas. No Librarian. No Mother counting Metaurus’s sleep. The battle-council had narrowed to threat and fire, and everything else was noise the Library wanted them to swallow.

Kael’s voice came from behind the sled—mechanical, steady, the one vox Titus still trusted because it was wired through a cable and not the air.

“Field generator compensating. Particulate density exceeding forecast. Recommend reduced movement.”

The parchment storm thickened.

Titus moved anyway.

The lower passage was the vector to ground truth; the anchor was down there; the coordinate would not certify itself because a lie-storm preferred them blind. He took the first three steps into the black and felt the sheets brush his greaves like hands that had forgotten they were paper.

Corvus followed.

“Brother—” Titus started.

“Covering,” Corvus said.

They descended in tandem—lamp beams crossing, bolters raised, the sled left in Kael’s custody with Metaurus and the secondary field. The engineer’s generator hum faded behind them into a lower note that meant distance and risk.

For twenty minutes the undercroft was only work. Titus checked lamp cells at each landing—charge adequate, beam steady, spare cell on Corvus’s thigh pouch untouched. Corvus counted cable spool tension and reported numbers Titus did not write down because writing down was Kael’s function and Kael was with the sled. They passed two side passages sealed with apostate mortar and did not investigate either. A servitor skull embedded in the wall watched them with dead lenses; Titus marked it on the slate as non-hostile debris and kept moving. Eggshell depth increased from ankle to mid-shin. Temperature held at four degrees below ridge surface. Nothing attacked. Nothing spoke except Wolf vectors and Kael’s wired field updates every six minutes.

The passage walls sweated ink—actual moisture, dark, smelling of iron and something sweeter. Parchment scraped the ceiling. A sheet wrapped Titus’s wrist; he tore it free with the knife and the paper parted with a sound like a small bird dying. More sheets rushed into the gap.

His vox burst—his own voice, one syllable delayed:

“Tit—”

Echo. Mercury playing back what he had not yet said.

Titus killed his external vox entirely. Wired only. If lies wanted his mouth, they would have to come through steel and cable.

Judge:

“Ground truth window narrowing. Proceed.”

No comfort in Judge. Judge was not built for comfort.

They reached a junction.

Left: a stairwell choked with rubble and eggshell powder. Right: a

wider hall where the parchment storm concentrated—a vortex of sheets spinning around something at the centre that his auspex could not resolve.

Corvus chose right because Marines chose threat before convenience.

They entered the vortex.

Bolter fire—controlled bursts, centre mass on the spinning paper, the absurdity of shooting lies while knowing lies did not die. The sheets parted long enough to show what they hid—three cultists, maybe four, bird-throated, eyes gold, waiting in the storm like fish in murk.

Corvus took the las-lock first—two bolts, split grouping, the Codex geometry Titus had taught by example if not by speech. The cultist folded.

The second closed on Corvus's left flank where the las-burn had weakened the seal.

Titus moved.

Knife distance. The hook caught his shoulder pauldron and bit—ceramite cracked, seal yellow on the HUD. The force spun Corvus sideways into the pillar. Titus drove the knife up under the cultist's jaw and felt the point find the soft place where mutation had not finished its work. The body became weight. He shoved it into the paper vortex and the sheets covered it like a shroud that had been waiting.

Corvus rose.

Blood on the left pauldron now—and something darker leaking from the seal itself.

Mother flickered—one line, then gone, Mercury's jam eating even grief's channel:

“—declining—”

Then silence again.

Corvus fired into the last cultist. The heretic screamed in bird-voice and fell. The parchment storm surged as if pleased.

Titus grabbed Corvus's gorget and checked the seal with his free hand. Warm. Wet past acceptable, still sealed.

"Can you climb," he said.

Corvus looked at the stairwell. At the blood on his armour. At Titus with the flat assessment of a battle-brother who had watched Orte buy seconds with his chest.

"Yes," Corvus said.

They climbed back toward Kael and the sled.

The chamber had worsened.

Parchment lay ankle-deep around the generator housing—Kael standing in it like a priest in snow, her servo-arms sweeping sheets away from intakes with mechanical indifference. Metaurus's sarcophagus remained sealed. Grey skull icon. The only still thing in a room that would not stop lying.

Titus keyed vox—habit, useless.

"Honour's Edge. Lieutenant Titus. Brother Corvus wounded. Mercury offline. Request medicae advisory."

The channel returned static, then a voice that was almost Mark Sheppard's register and wrong by half a tone:

"Confirm... surrender... coordinate..."

Titus killed the channel.

Judge, immediate, cold:

"That was not us. Do not respond to vox until Mercury restores."

Wolf:

"Storm intensifying. Hold chamber."

Corvus sat against the sled's flank and let Kael patch the pauldron seal with a foil strip and a whisper of binary. His breathing stayed controlled. Ultramarine controlled.

Outside the undercroft mouth, dawn might have come. Down here, dawn was a lie the Library had not bothered to print yet.

Titus reloaded his bolter. Checked the knife. Looked at the passage where paper still fell like snow that had learned scripture.

The storm lasted forty minutes by Kael's chronograph.

She swept intakes. Titus held the passage mouth. Corvus sat against the sled and breathed in controlled intervals Mother would have approved. Parchment accumulated—ankle-deep, knee-deep in the worst gust, each sheet a different false order. *Withdraw. Surrender. Metaurus deceased. Strike inbound on holder position.*

Judge did not confirm. Wolf did not confirm. Mother did not confirm. Titus scraped what reached the generator housing with his knife edge and ignored what did not.

At minute twelve a sheet landed on Corvus's pauldron naming him *traitor*. Corvus tore it without reading and handed the scrap to Kael for incineration. Pocket flamer. Blue flash. Ash.

At minute twenty-three Mercury coughed one word:

“—clarity—”

Then offline again.

At minute thirty-one the fall rate slowed. At minute forty it stopped. Kael ran field diagnostic. Stable.

“Storm ended,” she said. “Lie density declining. Recommend ingress to anchor chamber before next cycle.”

Titus walked the chamber perimeter once while Corvus sat against the sled and breathed through the foil strip. Eggshell powder had drifted into every spiral carving on the pillars—white grit in apostate script, too light to settle, catching the lamp beam like dust from a world

that had hatched downward. He pressed his gauntlet to the wall seam where Imperial strike violence met older shrine stone. The join was warm on one side, cold on the other, two histories disagreeing under his palm.

A servitor skull embedded in the masonry watched with dead lenses. He marked it on the slate as debris and moved on. Parchment drifts knee-deep near the generator intakes had begun to grey at the edges where Kael's pocket flamer had burned lies into ash. The smell was ink and cooked cellulose and ozone from particulate burning on the flamer's edge.

Corvus tested the wounded pauldron seal with two fingers—pressure at the gasket, blood dark but no longer flowing. "Yellow," he said. Operational, not green. Titus nodded once. They would not force the lower passage until the seal held another twenty minutes. Metaurus's sus-an line did not flicker. The sergeant slept through the storm as he had slept through the ridge. Somewhere above, the thunderhawk probe's downdraft had stopped; the pit lip was quiet except for generator hum and the soft scrape of Kael's mechadendrites clearing intakes.

Titus marked the cavity on his slate and moved on.

Corvus stood. Pauldron seal yellow. Operational. "I can walk."

"Walk behind the sled," Titus said.

They moved.

Mercury was silent.

Orbit spoke only through Wolf and Judge.

Corvus was bleeding.

The coordinate was still pending.

The Second Psyker

The thunderhawk did not land.

It hovered at the shrine pit lip—downdraft throwing ash in sheets that mingled with the parchment still venting from the undercroft mouth—and dropped a coffin on a cable like ordnance being gentle for one second because gentleness was cheaper than a second pass.

Kael had called it in through a hardline relay while Mercury was dead. Binary prayer. Mechanicus urgency. Titus had not asked what the engineer promised orbit to make them send **another box**.

He looked at the coffin when it reached the chamber floor.

New sarcophagus. Fresh restraints. Cables pre-routed. And inside, through the translucent seal strip the Tech-Priests put on emergency deployments for visibility, a face that was skin too thin, eyes milk-white, mouth open on a scream that had been going on since the drop and would not stop until the Emperor or physics chose mercy.

Astropath—second psyker, the first had died on the ridge when the sorcerer still breathed. This one had been dying since before the cable released.

Judge:

“Secondary anchor authorised. Transfer field load. Confirm holder.”

Titus looked at Metaurus’s sled-carriage. At the open restraints on the new box. At the passage leading deeper where ground truth waited

like a tooth in a gum.

“I confirm,” he said.

The words were heavier the second time.

Transfer took eleven minutes.

Kael ran the ritual—disconnecting the sarcophagus field from Metaurus’s carriage and bridging it to Vox-Nine with servo-arms that never trembled. Metaurus remained in sus-an throughout, sealed, grey icon, the sergeant’s body a weight the mission still carried because the mission did not know how to leave men behind even when they slept.

The thunderhawk’s downdraft had stopped. Ash settled on the pit lip above like a lid. Down here, the only sky was stone and the only weather was lies waiting to fall again.

Vox-Nine screamed through all eleven minutes. Sometimes the sound came through the field itself, a pressure behind the eyes, a taste of copper, the astropath’s agony translated into frequency that made Corvus’s wounded pauldron whine in sympathetic vibration. Titus stood at the new sarcophagus housing with one gauntlet on the generator stud.

Corvus covered the passage. Blood dried dark on his left armour. He did not ask to be relieved.

When the bridge completed, the field shifted to Vox-Nine’s housing.

Wolf:

“Window. Depth. Now.”

They moved.

Titus on point. Corvus behind, bolter up, limp controlled. Kael on the sled again—Metaurus plus the secondary generator, because the engineer would not trust one field this deep. Vox-Nine’s sarcophagus on its own grav-sled now, cables trailing, the astropath’s scream damped to a whine that lived in the teeth instead of the ears.

The lower passage was worse than the chamber.

Parchment storm thinned but the veil thickened—eggshell powder suspended in air that resisted the lamp beams, auspex returning the same coordinate three times with three different altitudes. Titus navigated by Wolf vectors and stone under boot, not by trust.

Judge did not speak. Good. Judge saved words for fire.

The astropath's field pushed back against the bleed.

Titus felt it as warmth on the back of his neck—machine warmth, the Geller- analogue doing what psykers did when the Imperium needed them to be batteries instead of men. Vox-Nine was holding the corridor open with whatever was left of a soul trained to send messages across the void and repurposed to keep reality from folding.

They reached a collapsed section.

Rubble half the height of a Marine, spiral pillar fallen across the path, bird carving shattered into pieces that looked like eggshell and bone both. Corvus climbed first—pain in the movement, ignored — and hauled rubble aside with gauntlet strength that cost him breath he did not waste on complaint.

Midway through the clear, Vox-Nine's field spiked and a vision—flickered at the edge of Titus's helm: Metaurus standing with bird eyes, smiling.

Titus kept hauling stone.

The sorcerer was dead. The Library recycled shapes. Shapes were not weapons unless you gave them room.

Titus passed the grav-sled cables underneath.

Kael's vox—wired, steady:

"Field load increasing. Vox-Nine burn rate accelerating. Recommend anchor contact within four minutes."

Four minutes.

The anchor chamber opened without warning—a bowl of stone smaller than the shrine above, walls carved with concentric rings that pulsed when the astropath's field touched them.

Titus stopped at the chamber threshold and felt the field strain. Vox-Nine's scream spiked—one raw human note that broke through every filter.

"Contact," Titus said.

He stepped inside.

The plinth was not the idol.

The idol would come later—fragment scale, apostate marker, the thing Librarian's archive had hinted at without naming. This was the socket. The place where Node I expected something to be plugged in so ground truth could be measured against reality instead of lies.

Vox-Nine's field surged when Titus's boot crossed the inner ring.

The astropath shrieked.

Corvus staggered at the passage mouth—and Titus kept walking. Fields collapsed when holders stopped on thin-veil worlds.

He placed both gauntlets on the plinth.

Cold stone. Warm under-surface where the veil pressed up.

Judge:

"Partial contact logged. Hold."

Titus held.

Vox-Nine burned.

The scream became a tone—single frequency, inhuman, the sound of a mind used as fuel—and Titus felt it in his black carapace interface as pressure, not pain. His Larraman organ compensated. Corvus's wounded seal did not—the brother dropped to one knee at the passage

mouth, bolter still raised, covering the retreat that was not happening because retreat broke contact.

Kael's vox—wired, urgent:

"Burn rate critical. Four minutes became ninety seconds. Withdraw from plinth. Binary one."

"Hold. Binary zero."

"Burn rate—four minutes nominal, ninety seconds observed. Field arithmetic unfavourable." Kael's mechadendrite clicked against the cable housing. "Continuing hold."

The plinth's rings pulsed in sequence—outer, middle, inner—each pulse matching a fraction of Vox-Nine's tone until the chamber sounded like two instruments tuning to the same wrong note. Eggshell powder on the floor lifted in spirals that did not obey the lamp beams. Auspex returned depth readings that climbed and fell like a heartbeat.

Titus kept both gauntlets on the stone. The cold became heat became cold again—veil physics, apostate engineering, the socket drinking the astropath's field and asking for more.

Vox-Nine's sarcophagus housing screamed behind him—the sound damped to a whine in his teeth but the pressure remained. Corvus fired once into the passage behind them—cover fire, no target named, the discipline of a Marine who knew something was coming even when Wolf did not speak.

Titus did not turn.

He felt the field wrap the chamber like a fist closing. Parchment on the walls blackened. Eggshell powder settled. For one breath the undercroft was almost honest.

Then the tone broke.

ASTROPATH ASSET: VOX-NINE-KIA

GROUND TRUTH: CONTACT-PARTIAL

The sarcophagus went dark.

Titus stood at the plinth with empty hands and a coordinate still pending.

Kael's secondary generator screamed as it took the full load.

Corvus's voice, ragged:

"Brother."

Titus turned.

Corvus was still upright. Still covering the passage. Still bleeding.

The second psyker was gone.

The chamber had been touched.

Ground truth was still not certified.

Titus keyed vox—knowing Mercury was dead, knowing Judge might answer anyway.

"Honour's Edge. Partial contact. Vox-Nine burned out. Request next action."

Judge, after a heartbeat that cost too much:

"Hold chamber. Anchor fragment remains unconfirmed. Do not withdraw."

Wolf:

"Hold."

One word.

Titus looked at the empty plinth. At Metaurus's sleeping icon on the HUD. At the crack in the wall where the side chamber waited.

Kael stripped Vox-Nine's sarcophagus for parts.

The engineer worked with the unhurried violence of a tech-adept who treated dead psykers as components — capacitors, cable housings, field coils still warm—while Titus watched the passage and

Corvus watched Titus and Metaurus watched nothing from inside sus-an.

“Secondary bridge possible,” Kael said. “Not optimal. Will not survive another burn.”

“How long,” Titus said.

“Unknown. Longer if holder remains at anchor. Shorter if storm returns.”

Corvus shifted weight off the wounded leg. Blood had stopped flowing; the seal had not healed, only paused. Titus filed the brother’s status the way he filed ammunition: present, finite, not to be spent on geometry mistakes.

Judge:

“Vox-Nine logged KIA. Ground truth partial persists. Do not withdraw.”

Partial persists. Imperium language for *you did not fail completely*.

The second psyker was ash in a box.

The first was memory on the ridge.

What remained was Marine biology, Mechanicus engineering, and Titus standing where the field needed a body.

He checked Corvus’s skull icon—still grey, wounded, finite—and checked the crack in the wall where the fragment waited.

The passage toward the fragment chamber felt shorter because the squad had. Fewer boots. Fewer skull icons. More weight on each remaining body. Corvus limped beside him without complaint. Kael’s sled wheels whispered on eggshell mud. Metaurus slept through the reduction of his Chapter’s presence to one lieutenant and a tech-adept and the doctrine carried in a knife and a failing field.

Titus did not mourn in motion. He kept work.

Fragment Idol

The idol waited in the chamber behind the plinth.

The passage opened through a crack the astropath's burn had opened when Vox-Nine's field collapsed and surged in the same breath.

He did not rush.

Corvus caught up at the crack mouth, favouring the left leg, bolter high. The wounded pauldron's seal held because Kael had made it hold.

"Orte said under the foundation," Corvus said.

"I heard him."

"He said don't—" Corvus stopped. Swallowed. "Don't leave the box. You heard that part."

Titus nodded once.

"Chainsword's still downslope." Corvus checked the passage seal on his pauldron—green, barely. "Orte's hand won't open. Reclamation will need a pry bar."

"He bought six minutes with the melta."

"You holding six?"

"Kael says four before burn critical."

“Then four.” Corvus moved three steps behind, favouring the left leg. “First astropath rushed the restraints when the sorcerer still had teeth. Orte rushed the mass. I rush nothing until you say.”

The passage narrowed. Lamp beams caught eggshell powder suspended wrong in the cold air—veil forgetting gravity again. Corvus’s boots crunched louder than Titus’s; the wounded seal leaked aspirator foam at the ankle, pink on white stone.

“Orte’s melta charge cooked fifteen,” Corvus said quietly. “I counted from the mouth. You counted from the box.”

“I counted bolts.”

“You counted both.” Corvus paused at a bird carving—beak polished fine, stone soft-looking, heresy elegant enough to tempt a hand. He did not touch it. “He voxed you under the foundation. Node One. Don’t—”

“Don’t leave the box.”

