

Slaughter Arrayed

Chapter 1: Smoke-Filled Hangars

Mahakala Secondary Freighter Hangar. 2800 Hours

To an unobservant eye the empty freighter hangar, ten kilometres from the main space port, looked completely ordinary. A slightly more observant eye would note that the hangar was surrounded by armed soldiers, and would remember that the planet of Mahakala was currently undergoing an armageddon-level military campaign.

And the most observant eyes of them all would note that this hangar wasn't just guarded by the soldiers of one galactic faction. An eclectic and arcane combination of guards stood watch, staunchly keeping their distance from one another. Auteriton and Ruptorix, Hali'Ctoch and Hinode, Human and Ormollian, all acting as though their nations were not at total war.

For inside this unassuming hangar, an almost unprecedented occurrence was taking place. The commanding generals of the star nations were engaging in what could be called diplomacy.

"If correct, identified artefact constitutes a potential Level 10 urgency threat" rumbled a great robotic figure, eight feet tall and built for strength. The uncompromising, malevolent genius present behind its spectralic red eyes announced this figure to all as the Infinite Locas, scourge of the Ramus Sector biologicals and Metrical Lord of the Sekte Infinite.

“Which is why it *cannot* be allowed to remain in Kolkattan hands” the middle-aged human responding to Locas seemed unperturbed by the Auteriton’s figure. Salamis Teltus’ crisp, neatly ironed uniform bedazzled with polished medals, his hair and mustache were masterfully groomed with not a hair out of place, and his eyes were sunken and pallid from exhaustion. “Those backward imbeciles will either accidentally set it off, or use it as a weapon against us the first chance they get. Either option will deprive us all of Mahakala’s valuable resources.”

“That is correct.” A second mechanical voice, less stilted than that of Locas, pierced through the meeting hall. Clad in a resplendent black robe and wielding piercing white eyes, Hellear was the Singularity Weaver of the Sekte Infinite, renowned throughout the galaxy for his strategic prowess. “While it is evidently a great displeasure to our assembled noble nations, in this case odds of substantial Exsintech retrieval are negligible without co-operation.”

“Most pleasing!” came a raspy, deep voice from opposite Hellear. There sat an emaciated, haunting figure bearing a satisfied expression. The skin stretched horrifically thin over his face and hands marked him as an Ormollian, none other than Maeven Kaeda, the high-ranking superintendent of Jian’Ha itself. “The United Races of the Rassa-Moxol have long advocated for co-operation and brotherhood, this assault is something we shall support fully!”

“Even if several caches of the Great Old Ones’ must be...*sacrificed*.” The figure to Kaeda’s left spoke warily, the tall, burly and tentacled Hali’Ctoch in full battle armour despite the diplomatic setting. Ikarn’Eztli, Warchief of Jian’Ha, made no secret of his distaste for diplomacy. A withering stare from Kaeda cut his speech short, but did not stop a muttered “usurpers” coming from the old commander.

“The Supreme War Council of Jian’Ha has agreed to the proposal of splitting recovered resources thriceways” Kaeda glibly interjected to cover his colleague’s dissent, “it is our

belief that Cent'Irum technology will come to better use by the Skolourgy and Sekte Mecherrum than by the primitive Kolkattan Familiysky."

"Excellent, excellent" Teltus raised his hands as he regained control of the meeting, pointed the assembled generals towards the assortment of charts and tokens assembled on the table. "Kythira, would you present the battle plan?"

"Of course, Master General Admiral" came the crisp reply of the last seated individual, a battle-scarred human with her white hair shortly cropped. With a practiced drawl she gestured to various positions on the map of Mahakala's Planetary Generator Array, a contraption designed to prevent orbital bombardment and which held the mysterious superweapon deep within its vaults.

The plan was simple. First, a horde of Auterium menials would launch probing assaults on the Kolkattan left flank, hopefully tying down the majority of the Kolkattan battle mechs. Then, a squadron of the POU's finest Hunter Tanks would bombard the Generator Array from distance, forcing the Kolkattan vanguard to advance or be destroyed. Finally, elite Rassa-Moxol troops would lie in ambush on the right flank, getting in under the battle mechs' defences and ripping them to shreds one by one.

All involved found such an arrangement acceptable. It kept all three factions at a distance from each other, leaving minimal room for potential betrayals. Heavily outnumbered, the Kolkattan forces would be sitting ducks for the combined might of three star armies. It was all but foolproof.

