

H A R B I N G E R

PART ONE

The silent leviathan drifted inexorably through the cold harshness of the void; its massive, scabrous hull pitted and scarred from millennia of meteoritic bombardment. The aeons spent lost in this sea of darkness had been cruel. At one time it had been a proud interstellar battleship, perhaps even the flagship of some long-forgotten admiral. But its original form was for the most part obscured beneath layer upon layer of galactic detritus. Now it was nothing but an eroded, lifeless carcass; its husk a tomb for a hundred thousand piteous souls.

Captain Dimitar leant forward to gaze upon the incredible sight before him, and he felt himself rising up from his chair to walk the few metres to the main view port. He heard gasps of awe from his officers as he pressed his hands to the glass and moved his head slowly from left to right in an effort to take in the impossible vastness of the hulk. It was enormous.

They were quiet for a few moments as they attempted to comprehend the enormity of their discovery. It was Lieutenant Churian who broke the awestruck silence.

"It's... it's huge," was all he could manage. Ivanko Churian was not known for his acuity.

Captain Dimitar turned and a smile slowly crept across his craggy face. "Indeed it is, lieutenant," he said, his voice rough from decades of barked orders. He grinned at Churian, revealing a mouth full of metal teeth, and his eyes shone as he continued.

"And now it's ours."

Borski cut through the last section and the bulkhead fell with an almighty clang as a tonne of metal struck the floor. He grunted his satisfaction and got up, placing the las-cutter back in its holster at his hip, and pulling out his bolter to aim it down the long, dark corridor that stretched into the darkness. Sweat trickled down his forehead and dripped from the end of his nose, despite the low temperature inside his enviro-suit. Borski, like the three crew members with him, was afraid.

He looked to his side and saw Temmov; the bulky form of the grey metal suit hiding his comrade's wiry frame. Temmov's armoured helm covered his entire head, and only his eyes were visible through the narrow slit of his visor. They were wide and darting from shadow to shadow. He could see his own fear reflected in them.

A hand landed on his shoulder and he turned to see that it was Lieutenant Churian. Borski looked at him,

and the man gestured with his hand that he should advance. Borski frowned but nodded his head in affirmation; a strange gesture in the cumbersome suit. He activated his lumen beams and signalled for Temmov to get up.

The four men stepped across the threshold and into the dread hulk.

Igo Dimitar walked down the short flight of steps that led from the cramped confines of the bridge, to the even more confined space of the navigator's chamber. As he entered the dimly-lit compartment, Dimitar called out.

"Vlados. I would speak with you."

For a moment there was silence. But then a metallic click as of a bolt sliding back in its housing, followed by the hiss of released pressure. A dark sarcophagus set into the opposite wall opened slowly, to reveal the shrivelled remains of an incredibly ancient man. Its skin was wrinkled and pallid. A mask, connected by a series of cables and tubes, covered its face entirely. Then it spoke.

"As I would speak with you, captain," the navigator rasped thinly. "The vessel we are docked with smells of death. A chill runs through its hull and I can feel the echoes of ten thousand years spent lost in the empyrean." The corpse-like figure seemed to regard Dimitar with an uncompromising stare from behind that cold mask before continuing.

"I warned you not to follow the translation ripple. We should retract the docking umbilical and leave immediately." Vlados, despite his appearance, sounded desperate.

"We are going nowhere," was Dimitar's simple, terse response. He leant back against a metal pillar and folded his arms across his chest.

"But captain, if –" he was cut short by Dimitar's interruption.

"Calm yourself, Vlados. We have discovered an ancient vessel that could contain untold treasures, not to mention the ship itself being a magnificent prize. This is just the sort of find that will take my career to heights previously only imagined." He closed his eyes and smiled inwardly at the glorious visions playing across his mind's eye.

"Given time, I might even make it the flagship of my new fleet."

"This is folly, my captain. You are blinded by visions of your own glory, when all I see are visions of terrible portent. Yet you are not gifted with the sight. I say again: we must leave.

"Now."

Dimitar was not happy. He had been unable to get any information from his navigator other than babbling omens. As he sank back down into the cold synthide embrace of his command throne, he mentally resolved to procure a replacement for him the next time they were in Imperial space. Right now, though,

he had more pressing matters to attend to; namely getting the warp drives on that hulk deactivated before it made an arbitrary jump back into the empyrean, as these things were wont to do.

"Captain, we're getting the pict-feed through from Lieutenant Churian's team," stated one of the officers on the small bridge.

"Put it up on the monitor," Dimitar grumbled. The screen above their heads flickered into life with a static snowfield of binary. Finally it cleared, although not entirely, to reveal the view from Churian's helmet-mounted picter. The image was distorted, and kept twisting in and out of focus, although you could make out the shapes of two armoured men advancing cautiously down a long corridor.

"Sort out the image, Varga! I can't see gak," he demanded of the comms officer.

Varga fiddled with the controls at her station, but this had little effect on the quality of the picture. She turned to face her captain.

"We're getting a lot of interference from the hulk, sir. I am unable to filter out all of the electrostatic noise," she said.