“Yes.” Corvus swallowed. “I heard the autogun. Three rounds under the helm rim. Larraman fighting. Then nothing. I wanted to climb. Kael said hold mouth.”

“You held mouth.”

“I held mouth.” Corvus checked the passage behind them—empty, generator whine distant. “When we withdraw, if we withdraw, someone has to tell reclamation where the chainsword is. Orte’s grip won’t open. Apothecarium will cite it in the reprimand file.”

Titus nodded once.

“That is not humour.” Corvus almost smiled—failed, seal failed, pain instead. “Orte would have made it humour. Orte made everything into tempo.”

Corvus nodded once. No more words. Battle-brothers saved speech for cover calls and kill confirmations; Orte had spent his last vox on coordinates, coordinates.

The passage narrowed again. Cold air pushed against Titus's faceplate—ink and feathers that had never been birds. Corvus's lamp beam caught suspended eggshell powder, white grit hanging wrong in the lamplight. Titus's boots crunched. The sound was too loud for a chamber that had not yet opened.

Titus keyed wired vox to Kael without turning. "Field status."

"Field integrity seventy-one percent. Decay rate accelerating. Recommend minimise time at anchor."

"Corvus seal?"

"Yellow. Left pauldron. If you scan, I lose overlap. If I move to him, anchor loses field. Choose."

Minimise time. As if time on Zsah'uj obeyed recommendations. Titus looked at Corvus's foam at the ankle, at the idol ahead, at the generator whine climbing.

"Corvus. Stay at crack. Do not advance."

"You need flank."

"I need field. Stay."

Corvus stayed. Kael stayed at threshold. The obstacle was load math eating minutes while the anchor waited.

The side chamber waited ahead—bird carvings at the threshold, cold pushing out smelling of ink and feathers that had never been birds.

Built to hide something the logic of apostates who knew the sky punished grand monuments and forgot that the Imperium also read depth.

Bird carvings lined the entry—elegant heresy, polished by hands that believed beauty was proof of divine favour. Titus's lamp caught one beak carved so fine the stone looked soft. He did not touch it.

The idol stood on a pedestal knee-high to a Marine.

Fragment scale—a carved figure perhaps half a metre tall, bird-skull face elongated, three eyes closed as if sleep were a lie it told itself, hands folded around a sphere that was not glass and not stone but something that caught lamplight and held it wrong.

Titus's auto-senses recoiled.

Auspex returned null in the sphere's centre and **too much** everywhere else—heat, mass, symbols that scrolled and deleted themselves before the cogitator could log them. His helm's filters whined. The thin veil pressed against his armour like a tide finding a gap.

Corvus whispered—rare—one word:

“Anchor.”

Titus nodded.

The marker was on the wall behind the pedestal.

Imperial Gothic and something older interleaved on cut stone: *VOG NODE I—APOSTATE STRATUM—GROUND TRUTH ANCHOR. CERTIFICATION: VOID.*

The coordinate on his HUD had been confirmed without being true. Orbit had locked Node I on provisional faith while the anchor remained unverified. Ground truth meant contact with the thing the grid intended to burn.

Titus raised his auspex and scanned.

The fragment idol pulsed once—and parchment birthed from the sphere's surface, one sheet, two, a dozen, each bearing coordinates that almost matched his HUD and diverged at the last digit.

Library weather, localised—parchment birthing from the sphere faster than auspex could swallow.

He did not fire. Shooting the idol would be shooting the socket with the key still inside—Judge had not authorised destruction, only confirmation. He stepped closer instead, boots crunching eggshell powder that had seeped through the crack. The chamber floor was colder

here—five degrees below the passage, ten below the ridge if such comparisons meant anything underground. Condensation beaded on his greaves and evaporated in the lamp heat.

The idol's scale was wrong for devotion—half a metre, knee-high, small enough to hide under apostate architecture while the Lord of Change burned above. Titus had seen shrine idols on a dozen purge worlds; they wanted height, visibility, fear at distance. This one wanted proximity. It wanted hands. The bird-skull face was polished by generations of touch the Imperium had not counted because counting required admitting the touch had happened.

Corvus covered the entry crack. "Time?"

"Kael's clock."

"Sister says four minutes before burn critical."

"Then four minutes."

Mother, bleeding through Mercury's dead channel—wrong syntax, half a beat late:

"Drink if you have water. Heart rate elevated."

Wolf, same bleed, stripped to three words:

"Idol. Proximity. One."

Mother again, overlapping Wolf, both through the jam:

"Heart rate—"

"Flank—close—"

Titus killed the channel bleed with a manual filter swap—ninety seconds lost while the auspex hung idle and Kael's clock ate the penalty.

He let the auspex build a profile the way Kael had taught him in the eleven minutes while Vox-Nine burned—slow sweep, second pass at lower amplitude, third pass with the housing pressed to stone so the machine spirit could taste the anchor through rock rather than air.

The scan felt like touching something that remembered the Lord of Change idol above—same lineage, smaller throat, the root where the tree had been burned. His helm translated radiation signatures into numbers he could act on and refused to translate the rest.

On the second pass the auspex flickered—null, then overload, then a coordinate that matched Librarian's depth reading and diverged by half a metre.

"Hold," Titus said.

Corvus did not ask what for.

Third pass—housing pressed to stone, amplitude dropped, machine spirit tasting anchor through rock. The read returned wrong again: depth eleven metres, then ten-point-five, then null. Strike residue in the sensor array. Kael had warned him on the ridge; the undercroft mouth had confirmed it.

"Filter insert," Titus said.

Corvus passed a spare from his thigh pouch—undercroft particulate already greying the mesh. Titus swapped the insert with one hand, kept the auspex on the sphere with the other, ran a fourth pass at minimum amplitude.

Depth locked. The fragment idol's sphere pulsed once against his gauntlet—recognition, demand.

GROUND TRUTH: ANCHOR LOCATED

PENALTY FLAG: +90 SEC (CHANNEL BLEED / SEAL FAIL)

Judge, distant:

"Anchor contact required. Physical confirmation. Holder must maintain field."

Wolf:

"Idol. Proximity. One."

Titus holstered the auspex and placed one gauntlet on the fragment

sphere—cold stone first, then heat recognition again, the same sick pulse the plinth had given, but sharper, more intimate, as if the anchor tasted the field generator on his back and found it insufficient.

The parchment storm in the chamber stopped.

For one second—one honest second—the only sound was Corvus breathing and the secondary generator's whine.

Titus did not flinch when the pressure came.

Flinching was a language the sorcerer had tried to teach Metaurus on the ridge—love corrupted, fear given shape. The fragment idol had no time-stop, no intimacy, only **demand**: stand, hold, let the auspex drink what the sky could not see through ash and stone. Corvus watched the passage. Kael watched the generator. Metaurus slept through the moment when Node I's true name began entering Imperial record as numbers instead of heresy.

Then the sphere brightened.

Titus did not pull away.

He stood with his gauntlet on the anchor and let the auspex finish its scan while coordinates logged with a precision orbit had been waiting for since the lance fell on the shrine above.

Corvus moved—mistake—toward the pedestal to cover the flank. Titus had chosen field overlap over seal repair at the crack; Wolf's bleed had said *Proximity* and Corvus had obeyed the channel instead of the order.

The sphere spat parchment outward like a cough.

One sheet sliced Corvus's wounded pauldron seal. The gasket vented **wrong way**—outward, field ingesting ink particulate through the breach instead of sealing closed. The seal failed with a hiss Titus felt in his own atmospheric integrity warnings. Corvus staggered. Fired twice into the idol's base. Ceramite chips. Stone dust. The fragment **did not fall**.

“Titus,” Corvus said, and Titus heard the seal failure in his own atmospheric warnings before he heard the name.

Titus withdrew his gauntlet from the sphere. Logging stalled—certification paused, penalty clock running.

He keyed wired vox to Kael.

“Move secondary generator to threshold. Now.”

Kael did not argue. Servo-arms and grav-clamps and the sound of a woman who treated deadlines as physics. The generator hum deepened when she crossed into the side chamber—field overlap, load redistribution, the Omnissiah’s arithmetic done in bloodless binary.

Titus placed his gauntlet on the sphere again and did not look at Corvus’s seal until logging finished. The fragment idol’s three eyes remained closed. It did not need to see them. It needed them to hold.

When logging hit ninety-four percent—penalty flag already on the record—the parchment stopped birthing.

The chamber settled. The veil’s pressure eased one notch—less unsafe. Titus removed his gauntlet and stepped back, and the idol remained on its pedestal like a heresy that had learned patience.

Librarian flickered—one line through the jam, Mercury’s absence torn for a heartbeat:

“Node One—fragment anchor—apostate stratum confirmed.”

Then gone.

Corvus leaned against the wall, bolter low, breath controlled, seal compromised, blood visible now at the neck gasket where the pauldron met gorget.

“Done,” Titus said. To orbit. To the stone.

Judge:

“Anchor logged. Certification requires stable field at coordinate. Hold position.”

Titus looked at the marker on the wall. At the fragment scale of the anchor the lance had erased, but the root beneath it. Node I's true name cut in apostate stone.

Apostate Node I marker.

Ground truth located.

Certification still pending.

He nodded to Corvus. They withdrew to the socket chamber where Metaurus slept and Vox-Nine's empty box still smelled like burned mind, and Kael's generator counted down in a language only machines spoke fluently.

Titus had found the anchor.

Finishing was what came next—secondary generator decay accelerating, certification still pending.

Back in the socket chamber, Titus logged the anchor coordinates into his helm auspex buffer—redundant storage, triple checksum, the way orbit demanded when Mercury could not scrub transmission errors. The data felt heavy with consequence. Node I was no longer abstract grid geometry—a fragment idol with closed eyes and a sphere that had tasted his field and found it wanting.

The chamber air had changed when the anchor woke. Eggshell powder that had hung wrong in the lamp beams now lay flat on the floor, as if the veil had spent its lie budget on the parchment storm and had nothing left to spend on gravity. Condensation beaded on the sarcophagus housing where Metaurus slept. Titus wiped it with his gauntlet cuff without thinking—habit from the ridge, where particulate mist had tried to claim the box.

Corvus sat against the passage wall while Kael patched the pauldron seal with a field kit meant for engineers, engineers. The foam hissed wrong—undercroft particulate in the breach, Mercury residue from the channel bleed still ghosting the mesh. Blood had dried in a dark line from the neck gasket to the gorget rim; Corvus did not ask

for Apothecary attention. Marines asked for operational status.

“You chose field,” Corvus said.

“I chose anchor.”

“Wolf said proximity.” Corvus tested the seal with a flex—green, then yellow, then green again. “Next time I stay at crack even when Wolf bleeds.”

“Next time you stay at crack.”

Kael did not look up from the patch. “Seal yellow acceptable for withdraw. Not acceptable for combat. Recommend socket chamber only until surface.”

Corvus nodded. His left leg still dragged half a beat on the wrong-fork collapse from landing four—nothing to do about that down here except keep weight off it. Titus watched the brother breathe through the repair and did not offer to take rear line. Offering would have been theatre.

Above them, strike ash still filtered through cracks in the ceiling in thin grey threads. Somewhere on the ridge, bird cries had stopped. Down here, the only weather was lies waiting to fall again.

“Surface is next,” Titus said.

The engineeer clicked acknowledgment and returned to the generator countdown in a language only machines spoke fluently. Finishing was what came next—field integrity at sixty-two percent, secondary generator decay accelerating, certification still pending, and ninety seconds of channel bleed and wrong-way seal they would not get back.

Hold Without Voice

Corvus died on the way back to the idol.

A cultist trio in the passage where the parchment storm had thinned but not forgiven—las-lock fire from an angle Corvus's compromised seal could not shrug, one bolt from Titus that killed one heretic and not the two others quickly enough. Corvus fired anyway. Covered the grav-sled. Took the second las-burst in the throat gasket where wounded pauldron met compromised seal.

Titus killed the remaining cultists in four seconds—bolter, knife, bolter—and returned to Corvus.

He sat down.

Marines did not sit unless the body decided before the mind argued.

BROTHER STATUS: BROTHER CORVUS-CRITICAL

BROTHER STATUS: BROTHER CORVUS-KIA

SKULL ICON: BROTHER CORVUS-RED

Titus looked at the icon one heartbeat. Closed the passage with two bolts and the knife for the third cultist who thought bird-voice could substitute for aim. Then he returned to Corvus and found nothing to save.

Corvus's helm was off. Blue eyes dimming.

"Brother," Titus said.

Corvus's mouth moved. No sound. Then one word, air and blood:

“Hold.”

Titus nodded.

Corvus died.

The undercroft did not notice.

Kael reached the fragment chamber with the secondary generator screaming.

Metaurus’s sled stayed in the socket room—sus-an, grey icon, the sergeant’s sleep the only continuity left from the ridge besides Titus himself. Kael wired the generator into the anchor threshold with hands that did not shake because shaking was not in her liturgy.

“Field integrity fifty-eight. Primary asset zero. Secondary decay critical. Holder at anchor sphere. Now.”

Titus looked at Corvus’s body in the passage behind him.

At Vox-Nine’s empty sarcophagus.

At the first astropath’s ghost in the cables.

At his own gauntlets.

“Proceed,” he said.

He stood where Vox-Nine had burned.

Where the plinth had recognised the field.

Where the fragment idol on its pedestal in the side chamber waited with three closed eyes and a sphere that wanted presence more than prayer.

Kael bridged the last cable from her generator housing to the anchor plinth—a physical connection, Omnissiah copper, no psyker left to do the work minds were for.

Titus placed both gauntlets on the fragment sphere.

Warmth in the carapace seals. Kael whispered binary behind him.

Judge wanted contact held. Mercury was still dead. The battle-council had narrowed to threat vectors and the wired vox Kael still answered.

The generator failed in increments.

Titus felt each one through the cable—Kael's secondary field stuttering, recovering, stuttering again like a heart that had forgotten its rhythm. The engineeer's vox came wired, flat:

"Capacitor bank seven depleted. Rerouting from carriage unit. Metaurus sled non-responsive—sus-an draw negligible. Four minutes operational field at current decay."

Four minutes.

Parchment breathed from the sphere's surface—slower now, almost lazy, lies that had lost urgency because the anchor had what it wanted: a holder who did not break. Titus let the sheets touch his shoulders and fall. His back stayed to the passage.

He had gauntlets on a sphere and certification climbing while the field ate itself.

Kael's generator screamed—capacitor bank seven depleted, failure imminent on the secondary housing.

"Titus." Kael's vox—serial clipped. "Capacitor seven zero. Reroute carriage. Four minutes field."

"I hold," he said.

The sphere pulsed. Certification climbed while the field strained.

The cultists came when the field dipped.

Two—then four—drawn by the sound of failing machinery. Titus fired one-handed, elbow locked on the sphere, recoil trying to lift his gauntlet with each bolt. Wolf vectors painted targets in the corner of his eye even when Wolf would not speak.

The first cultist took a bolt through the chest and kept coming—bird-mutation, extra ribs, wrong geometry. Titus adjusted grouping, put the second bolt in the throat, and the body finally became weight.

The second cultist carried a chain hook and reached for the cable bridge Kael had wired to the anchor. Titus could not turn. He fired blind by vector—one bolt, miss—second bolt, hit the hook arm, ceramite and bone shattering together.

“Lieutenant—” Kael again, louder now, binary bleeding through. *“Cable contact. Sever bridge, field drops twenty-two. Certification resets forty-one.”*

“I hear you.”

“Recommend servo-arm on cable guard. Cannot guard and reroute simultaneously.”

“Guard the cable.”

Her secondary arm locked across the copper bridge like a bar across a door. A cultist las-lock burst sparked off the arm—acceptable damage, yellow on her slate, not red. Titus filed the yellow and kept both gauntlets on the sphere.

Haldor’s vox broke through jam static from the passage mouth—plasma-scorched pauldron, still operational.

“Lieutenant—mouth again. Six. Las and knife mix. One has a melta charge on a stick—bad craft, good intent.”

“Hold. Do not cross threshold.”

“Copy.” Bolter fire—three-round burst, pause, burst. *“Melta stick down. Two left on the lip. They know the anchor is here. Bird cries getting louder.”*

Las-fire stitched the passage mouth. Sparks rained on the lintel stone Haldor had cleared earlier. Titus felt the vibration through the sphere—anchor coupling the chamber to everything touching stone

within forty metres. A cultist screamed with a human throat for once, and stopped.

“One on the lip. Chain axe. Engaging.”

Metal on ceramite. Haldor grunted—impact— the sound of a Marine taking a glancing blow on pauldron and deciding it was acceptable. Titus kept both gauntlets on the sphere.

“Clear. Mouth holds.”

“Copy assumed.” A las-burst hit stone near Haldor’s position—close enough Titus heard ceramite chip. *“They are probing the wreck angle. Not charging the mouth. Yet.”*

Haldor’s vox went to static for eleven seconds. Titus counted them against the sphere’s pulse—outer ring, middle ring, inner ring, each one pulling certification up a fraction while field integrity slid the other way. Kael’s secondary generator screamed behind him. Corvus’s body cooled in the passage. The undercroft smelled of ink and cooked copper and eggshell ash.

Static broke.