It had been roughly half an hour since the battle plans had been first presented, and already minds were shifting from the meeting to the oncoming battle, when a sound was heard from the hangar entrance.

Tap, tap, tap came the methodic, perfectly timed clicks of steel feet along the hangar fleet. Six heads turned to the noise, bristling with frustration at their meeting being disrupted. Their eyes fixated upon a slender mechanical figure, its heraldry marking it as a junior Auterium calculator.

“Permission to interject” came the flat voice of the machine, gazing at the Infinite Locas for affirmation.

“Granted.”

“Titan-Class Naval Ship of Kolkatan design encountered above Mahakala surface. Identified as flagship of the Titanichesky Sektorskii, the *Petrova Olgana*.” The Auteriton said its words in a calm, unfeeling tone, yet this attitude was not shared by the assembled generals.

The pale faces, seized circuitry and clenched tentacles of the room said it all. The *Petrova* was the personal ship of the Princheva Dominikia, assumed heir to the Kolkatt and the single most dangerous warrior in the galaxy. Her presence would singlehandedly swing the assault from an assured success to nigh-on-suicide.

Seemingly unaware of the firestorm its words had unleashed, the calculator continued. “Long-range scan indicates *Petrova Olgana*’s main hangar contains large vehicle estimated at 1750 tons. Weaponry attached to this vehicle considered equivalent to one-half of all non-Kolkattan ordinance on Mahakala.” A brief pause filled the room.

“Likely too small to be Dominikia’s walker” Ikarn’Eztli broke the silence, the old warlord having kept his wits. “Thank the Old Ones, there is still a slim chance of victory.”

Chapter 2: Rituals of Humiliation

At the Mahakala Planetary Generator Array. 2900 Hours.

“Bite down on this, my esteemed Princhev.” As much as Doctor Bogdan Vonchivo disliked it, the small plastic bar would have to substitute for anesthetic. Princhev Kozlov was needed on the frontline, and even local anesthesia would leave him sidelined for too long.

Slimly built and six foot tall, his face coated in scars from both ritual tattoos and a lifetime of war, Kozlov lived up to his moniker as the Ender of Worlds even while wounded. The variety of cybernetics installed across his body had not yet dulled the bioluminescent bacteria inhabiting his side-horns, the bright red glow showcasing a Kolkattan in his prime.

Just as the Doctor was applying the last poultice, Kozlov rose to his feet, staggering to the wall as the blood rushed to his head. “Do not try and keep me, Doctor” he growled, anticipating Bogdan’s response. “The war room awaits my presence.”

The esteemed Princhev walked two steps forward before his legs gave way, and he crumpled to his knees.

Ten minutes later, the assembled Boyars of the Giantchesky were holding their meeting in Kozlov’s private hospital chamber. Kozlov’s younger brother and presumed heir, Par-Princhev Matvei, had been assisted in, wrapped in bandages from recent skin grafts, and was currently propped up against a wall.

“What is the news from the front, my esteemed and noble Boyars?” Kozlov drawled, his voice booming even as he sat gingerly on the bed.

Six pairs of eyes looked around the room, each silently willing another to step forward. After several seconds of silence the most senior among them spoke, the woman's purple mantle marking her as a pilot qualified to command a mighty Boyarin Drighthen.

"There have been no reports of any fighting in the past day, oh great Princhev." Her tone was almost apologetic, seeking to mollify rather than explain.

"What do you mean *no reports*?" snarled the Princhev, red eyes blazing. "That is impossible. Surely the blundering serfs in charge of gathering intelligence are not *that* useless."

"Our outlying patrols can support this conclusion. Not a Uracilite conscript or Auterium menial has attempted an assault over the past day."

Kozlov slumped back against the hospital bed. He was stubborn, not stupid, and his keen military mind knew this could only mean one thing. "They're preparing for an assault on the Generator Array." The shuffled feet of the Boyars affirmed his conclusion. "They know of the ancient weapon."

To the back of the room, the bandaged figure of the Par-Princhev began to gesticulate. His blue-tinted, undersized horns showed his youth, but there was a determined intelligence blazing in his pale pink eyes. "We have to mobilize all available defences" Matvei spoke raspily, seemingly in pain. "Call back all patrols, beg for blockade-runners, throw as many non-essentials as we can into Bruzhers."

"My noble brother is correct, we aren't losing the weapon now." Kozlov rose from his bed, galvanized with a newfound strength. "Esteemed Boyar Marina, what forces are available to defend the array?"

