

Stale blankets of air, recycled untold times; the unremarkable hum emitting from everywhere at once; dim, despairing luminodes banished to the surfaces of forgotten corridors.

The sensations of interstellar travel--uniform and mundane. A constant stream of immutable factors.

And above all these things, there was a strata of immediately unidentifiable sensations coalescing in the air. Potent at times, almost imperceptible at others, but definitely there. Things suggestive of something bitter and primal.

Fear. Despair.

Pain.

Archon Kanarius of the Darkskull Kabal had known the warm presence for centuries, yet still it was as much of a treat to taste as it was centuries ago, a pleasure that could never wane and could only grow more exquisite in its fermented state.

The piercing screams of newly-captured pleasure-prey; the defeated moans of slaves abducted long ago--it was all music to his ears, and the cruel thing had to discipline himself against the sheer temptation of such sweet miseries.

Deftly, he drew the cruel pleasure-crafted dagger from his belt and raked its toxin-saturated edge across the scarred flesh of his cheek, drawing dark lines of ancient blood that escaped into the corner of his chapped mouth.

Two of his Incubii inclined a head in his direction. Clad in their gaudily ornate armored bodygloves, the gesture gave them the impression of hyenas made aware of the fresh scent of death.

"No," he rasped. Denied, though by nothing more than a whisper, the honor guards retreated to a respectful distance at once.

There were more pressing matters at hand than simple pleasure rituals. He beckoned them onward.

Not even pausing to treat the discolored, throbbing wound, he sheathed the dagger and entered the curiously dimly-lit bridge-deck, his ever-present Incubii maintaining their eternal vigilance.

The crew-slaves moaned and scuttled about like rodents exposed by the beam of a flashlight, accelerating their work efforts into a nervous frenzy fueled by a mix of trepidation and woe, for His presence meant wanton agony-voyeurs upon those that dared to slack in their labor--rituals of a pain all at once sundering yet delicious as nectar, their flesh given wholly to Him in praise.

Less given to unrest, but certainly not free of it, Raid Bringer Lasyr knelt instantly, his gaze to the floor, his long raven locks almost sweeping the surface below him. A patch of dark red crust blighted the solid tiles of the deck just inches from where he knelt.

The last remaining traces of the former Raid Bringer, who had been foolish enough to hesitate on a direct order from the Archon. Hesitation was a sign of frailty, and such things could not be tolerated in the cut-throat society of the Dark Ones.

The Archon, flanked by his ever-present retinue of Incubii, stalked across the dreary bridge, coming to stop before the Raid Bringer. His leering face was a pale mask of a texture like that of moist parchment, lines of fury--or perhaps ecstasy--a permanent feature etched upon his countenance. More disturbing than this, there was always a smile, a seemingly permanent grin of a manner that mocked compassion with its stark absence of benevolence and promises of unspeakable defamation.

Lesser beings, crew-slaves and Warrior-pilots too insignificant for him to be trifled to acknowledge as anything but rodents cowered with every step he took. With the exception of his Incubii honor guard, who stood like statued gargoyles, ever-vigilant at his side, all present bowed in reverence. Indeed, some of the crew-slaves bowed so deeply that their eyes nearly touched the cold deck, so desperate were they to demonstrate anything but unwavering loyalty to The Unbinder of Flesh and Rapist of the Byryzian System. So potent was their fear that he could taste it.

It was delicious.

"Sire," the Raid Bringer began, his gaze still set firmly to the floor. Passive terror gripped him for a moment as he felt one of the Incubii tense. To speak out of turn to The Unbinder of Flesh, was to invite a feast of a thousand morsels of pain.

Realizing his mistake, he bowed even lower and cupped his hands to his lowered skull in appeasement, desperate to the sensual punishment that surely awaited him, though truth be told, a part of him was genuinely curious.

"Speak, thing." the harsh rasp of a voice of the Archon seemed to seep into air like tendrils of ugly smoke.

It was rumored that the Archon had, eons ago, had his vocal cords altered by the Haemonculi of the kabal to emit waves attuned to the pain-receptors in the brain of most sentients. The effect was that his authority was reinforced whenever he spoke, inducing acute discomfort in any who would hear his voice.

The Haemonculii executed their craft well.

Filled with almost palpable cruelty, the sound of his voice seemed to squirm its through ear canals and into brainmatter. At the very sound of it, some of the lesser creatures present began to sob quietly, such was their discomfort.

"Y-yes, lord...", the Raid Bringer, a fierce warrior in his own right and ravager of eight worlds still knew his place, and moreover knew to fear the Archon as any rationally-thinking being would. "Lord," he continued, "Our Seekers have spotted a static outpost at the edge of the system -- a Mon-Keigh structure, bearing no docks for interceptor groups, and lightly defended, if at all."

The Archon brought his disturbingly long fingers to his dagger-sharp chin at the words, his grin widening even more.

"Man-things." he declared at length.

"Yes, lord. Their minds do break so easily, as you of course in your great wisdom know, but their souls..are quite delicious and a successful raid would satisfy The Thirst for some time."

"Man-things", the Archon repeated again, this his grin widening even more, to an impossible radius that revealed silver fangs of teeth. "You have done well, Raid Bringer. I shall reward your efforts with four agony-pleasures."

"Thank you, lord."

"Now then," Archon Kanarius continued, sweeping his hand of cruel, talon-like fingers across the room of still kneeling servants, "Translate us into real-space, and Raid Bringer?"

"Lord?"

"Prepare a vessel for my personal transport into this station. It has been such a long time--" his gaze wandered as if in sweet reminiscence, "--since I have feasted on fresh Mon-Keigh skin and soul, and I would very much like to re-acquaint myself with their particular....flavor, as it were". The word spoken with a disturbing relish. The Archon licked his lips, as if to cherish them before they escaped into the air.