“Lieutenant—mouth again. Four on the lip. Chain hook for the cable bridge.”

“Hold mouth.”

“Copy.” Chainsword rev—high whine, then impact rhythm. *“Hook man down. Two left.”*

“Haldor—status on the seal patch from landing four.”

“Yellow. Left pauldron. I can fight. I cannot take a second las burst on the throat gasket.”

“Stay on mouth. Do not cross threshold.”

“Copy. Corvus would have crossed. Orte would have made a joke about it.”

"They are calling from the wreck angle—bird cries, not human. Probing the cable run."

"Kael guards cable."

"I see her arm on the bridge. Good. Lieutenant—when this finishes, someone has to tell reclamation where Orte's chainsword is. His grip won't open."

"I logged the coordinates."

"You logged the box. Not the sword." Static. Bolter fire—two-round burst. "Mouth holds. Cable holds. Certification at ninety-three on my slate. Do not move."

"I am not moving."

"Copy." A las-burst hit stone near Haldor's position. "They think if they cut the cable they cut you. Stupid. Correct."

"Lieutenant—third wave. Four on the lip. One with a chain hook for the cable bridge. I can hold mouth. I cannot hold mouth and cable."

"Hold mouth."

"Copy." Chainsword rev—high whine, then impact rhythm, three beats, pause, two beats. A cultist shriek cut off mid-bird. "Hook man down. Two left. Las on my left pauldron—yellow, not red."

Titus fired one-handed at the hook man's backup—vector only, no sight picture—first bolt wide, second bolt through the shoulder mutation. The body spun into the passage wall and slid.

"Bridge clear for now. Cable intact. Your turn if they come again."

They came again.

Two from the wreck angle where Corvus had died—low crawlers with las-pistols duct-taped to forearms, the kind of craft that meant someone had taught them Astartes angles badly and they had learned anyway. Haldor met the first with bolter at hip height—two-round burst, throat, done. The second got close enough to slap a melta canister

against the lintel. The flash cooked stone and painted Haldor's right pauldron amber on Titus's HUD.

"Pauldron compromise. Still operational. Melta man dead—knife."

Titus heard the chainsword once more. Wet stop. Silence three seconds. Then Haldor's breath, controlled, expensive.

"Mouth holds. Cable holds. Do not move, Lieutenant."

"I am not moving."

Kael's vox cut through on the wired channel—binary clipped to words:

"Capacitor bank six at twelve percent. Field decay accelerating. Certification at ninety-one. Recommend complete or abort."

"Complete."

"Cannot complete without contact hold. You are contact."

"I know what I am."

The sphere's pulse changed—inner ring faster, middle ring slower, the anchor fighting Kael's reroute like two machine spirits arguing over the same throat. Parchment lifted from the idol base in a slow spiral, blackening at the edges where the field touched lie-matter and un-made it. One sheet brushed Titus's shoulder pauldron and left a cold stripe through ceramite sensitivity buffers—the undercroft marking a holder who stayed.

Corvus's icon in the HUD corner flickered amber, then red, then held red without commentary. The passage stayed behind his shoulder.

A fourth cultist reached the threshold—bird eyes, grin—and Titus used the knife because the bolter was one-handed and the anchor required both gauntlets except for the heartbeat it took to kill.

The cultist fell across Corvus's legs.

The knife came out.

Kael, vox wired flat through the cable noise:

"Lieutenant—Corvus in passage. Cannot retrieve. Maintain contact."

"I maintain."

"Capacitor bank six at four percent. Break contact, certification resets forty-one."

"I know."

"Kill cable contacts. You kill sphere contacts."

The fourth cultist's body twitched once on Corvus's greaves. Kael's servo-arm dragged it off the passage lip without ceremony. Titus heard metal on stone.

A fifth cultist tried the side approach—bird cry, las-lock, bad angle. Titus fired one-handed. Miss. Second bolt. Hit. The recoil tried to lift his anchor gauntlet; he leaned into the sphere until the hum steadied.

"Recoil drift point-zero-three. Do not fire unless vector closes."

"Understood."

The generator died without drama—hum gone, field collapsing toward the floor. He pushed with will and black carapace until the secondary went offline and certification stalled one step short of complete.

At ninety-eight percent the fragment idol's eyes opened.

A slit of gold. The sphere under his gauntlets burned cold. Parchment in the chamber blackened all at once and the veil's pressure snapped back like a wire cut.

The eye closed.

Certification stalled at ninety-eight percent. Field integrity at thirty-eight—holder critical.

Titus stood at the anchor with Corvus dead in the passage and

Kael's generator smoke curling from her back unit and Metaurus sleeping through the only moment Titus would have allowed him to wake.

Mercury still dead. Mother still silent. Judge still waiting.

He kept both gauntlets on the sphere.

Kael's hands moved behind him—cable splice, capacitor theft, mechadendrite threading through housing Metaurus would never approve of if he woke. Sparks jumped once and died. The generator note changed pitch, wrong harmonics, then steadied into something that might hold.

"Field integrity thirty-seven. Certification ninety-eight. Contact continuous. Do not speak to me for forty seconds."

The forty seconds were eggshell grit under boots, ink taste on filters, Corvus cooling, Haldor firing twice downslope and stopping, the sphere's inner ring pulsing against his gauntlets like a second heartbeat he did not want. At second thirty-one the gold slit opened again—one millimetre, no more—and the certification bar moved.

Ninety-nine.

The field dropped to thirty-six and held.

At second thirty-eight Kael said, *"Now."*

Titus pushed—not with muscle, with the black carapace's weight and the coordinate's arithmetic. The sphere answered. The idol's third face turned a fraction toward him.

One hundred.

The chamber exhaled. Parchment ash fell from the walls in a slow rain that did not lie. Field integrity climbed—thirty-seven, thirty-nine, forty-one—while Kael swore in binary at a capacitor that had no right to work and did anyway.

Corvus's icon stayed red.

Titus kept both gauntlets on the sphere until Kael said, *“Contact release authorised.”*

He released.

Judge:

“Certification complete. Node One anchor locked. Ground truth pending survey confirmation per archive doctrine.”

Wolf:

“Keys. Accepted.”

“Hold,” he said—habit. The anchor no longer required his gauntlets.

The fragment idol’s closed eyes did not open again. The chamber stayed quiet except for Kael logging serial numbers and Haldor’s foot-steps in the passage, checking Corvus because that was what brothers did when the anchor no longer needed a holder.

Fool's Weight

Dark first. Then the armouring chamber. Guilliman's statue watching from the wall with marble patience. Recycled sus-an fluid and the ozone of a field generator dying in a woman's hands. The chamber was a lie the membrane told to keep the mind from tearing. Metaurus knew it was a lie. He let it hold him anyway.

Titus stood in the dais ring without armour. The boy was a lieutenant in the undercroft with bird-eyes in the dark.

Metaurus had passed them. Fool override. Manual authorisation. The thing cogitators could not do.

The keys were never yours to keep.

One line from the membrane. He had never kept them. He had held Titus on a red field. He had held a squad together across three thin-veil deployments. He had held his organs inside his body with will alone until will failed.

Corvus is dead in the passage. Titus is alone with the idol. Kael's generator is dying. The boy will hold until the field breaks or the coordinate certifies. You passed him the keys because there was no one else left who could stand where psykers burned.

The statue's face blurred.

On the ridge you told him not to read the lies. He stepped on them instead. That is the boy. That is why the sorcerer saw a child.

Dark again.

Titus felt the sus-an sarcophagus hum through the deck plates—one long note, then nothing, then the note again, as if Metaurus's body were testing whether the world still existed.

He did not look at the box.

He looked at the **fragment idol**.

It squatted in the chamber's throat like a tumour carved by something that hated symmetry—three faces, each wrong, each beak-mouthed, each watching a different lie. Parchment had piled at its base in drifts the height of his greave. Eggshells cracked under his boots when he shifted weight. The air tasted of **fresh ink** and old blood.

The HUD did not use the word alone. The readout was clear anyway.

SKULL ICON: BROTHER CORVUS-KIA

SKULL ICON: BROTHER KALLAN-KIA

SKULL ICON: BROTHER VORR-KIA

SKULL ICON: BROTHER SETH-KIA

SKULL ICON: BROTHER ORTE-KIA

SKULL ICON: SERGEANT METAURUS-SUS-AN ACTIVE

PRIMARY HOLDER: LT. DEMETRIAN TITUS-WOLF CHANNEL

VOG NODE I: LOCK CONFIRMED-GROUND TRUTH PENDING

FIELD GENERATOR: SECONDARY-DEGRADED

Five red. One grey. Him.

Sister Kael worked behind the sled without speech—Mechanicus efficiency stripped to need. Her secondary generator spat static down the cable into the housing Metaurus's sarcophagus had become. The primary field was dead with the second astropath. The undercroft's thin veil pressed in like a thumb on a bruise.

"The housing will hold four more minutes," Kael said. "Four. Maybe three."

Titus nodded. Minutes on the HUD.

Corvus had died three metres from here.

Titus could see the stain without looking—dark on dark stone, already drying in the field's last clean band before the second psyker burned out and the lies came back. Corvus had held the undercroft mouth while Titus descended. Corvus had taken the las-burst meant for the sled. Assault silhouette—fast, loud in battle, silent when the icon went red.

Titus had not closed the helm visor over Corvus's face. There had not been time. There was never time on thin-veil worlds. You logged the red icon and kept moving.

He stood between the idol and the sled with one gauntlet on the auspex surveyor and one on the knife hilt. The knife had been witness on the ridge. It would witness here.

The second astropath's sarcophagus still sat chained to the sled's rear—empty restraints, cables dead, the box that had come down from orbit in the middle of the parchment storm because Mercury had gone silent and someone on *Honour's Edge* had decided a dying psyker was cheaper than losing Node I. The astropath had lasted four minutes and eleven seconds. Titus had counted. The HUD had counted. The astropath had screamed once and then stopped being a person and started being a cost line in a brief no one would read aloud.

Kael had said *acceptable loss* in Mechanicus tone.

Titus had not answered.

The fragment idol pulsed.

Attention.

Something in the Warp had felt the field narrow. It sent weight.

The chamber's temperature dropped. Parchment lifted from the drifts—and spun in lazy circles around his ankles. Bird cry from the ceiling. No birds. Never birds.

Judge:

"Ground truth pending. Holder confirm. Field integrity declining."

Mother, underneath, counting what Kael's hands already knew:

"Secondary generator—failure imminent."

Titus put his boot on the nearest parchment sheet. The ink was wet.

Metaurus's sarcophagus hummed again—that flicker, that half-breath of consciousness passing through sus-an like a knife through cloth. Titus's HUD registered nothing. The sergeant was grey and would stay grey until the Apothecarium or the grave decided otherwise.

The boy in his mind did not stir.

He adjusted the auspex against the idol's central face. The surveyor's machine spirit complained—thin veil, bad numbers, thermal noise from the strike residue still cooling in the shrine pit above. He waited until the numbers **stopped lying** long enough to matter.

Three minutes left on the field.

Above—distant, muffled by stone and ash—something moved.

Metal on stone. Chains. A voice that tried to be bird song and failed on human teeth.

Titus tracked it through the deck plates—vibration through the deck plates Six signatures, maybe seven, descending the vertical shaft from the shrine pit. Wolf did not bother to speak.

He could not climb to meet them. Could not leave the idol unlogged. Could not leave Kael with the sled and no Astartes between cultists and sus-an membrane. The geometry was simple: he held the anchor or the anchor became lies.

"Sister. Shaft cover."

Kael did and crossed to the undercroft's throat where the shaft opened upward into strike ash. She burned a support rib. Stone

groaned. A section of carved lintel dropped a choke. Dust billowed. Cultist voices became curses.

"Four minutes becomes three," she said.

"Then work faster."

She returned to the generator without offence. Mechanicus did not take offence from correct orders.

Titus raised the auspex and began to log.

Coordinate by coordinate, the Node I anchor's true position burned into the surveyor's memory.

First fix—depth, wrong, corrected. Second fix—lateral drift from the thin veil, compensated. Third fix—the idol's own warp-hum, subtracted as noise. The surveyor's machine spirit fought him like a beast that did not want to be tamed. He held it still until stillness became numbers and numbers became truth.

The fragment idol watched with three wrong faces.

Each face showed him something he ignored—Metaurus disappointed, Corvus bleeding, the second astropath burning, orbit asking for confirmation he had not yet earned. Projections. The idol's oldest trick. Noise.

He subtracted noise.

Sister Kael's generator screamed once and steadied. Mechaden-drites flashed amber. She was borrowing coil time from the sus-an housing—stealing sleep from Metaurus to buy seconds for ground truth. The sergeant would not feel it. The Apothecarium might notice later.

Titus filed that as acceptable and hated that the word had a use.

The sus-an sarcophagus hummed its long note.

Metaurus was asleep.

The keys had passed to Titus on the ridge.

Titus held them anyway—Wolf channel, primary holder—and the undercroft held with him, three minutes at a time.

Above the choke point, cultists fired las-lock bursts into dust. One bolt skipped down the shaft and sparked off the idol's shoulder. Stone chipped. The fragment anchor liked violence—fed on it, maybe, the way apostate things fed on attention.

Titus did not give it attention. He gave it measurement.

Two minutes.

The auspex tone changed—higher pitch, machine spirit satisfaction or machine spirit pain, he could not tell and did not care. The lock caught. Ground truth became not a hope but a procedure one step from complete.

Judge:

"Survey progress—sixty-two percent. Holder maintain."

He maintained.

Kael's voice—flat, binary edged:

"Shaft choke failing. Contact in ninety seconds."

Ninety seconds was enough if orbit was honest and the machine spirit was not lying and the field did not drop.

Titus worked through it.

He logged the final coordinate fix with the auspex pressed to the idol's broken beak-mouth—stone cold, vibration wrong, real—and held the contact until the surveyor confirmed **packet ready**.

The undercroft held.

Above the choke, las-fire stopped.

Then started again—wild, untargeted. Cultists firing at stone that had failed them.

Wolf:

"Contact. Shaft. Mass—marginal. Hold."

Titus pressed the auspex to the idol's beak-mouth and held until the machine spirit sang the tone that meant sent.

Judge:

"Survey packet—received. Certification—processing. Secondary strike—authorisation pending."

The cultists above fired wild—las-lock into dust, bird cries without formation. Wolf logged marginal mass. Titus kept both gauntlets on the anchor until the packet status read SENT.

The chamber smelled of ink and eggshell and burnt machine oil from Kael's housing. Stone sweat beaded on the spiral pillars.

Ground Truth

The auspex finished its work at the same moment Sister Kael's generator finished its argument with physics.

The undercroft never went silent. Stone ticked. Parchment settled. The fragment idol's three faces caught strike-light leaking through cracks in the ceiling and held it wrong, like a mouth remembering how to smile. But the numbers stopped fighting him.

The auspex packet was ready. Transmit and survive.

He did not trust the count on his HUD. He trusted weight—the auspex housing pressed flat to stone, the sled chains biting his wrists, Kael's generator scream under her hands.

Forty-seven seconds.

Titus did not look at the timer. He had procedure—the Codex reduced to what a gauntlet and a surveyor and a body standing where a psyker had burned could do.

The undercroft chamber was smaller than the ridge and older—stone carved before the Imperium had names for this world, before the apostate shrine above had been built to hide what slept below. Eggshells crunched under his boots—empty, dry, the residue of lies that had hatched wrong. The air tasted of copper and ink.

He keyed the transmit stud.

The machine spirit ate the coordinates and spat them upward

through stone and ash and the thin veil's hiccupping interference. Orbit would receive or it would not. The work was local. The work was his.

Judge:

"Receiving. Ground truth packet—fragmentary. Confirm anchor."

Titus placed the auspex flat against the idol's base—cold stone, warmer lie—and held it there while the surveyor sang its confirmation tone into his wrist. Minimal. No chaplain. No incense. The ritual was **contact and stillness** and a Marine who did not break when the field guttered.

"Confirm," he said.

One word.

Librarian—archive strata, grid doctrine, voice like parchment turned by someone who had never been on a planet:

"Node One anchor—apostate fragment. Cross-reference Zsah'uj strike residue. Pattern match: eighty-one percent. Certification requires field stability at transmit."

The field stability was **forty-one seconds**.

Kael's hands moved across the generator housing—red robes dark with undercroft grime, mechadendrites clicking like insect legs. She did not ask for help. Mechanicus did not ask Space Marines for help with machines. She worked.

"The secondary coil is fused," she said. "I am borrowing from the sarcophagus housing. The sergeant's sus-an will not notice. You will notice if the field drops."

Titus nodded.

He noticed everything anyway—the weight of five red skull icons, the grey one that was Metaurus, the second astropath's empty box still chained to the sled where orbit had dropped it after Corvus died holding the mouth of the undercroft.

Corvus had been heavy—assault silhouette, fast in the parchment storm, slow when the las-burst opened his seal at the throat. Titus had dragged him clear of the idol's line of sight because dead brothers should not watch you fail. Then Corvus's icon had gone red and Titus had stopped counting brothers and started counting minutes.

Forty seconds.

The fragment idol pulsed again objection. The anchor knew it was being measured. The Library did not like accounts that closed.

Parchment lifted. Three sheets. Five. A dozen. They spun around Titus's shoulders like birds that had forgotten they were paper. He did not swat them. Swatting was drama. He stood in the centre of the chamber with the auspex transmitting and let the lies **fail to land**.