Dimitar's lips curled in a silent snarl and he stood up from his chair, just as the image on the screen distorted horribly before vanishing into a mess of broken code.

"First mate," he growled. "Get another team down there with a cable link. I want to see and hear exactly what's going on inside that hulk."

"The door's locked, Lieutenant," Borski whispered through his vox link, although his voice sounded loud to his ears as it reverberated inside his helmet. They'd been tip-toeing nervously through a maze of passageways and had reached a wide blast door, constructed in the 10,000 year old industrial gothic style of Old Terra. Except for the hard-nosed officer, the men were fearful of what might lurk inside this dead vessel.

Churian spoke curtly, his voice loud in Borski's ears. "Open it".

The technician grimaced at the loudness of his voice and he could see the other crew members flinch. He remembered the grim faerie tales of his childhood, when his mother spoke of warp-spawned doom ships drifting in the void, and the fools who would try to unlock their secrets, in the vain search for fame and fortune. He recalled that the adventuring heroes invariably came to a sticky end, and the moral to these stories was always the same: Ware the things you seek; lest other, unspeakable things seek you.

He shook his head from the brief reverie and set about the task of unlocking the blast door.

"Pict-feed from the second team coming up now, sir," Varga announced.

The static on the main screen blinked several times before it switched to the flickering view to be had from a hull-mounted picter inside the dimly-lit umbilical connecting the two vessels. Four figures wearing heavy

mining enviro-suits were stood in the narrow passage; two men could be seen checking the signal booster units that would follow them into the hulk, whilst another was making his bolter ready. The leader, helmet visor down, walked over to look up into the picter screen.

A female voice spoke over the vox-link. "Captain, this is Markov. Signal boosters are prepped and we're ready for your orders."

"Proceed, Markov. I want a full exploratory sweep of this sector. Keep the reports regular."

"Aye, captain," replied Markov, and she turned to usher the second team towards the outer airlock door that was the only barrier between them and the unknown innards of the hulk. As they approached, the door slowly spiralled open in the fashion of a pict lens aperture, with ten curved, teeth-like sections receding with the squeal of metal grinding on metal into the circular rim of the portal. Once they stepped across the threshold, the teeth slid back into place, giving the distinct impression of the hulk swallowing four more crew members.

Despite the great antiquity of the control panel, Borski made fairly short work of re-wiring and thusly re-routing power to the overrides to unlock the door. A long groan came from within the wall and Borski winced, instinctively getting up to aim his big bolter at the blast door, taking a few steps back as he did so. The other crew members followed suit, and only Churian stood his ground, although he tightened his grip on his plasma pistol. There was a whirring sound that signified interior energy cells powering up, and steam began venting from grills set into the floor either side of the entrance. As the steam began to abate, huge internal bolts slid back in their housings and numerous cogs set into the metal began to turn.

With an almighty groan, the blast door began a slow descent into the floor. Wind howled through the gap and whistled past the men, as the atmosphere behind the portal expanded into the vacuum inside the corridor. Then, when it was only half way down there was an almighty screech of grinding metal and the door shuddered to a halt, still two metres above the deck plating.

Churian turned to Borski, but he didn't need to say anything. The tech slung his weapon across his back and went back to the open control panel to see what could be done. Behind him Churian spoke into his vox link.

"Captain Dimitar, this is Churian. Do you read? Captain Dimitar, do you read me? Captain?" but all he got was an earful of static.

No sooner had the portal closed behind Markov, than the images displayed on the bridge monitor began to judder and twist again.

Dimitar slammed his fist into the arm of his command chair. "Markov! Get those boosters up now," he growled.

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the sound of static, before Markov responded.

"Adjusting modulator now, captain. One moment..." her garbled voice trailed off, before the screen

flickered to become much clearer, although still slightly distorted.

"Is that better, captain?"

"Aye. Advance to Churian's last known location. I want a report from him within the hour. Time is of the essence; we need to locate and deactivate the warp drive. I need not remind you of the consequences of a random warp jump; you know what these ancient hulks are like." Dimitar sat back into his chair, eyes fixed to the screen, and waited.

In the navigation cell, Vlados meditated. His eyes were closed but twitching spasmodically from side to side under the thin, almost translucent skin of his eyelids. Blue, throbbing veins were visible at his temples and his face glistened with perspiration.

Vlados was dreaming the dreams of the Gifted, although he had long considered them more of a curse than blessing. Visions flashed across his mind's eye; dreadful revelations of the most portentous kind that clawed with icy fingers at his brain, sending shards of pain through his cerebrum and tingling down the nerve clusters of his bent and twisted spine. His breathing was heavy and his body had now begun to shudder; imperceptibly at first but rapidly increasing to a violent seizure. Froth bubbled at the edges of his mouth as he thrashed about inside the sarcophagus, threatening to break his fragile bones against the sides.

Then he was still. A solitary, bloody tear emerged from the corner of his left eye to trickle down his cheek.

Vlados slowly opened his rheumy eyes; eyes that were now shot with blood. He put his hand to his cheek and pulled it away, gazing contemplatively at the crimson smear on his finger tips.

"And so it begins".