"By your will, my master."

II

It had been the remote research station-turned observation post where he had worked for the better part of four years -- a job, simply, that he did only for the sake of putting food on the table. Figuratively speaking, of course.

The first thing you learn on Sentinel-E94 is that there are no tables.

There are no tables because the artificial gravity generator leave everything to be desired at times. Of course, it was nothing compared to the problems with the opposite end of the digestion process. Everything in this damnable place seemed on the verge of non-function, dysfunction, or some interesting combination of the two.

Nyhl sighed aloud and began to idly tap on the cold metal surface beyond the edge of his terminal's keyplate.

Four years, almost. Nearly four years of being cooped up in this offensive excuse for a habitat. Food, air, water: everything was recycled here, no entertainment to speak of, no meaningful friendships beyond forgettable acquaintances forged. And then there was the noticeable shortage of females on staff.

Not that the your average female Adeptus Mechanicus specimen wanted anything to lust for (or was even distinguishable from her male counter-part in places where it counted).

He sighed again, louder this time and rocked back in his chair, as if to better communicate his discontent to the galaxy.

A few of the adepts looked up from their terminals and cast scornful glares in his direction as though they had been interrupted from the most crucial of undertakings.

At the other end of the cluster of consoles, Observus-Majoris Cylus raised a probing head at the noise.

"Is something the matter, Junior Astrographer?" His voice as dull-sounding as the cooling mechanisms of the cogitator-stations, and it took a moment before Nyhl realized he was being spoken to. He sat upright in his desk, as if to reassure the speaker of his attentiveness.

The Observata-Majoris was not convinced.

"This is important work that ought not be undertaken so casually." he indicated the cluttered room with a sweep of his bronze augmetic hand. "The work we do here is critical to the functioning of commerce and communication of this system. Protocol is to be adhered to at all times, Ommissiah be praised."

"Ommissiah be praised," came the collective response from the staff.

So passionless was his voice that the adept reckoned the 'Majoris may as well stab a pre-programmed vox implant into his neck and save himself the effort of tonal modulation. Of course, he didn't say this.

Sentinel-E94 served as the star system's primary (and only) observation outpost. The tasks of gauging solar wind magnitudes, local warp-space fluctuations, and several galactic radiation subtypes all fell to it. However, in a system as insignificant as Verex Phi, work was generally limited to logging cruelly inconsequential happenings and laughably minor events that seemed to be observed and archived only for the sake of occupying the minds of the station's small staff and warding against insanity.

The Observationist-Majoris, a dry, middle-aged (at least in appearance) Mechanicus astrographer, was the official assigned to the void-latrine of Sentinel-E94. A slightly broad man with a not-so-slightly husky build and well-fed features, the desk-wall that obstructed the view of his lower body gave him the appearance of a puppet hanging by his master's threads to watch over some transpiring ordeal with an almost comical air of authority. A fitting analogy, indeed.

Sighing again, this time inaudibly, the adept sank back into his seat and tapped a few runes on his display-pane. The ancient cogitators hummed inelegantly as the screen flickered into life, displaying a curious rendering of a cog and wheel emblem accompanied by legions of text and numerals scrolling on the screen's background.

Going through the motions, just as he had been for uncounted months, Carl, appeased the authentication

aspect of the system's machine-spirit, summoning the usual array of rune-scripts and prayer-sequences.

the lesser astrography genie, he watched impassively as it went through its routine outlining of every discernible object in this region of the void. Lonely green blobs represented the sparsely located inhabitable planets of the Ryella system. Rogue bronze blips told of asteroid clusters and debris. As it was, nothing particularly interesting was going on in the system, as far as the sensory arrays affixed to Sentinel-E94 could discern. A part of him(or all of him, truth be told) wondered why the Adeptus didn't simply staff the post with servitors, so mundane was the task at hand. Rumor had it that the station existed solely as some manner of punishment for adepts. Indeed, all of the personnel were low-ranking adepts, most of whom had displeased their quasi-mechanical masters in some way or held viewpoints deemed too radical to be tolerated.

As far as Nyhl was concerned, neither was the case. He had failed to prove himself worthy of true Adeptus status, but was well-learned in astro-lore skilled enough with a cogitator to warrant not lobotomizing him into a servitor and calling it a day. What held him back was his personality. Where other adepts had shed characteristically human attributes(you know, humor, libido, etc.), Nyhl considered such things as what made life worth living(that and pleasing the Omnissiah and all that, if any of his superiors asked).

Executing a well-practiced sigh, he sunk further into the worn material of his seat. He dearly wanted to move on to greater things, but here he was, exiled to some rearwipe partition of the galaxy and likely to be partially insane by the time he was deemed punished severely enough to return to more conventional duties. He wished dearly for something, anything, to happen to provide the opportunity to prove himself to the magos.

As if in answer to his silent prayer, a violent red blight appeared on his display screen, followed by a late fanfare of blaring klaxons and numerous warning messages.

"Warning: Unknown craft detected in close-proximity. Preparedness level gamma initialized", the drone-like female voice announced on the vox system.

All of the adepts in the cogitator lab began to stir, more out of annoyance than anything else.

"Junior-Astrographer Nyhl," summoned the Observus-Majoris, "initiate a SYT-scan on this object and redirect all visual output to the holo-overlay. Glory to the algorithms."

"Certainly."

"--er, blessed be the syntax," Nyhl added hastily.

A few dexterous keystrokes accomplished the task. Loud and uncompromisingly bright emissions signaled the activation of the holo-overlay. When the image resolved, a collective gasp escaped from the normally silent adepts. Even the Observus-Majoris elevated himself to his full-height, as if to achieve a better sight of what surely could not be real.