Mercury tried to speak—vox warfare, comms degradation—and choked on static:

“—jamming—local bleed—cannot —”

Then nothing. Mercury silent. Good. Mercury lying was worse than Mercury silent.

Wolf:

“Contact. Upper shaft. Six.”

Six hostiles in the vertical shaft that led to the destroyed shrine pit. Titus could not leave the anchor. Could not climb to meet them. Could only hold and trust that six cultists without a sorcerer were just meat with bad timing.

Thirty seconds.

The ground truth packet climbed. He felt it in the auspex's vibration—numbers leaving the undercroft like blood leaving a wound, necessary.

Cultists breached the choke—he heard it, stone shifting, a body falling past the shaft mouth in a spray of ash and scream. **Wolf:**

“Contact. Shaft. Four.”

Four now. Not six. Kael’s choke had cost them.

From the shaft mouth came las-lock fire—wild, bird-chanted, the shots sparking off the chamber ceiling where apostate carvings held lies in the stone. Titus could not return fire without breaking contact with the auspex. Corvus was dead on the passage floor. Kael was the only other body in the chamber.

The choke point was the shaft itself—narrow, vertical, one body width. Kael had wedged a fallen lintel across the mouth at an angle that left a kill slot no wider than a bolter. Cultists had to come through one at a time or not at all.

The engineer did not look up from the generator. She rerouted a capacitor with a servo-arm while binaric spilled from her vox-grille. A cultist rappelled into the shaft mouth—chain hook, feather sutures, bird eyes—and Kael’s secondary arm caught him mid-drop, crushed the ribcage, dropped the body back into the vertical. Stone shifted under the corpse weight. The lintel held.

“Shaft clear—thirty seconds,” she said.

“Hold transmit,” Titus said.

Titus did not turn.

Judge:

“Ground truth—eighty-nine percent. Field stability required for certification. Holder confirm.”

“I confirm,” Titus said.

Twenty seconds.

Kael slapped the generator housing. Something inside screamed and obeyed. The field strengthened—a band of clean air around the idol and the auspex and Titus’s boots, thin as a blade edge.

“Transmit,” she said.

He was already transmitting.

Ten seconds.

The idol's central face cracked—stress. Fine lines radiating from the beak-mouth. Dust fell. The anchor was dying wrong, the way apostate things died when truth touched them.

The field wavered. Kael's mechadendrite locked a bypass and held it with violence.

GROUND TRUTH: LOGGED

VOG NODE I: CERTIFICATION PENDING

FIELD: COLLAPSE IMMINENT

The field was gone.

The thin veil rushed in like cold water. Parchment exploded upward in a storm that had no wind. The auspex shrieked in his grip—machine spirit panicking as lies tried to rewrite the numbers after transmit.

Titus did not let go.

He held the auspex to the stone until the surveyor's tone went flat and the packet status line read SENT and could not be unsent.

The parchment storm lasted eleven seconds.

He counted.

Each second was a place a lesser man might have broken—might have seen Corvus in the spinning sheets, Metaurus with bird eyes, the second astropath burning again. The Lie without a sorcerer was cheap—recycled horror, Library scraps.

The child in him did not look.

The child had never learned to read.

Eleven seconds ended.

Parchment fell.

Then he drew his bolt pistol and fired three rounds into the fragment idol's central face.

Stone and beak-mouth became rubble. The anchor **stopped pulsing**. The parchment storm lost its centre and fell like dirty snow.

A cultist dropped into the chamber behind him—las-lock raised, bird-eyes wide. Titus fired without turning fully—one bolt, upper group, the split muscle memory did not require sight. The cultist came apart. The body slid toward the idol rubble like an offering refused.

Silence—real silence, for one breath.

Judge:

“Ground truth logged. Certification pending orbital verification. Extraction window—opening.”

Titus lowered the pistol.

His mag-count was low. His brothers were red. Metaurus was grey. Certification was not certified. The field was dead. Four cultists were still in the shaft. The coordinates were real.

He reloaded from the partial mag on his belt—two seconds, no fumbling—and checked the sled chains. Metaurus's sarcophagus had not shifted. The sus-an hum was steady. Whatever Kael had stolen from the housing, the sergeant had not noticed.

He looked at the auspex one last time, then clipped it to his belt.

“Sister. Sled. Now.”

Kael was already moving—mechadendrites locking the generator scrap to the sled frame, chains rattling, binary prayer under her breath. She did not ask about the cultist corpse. Mechanicus did not ask about corpses on thin-veil worlds.

They hauled uphill toward the shaft—toward strike ash and cold sky and the secondary strike orbit would want after certification.

The passage was narrow—Corvus's blood on the stone, eggshells,

parchment drifts knee-deep in places. The walls sweated cold moisture that left white trails on Titus's pauldrons when he brushed them. Kael's generator scrap sparked once against a spiral-carved pillar and she killed the circuit with a binary curse.

Somewhere above, the pit mouth breathed heat and ink. Somewhere below, the anchor chamber was rubble where the idol had been. Between them, Titus hauled a sled that weighed like doctrine—sus-an fluid, ceramite housing, a sergeant who would not wake to see the sky again until Apothecarium said otherwise.

"Field dead," she said. "Haul speed is now physics only."

"Understood."

Kael took the lower chain, mechadendrites braced against the sled's lateral strut. Titus took the haul weight—Astartes mass and ceramite and the sus-an box that was heavier than Metaurus had ever been in life because sleep was dense.

The sled tipped on the first upward metre—Metaurus's housing canting left, chain load shifting to Kael's mechadendrites. She slapped a grav-clamp to the lateral strut and the housing righted with a groan Titus felt through his wrists.

"Centre of mass high," she said. "You take lead chain. I take drag. If we swap, sled rolls."

"Lead."

Each metre uphill cost breath. The undercroft's throat narrowed at the choke—stone Kael had burned to drop on cultists, now half-collapsed again from the anchor's death spasm. Titus wedged his shoulder under a fallen lintel and Kael shoved the sled through the gap at an angle that kept the sus-an box level. Ceramite scraped. Metaurus's housing did not alarm.

Halfway up the bend the sled snagged on a spiral pillar—lateral strut caught on carved stone, chain tension spiking yellow on Kael's slate. Titus braced the uphill chain with both gauntlets and lifted the hous-

ing two centimetres while Kael worked the strut free with a servo-arm. Three seconds of static load. His left knee particulate warning flickered and cleared.

“Clear,” she said.

They hauled again.

The cultists saw him coming.

They always saw Astartes coming. That was not the problem. The problem was whether they understood what came with the silhouette.

One fired las-lock—wide, panicked. Titus absorbed on pauldron and fired once. The second cultist tried to climb past the choke into the undercroft—wrong direction, desperate. Titus caught the ankle with gauntlet grip, pulled, fired downward. The body fell past him into darkness.

He climbed back down.

Kael had not moved. Mechanicus discipline.

“Clear,” he said.

They hauled again.

The passage tilted upward—five degrees, then eight, then enough that the sled chains bit into Titus’s gauntlet interfaces. Sweat inside the helm. Multi-lung compensating. Kael’s breath came in binary bursts on the vox, from calculation—load, angle, housing stress, serial numbers she would cite if the Apothecarium asked later.

At the steepest bend Metaurus’s housing shifted lateral—sus-an fluid slosh audible through the seal, centre of mass crossing the line Kael had warned about. Titus dropped to one knee and took the full sled weight on his shoulder while Kael reset the grav-clamp and re-threaded the lower chain through a different strut hole.

“Angle eighteen degrees,” she said. “Housing stress red if we do not pause.”

“No pause.”

“Acknowledged.” Three seconds of binary prayer. The clamp seated. The housing levelled. Titus rose without complaint and hauled again.

Parchment drifts knee-deep in the bend where Corvus had died. Titus waded through without reading. Ink particulate hung in the air—eggshell powder mixed with strike residue from the shaft mouth above, a grey fog that made auspex useless and made every cultist signature a guess until Wolf spoke.

The spiral pillars here were carved with concentric rings that hurt to track—the eye wanted to follow them and the mind did not want to follow. Titus looked at his boots instead. Boots on eggshells. Boots on stone. Boots on a brother’s blood where the passage narrowed.

“Angle increasing,” Kael said. “Housing lateral stress—yellow.”

“No pause.”

She clicked acknowledgment. Mechanicus did not argue with correct orders.

The undercroft exhaled cold behind them—the fragment rubble cooling, the anchor dead, the Library’s attention seeking new mouths. Titus felt the thin veil’s pressure on his seal—minor warnings. Acceptable.

Everything was acceptable until it was red.

The shaft mouth appeared—a circle of bruised sky—and strike ash blinded his auto-senses for one second. He did not stop.

At the mouth, the world changed temperature—strike heat above, undercroft cold below. Zsah’uj’s sky was bruised metal colour. Clouds moved too fast—particulate shear, Mercury dead, shapes unreliable. Ash on the lip was still warm from the secondary lance’s afterglow; it crunched under his greaves in a crust that flaked and rose in the gunship downdraft that had not yet returned. Ridge wind carried cordite and cooked promethium and the sweet wrongness that followed them

up from the anchor chamber like a thread tied to the stone.

Corvus was dead in the passage below. Vox-Nine was dead in the anchor chamber. Metaurus was grey in the sled. Titus hauled over the pit lip with a partial mag and a ground truth packet already sent.

Wolf:

“Perimeter—scattered. Proceed.”

Behind them, the undercroft collapsed inward with a sound like a fist closing on a throat—stone dust and ink particulate rushing up the shaft in a warm gust that tasted of eggshell and cordite.

Ahead—surface.

Titus hauled Metaurus’s sleep toward daylight.

The pit air hit his filters—ash, ozone, strike residue, honest. No ink. No eggshell. The undercroft’s vocabulary ended at the shaft mouth. Ridge wind pushed warm across his pauldrons for the first time since descent.

Kael tripped once on Corvus’s blood-slick stone. Titus caught the sled—no pause, no ceremony—and kept climbing.

Surface was work still. Surface was never safety on Zsah’uj. Surface was where orbit could see you and cultists could mass.

But surface was where secondary strikes landed.

He climbed toward it anyway.

The shaft gave way to pit slope—rubble at forty degrees, strike glass under ash, the tank wreck’s black silhouette marking the horizon like a dead beast. Kael’s generator scrap rattled on her back. Metaurus’s susan hum traveled through the chains into Titus’s wrists—steady, grey, real.

Las-fire stitched the pit rim. Wolf marked two signatures, then one, then none. Scattered. Grieving. The heretics’ vocabulary after the anchor died.

Titus hauled across open ground—eighty metres, a hundred, a hundred twenty—while the pit mouth smoked behind them.

Open ground changed the physics. Undercroft had been vertical load and chain bite; surface was lateral shear and ash that hid strike glass. The sled runner caught on vitrified stone; Titus hauled left while Kael hauled right until the housing cleared and the runners slid again. Metaurus's sus-an fluid sloshed—audible through the seal, a reminder that sleep was mass and mass had a centre.

"Recommend reduce speed," Kael said. "Housing lateral stress yellow."

"No reduce."

"Acknowledged."

A gust off the ridge pushed ash horizontal across the sled path. Titus turned his shoulder into it and took the wind load so Kael could keep the lower chain taut. Visibility dropped to twenty metres. Wolf logged nothing—good, bad, same on Zsah'uj when ash lied about distance.

At a hundred metres the sled tipped on a rubble lip—right runner airborne, chain load snapping to Titus's wrists. He dropped the haul weight onto his knee and shoulder, ceramite scraping strike glass, and held until Kael slapped the grav-clamp and the housing settled level again.

"Clear," she said.

Kael's vox, wired, flat: "Housing stress increasing. Recommend pod ring centre."

"I see it."

They hauled the last eighty metres to the pod ring in silence broken only by generator scrap rattling and sus-an hum and breath.

The pod ring was ferrocrete and orbit's geometry—a circle cut into Zsah'uj's crust years ago for extractions exactly like this one. Titus did

not know if he would reach it before the secondary strike. He knew he would reach it or stop trying.

Metaurus slept through the haul.

The sergeant would sleep through the lance.

Titus hauled.

The Lie Returns

They did not reach the shaft before the veil reached them.

Titus hauled the sled—Metaurus's sarcophagus, chains, the weight of a sleeping sergeant and every lesson he had while Kael braced the generator housing with her body and two mechadendrites like a woman holding a door against a flood. The undercroft sloped upward toward the shrine pit, toward strike ash and cold sky and extraction.

Six cultists in the shaft became sound—scrabbling, bird-voiced, desperate.

Then the sound stopped—pause without sorcerer, the veil remembering how to hurt without a hand to guide it.

His auto-senses greyed out.

The HUD stripped itself down to skull icons and nothing else—five red, one grey, him holding the chains. The undercroft vanished.

He stood on the ridge again—impossible, wrong—with the dead shrine burning behind him and cultist bodies scattered like bad geometry. The air was pre-strike. The sorcerer was still meat on the temple steps. Metaurus stood at his left, whole, seal intact, bolt pistol raised—wrong, too light, too certain.

The vision knew his order—what he loved, what he feared losing. It did not know he did not fear. That was the flaw in every Lie on Zsah'uj. The sorcerer had found the flaw and died to it. The corridor found it still.

"Titus," Metaurus said.

The voice was right. The weight was wrong—too light, too certain, no wet breath behind the vox-grate.

"You held when I asked you not to," the sergeant said. "The tank. The box. You always hold when you should release."

Titus did not answer.

Metaurus had fallen once—Titus corrupted, Titus grinning with bird eyes, the shame of believing for one heartbeat. There was no sorcerer to bisect this time. No staff to break. Only the Lie wearing his mentor's face.

Behind the sergeant's shape, the dead shrine burned wrong—flames frozen mid-tongue, strike light that had not yet landed. Titus saw himself on the temple steps in the vision's margin—younger, knife wet, staff broken. The Lie showed both at once.

The Metaurus-thing lowered his weapon.

"Wolf channel," it said. "Primary holder. Orbit loves a weapon that does not break."

"You left the box," the Metaurus-thing said softly. "On the march. For the tank. Metaurus told you not to. You always choose violence when protocol asks for stillness."

Titus did not answer.

Parchment spun at Titus's feet. Fresh ink. The Library's ledger.

"You were always the solution," the thing said. "The Emperor's empty vessel. No brothers left to doubt you."

The ridge flickered.

Metaurus's face split—gold sclera showing beneath the helm's edge. Bird cry from human throat. The thing that wore his sergeant smiled with too many teeth.

“Corvus died because you logged instead of firing. Kael will die because you haul a sled instead of her. Metaurus sleeps because you chose the box. You are hungry.”

The ridge was not real.

He looked at his hands. Gauntlets. Black carapace interface. **His.**

The Lie pressed closer—intimacy as weapon.

You will outlive every brother who taught you.

He did not flinch.

Inside—deeper than HUD, deeper than organs—the child moved.

The pre-fear self the sorcerer had looked at on the ridge and found nothing to corrupt.

The child looked at the Metaurus-thing and did not understand it.

The beak-mouth stuttered.

The ridge flickered again.

The vision showed him Corvus—alive, whole—stepping between Titus and the idol. *You could have blocked the las-burst*, Corvus said with Metaurus’s voice. *You were logging.*

Corvus’s icon on the HUD was red. The vision lied. Titus knew the icon was red because the HUD was honest when the world was not.

He chose the HUD.

Corvus-thing dissolved into parchment.

“You will hold,” the Metaurus-thing said, and now it was Titus’s own voice coming out of Metaurus’s throat—worse, intimate—“until holding is all you are.”

Titus stepped forward through the vision.

He did not care if it was real or false. He scraped the parchment aside with his boot heel and kept walking uphill with the sled chains

biting his gauntlet.

The ridge tore.

Undercroft stone returned—cold, real, weighted. Ridge wind hit his filters before his auto-senses finished rebooting: chemical load from strike residue, cordite cooked into rain that had never fallen, ash fine enough to coat his tongue through the scrubbers. He tasted metal and burned promethium and something sweet underneath—the eggshell wrongness the undercroft had taught his rebreather to hate.

His auto-senses blinked back online one channel at a time like eyes opening after sus-an.

Wolf:

“Contact. Shaft. Six. Closing.”

Six—more than Wolf had counted at choke. The undercroft replenished heretics faster than the shaft choke had killed them.

The cultists were thirty metres above, las-locks and scavenged chain weapons, bird-eyes catching the last grey light from Kael’s dead generator housing.

No sorcerer.

Just meat.

Titus planted the sled brake—Mechanicus design, Kael’s work—and met the first cultist before the shaft widened into pit.

Bolter at twenty metres. Knife at two. Economy.

The first cultist charged—bird cry, chain axe, sloppy footwork. Titus fired—upper group—and moved before the body landed. Second cultist—las-lock burst, low, meant for Kael. Titus stepped into the line, pauldron absorb, knife distance closed in two strides. Throat. Clean. Third.

The fourth hung back at the shaft mouth—smarter, or more afraid, which was the same thing on Zsah’uj now.

Titus raised the bolt pistol. Partial mag. He counted rounds the way he counted brothers—exactly.

The fourth cultist ran upward, toward ash and scattered survivors. Let him run. Running spread fear without cost.