The mantled Drighten pilot once again let a nervous expression cross her face. “Well, we have my Drighten, a Breaker and three Reavers stationed guard, alongside two squadrons of experienced Esquires.” She began to sweat as the unimpressive nature of their force became clear. “We have about thirty Bruzhers. Mostly industrial.”

Kozlov blinked a few times, his face morphing into a grimace. “So, we are doomed?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t mentioned the worst aspect yet, oh noble and esteemed Princhev.” Marina bowed deeply and apologetically. “The *Petrova Olga* is in orbit. Your sister wishes to speak with you.”

Kozlov stood tensely in front of the large, blue screen, tapping his feet nervously as he waited for the connection to establish. Matvei and the Boyars stood out of sight, not wishing to interrupt the conversation between Princhev and Princheva.

After a short wait, the screen flickered and crackled to light. A large control room blinked into view, showing a middle-aged Kolkattan woman, her regal bearing and fine clothing marking her as none other than Princheva Dominikia herself.

Much to Kozlov’s annoyance, his sister’s attention was currently not focused on the screen, instead being drawn to something out of the screen’s view.

“Have her hung from the roof of her foundry” Dominikia’s voice was quiet and reserved, yet shook with unchallenged authority, “any future troublemakers will take her corpse into account.”

A muffled scream filled the room as Dominikia turned to the screen, her face suddenly brightening into a smile. “Ah! My baby brother woke up from his nap!”

“Hello, dearest sister” Kozlov’s smile did not reach his eyes. “I heard that you wanted to speak with me.”

“Oh yes, we have lots to talk about, problems, problems.” Dominikia casually gestured with her right hand as she reclined in an austere titanium chair, “But first I want to chat with my little Kozlovskii, how have you been?”

“Perfectly adequate.” Kozlov’s eye twitched under his sister’s piercing gaze. “The Mahakala campai-”

“You look skinny!” Dominikia tut-tutted visibly, “Have the chefs been feeding you enough? Perhaps I should have a word with them.”

“That won’t be necessary, dearest sister.”

“Alright, if you say so Kozlovskii.” Dominikia chuckled to herself as her brother struggled to keep smiling.

“The Mahakala campaign is progressing well.” Kozlov continued, trying to regain control of the conversation. “We have acquired an extremely powerful Exsintech device, and will be studying it closely for potential technological discoveries.”

“Yes, I already know what you found, Kozlovskii. That’s why I’ve taken the time out of my schedule to contact you, in fact.” Dominikia’s smile looked more predatory now, and Kozlov couldn’t stop himself from flinching.

“You said earlier that the Mahakala campaign was ‘going well’, but that was a lie wasn’t it. Your frontline is collapsing, and our very presence planetside is in danger.”

Kozlov bristled at his sister's accusation. "Despite a cravenly blockade by the decrepit nations, we have easily secured the Exsintech we came here for. I can assure you, dearest sister, that technology will be transported offworld within the day."

Dominikia let out a weary sigh. "You may well be right, Kozlovskii. But unfortunately I just can't take a chance. Not with the potential future of the Kolkata Alliance on the line." Her maroon eyes, dulled with oncoming age, suddenly brightened. "I am sending a Corasov to the Array. It will take possession of the Exsintech, and deliver it to the Titanchesky where it can be properly studied."

"Dominikia!" Kozlov's smile was gone now, his mouth curled into a snarl and his eyes burning. "This is an outrage! That Exsintech was retrieved by my Giantchesky, and we have already conducted preliminary tes-"

"NO DISSENT, *boy*" Dominikia's face was expressionless and cold as she beheld her brother's rage. "Did you think I broke a planetary siege for nothing? *You* couldn't perform your duties, so *I* have generously assisted my dearest brother." Getting up from her chair, Dominikia strode up the communication screen.

"The Corasov will be piloted by Ekaterina, one of my finest pilots. I believe she's rescued you before." Dominikia's face fell into a light smile at her own words. "Until that Exsintech is safely off the surface, she is in charge of all Kolkattan forces on Mahakala. Understood?"

For a brief few seconds, Kozlov remained motionless, before sighing in defeat. "As you wish, dearest sister."

"Excellent. She'll make planetfall within the hour. Oh, and brother, make sure to get enough rest." Dominikia's face once again assumed a teasing smile. "Just because my little Kozlovskii can be impudent sometimes, doesn't mean I want him to neglect his health!" With that, the screen flickered off.