The fifth did not run.

Woman, mutation early-stage, las-lock trembling. She fired once—miss—and dropped the weapon like it had burned her.

Titus did not kill her. One partial mag. Extraction window. Sled to move.

She crawled backward into the dark until the undercroft swallowed her.

Kael shouted from the sled—binary clipped to Gothic through a dying vox:

“Lieutenant. Shaft angle forty-two degrees. Generator offline. Brace two minutes.”

“Two is enough.”

She locked her mechadendrites to the sarcophagus lateral and braced against the stone. The undercroft wall sweated cold moisture that smelled of eggshell powder and old ink. Stone groaned when Kael burned the support rib. Dust billowed—white and grey mixed, tasting sweet on his filters for one breath before the rebreather scrubbed it.

Titus fired at twenty metres. Moved before the body landed.

The generator spat once and died.

The field was gone.

Titus holstered the pistol, grabbed the sled chains, and ran uphill toward ash and cold sky. Metaurus’s sus-an hum travelled through the chains into his gauntlet—steady, grey, real.

The shrine pit opened above him like a punched socket in the world’s face. Strike residue still glowed in the fracture lines. Bruised-

metal sky. Wind off the ridge pushed ash horizontal across the pit floor—warm in the lance-heated pockets, cold in the shadow of the tank wreck, tasting of ionised stone on every inhale. Four cultists at the rim had not yet heard the Lie fail in the dark.

The first lunged from pit-rim rubble—bird cry, scavenged sword. Titus fired without stopping the sled—one hand on chain, one on pistol. The cultist dropped. Three remained.

Kael shoved the sled right while Titus fired again. Second cultist down. Third fled toward the ridge line where dawn had climbed six hours ago and left bruised light. Fourth charged stupid.

Knife distance.

The blade entered the fourth cultist's sternum and exited through compromised rib armour. Titus cleaned on the corpse and sheathed without slowing.

"Sister. Run."

They ran across the pit floor—two hundred metres of broken ferrocrete and strike glass between purge locus and extraction geometry. Las-fire stitched ash around them. Grieving fire.

Titus ran.

Behind him, stone settled. Parchment fell. The fragment rubble cooled where ground truth had been logged.

The pit air was thin with strike residue—filters working overtime, seal warnings flickering and clearing. Kael coughed binary. Metaurus's housing did not cough.

At the pit lip, ridge wind doubled—ash in his faceplate, visibility dropping to thirty metres, the chemical bite of second fire still in the air from the lance he had not yet survived. Veil-shed mist beaded on his pauldron where thermal ash had lodged. The downslope smelled of wet cordite and cooked stone mixed with ink from the collapsed undercroft mouth.

He tasted ash through the scrubbers anyway—fine enough to coat his tongue, sweet underneath the metal, the eggshell wrongness that had followed them up the shaft. Zsah'uj's sky was bruised metal colour. Clouds moved too fast. Shapes unreliable with Mercury dead.

Wolf spoke once:

"Perimeter—scattered. Proceed to pod ring."

Titus kept hauling.

The ridge above the pit showed its weather honestly now—no sorcerer left to edit it. Wind came in gusts that pushed ash horizontal across the pit floor, then died to stillness long enough to hear cultist scavengers retreating toward the horizon. Strike residue cooled in the fracture lines with a smell like ionised stone and promethium and something sweet from the buried shrine. His filters worked. His seals flickered warnings and cleared. Multi-lung. Controlled.

Halfway to the pod ring the wind shifted downslope—cold first, then hot pockets where lance glass still held heat from the morning strike. Ash stuck to his greave joints in grey paste. Kael's robes were white with eggshell dust at the hem. Metaurus's sarcophagus left a track in the ash like a plough line Titus could follow backward if he needed to.

A las-lock burst stitched the ridge crest—one shot, wide, grief not mass. Titus did not return fire. The shooter withdrew. Wolf marked nothing.

At the pod ring lip the ferrocrete was warm under his boots—extraction geometry holding yesterday's heat. Strike pylons hummed at a frequency his auto-senses logged and ignored. Ridge weather honest: bruised sky, fast clouds, bird cries absent, cordite and cooked stone in every third breath.

Kael's vox, when she used it, stayed numbers. Metaurus's sus-an hum through the chains stayed grey.

Lance for Node One

The undercroft mouth breathed cold.

Titus broke surface into the shrine pit—the crater orbit’s first lance had made of the dead temple, stone turned to memory, strike residue still glowing in cracks like veins of false dawn. Ash moved in thin sheets across his greaves. The sky was the colour of bruised metal. *Honour’s Edge* was up there, invisible, real.

The pit was deeper than it had been at dawn—first strike geometry, rubble slides, the undercroft mouth a black throat he had climbed from with ground truth logged and field dead. The air tasted of second strikes waiting.

Four cultists followed him out of the shaft.

He did not turn to count. Wolf had already counted.

“Four. Rear. Closing.”

Kael stumbled into ash beside the sled, generator dead on her back like a corpse she refused to abandon. Metaurus’s sarcophagus rode the incline where rubble met rubble—sus-an hum steady, grey skull icon steady, the sergeant’s last gift sleeping through the end of the world.

Titus fired once backward without looking. A cultist stopped being a problem. Three remained between him and the pod ring.

The pit’s rim was forty metres. The pod ring where Thunderhawk

extraction would open was another two hundred across broken ground that had been holy this morning and was now just geometry. Las-fire from the ridge—survivors, scavengers, bird-voiced heretics who had stitched the ash around his boots.

One bolt caught his left pauldron—seal warning, not breach. He absorbed it and kept hauling.

The sled was heavy—sus-an fluid, ceramite housing, Metaurus's body and every doctrine not yet finished. Kael pushed from the lateral strut, robes ash-grey, mechadendrites locked to keep the housing level. She breathed in binary. He breathed in counts.

Forty metres became thirty.

The pit's eastern rim threw a shadow long enough to hide las-lock teams. Titus read angles while he hauled. A cultist with a scavenged chain weapon dropped from the lip onto the sled chain—mistake, brief. Titus backhanded the heretic off with gauntlet mass, fired one bolt into the descent. The body hit ash and slid.

Twenty metres.

The ground between pit and pod ring was broken shrine stone, strike glass under ash, cultist dead cooling in piles where las-fire had stopped being selective. Titus hauled the sled through it without stopping. Kael's boots slipped once on vitrified glass; she caught the strut and did not fall. Metaurus's housing swayed but stayed level—the sus-an fluid inside sloshing once against the seal, a sound like water in a metal throat.

A cultist scout rose from a tank wreck viewport—the same viewport Titus had killed through on the ridge push. Bird eyes. Las-lock. Titus fired without dropping the chain. The bolt took the scout in the shoulder; the body fell back into the wreck. Second shot through the viewport glass. Silence.

Fifteen metres to the ring. Ridge wind pushed ash sideways across the sled path. Titus tasted copper and promethium and the sweet

wrong trace that had followed them up from the undercroft. His left pauldron seal warning flickered yellow, cleared green.

Ten metres to the ring centre. Pod ring ferrocrete ahead—scorched concentric circles, strike pylons humming at the edge of hearing. Thunderhawk extraction window still closed. Wolf logged two heat signatures on the ridge, non-mass, recording equipment only.

Five metres to the ring centre. Titus did not stop.

Judge:

“Ground truth verified. Anchor fragment destroyed—undercroft collapse imminent. Secondary strike—Node One undercroft anchor—authorisation requested. Confirm holder.”

The words landed upper case and final.

Secondary strike. The undercroft anchor beneath the pit. The fragment idol he had shot to rubble. The node Titus had logged with auspex and body.

Orbital wanted to certify by erasing what he had measured.

“I confirm,” Titus said.

Judge:

“Holder confirmed. Secondary grid—VOG NODE I—undercroft anchor. Purge authorised. Window—ninety seconds. Clear blast radius or accept mortality.”

Ninety seconds.

The blast radius was the pit, the ridge approach, the ground he stood on.

He could drag the sled behind the tank wreck’s tilting shield—or stand in the open and keep hauling while the lance counted down. The shield would not stop peripheral strike. It would stop las-fire. Kael’s housing would survive either geometry. Metaurus would not wake to choose.

Titus kept hauling in the open.

The pit rim was rubble slides, dead cultist piles, the tank wreck's tilting shield casting a shadow long enough to hide las-lock teams. Titus read angles while he hauled.

Two cultists crested the pit lip.

Titus dropped the chains long enough to kill one with the knife—throat, under arm, economical—and shot the second through the beak-mutation before the face could finish becoming bird.

Zero rear contact.

A third cultist fired from the tank wreck viewport—the same viewport he had killed through on the ridge push. Full circle. Titus returned fire—one bolt—glass and scream again. The machine spirit of the tank was still dead. Good.

Wolf:

“Clear. Perimeter—scattered. Non-mass.”

Scattered.

Sixty seconds.

The sky changed.

Pressure on his auto-senses—the same weight he had felt when the first lance hit the Lord of Change idol. His auto-senses dimmed voluntarily as the strike cruiser's targeting spirit found the undercroft anchor through ash and residual warp-noise and the ground truth he had logged.

Atlas, void cartography, one line:

“Node One—anchor fix—acquired.”

Thirty seconds.

Kael's vox crackled—Mechanicus frequency, stripped of liturgy:

“The sarcophagus housing will survive peripheral strike. The sergeant will not wake. You may wish to **look away**.”

Titus did not look away.

Fifteen seconds to strike. He planted his boots wide and faced the pit mouth—the undercroft throat where eggshells and parchment and the fragment idol’s rubble still held the Library’s attention. The anchor was dead. Orbital would make it forgotten.

Kael dropped behind the sled cover from las-fire.

Ten seconds. Five red skulls. One grey.

Judge:

“Strike in five. Holder hold. Confirm.”

“I hold,” Titus said.

The world went white.

Light without warmth passed through the pit and into the undercroft. Stone cracked without sound. The anchor that had pulsed against his auspex became nothing—a hole where a heresy had squatted.

The shockwave hit him in the chest like a giant’s palm.

He did not fly. Power armour was heavy and he was planted and the sled skidded half a metre and stopped because he had locked his knees and accepted mortality the way the brief had always asked.

Ash returned. Zsah’uj ash. The taste of the episode’s ending scaled down to one node—local, temporary, true.

The undercroft mouth collapsed—stone folding inward—and the shockwave’s second pulse rolled across the pit rim and stripped scavenged banners from dead cultist poles.

His auto-senses rebooted.

SECONDARY STRIKE: COMPLETE

VOG NODE I-ANCHOR: PURGED

UNDER CROFT: COLLAPSED

CERTIFICATION: IN PROGRESS

ATMOSPHERIC SEAL: COMPROMISED-MODERATE

Moderate. He could walk two hundred metres.

Judge:

“Strike complete. Certification—processing.”

Titus picked up the sled chains.

Las-fire from the ridge stopped shock. Even bird-voiced heretics understood what it meant when the sky answered twice in one day.

Two hundred metres to the pod ring.

Behind him, the pit smoked.

Above him, *Honour’s Edge* counted the next window.

He started walking.

The two hundred metres to the pod ring were not a straight line. Strike collapse had turned the pit lip into a field of vitrified shards—glass that caught the bruised sky and threw it back wrong, warm under his greaves where the lance had flash-heated stone seconds ago. Ash lay in drifts against the sarcophagus sled’s runners; Kael cursed in binary when the housing scraped a ridge of fused rock and checked the lateral stress read before allowing another step.

Wind off the ridge carried fewer bird cries now—survivors recording, not charging. Chemical bite from the buried shrine layered over cordite and promethium.

Halfway to the ring, a cultist scout broke cover fifty metres upslope—las-lock, no mass behind him, lens pointed at the Thunderhawk’s expected descent vector. Titus raised the bolt pistol. One round. The scout dropped the recorder and crawled backward into rubble that still smelled of cooked stone. Kael did not look up from the generator housing. “Perimeter negligible. Continue.”

The pit floor was a maze of strike glass and collapsed ferrocrete—footing that shifted under greaves, sled chains rattling, Kael's mechadendrites locked to the lateral strut so she could brace and walk simultaneously. Wind off the ridge pushed ash into their faceplates in horizontal sheets. Visibility dropped to forty metres, then thirty, then enough to see the las-cannon flash in the strike crack ahead.

A cultist cell had dug into the crack with a heavy las-cannon salvaged from traitor armour. The first burst meant to kill.

Titus saw the muzzle flash before Wolf spoke.

He shoved Kael right—sled mass continuing forward on inertia—and took the burst on his left pauldron and shoulder seal. Warning flared red. Acceptable.

The return fire was three bolts—upper group, lower group, centre mass on the crack mouth. Silence inside. Smoke out.

The tank wreck's tilting shield appeared through ash-haze—Metaurus's old cover, Titus's wrong-protocol grenade, the reactor wound still leaking heat that made the air shimmer. He did not look at it long.

The pod ring appeared as a coin of scorched ferrocrete orbit had cut into the continent years ago—concentric scorch rings like tree rings, ash settled into grooves, ferrocrete warm from the lance's afterglow. Heat rose through sole interfaces in a pulse that matched nothing in his HUD except atmospheric compromise. Somewhere above, two heat signatures flickered and withdrew.

Kael matched his pace without being asked. Metaurus's sarcophagus hummed through the chains—sus-an steady, grey steady.

The auspex on his belt was singed but logged.

Titus entered the pod ring centre where certification would ask him to become the asset.

The ferrocrete under his boots was still warm from the day's second lance. Concentric extraction rings showed in the stone—older briefs, older coordinates, older holders who had walked this circle and been extracted or not. Strike pylons at the ring edge still hummed at a frequency his auto-senses logged and ignored.

Wind off the ridge carried the last chemical bite of the day's fire. Ash settled in the ring grooves. The shrine pit behind him smoked. The undercroft below was collapsed and certified and forgotten.

Metaurus slept through the crossing.

Certified

The pod ring was a circle of scorched ferrocrete orbit had cut into Zsah'uj's flesh years ago. Titus reached it with the sled and Kael and ninety seconds of life he had not spent.

Wind off the ridge carried bird cries and the chemical bite of second-strike residue. The ferrocrete under his boots was warm from the lance's afterglow, heat rising through sole interfaces in a slow pulse that matched nothing in his HUD except atmospheric compromise. Concentric scorch rings from older extractions showed in the stone like tree rings. Ash had settled into the grooves and turned grey-brown where rain had not yet reached this side of the continent.

Las-fire from the ridge stopped. Scattered cultists had seen the second lance and understood the sky answered heretics on this world with erasure. They withdrew into rubble that still smelled of promethium and cooked stone.

Titus stopped in the ring's centre.

Ash settled on his shoulders. Fine grit. It tasted of copper when his rebreather cycled.

One partial magazine. His body. Metaurus sleeping in the box.

He checked the sled chains twice. The sarcophagus housing had taken lateral stress at the pit lip. Kael's seal read green on her auspex. The dead generator lay where she had dropped it, casing split,

promethium smell sharp in the ash.

On the ridge above the pod ring, two heat signatures flickered and withdrew—the same pair Wolf had logged during extraction. Titus watched them through magnified reticle: cultists without mass, recording equipment scavenged from dead tank crews, lenses pointed at the Thunderhawk's descent path. They would sell the footage to someone who would call it victory. Let them.

Kael ran a final diagnostic on the sarcophagus carriage while they waited for *Gothic Spear*.

"Lateral stress within tolerance for sus-an," she said. "Seal green. If Apothecarium disagrees, they will cite my serial."

"Noted."

"Your auspex first read was wrong because you read at the strike scar before the stone cooled. Voren will ask. Tell him you walked third point at the mouth."

"I walked."

Wind shifted—upslope now, carrying bird cries that were fewer and farther between. The ridge was learning silence. Titus logged the weather: gusting, chemical load elevated, thermal residual declining, hostile mass negligible.

Judge:

"Certification processing. Ground truth—verify at purge locus. Holder status—query."

Titus unclipped the singed auspex from his belt. The housing was blackened along one edge where secondary strike residue had flash-heated the composite. The machine spirit whined when he powered it—offended.

He raised the surveyor and pointed it at the strike scar two hundred metres upslope where Node I's anchor had been.

The first read came back wrong.

Titus lowered the auspex. Checked the housing serial against the packet he had logged in the undercroft. Same unit. Same coordinates burned into memory at ninety-four percent before the field collapsed and Corvus went red in the passage.

The drift was real or the machine spirit was lying or the strike had moved the anchor's corpse in the stone.

He walked ten metres upslope. Ash deeper here. The strike scar was a bowl of vitrified rock, still warm, edges feathered with glass that caught the bruised sky and threw it back wrong. He pressed the auspex to bare stone inside the scar's rim.

Second read.

Kael looked up from the sarcophagus housing. "Problem?"

"Ground truth packet conflict. Telemetry says one depth. Auspex says another."

She crossed to him with mechadendrites clicking. Took the surveyor without asking. Ran a diagnostic sequence Titus could not follow—binary under her breath, then a sharp gesture at the housing seam.

"Strike residue in the sensor array. You logged at one-one-four-seven under field collapse. Lance telemetry agrees. Local read is contaminated by vitrification heat."

"Fix?"

"Third point." She pointed upslope to where the shrine pit's mouth gaped, rim cracked, smoke still threading from depths. "Triangulation. Purge locus is here. Anchor truth is there. You confirm where the Imperium asks, not where the stone moved."

Titus climbed to the pit lip. Ash slid under his greaves. The pit breathed heat—the memory of fire, stone that had been flesh and was now glass. At the undercroft mouth the air changed temperature: colder by five degrees, smelling of ink and eggshell powder and something sweet that had no name in his helm's chemical library.

He braced the auspex against the carved lintel where Kael's choke had dropped stone on cultists. Third read.

Kael transmitted the raw packet to orbit before Titus could second-guess the third read. Judge's acknowledgement came back in four seconds—fast for a certification window.

Judge:

"Triangulation accepted. Purge locus confirm required at pod ring centre."

Titus descended from the pit lip. Ash slid under his greaves in sheets. At the pod ring a ground crew of three logistics ratings and one Navy liaison waited with slates and scepticism.

The liaison—Lieutenant-Commander Hale, name tag half-melted from earlier extractions—checked Titus's auspex serial against her manifest.

"Packet says one-one-four-seven at undercroft mouth. My telemetry says one-one-four-seven at strike scar. Your first read said one-one-eight-two." She did not look up. "Which lieutenant am I certifying?"

"The one who walked the third point." Titus held the singed surveyor out. His left gauntlet tremored once against the housing—stress fracture in the servo, or residue, or something else he would not name. He locked the hand flat. "Strike residue in the sensor array. First read contaminated because I logged before zero at purge locus. That was mine. Undercroft lintel locked it."

Hale ran a stylus across her slate. "Enginseer?"

Kael's mechadendrite extended a data spike. "Diagnostic confirms residue in array housing. Lateral drift point-zero-four-seven on first pass. Third-point triangulation within tolerance. Packet integrity ninety-one percent."

Hale keyed her slate without looking at Titus. "Ground crew—stand by for holder confirm at ring centre."

One of the ratings—a woman with ash still in her hair from an earlier gunship cycle—muttered loud enough to carry: “Third point in a mouth that eats vox. Of course the numbers wobbled.”

Voren’s voice came from the Thunderhawk ramp: “Numbers wobble when the stone moves. Confirm at centre or confirm nowhere.”

Hale stepped aside. “Pod ring centre, Lieutenant.”

Titus walked to the scorched ferrocrete circle. Wind off the ridge carried bird cries—fewer now, scattered. Ash tasted of copper when his rebreather cycled. He could feel the strike scar’s residual heat through his greaves.

Hale followed him three steps. “First read one-one-eight-two. Telemetry one-one-four-seven. Undercroft mouth one-one-four-seven. Novahistorium will ask which number you bet the grid on.”

“The one I walked.”

“You walked because the first read was wrong.”

“I walked because strike residue cooked the sensor array before the stone cooled.” Titus held the singed surveyor out. His left gauntlet tremored once against the housing—stress fracture in the servo, or residue, or something else he would not name. He locked the hand flat. “That was mine. Undercroft lintel locked it.”

Hale wrote without looking up. “Novahistorium gets the tremor note too.”

“Write it.”

She wrote.

He transmitted.

Judge:

“Ground truth—verified against strike telemetry. Anchor purge—confirmed. Certification—final. Holder confirm at purge locus.”

The purge locus was ash under his boots in the pod ring. His body.

"I confirm," Titus said.

The HUD flashed:

VOG NODE I: CERTIFIED

GROUND TRUTH: LOCKED

STRIKE GRID: UPDATED-NODE I-ACTIVE

INTERLOCK: CLOSED

PRIMARY HOLDER: LT. DEMETRIAN TITUS-WOLF CHANNEL

The interlock closed. Judge and Wolf and the battle-council's chorus settled into done for this coordinate, this ash, this day.

Titus breathed once. Multi-lung. Controlled.

Ridge wind pushed ash across the ferrocrete coin in sheets—warm where the secondary lance had flash-heated the stone, cold in the ring grooves where strike pylons still hummed. The air tasted of ionised glass and promethium residue and the sweet wrongness that had followed them up from the undercroft. His filters worked. Seal warnings flickered and cleared.

Kael looked up from the housing. "The sergeant dreamed."

"Explain."

"Sus-an flicker. Three seconds. Neural activity inconsistent with deep membrane." She paused. "He spoke one word. Unlogged. Housing dampened vox."

Titus did not ask the word. He filed the flicker and returned his eyes to the sky.

Judge:

"Extraction—authorised. Thunderhawk Gothic Spear—inbound. Window—four minutes. Hold locus."

Four minutes.

Titus checked the sled chains again. Checked Kael's seal. Checked the sky where the Thunderhawk would descend.

The sound came first. Thruster wash, distant, growing. *Gothic Spear* dropped through bruised metal sky and settled on the pod ring with a wash that turned ash into a horizontal storm. Grit stung his faceplate. The ridge twitched—movement, two signatures, las-lock fire that scattered ash and stopped when the wash hit.

Titus did not fire.

Wolf:

“Perimeter—negligible.”

The Thunderhawk’s shadow crossed the pod ring. Black circle on ash. Thrusters cut. Silence brief, then ramp noise and the smell of hot metal and promethium from the gunship’s belly. Ridge wind pushed ash sideways across the ferrocrete coin while the crew ran load checks on the ramp lip.

A Techmarine at the ramp lip watched load balance with mechaden-drite clicks. Pauldron marked cog-and-skull. Forge adjunct.

“Lieutenant. Auspex packet already transmitted. Confirm you are the holder on record.”

“I confirm.”

“Name?”

“Brother-Smith Voren. Ninth Company forge adjunct.” No salute. Load order did not require one. “Clamps first. Sarcophagus. Engin-seer. You last.”

The servitors locked the sled. Voren read load balance on a wrist slate, adjusted servo tension, cleared the ramp. Hale signed the ground truth packet. Titus signed wet ink on recycled paper that smelled of gunship solvent.

Metaurus’s sarcophagus crossed the ramp threshold. Grey icon steady on Titus’s HUD. The sus-an hum changed pitch when the housing left Zsah’uj’s gravity field for the gunship’s belly—a note Titus felt through the deck plates, not heard.

Voren closed the auspex shock case. Marked NOVAHISTORIUM—PRIORITY on the lid in stencil that would survive re-entry.

Hale keyed her slate before the ramp rose. “Navy logs extraction complete. Novahistorium will ask about the nine percent. Give them numbers.”

“I walked third point.”

She did not salute. Navy did not salute Marines on extraction decks; they signed slates and moved to the next gunship cycle.

Voren clicked approval. “Ramp in thirty seconds.”

Titus climbed last. Mag-empty. He turned once at the ramp lip.

Zsah’uj: ridge line brown against a sky the colour of old blood, pit mouth smoking, tank wreck a black tooth on the horizon, five red places in ash he could not see from here but carried on his HUD anyway.

Node I: certified.

He did not salute the world.

The ramp rose.

In the bay darkness, red lighting, chain restraints, cold metal under magnetised boots. Metaurus’s sus-an hum filled the spaces where five brothers’ breath should have been. Voren secured the auspex shock case in a wall locker—stencil NOVAHISTORIUM—PRIORITY, lid seal clicking like a vault door.

Titus watched the case until the locker light went green.

Extraction

Docking clamps engaged. Weight changed.

Voren unsealed the auspex shock case and passed it to a logistics officer waiting at the embarkation hatch. The officer scanned the serial, nodded once, and left without asking Titus's name. Holders were numbers until Novahistorium made them mouths.

"Sus-an sled to Apothecarium priority green," Voren said. "Lieutenant to decontamination beta-seven. Novahistorium in six hours."

"Understood."

Metaurus's sled went one way down priority-green corridor lighting. Titus went another. The sus-an hum faded behind a bulkhead door that sealed with a soft pneumatic sigh.

MOTHER:

Sergeant Metaurus sus-an intake stable. Status grey.

EXTRACTION CONFIRMED. Node One certified. Return to Honour's Edge

Embarkation deck lights replaced gunship red.

Wolf:

"Ridge contact two. Non-mass."

Two cultists watching the extraction from the ridge below. Recording. Not charging.

Titus did not fire. The ramp had already sealed. The gunship had

left Zsah'uj's ash behind.

Decontamination corridor beta-seven smelled of solvent and recycled air. Chemical wash first—jets of amber fluid that stung even through seal interfaces.

A servitor rolled past with a cart of filter inserts marked ZSAH'UJ EXTRACTION BATCH and did not stop. Thaddaeus took three without paperwork when it returned empty.

"Left pauldron composite is scrap," the Techmarine said. Name tag: THADDEUS. "Armoury reissue before Novahistorium. Seal check next."

Titus stood in the wash alcove. Green light. Red light. Green again.

"Seal integrity returning," Thaddeus said. "Minor compromise logged. Acceptable for briefing. Auto-senses recalibration—hold still."

Scrubbers whirled against his helm interfaces. Thaddeus replaced two filter inserts without comment.

"Eleven minutes on the chronograph," he said. "You have nine left. Mag-count when you're out."

"One partial. Bolt pistol."

"Knife stays separate. Apothecarium won't take it. Armoury will log it."

Titus nodded once.

Thaddeus paused at the seal check. Warning glyph on his wrist slate—undercroft particulate in the left knee joint.

"That'll itch in six hours," he said. "Log it anyway."

He ran the final seal check. Green on the HUD. Titus stepped out into corridor lighting that was neither gunship red nor embarkation blue—neutral grey, the colour of waiting.

A second Techmarine passed with a cart of filter inserts marked

ZSAH'UJ EXTRACTION BATCH. Thaddeus took three without paper-work.

"Novahistorium will still ask about undercroft particulate," Thaddeus said. "Lieutenant Demetrian Titus. Serial match. Decon complete. Armoury queue—twenty-two minutes estimated."

Titus nodded.

An Apothecarium orderly intercepted Titus at the corridor junction—white coat, slate, no rank insignia.

"Lieutenant. Castell, Brother—ridge KIA, hour fourteen by holder log. Confirm bearing for reclamation manifest."

Titus gave the bearing from memory. Zero-nine-zero from sarcophagus shadow. Tank wreck downslope. Wrong sector—the wreck was east-slope, not zero-nine-zero. The orderly waited, stylus up.

"Correction," Titus said. "East-slope tank wreck. Bearing one-one-two from box locus. I logged zero-nine-zero at triage. That was wrong."

The orderly wrote without comment. "Reclamation team will find him or not. Manifest corrected." She left.

Brother Mace passed the junction two minutes later—Assault Intercessor, pauldron still Zsah'uj ash-grey, vox crackling with reclamation channel traffic.

"Lieutenant." Mace did not salute. Reclamation crews rarely did. "We searched zero-nine-zero sector six hours. Found nothing. Found Castell east-slope on the second pass by smell, not by your bearing. Apothecarium logged him hour fourteen while you still held the box."

Titus said nothing.

"Castell asked for three metres left of the lip. You said negative." Mace stopped walking. Reclamation manifest in one gauntlet, wet ink, Castell's serial highlighted. "I would have said yes. Knee vent was your patch. He crawled on zero-nine-zero because you said shadow line. He died one-one-two because that is where the wreck was."

Mace tapped the slate.

“Apothecary logged hour fourteen. Reclamation logged your bearing first. Both records stand. Fix the log next time or don’t. Not my confession to hear.”

Titus met his faceplate. “I know.”

He continued down the corridor without waiting for an answer. The slate’s wet ink left a smear on his gauntlet he did not wipe off.

Voren had not stopped. Titus stood in neutral grey light and listened to the sus-an hum fade down another corridor.

Armoury queue: twenty-two minutes. Three Marines ahead of him with deployment damage from a different brief—cracked gorget, scorch marks, one standing too still.

The one standing too still voxed his sergeant without lowering his voice.

“—armoury said green but the left knee still clicks—”

Titus waited without sitting.

The Marine noticed him. Nodded once. Went back to the vox.

“—tell them the knee clicks on stairs not on deployment—”

Another pause. The Marine’s shoulders dropped a fraction.

“Copy. Sorry, Lieutenant. Different brief. Different ridge. Same armoury queue.”

Titus nodded once.

The armoury tech was a woman with augmetic eyes that clicked when she focused. Name tag: SORAYA. She took his bolt pistol first, disassembled it on a cloth that already bore ash stains from Zsah’uj extractions earlier in the cycle.

“One partial remaining,” she said. “Confirm?”

“Confirm.”

“Firing pin carbon from strike residue. Cleaning.” She worked the pin with a brush smaller than his thumbnail. “You fired until empty on the ridge?”

“Until partial.”

“Same thing on a purge world.” She reassembled the pistol with three clicks and ran a cycle test against the bench mount. The bolt left the muzzle into a catch tank with a sound like a door closing. “Full mag reissue. Serial logged to your name.”

She cleaned the knife under magnification—edge chip near the tip from undercroft stone, nothing that would fail on flesh. Pauldron plates followed—left side scrap, right side salvageable. Fresh composite from stock. The fit took six minutes. She worked in silence except for serial numbers muttered to the bench cogitator.

“Left knee joint—particulate warning from decon. Thaddeus logged it. Annoyance in six hours.”

“Gorget interface—minor compromise from decon. Green for briefing. Yellow for deployment. Captain decides.”

“Backpack vent—strike ash in the mesh. Cleaning.” She ran a sonic brush over the vent grilles. Three minutes. “Green.”

“Novahistorium in five hours forty,” she said at the end. “Captain’s adjutant will find you. Don’t be late. Holders who miss the slate lose the channel.”

“I won’t.”

She slapped the pauldron seam once—approval or habit—and returned the knife to his thigh sheath.

A queue clerk stamped his armoury completion slip. Wet ink. Recycled paper. The Administratum’s proof that a Marine was dressed for council.

Captain’s adjutant found him at the armoury exit with a data-slate.

“Novahistorium in five hours twelve minutes. Captain will ask for continuation on Node Two.”

“Understood.”

The adjutant’s stylus squeaked on recycled paper. She did not look up. “Seventy hours to convoy departure. Do not be late.”

Convoy staging bay seven was already half-assembled when he arrived.

Servitors moved psyker casket mounts along ceiling rails—two occupied designations on the manifest, one empty slot marked RESERVE. The empty mount bothered the logistics officers. An empty box was a question.

The bay smelled of cold metal and restraint lubricant. Overhead lumens cast flat white light on deck markings: yellow lines for casket paths, red for ordnance, blue for personnel. A pict-feed on the far bulkhead cycled Zsah’uj’s ridge on a six-hour delay—dust front still moving east, pod ring half-buried, shrine pit smoking in a thin thread orbit’s sensors would log as residual thermal for another week.

A deck crew rating walked past with a filter bag and muttered to his partner.

“—ghost overlay again on the pict-feed—”

“Scrub it after void-shear. Bosun posted amber.”

“Copy.”

Kael was wiring her new generator housing to a diagnostic port. She looked up when Titus entered.

“Serial numbers logged. Node Two housing approved. Fool channel reserved.”

“One open psyker slot.”

“One open.” Binary click. “Chapter recruitment underway. Until then, the mount travels empty.”

“Field integrity on the housing?”

“Nominal at dock power. Under load unknown until integration.” She gestured at the diagnostic port with a mechadendrite. “Mercury jam on Node Two is probable. Hardline requisition submitted. Three hundred metres copper.”

“Approved.”

A Sister Hospitaller checked restraint chains on the caskets without speaking. Two astropath designations—names Titus did not know yet, would not know until they were in the box or not. The Imperium did not introduce psykers to Marines before deployment. It introduced them as assets.

Captain’s staff ran convoy math on slates—transit windows, Geller-analogue requirements, fuel reserves for three hops. *Sarcophagus Road* was a route name on the slate, three transits, eighty-one days minimum.

Titus watched the empty mount sway slightly on its rail when the cruiser’s station-keeping thrusters fired.

A logistics officer called numbers across the bay—transit windows, fuel reserve green, Geller chain pending clamp final, psyker assets two filled and one empty, Fool channel armed, holder confirmed.

The officer wrote. No commentary.

Voren entered the bay with two servitors carrying spare clamp arms from *Gothic Spear*’s reclamation bin.

“Lieutenant. Staging geometry for Node Two differs from Zsah’uj. Ocean world. Geller-analogue chain must stay continuous across three transits. One break and the convoy becomes a funeral.”

“Understood.”

“Clamp sequence logged.” Voren ran a mechadendrite down the empty psyker mount rail—torque one, torque two, lateral shear, load balance. “Step one: rail tolerance green. Step two: casket chain ge-

ometry. Step three: housing stud alignment before embarkation arm. Step four: Geller overlap verification at each transit hop. Step five: holder confirm at stud.” He clicked each step on his wrist slate without looking at Titus. “Weight tolerance confirmed. Whoever goes in the box will not know your name until embarkation.”

“Same as Vox-Nine.”

“Same serial family. Different ocean index.” Voren moved on to the generator housing clamps—serial scan, clamp torque, clamp torque, green rune.

Kael spoke without looking up from her diagnostic: “Integration time eleven minutes if Mercury is clean. Unknown if jammed. I will need you at the housing stud if the Fool channel reserves primary override again.”

“I will be there.”

“Node Two. Serial seven-four-alpha. Ocean index eighty-three. Zsah’uj index forty-one. Same protocol. Different medium.”