Kozlov picked up the screen emanator with his cybernetic right arm. Slowly, he crushed the small device as he formed a fist. “That lazy, thieving WHORE!” The ruined machinery went flying into the nearest wall, shattering into a hundred pieces.

Matvei limped up to Kozlov as he raged, his face curled in a smirk. “Shall I get the landing bays ready, *Kozlovskii?*” The diminutive almost seemed to sing from his lips.

“Shut your mouth, you insolent child, or I’ll run a bayonet through it.” Kozlov snapped at his brother, who showed no reaction to the clearly unmeant threat. Shoving past the assembled Boyars, he barked an order to no-one in particular.

“Get the landing bays ready for the Corasov. I have an Ender of Worlds to prepare.”

Chapter 3: Dead Man’s Bluff

10 kilometres from the Generator Array, 3000 Hours.

Ikarn’Eztli’s personal Extasis Carrier trundled along a decrepit road, the lights of the Generator Array beginning to appear on the external monitors.

The old general was silent as he contemplated his artefact collection. He ran his hands over a burnt chunk of reactor, taken from the wreckage of a Drighten slain by his own hands. A shelf of polished skulls, both Human and Hinode, marked victories over the Uracilites. There was a Singularity Scythe of the Infinite Locas, collected after one of the machine lord’s bodies was destroyed.

Ikarn’Eztli let out a deep sigh as he reminisced on days past. Before him lay the trophies from centuries of war, centuries of pain, death and victory. As a foolish youth, he had bragged before his superiors that he was invincible in battle. Father Time had

shown him to be no idle boaster, yet had cruelly begun to eat away at the very strength that had brought the Warchief so many victories.

His skull tentacles no longer shone with the same gloss they once did. Some back teeth had fallen out already, and his skin had begun to mottle yellow. How much longer would his might last? Ikarn'Eztli did not know.

A faint *swoosh* distracted the Warchief from his contemplation, as another Hali'Ctoch entered his compartment. This one was young, standing proud and tall, yet with a look of concern across his helmess face. "You called for me, Master."

"Come in, Akalan, come in." Ikarn'Eztli turned to meet his protege, deftly unlocking a small cabinet as he did so. "I desire to converse away from prying Ormollian eyes."

A small smile came across the young Hali'Ctoch's face. "You wish to talk of how our honoured Maeven has become too close to the Ruptorix filth?"

The old Warchief let out a chuckle at the youngster's eagerness. "Ah, Akalan, alas no matter which Ormollian is assigned to the great Hakarak, they will always busy themselves with the concerns of lesser races. No, I wish to discuss more personal matters."

Akalan's five eyes bulged as Ikarn'Eztli handed him a fine crystalline glass, containing a cocktail of the most exotic blood in the galaxy. Carefully holding the delicacy between his claws, he took a small sip as he waited for the Warchief to continue.

"One day, my student, the Hali'Ctoch of Jian'Ha will be yours to command. You have proven yourself on the battlefield many times over, but you must learn that some aspects of leadership require a finer touch."

Akalan shifted uncomfortably beneath his superior's gaze. "You have led Jian'Ha for many years, oh great Warchief, and Old Ones willing will do so for many more. If my leadership has deficiencies, I have much time to improve further under your tutelage."

The Warchief let out a thunderous laugh, clasping a powerful hand on Akalan's shoulder. "Humility, that is good!" His relaxed expression hardened slightly as he looked over his pupil. "Nevertheless, it is never too soon for one to start learning the necessary skills. After tonight's victory, you will represent the Hali'Ctoch at the supreme war meeting, alone."

Akalan looked concerned, his fangs held back in a grimace. "Will the honoured Maeven not require your attendance? How will you explain an absence?"

"Do not worry yourself with the details, just know that I have organised a suitable excuse." Ikarn'Eztli's upper eyes twinkled with a faint mischief as he downed a large blood cocktail, pouring himself another without a pause. "But enough of such plans. Let us drink to the Old Ones! The Hakarak shall need their blessing in the battle ahead."

"MOVE FOR FREEDOM, BOYS!" Lord Captain Kythira overlooked her battalion with a keen eye as they marched through the night. The children of Basilar Sector were the Prestige of Uracil's finest soldiers, and they moved in lockstep through terrain conscripts could not pierce.