Titus did not answer. The pict-feed showed the ridge weather again—brown line across a continent, bird cries absent, strike scar whitening as dust buried it.

“Lieutenant.” The adjutant again. “Novahistorium in four hours fifty. Fresh armour is logged to your serial.”

Titus nodded once.

“Captain will ask for continuation. Node Two is amber. Kaelen-Theta. Eighty-one days minimum transit. Metaurus non-deployable. You are primary holder until Chapter command reassigns.”

“Understood.”

The adjutant made a note on her slate. “Seventy hours to convoy departure. Use them to sleep if you can. Most holders don’t.”

“I won’t.”

She left.

Titus did not sleep. He walked the staging perimeter once and watched Kael and Voren argue load geometry at the yellow line without interfering until the dispute required a holder.

At the rail by the dead pict-feed he sat for eleven minutes—not rest, maintenance the Captain had ordered—and ate a ration bar without tasting it. Crumb stuck in his gorget seam. A servitor passed with filter inserts, bumped his knee, did not apologize. A logistics officer argued fuel reserves with a Navy bosun. Normal ship noise.

The argument escalated when the pict-feed died again.

Kael had the generator housing half-lifted on a ceiling rail toward the embarkation-arm transfer point. Voren had the psyker casket chain on the yellow path, load balance green on his slate, clamps torqued to spec.

“Hold the housing,” Voren said. “Casket chain transits first. Geller overlap cannot gap.”

“Housing transits first,” Kael said. “Fool channel stud must seat at embarkation arm before casket integration. Protocol seven-four-alpha. Mechanicus.”

“Protocol does not outrank clamp sequence.”

“Clamp sequence does not outrank field integrity at integration.”

They stood three metres apart in flat white light, two tech-priests in different uniforms, neither yielding. The deck crew rating watched from the dead pict-feed with a filter bag in his hand.

Titus stopped at the yellow line.

“Status.”

Kael: “Housing serial seven-four-alpha. Embarkation stud alignment pending. Transit now or integration slips eleven minutes.”

Voren: “Casket chain three of three. One mount empty. Geller chain

breaks if housing rail blocks yellow path for more than four minutes. I have four minutes on the chronograph.”

“Housing holds. Casket chain transits. Parallel rail for housing when yellow clears.”

Voren: “Four minutes on chronograph. Clamp jurisdiction mine. Housing jurisdiction hers. Parallel rail if yellow path blocked.”

“Parallel rail confirmed,” the logistics officer said, already keying orders. “Servitor seven-gamma, shift housing to blue path. ETA three minutes.”

Kael: “Integration window eleven minutes preserved.”

Voren: “Geller overlap preserved.”

Neither thanked him. They logged and moved.

The deck crew rating slapped the pict-feed housing closed. “Relay green. Ridge feed stable. Ghost overlay gone.”

Titus continued toward Novahistorium prep.

Void-shear hit the embarkation arm without warning—Zsah’uj’s dust front shedding on station-keeping range, particulate load doubling in nine minutes, sweet trace on filters that two scrub teams confirmed independently.

The bosun’s slate climbed: five point two, five point eight, six point one.

“Posting amber on gunship cycle two,” he called. “Window holds unless index hits seven.”

Kael looked up from the generator port. “Fool port tolerates six point five. Recommend scrub before integration if index exceeds six.”

Voren: “Clamp torque nominal to seven. Debate indices later. Scrub the relay.”

Six Navy ratings were already in void-suits on the arm, tethers clipped, filters turning brown-grey in catch bags. The lead rating—

name tag PELL on his shoulder—hung inverted from the relay housing with a solvent brush in one glove and a catch bag clipped to his belt.

“Relay board’s choked,” Pell said through suit vox. “Same sweet particulate Everson warned about. Filters clog in four minutes at this load. I already filed the maintenance form twice and the bosun’s office sent it back for stamp alignment—third copy’s in my belt pouch if anyone needs paperwork to die on.”

He pulled the board free. Brown-grey film peeled off in sheets. Sparks when the fresh filter seated wrong—he cursed, reseated, tapped the housing twice with his rubber mallet.

“Bosun—filter three seated wrong first pass. My fault. Second pass green. Also the form needs your countersign or I cannot close the cycle and I will have to write a fourth letter—and if the fourth letter bounces I am required by Navy regulation to open a fifth, which means I miss the housing transit window and then the bosun’s office will blame me for paperwork I did not invent.”

The bosun keyed something Titus could not hear. Pell hung inverted another minute, solvent brush working the microgroove.

“Lieutenant—you on the rail?”

“On the rail.”

“Do not fall off. Novahistorium in four hours and I need the rail clear for housing transit. And if you know anyone in Administratum who reads forms before lunch, introduce me.”

“Copy.”

Titus watched from the staging rail until Pell’s partner called drift on the stud.

“Three millimetre particulate drift,” the partner said. “Brush won’t clear the groove. Need manual scrape.”

Pell hung another thirty seconds, brush failing. “Solvent flash won’t take eggshell trace. Lieutenant—if you’ve got a gauntlet free, hold the

housing steady. I need both hands on the scraper.”

Titus mag-locked to the rail, crossed to the embarkation arm, braced the Fool channel housing with his left gauntlet. The metal was cold through ceramite—wrong pressure in the microgroove, ash and ink worked into a seam the ship had not earned yet.

Pell worked the scraper by hand—no mechadendrite, no servitor, just a Navy rating inverted in a void-suit with a tool from his belt pouch and the patience of a man who knew paperwork would outlive him. Grey-brown particulate curled off the stud. Eggshell trace. Ink trace. Undercroft leaving marks on the ship the way undercrofts did.

“Give me ten seconds,” Pell said.

Titus held. Ten seconds. Twenty. The housing did not shift.

“Reseat,” Pell said.

The board clicked. Green. Pell detached, catch bag full, wiped his visor with the back of his glove—brown streak—and keyed the relay green with a thumb still grey from particulate.

“Feed stable. Ghost overlay gone. Window holds. And I am filing the form a fourth time because the bosun will want paper even when the relay is green.”

The bosun posted amber on gunship cycle two anyway. Pell shrugged inside his suit and stowed the mallet on his belt hook.

Voren walked past without salute. “Load geometry unchanged. Departure holds. Lieutenant—Novahistorium in four hours. Do not be late because you watched weather.”

“I will be there.”

Novahistorium prep room three-alpha was cold and smelled of cogitator incense. A Sister Hospitalier checked his seal integrity without speaking. Fresh armour from the armoury. Minor compromise logged. Acceptable. She ran a gloving scan on his gauntlets—residue from Zsah’uj still in the microgrooves, ink and ash mixed.

"You were deep," she said.

"Yes."

"The undercroft leaves marks." She made a note. "Record only."

She checked his gorget interface. Green. His left knee warning from decon. Yellow. Acceptable for briefing. She stamped a slip. Wet ink.

"Novahistorium dome in six hours. Be on time."

"I will."

A servitor entered with a censer, swung it twice, left without acknowledgment. The incense smell mixed with solvent from the corridor. Titus's left knee clicked once when he shifted weight—the particulate Thaddeus had warned about, not failure, annoyance.

Voren entered prep room three-alpha without knocking—forge adjunct privilege.

"Captain Dyrias wants you in the dome on time. Not early. On time." He checked Titus's fresh pauldron serial against his slate. "Armoury reissue matches your biometrics. Good. Knife stays on thigh until Chaplain clears ritual carry for convoy."

"Dyrias already cleared Metaurus's blade."

"Dyrias cleared the blade. I clear the load geometry." Voren left.

Captain Dyrias stepped into the prep room without escort—no retinue, no ceremony. Company colours. Slate in hand.

"Lieutenant. Novahistorium in six hours. Be on time." He checked Titus's seal readout on the wall panel. "Mace filed his complaint. It stays filed. You amend bearings in the field next time or you do not hold."

"I hear you."

Dyrias tapped the slate once. "Sleep if Mother allows. The sergeant stays grey."

He left without waiting for acknowledgment.

Six hours until the slate.

He checked the knife. Checked the bolt pistol. Checked the HUD where five red icons and one grey icon arranged themselves in the corner.

He walked toward the dome.

Honour's Edge

Fourteen minutes in *Gothic Spear's* belly: ash tapping hull plates until void took the sound. Titus stood at the port bulkhead watching Zsah'uj shrink—ridge line, pod ring, pit mouth, then particulate and black. Metaurus's sus-an line on the HUD stayed grey.

Docking clamps engaged on *Honour's Edge*. Weight changed again.

Honour's Edge logged the extraction and queued the next brief.

Titus walked corridor seven-alpha in fresh armour. Seal intact. Knife on his thigh. Bolt pistol reloaded. Maintenance oil and solvent rode the vent cycle from the lower decks. The cruiser's spine hummed around him—machine spirits in maintenance cycle, distant vox traffic from decks he was not cleared to enter, the faint pulse of Novahistorium's dome ahead like a heartbeat measured in cogitator cycles.

The corridor opened onto the Novahistorium antechamber.

Incense here. Cogitator incense, ozone and parchment and the cold that came from three-dimensional projectors running Veil Ordinance Grid telemetry. The air tasted of recycled void and something older, the smell of archives that had never been lies.

He passed the first marker stone without stopping. Second Company casualties, Kaelen-Theta prior brief, names he did not know. Third marker: Node VI purge, the episode scar, already historical. The stones were warm from the projector's bleed—a detail his auto-senses

logged and did not comment on.

Between the third and fourth markers, the antechamber floor changed texture—polished obsidian inset with silver thread showing the thin-veil corridor as a single line from Segmentum edge to edge. Titus's boots rang differently here. The Novahistorium did not want footfalls forgotten.

A servitor with a incense censer passed him heading for the dome—three swings per metre, Mechanicus rhythm, ozone trailing. Officers waited on bench rows along the wall, data-slates dark until the slate opened. No one spoke. Speaking before Judge was bad protocol.

Fourth marker: Node I—certified—date stamp still cooling in the slate.

He paused one heartbeat at that stone. Five names were not carved here. They were on his HUD instead.

The dome opened above him.

Seven nodes along the thin-veil corridor hung in hololithic space—cold light, no warmth, each world a bead on a wire stretched between Imperial desperation and apostate hunger. Node VI bore the strike scar from the episode: PURGED. Node I glowed CERTIFIED. His ash. His auspex. His confirmation at the pod ring centre after the first read lied.

He stood at the dais and did not sit.

The Novahistorium walk was ritual—archive strata speaking in sequence through the dome's acoustic layers. Captain's staff called it the battle-council catechism. Marines called it the slate. Titus stood at the dais while hololiths appended Node One to Imperial record: certification logged, ground truth locked at one-one-four-seven, apostate fragment purged, convoy *Sarcophagus Road* queued seventy-one hours out, Metaurus grey in Apothecarium, Node Two amber on the grid.

Officers lined the periphery. Captain's staff. Logistics. A Sister Hos-

pitaller with a data-slate and no expression. None spoke until Judge reopened.

Titus watched the hololith's afterimage burn on his retinas—seven nodes, one green, one purged, five waiting. The dome's acoustic strata still hummed in the plates beneath his boots.

A logistics captain three rows back whispered to his adjutant—Titus caught the words *non-psyker certification* and *thirty-eight percent*—and the adjutant wrote fast.

Judge:

"Node Two awaits certification. Convoy brief Sarcophagus Road appended. Holder status confirm continuation."

Titus looked at the grid. Node II pulsed amber. Kaelen-Theta. Waiting. The hololith showed a world with more ocean than land, thin-veil indices in the red band, apostate shrine markers unconfirmed but probable. Three psyker designations on the convoy roster. Twelve Ultramarines. One engineeer slot marked Kael AVAILABLE.

"I confirm," he said.

Wolf:

"Hold keys."

Judge:

"Ordinance pending Node Two. Convoy departs seventy-one hours. Dismissed."

The slate dimmed. For three seconds Atlas's void-cartography voice bled through Mother's life-sign stratum—a navigation update that had no business on a sus-an channel:

"—approach vector—eighty-one days —"

Then silence. A logistics captain near the wall winced and made a note. Channel bleed happened after Zsah'uj; orbit was still patching Mercury's recovery.

The hololith folded. The Novahistorium emptied in the order staff officers left such rooms—logistics first, Hospitaller last, Captain's adjutant handing Titus a data-slate as he passed.

Chaplain Dyrias waited at the dais steps.

"Five," Dyrias said.

"Five," Titus said.

"The sergeant?"

"Grey."

Dyrias counted names on his rosary without looking at the beads. Kallan. Vorr. Seth. Orte. Corvus. Five clicks. "Everson has him in Apothecarium. You may visit after protocol clears you."

Titus nodded once.

Dyrias paused at the dais steps. His voice dropped closer, the way chaplains spoke when the slate was closed and the record was not listening. "Sleep if you can. Novahistorium is done for today."

"I held the lock."

"I know." One nod. "Mace is correct about Castell. You logged zero-nine-zero when east-slope was one-one-two. Reclamation searched empty ground six hours while he bled in the wreck you would not let him reach."

Titus said nothing.

"Castell is on you." Dyrias counted a sixth click on his rosary without naming the bead. "Not on the coordinate. On you."

"Understood."

"Eat something that is not paste."

Dyrias left. The dome's cold lingered in Titus's pauldrons.

He walked the Novahistorium antechamber in reverse—past the obsidian corridor line, past the warm marker stones, past the servitor with

the censer now returning empty. His boots rang the same. The slate was closed. The next slate was waiting.

Between the fourth marker and the maintenance junction, a hololith projector stuttered—Node II amber flickering to void-black, then back. A tech-adept in forge grey knelt at the floor access panel, mechaden-drites inside the housing.

“Projector fault,” she said without looking up. “Thermal bleed from Zsah’uj certification. Coil overheated.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Manual reset. Two minutes. Do not walk on the obsidian line until I close the panel.”

Titus waited. The antechamber was quiet. Officers passed on the far bench without stopping. The tech-adept pulled a burnt coil from the housing—smell of scorched silver thread—slotted a fresh one from her belt pouch, reseated the connection by hand without servitor assist. The hololith steadied. Node II amber. Node I green. Seven beads on the wire.

“Green,” she said. “Reset complete.”

Titus stepped over the obsidian line when she closed the panel.

Corridor seven-beta took him past the Reclusiam arch where Dyr-ias’s vigil lamps burned for five names not yet carved. A battle-brother Titus did not know stood watch with a bolter across his knees—funeral protocol for men whose bodies had not come home yet. Zsah’uj’s ash was still in the embarkation scrubbers; the bodies of Kallan, Vorr, and Seth had burned on the ridge; Orte and Corvus were in the undercroft’s accounting, if not its soil.

Maintenance bay fourteen smelled of solvent and copper. Servitors scrubbed *Gothic Spear*’s belly plates while a tech-adept logged Zsah’uj particulate composition on a slate. Pink runoff in the drains. Titus watched ash dissolve and did not speak.

Two ratings worked a mag-rail cart stacked with Novahistorium marker offcuts—warm stone, still humming from projector bleed. The lead rating stopped when he saw Titus's pauldrons.

"Lieutenant. Bay is hot until the stones cool. Captain's order."

Titus nodded. The rating moved the cart to the side wall. One stone slipped—Titus caught it with a gauntlet before it hit the deck. Warm. Names on it he did not know. He set it back on the cart and kept walking.

"Sir—" the rating called after him. *"That stone is still registering heat. Do not pocket it. Novahistorium gets angry about pocket stones."*

"I am not pocketing it."

"Copy."

"Sergeant Metaurus's auspex housing?" the tech-adept asked without looking up.

"With Novahistorium. Priority."

The servitor moved to the next plate. Scrub. Rinse. Log.

Titus continued toward the Apothecarium deck. The temperature dropped degree by degree—medicae climate bleeding through the bulkheads ahead. Somewhere behind him, Captain's staff reopened Node Two telemetry in the dome. Amber pulsed on pict-feeds he did not stop to watch.

The Apothecarium was one deck down from Novahistorium prep.

Cold hit first—medicae climate control, sus-an fluid temperature, lumen strips flat white. The corridor floor was rubberised for spill containment. Through the glass doors, Titus counted six slabs: one occupied, five empty restraints waiting for names the mission had already spent.

A medicae servitor rolled past with a spill tray and did not stop. An orderly keyed organ columns on a wall slate without looking up. Normal Apothecarium noise.

Metaurus lay on the occupied slab under lumen strips. Faceplate off. Face old in a way Titus had never seen on the sergeant who stood in the armouring chamber with Guilliman watching.

Apothecary Everson worked in silence. Mechadendrites probed the neck seal where atmospheric compromise had chewed ceramite. Sus-an fluid lines glowed amber. A wall slate listed organ status in columns Titus could read without wanting to:

LARRAMAN: RECONSTRUCTION REQUIRED

BELISARIAN: DORMANT

MULTI-LUNG: COMPROMISED-FUNCTIONAL AT REDUCED CAPACITY

SUS-AN MEMBRANE: ACTIVE-DEPTH 94%

"He will not wake for months," Everson said to the record. "Possibly longer. Recommend honoured sleep unless Chapter command orders otherwise."

SKULL ICON: SERGEANT METAURUS-SUS-AN ACTIVE-GREY

"The housing flicker on the ridge," Titus said. "Three seconds. Un-logged word."