Kythira had spent two centuries honing the Basilar Stormers under her command into the deadliest infantry the POU could muster, and she was well aware tonight's battle would test every one of her finely honed leadership skills. Her force could advance as fast and fight as fiercely as they could, but it would mean nothing if their vehicles failed them.

A sharp ping drew Kythira's attention to the screen emanator strapped to her arm. Bringing it up as she continued to march, she gave a quick nod to the figure of Salamis Teltus on the screen. "Master General Admiral."

"Kythira!" Teltus was perched on the back of a Prudence Hunter Tank, his ceremonial uniform replaced by battle fatigues. He was absent any visible bodyguards; clearly he wished to discuss sensitive information. "What's the status of the Basilar Stormers' advance?"

"All units are in position, the march has progressed well despite the short notice." Kythira's eyes narrowed as she attempted to read Teltus' face. "All we are waiting on is an assurance of tank support."

"The last propaganda shoot played well in the core regions. We have been assigned enough ammunition for an effective assault, don't you worry." Teltus responded with a glib smile.

"And will this ammunition be expended?"

"The Lord Minister requires results, Kythira. Consul Nician has been getting uppity again, we need a victory to put him in his place."

If there was one thing Kythira knew Teltus could be trusted to do without trickery, it was to oppose the Hinode consul. The two men famously loathed each other. "Good to hear that you and Thylia have come to your senses. I don't care what the bigwigs say, I don't like losing battles to drum up recruitment."

Teltus let the smallest of smirks cross his face as he listened to Kythira's complaints. "Rest assured, Lord Captain, you will not be losing this one."

Silence. The Sekte Infinite had no need for such inefficiencies as chatter to be programmed into its menial troopers, and so they offered none. The vast horde moved in divine perfection, each menial in chorus with its brethren.

Scattered between these lesser machines were the first rank of special units, the Void Commissars. Granted just enough intelligence to interpret commands, yet still lacking sapience. Mighty Ruination and Annihilation Devastators trundled alongside the ranks, their cannons designed to pierce and destroy armour.

But mightiest of all was the Tesseract Engine. Ten metres tall and shimmering with a blue light, the behemoth emanated an aura of holy wreath-gravity on all Auteritons around it. Powered by the compressed fragment of a neutron star, it was behind this great beast that the leaders of the Sekte Infinite made their plans.

“Rear Defences Vulnerable.” Infinite Locas rumbled, the absence of other races allowing for the discarding of inefficient grammatical patterns. “Kolkatta Alliance forces concentrated in vanguard. Calculations prove potential flanking manoeuvre effective.”

“The *Petrova Olga* prevents the commitment of substantial airborne transports, Infinite.” Hellear tapped his sceptre in a steady rhythm on the Unending Ark’s floor.

“Your troupe would be absent heavy support. I do not support this action.”

“Acknowledged. Not accepted. Flanking necessary in order to ensure retrieval of Exsintech weapon. Biologicals are incapable of retrieving true potential of the Wreath.” Locas had come to a conclusion, and the combined universe would not sway them now.

“Slaves of no concern.” The third machine in the ark spoke at last, its mechanical head inlaid with glowing blue orbs and its body constructed of flawless Tungsten. “They are INFERIOR. They will *bleed*.”

“Isen.” Hellear let a tone of displeasure enter his voice at the eagerness of his compatriot. “Do *not* take this assault lightly. You make an astute commissar of the Devastator Corps, but you are not immortal.”

Isen whirled bombastically, gesturing to the assembled Devastators marching ahead of the Tesseract Engine. “Kolkatta, mere slaves. Kolkatta, *nothing*. Ruination Devastators will deconstruct Kolkatta. Annihilation Devastators will deconstruct Kolkatta. Eminent Devastators will deconstruct Kolkatta. *I* will deconstruct Kolkatta.”

“Correct attitude, Molten Devastator Isen.” Locas intervened in his subordinate’s dispute, addressing Isen in an almost relaxed manner. “But take note. You are under command of Singularity Weaver Hellear. Do not question Hellear’s orders.”

Isen bowed his head low in supplication. “At command. Master Hellear. Choose target, and I will bring death.”

Even as Hellear gave a nod in return, Infinite Locas began to shepherd his subordinates from the Ark. “I must depart. I expect success in my absence.”

“Understood, Infinite” came Hellear’s reply as he stepped off the Ark, Isen behind him as the Devastator made his way back to his walker.

“May the Wreathe guide your path” Locas called out, the Ark beginning to hover into the air and leave the battleline.

“May the Wreathe guide your path.”