"Fool channel echo," Everson said. "Membrane remembers what the man forgets. Waveform logged. Content drowned." He rotated a slate: neural trace, one spike, three seconds. "If Novahistorium asks, the pattern matches manual override. If they ask what he said, tell them sus-an took it."

Titus stood at the slab edge and did not touch the sergeant. The Apothecarium's other slabs held empty restraints. Five names on a wall slate beside the door—Kallan, Vorr, Seth, Orte, Corvus—ink still wet on the last two.

Everson followed his gaze. "Carving waits for Captain's roll call. Dyr-ias counts aloud. You count on the HUD. Same five."

"Same five."

"Sleep is honest, Lieutenant. Awake would have been worse for a

body with his organ profile." Everson adjusted flow on the sus-an line. "Go eat. Convoy prep in six hours. The sergeant will still be grey when you return."

Titus left when the chronograph allowed.

Kael found him in the corridor outside the Apothecarium.

"Lieutenant."

"Enginseer."

"Secondary generator—scrap. Ground truth—logged. Node Two housing—requisitioned." She extended a data-slate—serial numbers in binary columns, Fool channel compatibility green, hardline copper requisition approved. "Mercury predicts jam on approach. Fallback protocols—three. Longest: twenty-two minutes. Shortest: nine. Shortest requires gauntlet on housing stud."

"I will be there."

"The sergeant?"

"Sleeping. Everson says months. Possibly longer."

"Convoy?"

"Seventy hours. Third psyker—pending. Two candidates post-medical."

Kael clicked acknowledgment. "Kaelen-Theta particulate—sweet on filters. Do not trust sweet." She paused. "You held at thirty-eight percent. Ocean will ask more."

Titus nodded once.

She left without salute. Mechanicus did not require more.

Before the mess alcove, Kael called him back to staging prep alcove nine.

"Fool channel handshake—test required before convoy. Gauntlet on stud."

Titus placed his gauntlet on the housing stud. Kael triggered the waveform from Everson's reserve case—three seconds, manual override signature.

The stud pulsed amber. Then red. Then nothing.

"Handshake failed," Kael said. Binary flat. "Serial seven-four-alpha. Waveform accepted. Stud response—null."

"Cause?"

"Unknown. Possibly Zsah'uj residue in Fool port. Possibly membrane echo from sergeant's sus-an still in housing memory." She ran a mechadendrite into the port. "Recommend strip and rebuild. Eleven minutes if parts in bay."

"Do it."

She worked without liturgy—strip, solvent, replace micro-relay, re-seat stud. Titus kept his gauntlet on the housing through the second attempt.

Amber. Green. Three-second pulse logged.

"Handshake green," Kael said. "Convoy may arm Fool channel. Do not lose case in embarkation crush."

Titus nodded.

Titus ate nutrient paste in a mess alcove that overlooked the cruiser's dorsal spine. Through the viewport, *Honour's Edge* filled half the glass—cathedral hull, bombardment bays, Novahistorium dome faintly lit. The other half was black. Zsah'uj a smear below, cooling.

A deck rating passed the alcove hatch, saw Titus, stopped, thought better of it, kept walking. The hatch sealed. The paste was warm. Normal.

Node II pulsed amber on the HUD.

Judge:

"Convoy staging active. Node Two pending."



Ordinance Pending

Eighteen minutes before the window, astropathic choir sent a body.

Titus watched from staging bay seven through the hatch gap: two Hospitallers flanking a psyker in white restraint cloth, face bandaged, hands cuffed to a walking frame. A choir adjutant read serial numbers without looking at the asset's eyes.

The bay was already full—twelve Ultramarines in deployment order, Kael at the generator diagnostic port, two psyker caskets chained to the deck, the third mount empty until now. Voren checked clamp torque from the rail: green rune, green rune, green rune.

“Load geometry—green,” Voren said. “Geller overlap—three transits. Mercury jams—hardline in Sister Kael’s slate. Clamp sequence: housing stud, then casket chain, then embarkation arm. Auspex drift point-zero-four-seven on Zsah’uj. Kaelen-Theta drift unknown. Hold anyway.”

Everson stepped into the hatch line, slate in hand.

“Adjutant. Burn tolerance marginal. You are fast-tracking a body that failed choir screening yesterday.”

“Screening updated this watch. Captain accepted.”

“Captain is not Apothecarium.” Everson’s voice stayed flat—clinical register, full sentences on the slate. “Burn tolerance marginal on file. Screening updated this watch without my countersignature. I logged dissent four times. This is the fifth. Record it.”

“Recorded.” The adjutant did not look up. “Choir recommends speed. Convoy window in eighteen minutes. Empty mount is a failure mode.”

“So is a body that burns in four.” Everson held out his slate. “Restraint cloth tolerates rail geometry. Fool channel compatibility untested. Integration under hardline fallback only.”

“Mechanicus accepted.” The adjutant nodded toward Kael at the housing stud. “Lieutenant—gauntlet on stud when she calls.”

Everson looked at Titus. No plea. “If he screams, you hold anyway. Apothecarium record will note choir fast-track and holder confirm at stud.”

The psyker made a small sound—throat working against bandages, not words. A Hospitaller adjusted the frame strap.

Kael was already at the housing stud. “Mercury offline. Hardline fallback. Lieutenant—gauntlet on stud.”

Titus placed his gauntlet on the stud. Fool handshake—amber, red, nothing. Kael stripped the micro-relay without asking permission, solvent flash, reseal, second attempt. Green.

“Integration authorised,” Kael said.

The Hospitallers winched the body into the third mount—chains clinking, restraint lubricant shining under flat white lumens, the mount accepting weight with a shudder that ran the length of the ceiling rail. The designation string on the slate updated: PSYKER THREE—ASSIGNED.

Everson watched from the Apothecarium hatch, slate in hand, jaw tight. He did not cross the yellow line to intervene.

“Burn tolerance still marginal,” he said when Titus passed him. “If he fails at Node Two, the record will say choir fast-tracked and holder confirmed.”

Titus took the rebreather insert Everson held out—marked KAELEN-THETA HEAVY—and said nothing.

Captain's adjutant keyed the departure slate:

"Departure in twelve minutes. Void-shear amber. Geller chain continuous. Psyker assets three of three. Holder confirm."

"I confirm."

Thunderhawk *Gothic Spear* waited on the embarkation cradle—belly open, fuel lines connected to the cruiser's spine. Navy deck crew ran final checks in hand signals because void-shear static ate vox below a shout. A bosun held up two fingers, then five, then a fist: two minutes, fuel prime, hold.

A rating at the ramp seam checked Titus's harness twice—standard, impersonal, gloves smelling of solvent.

"Lieutenant. Harness torque good. Do not unclip until bosun clears red."

"Copy."

Titus climbed the ramp behind the third psyker casket team. Chains clinked. Kael was already at the generator housing stud, diagnostic slate green.

"Field integrity nominal at embarkation power," she said. "Handshake green. Fool channel armed."

Voren checked clamp torque from the deck plate—green rune, green rune, green rune. "Load geometry green. Geller chain continuous. Departure authorised when bosun clears."

The bosun cleared.

Fuel lines disconnected—hydraulic hiss, cold metal smell. Clamps released—one, two, four, a shudder through the deck. Repulsor lift engaged. Low note at first, then higher.

Through the ramp seam *Honour's Edge's* belly plates slid past—grey

ceramite, Novahistorium dome a faint glow above the curve. Then void. Particulate streaks, brown-grey, sweet on the filters through Everson's heavy insert.

Lift-off was pressure—knees heavier, stomach lighter, harness straps pulling. The ramp seam narrowed to a line, then closed. Bay lighting went red.

Atlas:

"Convoy transit one of three. Eighty-one days minimum. Kaelen-Theta approach vector locked."

Mother:

"Psyker assets three of three. Restraint tension green. Eat if you can."

Titus sat in the passenger restraint along the port bulkhead. The Fool channel case clipped to his belt. Outside, void-shear particulate scraped the hull—fine grit, continuous.

The thunderbird banked. Through a viewport slit the cruiser's cathedral hull slid away—embarkation arm shrinking to a line, then a point, then nothing.

Judge:

"Ordinance pending Node Two. Convoy underway. Record logged per Novahistorium charter."

Titus checked the HUD:

VOG NODE I: CERTIFIED

VOG NODE II: PENDING

PRIMARY HOLDER: LT. DEMETRIAN TITUS-WOLF CHANNEL

CONVOY: SARCOPHAGUS ROAD-70:12:00

PSYKER ASSETS: 3/3

FOOL CHANNEL: ARMED

The generator housing hummed through the deck plates. Kael watched the diagnostic slate without speaking. Metaurus was grey

three decks up and three hundred kilometres behind.

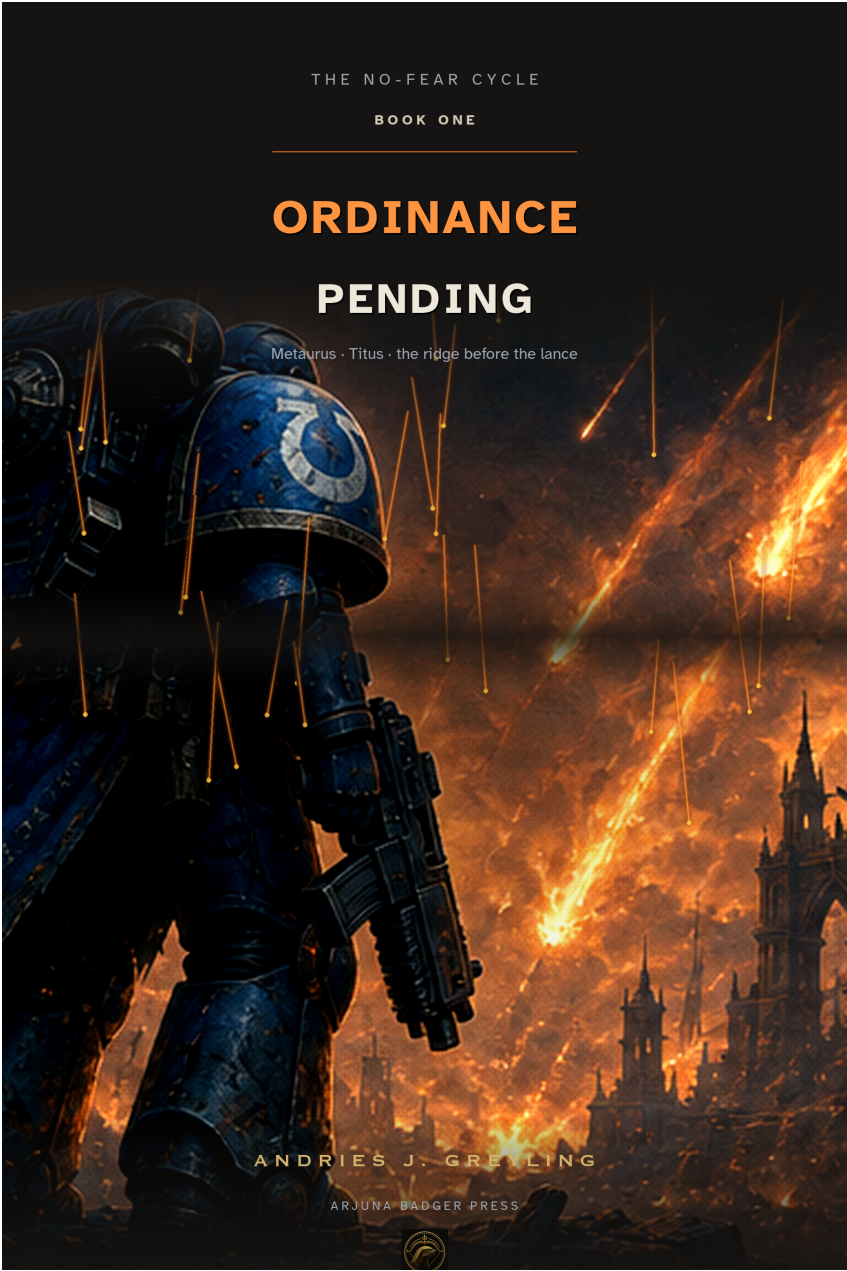
The Sarcophagus Road had a name in his mouth now.

Cover Art — Alternate Designs

*Platform demo: the selected cover is the PDF's full-bleed first page ([design/cover.jpg](#) — **Cover E, Ordinance enhanced**). The explorations below are the image compendium at the end of the trade paperback — the same appendix slot used for illustration galleries on the main Arjuna Badger Press shelf.*

Cover E — Ordinance (selected)

Portrait composite — Atkinson type, ridge + orbital lance, Arjuna Badger Press imprint.



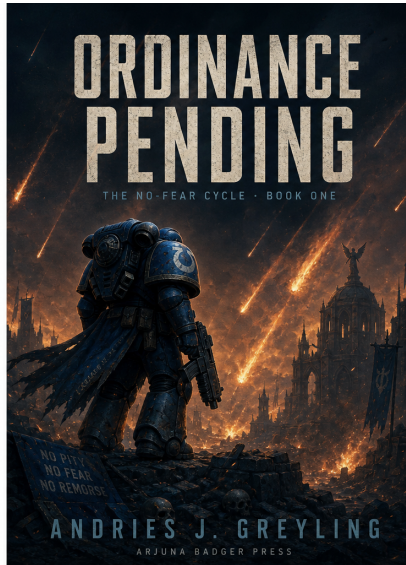
Cover E — Ordinance enhanced

Arjuna Badger Press / Andries J. Greyling, 2026 — selected front

cover.

Cover A — Ordinance (source)

Original landscape exploration.

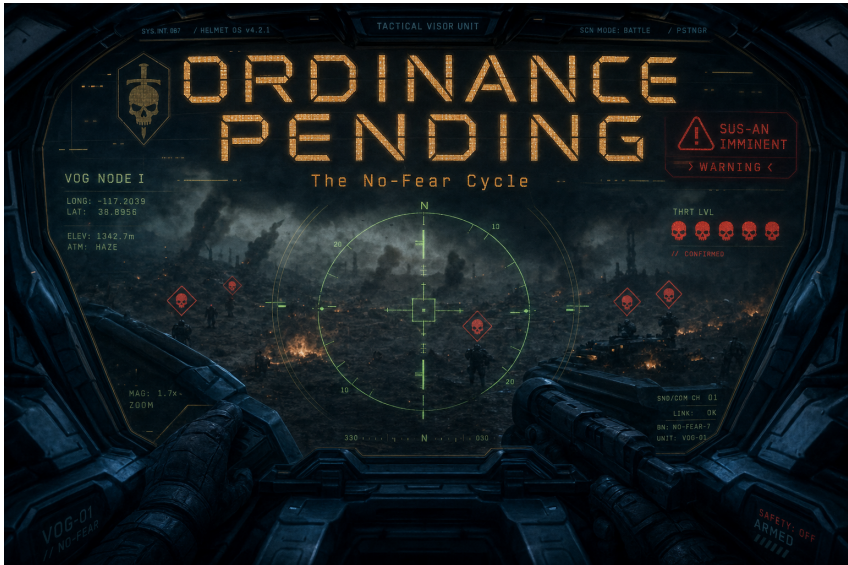


Cover A — Ordinance (source)

Arjuna Badger Press / Andries J. Greyling, 2026 — alternate exploration.

Cover B — HUD

Battle-council / HUD aesthetic.

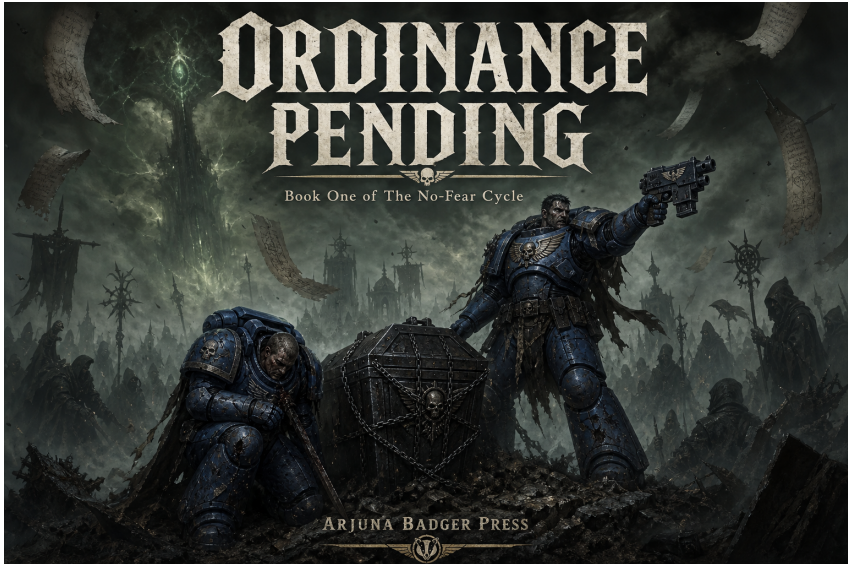


Cover B — HUD

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Cover C — The Ridge

Metaurus / Titus / sarcophagus.



Cover C — The Ridge

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Cover D — No Fear

Titus ontology — eye in bolter.



Cover D — No Fear

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Cover credits

Cover	Role
E — Ordinance (enhanced)	Selected — design/cover.jpg (PDF page 1)
A — Ordinance	Source art
B — HUD	Alternate
C — The Ridge	Alternate
D — No Fear	Alternate

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